JAMES BALDWIN'S CONFRONTATION WITH RACIST TERROR IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH
Sexual Mythology and Psychoneurosis in "Going to Meet the Man"

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The memory of Jesse, James Baldwin's protagonist in "Going to Meet the Man," channels a flow of impressions that both dramatizes his psychic and sexual wounding and provides a useful perspective into the distorted reality growing out of Southern history of racist violence. Baldwin's experiments with perspective, time handling, and revealing reflect his interest in style as exposé of harmful delusions. His treatment of point of view functions to analyze culture myths about sexuality that justify violent rape of Black women and castration and live burning of Black men. Validated as ethical norm, these myths serve as the altar on which the community sacrifices its capacity for self-examination. They supply the energy that keeps in motion cycles of barbarity against which the perpetrators claim, ironically, to be defending their enlightened selves. Inevitable, therefore, is the tragic undermining of individuals' humanity and warping of the social character.

James Baldwin's (1998b) "Going to Meet the Man," the title story of his 1965 collection, is sustained by an impassioned politics. The narrative dramatizes racism as symptomatic of an inner disorder that reveals itself through the protagonist's sexual dysfunction, itself the malady of a defective mind. The story, filtered through Jesse's consciousness, communicates the perverted sense of reality that is a condition of what Baldwin called the "guilty imagination." Plotted here is the insidious and self-destructive working of guilt and repression on the mind, agency for the crip-

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pling sense of personal and social unease that makes inevitable the racial crisis in America.

Baldwin (1972), tracing the literary expression of this disturbance, located a seminal strain in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe, 1852). Stowe's (1852) novel, he stated, helps us understand how in America, "the formula created by the necessity to find a lie more palatable than the truth has been handed down and memorized and persists yet with a terrible power" (p. 11). Responding too to Richard Wright's (1940) *Native Son*, Baldwin identified a similar problem: namely, that

> the story of the "nigger" is inevitably and richly to become involved with the force of life and legend, how each perpetually assumes the guise of the other, creating that dense, many-sided and shifting reality which is the world we live in and the world we make. (p. 35)

Out of the disquieting "myths we perpetuate" about Blacks, Baldwin suggested, issue our lamentable tragedies.

Baldwin's (1972) denunciation of racism as social disorganization and psychological disorder is made clear in *Notes of a Native Son*: "The ways in which the Negro has affected the American psychology are betrayed in our popular culture and in our morality; in our estrangement from him is the depth of our estrangement from ourselves." He added, "Our dehumanization of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves: the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for the annulment of his" (pp. 18-19). The characters of the world depicted in "Going to Meet the Man" (Baldwin, 1998b) are under an unholy amount of stress or in the grip of a debilitating anxiety state. The prey of obsessions and tortured by forces they fail to understand, White individuals in this environment reel under the shock of macabre circumstances, the ultimate result of which is psychosis.

In such a menacing world, the Black man too is fated to become "a social symbol, revelatory of social disease and prophetic of disaster"—a point Baldwin (1998a) further underlined in "Alas, Poor Richard":

> In most of the novels written by Negroes until today . . . there is a great space where sex ought to be; and what usually fills this space is violence. . . . The violence is gratuitous and compulsive because the root of that violence is never examined. The root is rage. It is the rage almost literally the hurt of a man being castrated. . . . There is probably no greater (or more misleading) *body of sexual myths* [italics added] in the world today than those which have proliferated around the figure of the American Negro. This means that he is penalized for *the guilty imagination of the white people who invest him with their hates and longings, and is the principal target of their sexual paranoia* [italics added]. (p. 251)

Proscribing the bigotry that emerges from and mirrors America's fear, confusion, and dishonesty, "Going to Meet the Man" attempts a more complex dramatization of the protest Baldwin (1964) staged also in *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (against Southern racist myths). In his narrative, rituals of social violence generated by community-engendered fantasies play themselves out also in terms of an intense psychological drama.

To depict racism as a disabling neurosis, Baldwin orchestrated perspective and plot through flashbacks, achieving a structural logic and stylistic coherence that ought to be defended against Harry L. Jones's (1977) contention that the "ideological content tends to smother the narrative as narrative" (p. 145). Basically, Jones charged, Baldwin has difficulty rendering into art his explicit ideology on the relationship between White guilt and Black suffering. Consequently, Jones added, the story is "limited to the use of flashbacks as a means both of character development and of plot resolution" (p. 150).

Certainly, racist brutality in the South roused Baldwin to a new aesthetic challenge. Remarkable were the outrages surrounding the lynching of Emmet Till, the acquittal of the accused, and his public acknowledgement of involvement in the murder. More direct were the acts of violent resistance to the Negro voter registration, a cause Baldwin embraced in 1963. Faced with this dismaying reality in America, Baldwin used his art to decry acts of racial terror. He questioned White supremacists' self-constituting ideals founded on criminal abuse of others: "I am aware that no man is a villain in his own eyes. Something in the man knows—*must* know what he is

doing is evil; but in order to accept the knowledge the man would have to change" (Baldwin, 1964, p. xiv). Instead, Baldwin (1964) added, to stave off madness, the guilt-ridden perpetrators close their eyes, compulsively repeat their crimes, and enter "a *spiritual darkness* [italics added]."

