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Talking to James Baldwin: Alain Mabanckou's Jimmy

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Résumé de l'article

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TALKING TO JAMES BALDWIN : ALAIN MABANCKOU'S JIMMY

ABSTRACT

« Talking to James Baldwin » explores the consequences of the intimacy which many readers experience when they read Baldwin's prose. What are we to do when we confront this intimacy ? What ethical questions does this raise ? What is there in Baldwin's writings which enables us to imagine productively the relations between the dead and the living ?

RÉSUMÉ

« Parler à James Baldwin » explore les conséquences du sentiment d'intimité que de nombreux lecteurs ressentent lorsqu'ils lisent la prose de Baldwin. Que devons-nous faire face à cette intimité ? Quelles questions éthiques cette rencontre soulève-t-elle ? Qu'est-ce qui nous permet, dans l'écriture de Baldwin, d'imaginer avec profit les relations entre les morts et les vivants ?

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In 2007 Alain Mabanckou published *Lettre à Jimmy* subtitled « *(À l'occasion du vingtième anniversaire de ta mort)* », which was later translated into English [1]. The book embodies a contemporary current of thought in the emergent scholarship on Baldwin and brings into focus a curious phenomenon. Intellectuals well attuned to the precepts of critical theory wish, it seems, to become Baldwin's friend, or at least harbour a belief that they have the right to become his friend. The title of Mabanckou's study alone – the use of the name « Jimmy » and the branding of the text as a « letter » – is symptomatic of a larger trend.

There are contrary forces at work which may begin to explain the relation between the living Mabanckou and the deceased Baldwin, and to illuminate as well the manner of the intimacy at play.

On the one hand, the pressures of what can be called a specifically *public intimacy* inhabit, and give meaning to, the operations of modern life. This has become a constituent of the revamped public sphere of current times. In this situation the appearance in print of the figure of « Jimmy » – once a term of affection for Baldwin's

[1] MABANCKOU (Alain), *Letter to Jimmy (On the Twentieth Anniversary of Your Death)*. Translated by Sara Meli Ansari. Berkeley : Soft Skull Press, 2014, 168 p.

close friends – takes on a variety of free-wheeling associations. « Jimmy » in this context appears to become more immediately ours. To paraphrase Benedict Anderson, the once « knowable » community of Baldwin's intimates is now turning into the more heavily mediated, « imagined community » given form, not by the person of Baldwin himself, but by means of the printed page and old archive film footage [2]. And so it is that « Jimmy » arrives on the page.

On the other hand, there arises from much of Baldwin's writing a peculiar contract between author and reader which invites the latter to call upon a certain intimacy. Baldwin's essays and fictions endeavoured to bring the author himself onto the surface of the text. In much of the non-fiction, and in scores of interviews, the figure of the author appears to be radically present and unmediated. It's difficult to catch or to explain precisely what this affective Baldwin entails and how it works. But there's no doubt of its presence. In comparison, it's difficult to imagine a critical work on Philip Roth, for example, which would take for its title *« Letter to Phil »*. Baldwin's prose, however, for all its fury and intransigence, nonetheless proves peculiarly hospitable to this kind of writing.

Mabanckou's *Letter* exemplifies this structure of feeling – the desire for intimacy with Baldwin – in all its contradictions.

At the beginning of the opening chapter (p. 3-4) Mabanckou contemplates a black and white photograph of Baldwin.

> Those big eyes – prominent on your face, that once mocked your father, unaware that they would later peer into souls, or that they would pierce through the darkest parts of humanity, before closing forever – still hold their power to search deeply, even from the next life.

Mabanckou's reverie, common enough when we scrutinize images of the dead, turns on the belief that some manner of dislocated conversation is taking place.

> Studying you in this way, I sometimes imagine that we are building a dialogue, and that you are listening to me, entertainned by my unanswerable questions.

By the end of the «encounter», briefly told in a few sparse paragraphs, the figure in the photograph has acquired a name. He is

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[2] ANDERSON (Benedict), *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London : Verso, 1983, 224 p.

identified as « Jimmy », the fantasized recipient of the letter that Mabanckou is composing.

The image of the photograph recurs. At the start of the second chapter Mabanckou informs the reader that « [he is] still staring at [the] photo ». He continues : « I blow on it lightly to remove the dust, but I do so with the hope that I will awaken the memories enclosed within it » (p. 29). Before too long this initial identification with his subject escalates. Mabanckou confesses that his letter to Jimmy amounts to a « love letter » (p. 158). He returns to the photo, explaining that he'd bought it from the *bouquinistes* by the Seine. « Baldwin had looked at me as if he were begging me to save him from his public display » (p. 159). As he contemplates his purchase on the metro on his way home, his reverie takes command : « He had the face of the brother I would have liked to have had, and of the biological father I had never known [...]. In essence I was asking Baldwin to adopt me ». The photo, he realizes, « is essentially the source of our encounter » (p. 159-160). But what can Mabanckou's musings mean ? Blowing off the dust promises to « awaken the memories enclosed within » the photo. Whose memories can these be ? Where are they located ? Why does Mabanckou indulge in the fantasy that Baldwin wishes to be saved from « public display » ? What happens when the boundaries between a dead icon and a living author aspiring to a similar fame are so radically dismantled, that the deceased are given the thoughts of the living ?