Jesse is shown to have internalized disturbing anxieties born out of such guilt. The malignant effects of his moral darkness are brought to the fore so that those so bedeviled may confront the unquestioned but ultimately unsettling myths that have undermined their humanity and warped the social character. The flashback technique, a crucial function of the psychological drama, contrary to Jones's (1977) claim, is consistent with the unifying function of style (perspective) and structure (character) within the narrative.

The reveries, via which most of the story unfolds retrospectively, dramatize the fragmentation in Jesse's mind even while they help to sustain narrative coherence. The story begins and ends in Jesse's nuptial bed where his temporary impotence is explained by his wife as a consequence of his being tired. However, a signal of the graver psychological disturbance frustrating Jesse's manhood is the stress that takes his mind back to the scene of sadistic brutality he unleashed earlier that day on the Black civil rights leader. Yet Jesse's anxiety evolves from a deeper pathological wound, the "nightmare" in which he remains trapped, and that is revealed when his mind slips into the 34-year-old past.[1] Here, he was initiated into the sex mythology that normalized hatred and validated sadistic rituals of terrorist violence against Blacks. His sexual frustration, therefore, reawakens his memory of the castration and burning of the Black man, called by Roger Whitlow (1988) a "primitive sex rite" (p. 197) by means of which he and other participants released themselves in a communal orgasm. The present occurrence takes Jesse back to the moment in the past by which his present failure was predetermined. The reverie explains the collective anxiety state that continues to live in him and that surfaces in the brutal crimes he commits and will continue to commit.[2]

Because Baldwin is interested in the idea that social conditioning rather than innate nature determines the individual's values and

attitudes, the ordering of Jesse's perceptions is significant. The perspectival shift from the immediate present into Jesse's past logically relates the effects and causes of Jesse's angst. Implicit is the extent to which the community makes imminent its own failure via its perverse and powerful desire to persist in fantastic crimes meant to perpetuate Black exclusion.

The broken time surfaces within the narrative are symptomatic of the stress that torments the protagonist's mind. This drama of Jesse's bewildered self-consciousness plots the crisis of identity that inevitably overtakes those persons who ignore the past. The deliberate efforts of Jesse's father and the rest of the community to alchemize into propriety the abnormality of the lynching[3] are directly related to what Baldwin (1972) regarded as a concerted disinclination among Americans to face their history:

> In the context of the Negro problem neither whites nor blacks, for excellent reasons of their own, have the faintest desire to look back; but I think that the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly. (p. 4)

Our failure to engage our brutal history responsibly, the narrative suggests, will forever endow that history with a lethal power to frustrate and destroy. In situations remarkable for their dramatic irony, Jesse's father refuses to face up to this disturbing truth. He jests awkwardly with his wife before the lynching:

> "You look all right," said his father, and laughed. "When that nigger looks at you, he's going to swear he throwed his life away for nothing. Wouldn't be surprised if he don't come back to haunt you." And he laughed again. (Baldwin, 1998b, p. 946)

Later, he tries to reassure his son who is clearly traumatized by the murder:

> "Well, I told you," said his father, "you wasn't never going to forget *this* picnic." His father's face was full of sweat, his eyes were very peaceful. At that moment Jesse loved his father more than he had

> ever loved him. He felt that his father had carried him through a mighty test, had revealed to him a great secret which would be the key to his life forever. (p. 949)

Both scenes convey the father's disturbance. The laughter and the sweat are signs of nervous discomfort; but although the evidence is clear, the boy is incapable of understanding his father's suffering. The uneasiness is an expression and outcome of hidden as well as socially manifested obsessive neuroses. Such a community that refuses to countenance its own shameful acts will continue to be tortured by anxieties that stem from its history of unrequited brutality.

The community is agent of the evil that it brings down on itself. The palpable presence of evil the boy senses is associated with an uneasiness that refuses to be exorcized by the myths generated to absolve such horrifying conduct. The drama of life enveloped in the gothic sphere surrounding the lynching ritual is both tragic and absurd. The uninitiated boy is appalled at the unusual horror of the deed that rises from a fundamental disproportion between the community's rejection of the Black man's claim to manhood and the awfulness of the measure they adopt to reject such a claim:

> The man with the knife took the nigger's privates in his hand, one hand, still smiling, as though he were weighing them. In the cradle of the one white hand, the nigger's privates seemed as remote as meat being weighed in the scales . . . and Jesse felt his scrotum tighten. . . . The white hand stretched them, cradled them, caressed them. Then the dying man's eyes looked straight into Jesse's eyes—it could not have been as long as a second, but it seemed longer than a year. Then Jesse screamed as the knife flashed, first up, then down, cutting the dreadful thing away, and the blood came roaring down. Then the crowd rushed forward, tearing at the body with their hands, with knives, with rocks, with stones, howling and cursing. (Baldwin, 1998b, p. 949)

Here Jesse is awakened to not only what David Littlejohn (1965) called the community's discovery "in this barbaric anti-human rite a genuine primeval satisfaction" (p. 480) but also his own debased inheritance. The implied bond between the dying man and the

fledgling youth suggests the tragic legacy of the grotesque rite. Shorn of moral sensibility, he, like the castrated man, is deprived of his humanity, of his vital essence. When Jesse's mind subconsciously replays this scene after his torture of the civil rights leader, we recognize the transmission and persistence of Southern terrorist violence as a continual process of cultural reinforcement.

Recognizing, as social psychologists point out, that the ontogenesis of knowledge occurs within a social context,[4] we begin to understand the function of the protagonist's reveries: to unravel for readers how Jesse self-destructively incorporates the ideology of his community. The series of flashbacks define him as a psychological product of the deep forces within the dominant White culture's "collective unconscious."[5] They function to underline the formative character of history and culture, the means whereby racist myths have been harmfully perpetuated in the American South. Thus, the style and treatment of point of view that the style permits are organically related to Baldwin's tropological treatment of time and history. In his judgment, the force of history shapes culture and psychology, collective norms, and individual sensibility. On this score, Baldwin (1966) warned:

> History does not refer principally to the past. The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are consciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do. It is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations. (p. 174)

Baldwin's strategy of unraveling his protagonist's experience is connected to his recognition of this ever present influence of the force of history. Significantly, according to the flow of impressions that comes to the reader through the mind of the protagonist, the ordinary distinction between past and present is diminished. Mixed in the surging sensations of Jesse's mind are reminiscences of the past that, brought to the surface by the stimulus of the present sensations, impinge on the present and become part of it. Jesse's psychosexual ailment becomes evidence of the traumata left on his mind and body by the burden of anxiety and guilt he carries. It is this disability that Louis H. Pratt (1978) recognized:

> The black man has had his genitalia removed. . . . Yet, Jesse, too, has been emasculated, from an emotional perspective. He has been consumed by hate, and consequently, his sexual impotence symbolizes the incompleteness resulting from this corruption. . . . His inadequacy in consummating the sex act symbolizes his inability to look at himself and recognize the ugly, unspeakable crimes which he has perpetrated in the name of white supremacy. (p. 49)

Focusing on an American sexual mythology derived from a tradition of negative beliefs about the human body, Baldwin invites his Southern audience to examine the beliefs about sexuality it projects on others and to recognize them as a manifestation of its most fundamental vision of itself. He takes a close look at Jesse's mind, at his anxiety state, to underline the disabling impact that such a troublesome mythology has on the psyche of the individual as well as on the entire American society.

Jesse, who applies the cattle prod to the Black man's testicles, reveals himself a product of the greatly troubled and troubling moralism that has evolved out of the racially defined, sex-negative culture in the South. The terrifying spectacle of the hand wielding the castrating knife constitutes a synedochic representation of the personalized force of evil now reappearing in Jesse's own dehumanized and dehumanizing conduct. His sexual paralysis symptomizes his being consumed by virulent hatred that vitiates the soul and thwarts creative relationships with others. Ultimately, like the self-wounded and impotent Fisher King in a spiritually corrupted and sterile land (according to the folk myth described by Jessie L. Weston, 1957), Jesse, Baldwin's protagonist, is himself a casualty of myth. An ultimate creation of his culture's mythic imagination, he, "the Man," self-centered in Southern racist history, lies psychically and sexually wounded in his bed, languishing in the anguish of his devitalized present condition.

What Baldwin (1972) called a "terrible power" has been born out of attitudes that arising from Southern sexual mythology have become socialized into custom. In racializing sexuality and equating sexual activity among Blacks with animal lust, this culture justifies its sacrificial removal of "the dreadful thing" owned by the Black man, the sex organ as agent of vice. According to such theo-

rizing, biology and race are translated into sociocultural as well as ethical imperatives. On such suspect codes supremacists validate themselves as the prototype for all humanity, contrasting their "civilized restraint" to Black people's behavior, allegedly not a result of free choice but a necessary and impulsive response to sex organs and genes.