Personally, this extravagance makes me uneasy. But that's not exactly the point. We are still left with the question : what do we do with this approach to Baldwin? After all, I regard Mabanckou's position only as a more stylized and heavy-handed version of the motivations which underwrite the engagements of many of us, myself included, with Baldwin.

Mabanckou is the distinguished author of fine novels, amongst a variety of other writings. He was born in Congo-Brazzaville in 1966, received his *baccalauréat* at the Lycée Karl Marx, won a scholarship to study in France, and now teaches at UCLA. In substance, his *Letter to Jimmy* doesn't aim to do any more than rehearse the principal constituents of Baldwin's life. To embark upon such an undertaking is nevertheless a high-risk venture, for Baldwin himself recounted his life on many occasions, and in many forms, with unusual, precious skill and subtlety. The complexities of his life are there for all to see and a brief, newly written digest requires a commanding perspective to justify its existence. Much of Mabanckou's recounting is by comparison artless and historically

impossible to verify. The aura of celebrity hangs over his prose so that Simone de Beauvoir and Roger Moore, for example, become construed – indiscriminately – as equivalents, bound only by their shared proximity to Baldwin. Each apparently was a friend. But to suppose an equivalence on these grounds alone requires a considerable effort. What Mabanckou has to say about Baldwin's friendships are, I suspect, not empirically false. It's perfectly conceivable to imagine Baldwin, in his inimitable way, striking up a friendship with Roger Moore. But context is everything. To give another example, that during the March on Washington Baldwin was standing next to Marlon Brando may be factually true ; but to content oneself with mentioning only that piece of information deflects our attention from both the history and the politics behind the event.

In North America Baldwin's writings are coming alive again. The past twenty years have seen the publication of a serious body of critical literature, which in turn demands that the maxims of conventional literary criticism be rethought. In today's world one can « catch sight » of Baldwin in such organizations as Black Lives Matter, not as a dominating presence for sure, but there all the same. This is, even so, a strange resurgence, standing still even while advancing. For a long while now Baldwin's re-emergence as an eminent figure in American letters has been promised ; it is always just around the corner. Yet it never quite seems to occur – and when critics demand a place of prominence for Baldwin, those hostile to him regard such arguments as requests for favoritism. Baldwin's literary reputation in the U.S. still carries with it a degree of ambiguity. His writing is too awkward to settle easily into the literary canon. I see this ambiguity, for instance, in the way Ta-Nehisi Coates is being hailed as the new Baldwin, to such an extent that he appears to eclipse his putative forerunner. Paradoxically, such a phenomenon works to obliterate Baldwin himself.

But Mabanckou brings to his reading of Baldwin a predominantly francophone approach, a contribution which I believe to be of the highest value. Baldwin witnessed the collapse of French colonialism at close quarters [3]. He was familiar with the new ideas that this historic transformation released. He was present in Paris at the First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in September 1956, where he heard Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon. *Paris noir* was his Paris. Mabanckou's text is peppered with references to Césaire, Fanon and

[3] KAPLAN (Cora) and SCHWARZ (Bill), « America and Beyond », in KAPLAN (C.) and SCHWARZ (B.), eds, *James Baldwin. America and Beyond*. Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 2011, 228 p. ; p. 1-32.

Édouard Glissant. Attention to this intellectual world relocates Baldwin beyond an exclusively American focus and puts new emphasis on his work.

At the same time, Mabanckou brings to his reading of Baldwin the sensitivity of black Africa, an Africa only recently – in historical terms – freed from the jurisdiction of formal colonialism. The story of Baldwin and Africa is a complex one [4]. The intensity of Mabanckou's perspective, arising neither from the U.S. nor from the French *métropole*, shifts the angle of vision. Consequently Baldwin's commitment to his native land becomes more complexly layered. It's not so much that Mabanckou delivers new information or insights. It is the very existence of his tribute which is revealing. Reading Baldwin through these diasporic perspectives is a productive route to follow and cannot help but bring a deconstructive note to bear on Baldwin, one I find to be consonant with his writings. I do not mean « deconstructive » in the specifically Derridean sense. That could hardly be the case. Yet Baldwin was always sensitive to the doubleness of thought and to the surreptitious presence of a system's others in its very foundations. His was a life bred on displacement, as a being that was perpetually differently centred. Time and again he discovered himself to be « elsewhere », distanced from his native homeland and cut off from all that had once nourished the meaningfulness of his selfhood, and from which he was never able, finally, to separate himself. For Baldwin there could be no absolutes. No meaning existed outside the self. Meaning could only be located in what was to hand and improvised as best as possible.