The American South, as these self-valorizing attitudes suggest, doggedly bases its attitudes and ethical judgments on a morality that grew out of a misguided mythology—obsolescent notions that still have immense authority on the mid-20th-century Southern mind. Although the basis of the mythology has been demystified, the dogmas born out of the belief system still survive.[6] Consequently, racism has become an entrenched mode of cultural expression as unquestioned and as impassioned as an expression of faith. This is what Baldwin (1972) meant in declaring that "the nigger" "actually exists; for we *believe* that he exists. Whenever we encounter him amongst us in the flesh, our faith is made perfect and his necessary and bloody end is executed with a mystical ferocity of joy" (p. 29). Bloodlust is motivated by heinous fallacies sanctioned in the South by the authority of religion, science, and law. On these grounds, supremacists refuse to relinquish their ruthless intolerance despite their realization that the notions they project onto others are clearly the collapsed paradigms of their own imagination.[7]

Baldwin (1972) suggested that in the sexual assumptions informing the Christian worldview are to be discovered formative influences behind the Southern myth that regards the body as a basis of defilement. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe, 1852), he remarked, is illustrative of a cultural mind-set activated by "a theological terror, the terror of damnation": The "spirit that breathes in this book, hot, self-righteous, fearful," he stated, "is not different from that spirit of medieval times which sought to exorcize and burn witches; and is not different from that terror which activates a lynch mob" (p. 13). Fundamental to Christianity is the idea that creation contains sacred and profane elements. Factored into this myth is the belief that human beings possess a twofold nature in conflict with itself: godlike goodness and diabolic evil. To strive for a life of

purity and attain immortality, human beings must reject the body, a defiling prison that inhibits the divine pursuits of the soul.

Against a background of such Christian tropes, the lynching is carried out. Whitlow (1988) highlighted the religious symbolism informing the rite. Jesse has

> participated in the destruction/communion of that figure which his society had deemed an object of both announced fear and secret admiration; and he, with his community, has symbolically eaten (beaten, burned, cut) the flesh and drunk (brought pouring forth) the blood. (p. 197)

Attending the brutal event (imaged too as a sexual/spiritual rite) is synonymous in Jesse's mother's mind with performing a sacred duty (Baldwin, 1998b, p. 944). The surreal quality of the images implies, moreover, the evil character of the castration and provides a curious twist to the Garden of Eden story of original sin that in Christian mythology tainted subsequent generations of humanity.

The White hands reaching up to caress and cut off the privates of the Black man hanging from the tree renders a picture of strange and forbidden fruit being plucked from the tree of life. In this oblique version of the Southern community's fall from grace, Baldwin ironically coalesces biblical and Southern stories. The original myth of man's fall was connected to human pursuit of self-knowledge and discovery of procreative potential. The Southern myth reverses such insight and life vision. Here, "the Man's" "fall" is essentially a condition of self-estrangement, threatening himself and society with impotence and sterility.

Southern "reality," in Baldwin's (1972) words, is based on a "medieval morality" that problematically correlates "black, white, the devil, the next world" (p. 9). An insufferable brain child of this "contrast conception,"[8] Uncle Tom cannot escape being asked to shed his physicality—his badge of shame, in his creator's judgment. As Baldwin comments, it is

> only through humility, the incessant mortification of the flesh, that he can enter into communion with God or man. The virtuous rage of Mrs. Stowe is motivated by . . . a panic of being hurled into the

> flames, of being caught in traffic with the devil. She embraced this merciless doctrine with all her heart, bargaining shamelessly before the throne of *grace* [italics added]: God and salvation becoming her personal property, purchased with the coin of her virtue. *Here black equates with evil and white with grace* [italics added]; if being mindful of the necessity of good works, she could not cast out the blacks—a wretched, huddled mass, apparently, claiming, like an obsession, her inner eye—she could not embrace them either without purifying them of sin. She must cover their intimidating *nakedness, robe them in white, the garments of salvation; . . . only thus could she bury, as St. Paul demanded, "the carnal man, the man of flesh* [italics added]." Tom, therefore, her only black man, has been *robbed of his humanity and divested of his sex* [italics added]. It is the price for that darkness with which he has been branded. (pp. 12-13)

The dreadful reputation sex received via Christian dogma engendered a sex-negative ideology that in Baldwin's narrative is seen to be incorporated into Southern secular myths. Cast over this outline of the White woman in Southern consciousness is the shadow of a male-dominated religious mythology transforming her body into a temple of the holy ghost. This disabling dualism proceeding out of Christianity Baldwin has embodied in the image of Grace as "frail sanctuary." She is White woman framed in the imagination of Southern myth makers entrusted with the virtue and purity of the race. As symbol of this ideal or fiction, however, she is "dead." The moonlight reveals this ambiguity. Reflecting her apotheosized saintliness, it "covers her like glory," but it also envelops her in beams "grown cold as ice," signifying her condition as a thing abstracted from passion and from life. So deeply rooted is the Southern sex-negative mythology that Jesse cannot simultaneously conceive of his wife as both God fearing (pure) and an object of sexual desire. It was by deifying Whiteness, especially the White female, that such individuals sought relief from the anxieties that accompanied their vilifying the sex act.

The Puritanical strictures that accompanied this ascetic version of sex having led to a belief in a "pure" sex act devoid of pleasure, a compensatory myth was demanded. To the extent that the ideal of purity was associated with Whiteness and personalized in White

women, sensuality was commensurately damned and projected onto Blacks. Southern society objectified into anatomical metaphors its phobias and self-hatred, detached these from itself, and yoked them to the Black race it stigmatized as scapegoat, or "phobogenic object," in Frantz Fanon's (1952/1967) phrase. Via the inverse construct, Blackness came to signify excessive libido: mindless body given to free and unbridled expression of sensuality. In the context of these harmful notions, Blacks were rendered subhuman beasts: "bulls" or "African jungle cat," as Jesse describes the victim of the castration. These alleged sexually aggressive animals had to be violently desexed to preserve the purity of White civilization and shore up the egos of sexually insecure males.

Baldwin's remark that White men are obsessed by the nightmare of the big Black prick they want to make their own has been reduced to his being obsessed by this discovery (Freeze, 1977). More appropriately, however, Baldwin is indignantly pointing to the real harm caused by the pernicious sexual mythology of the South. He has set out to analyze and demythicize the pervasive, obsessive, and disturbing illusions that sanction sadistic rites of castration and rape. Because in the context of such perverse fabrications the Black woman too becomes an obverse representation of the desensualized White female, Jesse accepts without hesitation that the "spice" his wife cannot give him he can obtain by "pick[ing] up a black piece or arresting her." Such thinking attests to pathology—the mental dis-ease that from the opening scene the protagonist betrays:

> Excitement filled him like a toothache, but it refused to enter the flesh. . . . This was his wife. He could not ask her to do just a little thing for him, just to help him out, just for a little while, the way he could ask a nigger girl to do it. (Baldwin, 1988b, p. 933)

Although Genesis may be regarded as a source of deeply ingrained Western mythological assumptions that came to serve as the norm for sexual relations, these religious attitudes were later influenced by a history of scientific thinkers such as Darwin (1962) and Freud (1953). Darwin's ideas, encouraging the search for the

animal in human beings, found this connection in human sexuality. Freud reenvisioned this struggle as a contest of mind (civilization) and sexuality (instinct). The Freudian tradition emphasized the image of the sexual drive as a biological necessity that attempted to express itself despite the rules devised to control it by culture and civilization.

Freud's (1953) view of sexuality "as an innate and dangerous instinct" and that human beings are civilized only to the extent that they have been able to suppress such essentially animalistic drives inform Jesse's diatribe. On the basis of this myth, Jesse rules the Black race out of human civilization:

> They [Blacks] were animals, they were no better than animals, what could be done with people like that? Here they had been in a civilized country for years and they still lived like animals. Their houses were dark, with oil cloth or cardboard in the windows, the smell was enough to make you puke your guts out, and there they sat, a whole tribe, pumping out kids, it looked like, every damn five minutes. (Baldwin, 1988b, pp. 934-935)

An ironic qualification to this self-defense of White civilization is that it comes from a man guilty of repeated acts of rape and responsible for the stranglehold of social oppression he scorns. Jesse characterizes a tradition of moral contradictions: the supremacists' fantastic boasts of superior codes of conduct that connect nowhere with the reality of their brutally oppressive practices.

Jesse's malevolence is a result of hatred that evolves into a neurosis and eats away at his humanity, personhood, and sense of stable identity. Such an insight Baldwin (1963) philosophically advanced: "Whoever debases others is debasing himself. That is not a mystical statement but a most realistic one, which is proved by the eyes of any Alabama sheriff" (p. 113). Jesse, commissioned as law enforcement officer to keep Blacks in their place, is an embodiment of the self-contradictory and obtuse system that Blacks will confront when they vie for liberty and equality in America. This absurd irony (which he fails to detect) also underlies his sensing as a boy an equation between the community's euphoria over the lynching and the spirit of the July 4th celebrations. The institution-

alized practices of racial injustice he represents underline the national paradox: the pervasive delight of Americans in dishonoring the democratic ideals and humanist principles they celebrate as constitutionally enshrined ethical codes.

Jesse, then, exemplifies a community out of touch with itself and out of touch with real life. This innate contradiction is effectively dramatized through the schizoid tensions in his mind. In his anxiety to gratify his wife sexually, Jesse imagines himself as "nigger." This is an act of self-retrieval via which Jesse shows that the stigmatized image of Blackness is a projection embodying his personal angst of self-denial. The "nigger" is a creation of supremacists' insecure imaginations, the body disgraced and rejected, but without which those who so disclaim it cannot function. The rambling time dislocations in Jesse's consciousness result thus not from Baldwin's problem with form but from the irrefutable logic of Jesse's perverted imagination. Because the tortured psyche (trapped in a "nightmare" induced by bigotry) is in no condition to order meanings logically or realistically, the time disjunctions are appropriate. In essence, the perspectival arrangement helps to reflect the powerlessness of a diseased mind to grasp and identify its illness. Thus style is tuned to character. Jesse is "Man" demoralized (emasculated and dehumanized) by the myths that drive his violent culture.

Because of White supremacists' refusal to face themselves, the burden of the past continues as a heavy and oppressive weight on the present, on the individual and collective psyche. This is an effect of the pervasive flashbacks. Past realities that, ghostlike, haunt the present South, explain Jesse's moment of personal crisis, and point to the source of America's moral paralysis. For Jesse, who must do what his forefathers ordained for him, is unable to escape the burden of his heritage; and inevitably, violence continues as automatic response to fear and guilt. For this reason, Baldwin seeks to remind us that history does not refer "principally to the past;" it is by the weight of history as a "great force" within that Jesse is controlled. Thus, the story's perspective functions to fuse together the two elements of time and perception so vital to the narrative's development: its concern with the special circumstances

of the past that shape human perception and that are themselves vital determinants of present reality. The boy's perception of gothic detail at the lynching places emphasis on the haunting perversity he internalizes and that distorts his humanity.

Seeing himself as the nigger, Jesse acknowledges that he is the brutalized consciousness of the South confronted with its own perversion. That he is aroused by identifying with the sexually aggressive "savage" produced within the paranoid imagination of Southern culture reflects the extent to which sadomasochism has become a prominent element in his community's eroticism. Out of Jesse's warped boyhood (the conditioning experience of orgasm at the lynching), sadistic impulses are retained as unconscious images of bliss. His torturing of the Black prisoner is illustrative. Healthy and creative human coexistence having been thwarted within the vortex of emasculating violence engendered from Southern sex-negative myths, Jesse becomes a psychoneurotic in the terms defined by Freud (1953), who wrote that "every pathological disorder of sexual life is rightly to be regarded as an inhibition in development" (p. 208).

The story, then, is about two tragic confrontations: that of African Americans with the "Man" (the White supremacist) and that of the "Man" in conflict with a neurotically inflated self:

> People who imagine that history flatters them (as it does, indeed, since they wrote it) are impaled on their history like a butterfly on a pin and become incapable of seeing or changing themselves or the world. . . . This is the place in which, it seems to me, most white Americans find themselves. They are dimly, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed themselves is mainly a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence. . . . Moreover, the history of white people has led them to a fearful, baffling place where they have begun to lose touch with themselves—and where they certainly are not happy. They do not know how this came about; they do not dare examine how this came about. (Baldwin, 1966, pp. 175-176)

Racism, then, is an outcome of the White community's personal and social disorganization—a product of an "appallingly oppres-

sive and bloody history" that continues to menace members of the White community. Jesse's thoughts reflect the deep-seated and troublesome community angst he has inherited:

> Each man, in the thrilling silence which sped outward from their exchanges, their laughter, and their anecdotes, seemed wrestling, in various degrees of darkness, with a secret which he could not articulate to himself, and which, however directly it related to the war, related yet more surely to his privacy and his past. . . . They had never dreamed that their privacy could contain any element of terror, could threaten, that is, to reveal itself, to the scrutiny of a judgment day, while remaining unreadable and inaccessible to themselves; nor had they dreamed that the past, while certainly refusing to be forgotten, could yet so stubbornly refuse to be remembered. (Baldwin, 1998b, p. 941)

Generally, Baldwin successfully fuses narrative point of view with character perspective. Jesse, though, is incapable of this type of self-conscious attempt at self-analysis: this search for the source of the "nightmare" that motivates men to blind repetition of crime. This authorial intrusion is meant to highlight the morally dark and psychologically turbulent forces by which supremacists are controlled. The evidence of their fell deeds breeds tormenting fear and guilt, and the crimes executed as defense of civilization constitute an avenue of flight, a cry for help from desperate men, as Jesse's flashbacks show, haunted by complexes of insecurity and self-abasement. The "nigger" as incarnation of these fears is explored through Baldwin's representation of this construction as metaphor. Supremacists' encounter with the "nigger" is a self-encounter. Such oppressive groups, in acknowledging this, Baldwin suggests, may lay claim to a new history in which they may find themselves and be transformed from tyrants into humane persons.

The characters in "Going to Meet the Man" are under the threat of a macabre force pervading their world. This threat arises from the anxieties of individuals whose unrequited guilt is palpably capable of bringing catastrophe on themselves and others. Consequently, the lynching becomes a pivotal episode in the plot and in Jesse's development, telling how the story turns on that moment of

crisis when characters in this world find themselves driven to do things by forces they understand only vaguely. Underscored is the tragic feeling that personal relations among individuals should be determined by a virulent myth overshadowing their lives with the inevitability of imminent evil. For this reason, the society remains haunted by the threat of violence. The lurid lights against the blinds so terrify that Jesse impulsively reaches for his gun. Thus, the minds of the characters in this world can be said to move not in two merging time planes but in three; their constant apprehension over what is imminent constituting what amounts to a third temporal dimension.

The demands that Baldwin makes on his reader through point of view and time handling are so closely related as to be aspects of one another. It is the omnipresence of this always imminent, nameless fear associated directly with the central symbol of the lynching that terrorizes the mind and, as Baldwin shows, derives from and continually demands the power of myth to relieve what is a deep-seated anxiety, a communal urge for absolution. The myth becomes, ironically, an illusory principle of order in a world disturbed by the very myths that are the source of the disorder.

Baldwin's conception of time in such a way permits the existence of two interlocking planes of action in the story—one present and dramatic, the other past and explicative but always influencing the present that forms the framing pattern of the story. The present plane is that which catches the action at the beginning of the crisis (the point of Jesse's personal breakdown). The flashbacks follow the action (through the inner drama) to the source of the catastrophe in the past. The reveries recapitulate the forces that made the catastrophe inevitable. Such memory recall functions in terms of the movie-like flashback that explains the present turn of events in the narrative. But for the reader, the recall is much less background than part of the present because Jesse's present does not disappear from the scene as it would during the movie flashback; instead, the two planes of action are, as it were, projected on the screen simultaneously. The action of the present plane is limited, yet it moves with the concentration and rapidity of good drama. The story covers, practically, a few hours surrounding Jesse's discomfort in bed and

his consciousness of the tense Southern race drama in which he anticipates acting his brutal role once again the following morning. Meanwhile, on the other plane, we have the tortuously unfolded stories of how he, the principal character, got the neurosis that has brought him and his society to this crisis, according not so much to the inexorable law of his own personality but of his history. Out of the details related to his own personal past come the obsessions and anxiety states that stand in the place of motives, determining his violent conduct.

This past is the history of the South, treated not so much as legend but as myth: myth being a narrative account of origins that explains why things must be as they are. The evil in Jesse is a psychological product, not the result of nature's slip but of social conditioning. He is what he is because of the belief system into which his father-ancestor has initiated him. His role is determined for him by a community into whose codes he, like the youth in primitive societies, had to be ritually initiated for the system to be perpetuated. Baldwin's interest in not only how such balefully evil characters are produced but also their tragic legacies may be further examined in the context of his (1972) observations in *Notes*:

> In our image of the Negro breathes the past we deny, not dead but living yet and powerful, the beast in our jungle of statistics. It is this which defeats us, which continues to defeat us. . . . It is a sentimental error, therefore, to believe that the past is dead; it means nothing to say that it is all forgotten, that the Negro himself has forgotten it. It is not a question of memory. Oedipus did not remember the thongs that bound his feet; nevertheless the marks they left testified to that doom toward which his feet were leading him. The man does not remember the hand that struck him, the darkness that frightened him, as a child; nevertheless, the hand and the darkness remain with him, indivisible from himself forever, part of the passion that drives him wherever he thinks to take flight. (p. 22)

This idea of the past as inexorable force is crucial to Baldwin's vision of American reality as essentially tragic. Man's fate is to be an agent of evil that is perpetuated inevitably out of his own history. He becomes both victim and worker of evil; and as in Greek drama, the sign of evil is the violence it brings forth. Evil comes out of the

past that the individual has failed to control responsibly—hence, essential to the drama is the recapitulating of the fear-engendered myth from which it grows. For Baldwin, this means retracing the genesis of the mid-20th-century Southern violence, a critical situation that foredoomed generations prior to that in which his protagonist wreaks his terror. Jesse is entangled in the forces of history and a tradition of myth that his community refuses to deny or put from itself.

The characters of this world feel the impact of the violence that they all witness, perform, or receive. They are aware of being the agents or in danger of an evil that man sets abroad in this world. It is undoubtedly the presence of this always imminent evil associated in the South with racist hatred that for Baldwin has the power to fascinate and paralyze. Its ability to attract and terrify at once creates the tortured, evil world he depicts. "Going to Meet the Man," thereby, gives us a glimpse of human tragedy, a culture of dark, irrational fear and human private anguish.

Control over point of view is a major cause of Baldwin's success. His experiments in perspective, in time handling, and in revealing (the latter clearly not the same thing as developing) character (a point Jones, 1977, did not acknowledge) function as aesthetic medium for revealing a mind twisted by guilt and seeking flight from responsibility through outdated myths. Because it is from this point of view that Baldwin is generally able to merge his narrative voice with the consciousness of the anxiety-ridden protagonist, the story is given credibility and power, effects that depend on the disclosure of what is happening in the protagonist's mind. His narrative method is to establish frames of subjective reality and time for his protagonist and then to render contrasting perceptions of reality and time. Reality appears, therefore, to lie outside the events and exists in the protagonist's distorted perception.

Baldwin's intention is deconstructive, to offer a vision of the painful process by which the individual may begin to approach healthful self-awareness: "It is with great pain and terror," Baldwin (1966) said, "that one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is, and formed one's point of view" (p. 174). As he also insists, only by confronting our history can we understand our-

selves and bring about change. The flashbacks, then, signify a process of therapeutic personal and collective psychoanalysis. The buried neuroses of the protagonist, the American imbalanced by racist myths, must be brought to the surface to allow him to repair his own distorted sensibility and recognize the humanity of his victims. The flashbacks structuring the story, therefore, carry epistemological weight. Baldwin (1972) asserted that,

> To tell his [the "nigger's"] story is to begin to liberate us from his image and it is, for the first time, to clothe this phantom with flesh and blood, to deepen, by our understanding of him and his relationship to us, our understanding of ourselves and of all men. (p. 35)

The reveries in "Going to Meet the Man," then, delineate the disabling myths that derive from the Southern community's racialized assumptions about culture, biology, and sex and demystify the troublesome illusions it shows up as effusions of the protagonist's morally darkened mind.

NOTES

1. Jesse recalls that, when he was debt collector in the Black community, he had a feeling of being "caught up in a nightmare, a nightmare dreamed by a child," and "everything familiar, without undergoing any other change, had been subtly and hideously displaced" (Baldwin, 1998b, p. 937).

2. Jesse's final arousal is a product not of calculated willpower, according to Roger Whitlow's (1988) reading (p. 195), but of psychosis. Jesse is controlled by a brutal past that limits his emotional functions. Conditioned to experience pleasure only through abnormal brutality, he becomes a sadomasochist. The orgiastic sensations he experiences from torturing the prisoner are illustrative: "I put the cattle prod to him and he jerked some more and he kind of screamed." The victim's intense pain brings him sexual satisfaction. "For some reason, he [Jesse] grabbed his privates" in response to the man's suffering when he applied the prod to his testicles. The feeling Jesse experienced was "very close to a very peculiar, particular joy; [and] something deep in him and deep in his memory was stirred, but whatever was in his memory eluded him" (Baldwin, 1986b, pp. 936-937). This foggy déjà vu is the lynching that has disturbed him mentally and emotionally.

3. The boy's mind records the absurd, eerie, and ominous setting: the barking dogs, the smoke, the light from the sun grown cold and effecting a surreal ("under-water") illusion; the human suffering: the moaning, pain, the death; and the final, intense orgiastic release.

4. The theory of social psychology provides valid principles on the acquisition of knowledge that can facilitate our understanding of the mental processes Baldwin seeks to trace through Jesse's reveries. Social psychologists argue that a subject is a purely sociological being whose consciousness takes shape only when it has been filled with ideological (or semiotic) content. Among such thinkers is David Hamlyn (1982), who posited that the social context alone functions to determine "any intelligibility in the idea of the emergence of the force of a norm. Only with that can one speak of knowledge and understanding" (p. 31).

5. Arguing that Carl Jung was mistaken in attributing to the collective unconscious a primary biological component, Frantz Fanon (1952/1967) redefined this idea as "the sum of prejudices, myths, collective attitudes of a given group" (p. 188). White persons, he said, used their myths of a superior civilization and culture to deprive other people of human status. Blacks were turned into the phobogenic object through such myths and made to represent the latent desires and impulses lying deep in the European psyche. By thus stigmatizing Black people as the symbol of the biological, of everything Europe desired to reject as evil, Europeans conveniently repudiated their desires as though they were not their own (Fanon, 1952/1967).

6. Baldwin (1972) spoke directly on this point:

> Today, to be sure, we know that the Negro is not biologically or mentally inferior; there is no truth in those rumors of his body odor or his incorrigible sexuality; or no more truth than can be easily explained or even defended by the social sciences. (pp. 19-20)

7. James Weldon Johnson (1990) made this point succinctly in an exchange between a Texan planter and a Northern soldier. The soldier's explanation of the false premises on which the Texan bases his belief in White racial superiority elicits the latter's intransigence: "We don't believe the nigger is or ever will be the equal of the white man, and we ain't going to treat him as an equal; I'll be damned if we will." It is the mythical basis of this insularity that reassures the narrator:

> The Texan's position does not render things so hopeless, for it indicates that the main difficulty of the race question does not lie so much in the actual condition of the blacks as it does in the mental attitude of the whites. (pp. 120-121)

8. Ralph Bunche (1990-1992) referred to this idea also as the

> counter-conceptions, conceived in terms of good and evil, long familiar to religion, [and] when employed to interpret human relations involve a polarization of values and a comparative moral significance which must ordinarily portray one of the groups in an unflattering light. Thus in America, whites and blacks are placed in juxtaposition, and the blacks by tradition, legend and belief, are the antonym in antithesis to the whites, in whom are found the highest moral values, the virtues, the creative urges and the intelligence. The moral virtues find themselves personalized in the guise of white men and women. (p. 76)

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