Mabanckou is aware that his own life-journeys mirror in some form those of Baldwin, although the United States is for him his current, if not final, destination, not, as it was for Baldwin, the defining, foundational experience. Indeed in his Preface, Mabanckou chooses to frame the life he is about to narrate with an American story : not about Baldwin exactly, but about himself. Formally, this adds much to his account of Baldwin.

To be more precise, the opening scene takes us to Santa Monica beach. Mabanckou is mesmerized by an elderly, impoverished man who appears regularly on the beach, « conversing with invisible beings » (p. VIII) and building sandcastles before kicking them to

[4] FIELD (Douglas), « What Is Africa to Baldwin ? Cultural Illegitimacy and the Step-fatherland », in KAPLAN (C.) and SCHWARZ (B.), eds, *James Baldwin. America and Beyond*, *op. cit.*, p. 209-228 ; and SCHWARZ (B.), « After Decolonization, After Civil Rights : Chinua Achebe and James Baldwin », *The James Baldwin Review*, 1, Sep. 2015, p. 41-66.

destruction. Mabanckou explains his compulsion to get to know the stranger : « as if I expected him to reveal the key to the mysteries that confront me when I read your work. I cannot stop myself from wondering about his life, with the secret hope that one day I will find a way to speak to him about you » (p. VII-VIII).

The second person singular, here, turns out to be Jimmy. And the « wanderer », as he gets to be called, « seems like a character lifted straight from the pages of one of your novels » (p. VIII). Indeed *Letter to Jimmy* is dedicated to this distant apparition (p. VII-VIII).

Mabanckou returns to the wanderer in an Afterword. With the text now finished, he goes in search of his muse. He spots his man, noticing that amongst « the disorder of his belongings » there could be seen a copy of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (p. 154). For the first time, it appears, they converse. It transpires that the observer had been observed : the wanderer recognizes Mabanckou, knows where he lives, and announces that the apartment had once been his. They talk a little and arrange to meet the following day. And there the story of the wanderer closes. The reader will know nothing more. Whether the meeting occurred or not remains undisclosed.

It's difficult to know what to make of all this. Notwithstanding Mabanckou's contention, I can see no reason to suppose that the wanderer can be found in the pages of one of Baldwin's novels. Nor can we easily decide why Mabanckou came to believe that he held the secrets of Baldwin's life and writings. What the stranger signifies in relation to *Baldwin* is difficult to grasp. It feels like a conceit with nowhere to go.

It's possible, of course, that the entire episode is imagined. If so, one can't help but wonder why *that* story is given such analytical significance, framing the account of James Baldwin which follows. Yet even if the encounter took place, as recounted in the book, it's clear that the figure of the wanderer is almost exclusively the projection of Mabanckou's own desires. A few of his words are recorded. But the man himself is almost entirely an imaginary being, the creation of Mabanckou's own projections. In itself, there is nothing egregious about this. The book is a personal reflection – epistolary in form, addressed to the subject of the narrative – and there is no need for it to conform to the protocols of more conventional critical assessments. They are Mabanckou's musings and they stand as such.

And yet the very point of correspondence between the wanderer and Baldwin, as I read it, is the degree to which they both principally exist on the page as emphatic projections of Mabanckou. There is, of course, an inevitability about projection. A narrative in which the

self does not intervene is impossible to imagine. But if the purpose of the *Lettre* is to enlighten us about Baldwin, there is legitimate room for doubt about whether Mabanckou has achieved his aim. Reveries are fine. But not all reveries are equally illuminating.

The death of the main subject is characteristically difficult for biographical narratives to manage. In this case, as Baldwin's demise moves to the centre of the story, Mabanckou's prose shifts into a higher gear. Amplification takes over, and Mabanckou gets more daring in imputing his own reveries to Baldwin.

Roger Moore returns, this time alongside Tony Curtis. (By this stage I feel that the significance of Roger Moore in Mabanckou's story is increasingly improbable.) « On your deathbed », the reader is told – even though it is Baldwin who is directly addressed – « you can do nothing more than imagine these famous figures. You are waging a war against your own shadow » (p. 132). Mabanckou ponders the distress Jimmy was feeling while he contemplated all the work that lay incomplete : this he calls « a shroud of sadness » caused by the fact that « you » never finished « your last sentence » (p. 133). In his final confinement, the letter continues, « there is the feeling that Simone Signoret and your other friends dead long ago have come to bring you news of the other world » (p. 136). Maybe such things did indeed occur. To my mind little of this rings true. But who knows ?

Even so, Mabanckou compels us to ask the question of how we talk with, or to, Baldwin. As I've suggested, Baldwin in this respect is not the typical revered writer, monumentalized from the past. Many contemporary critics attest to the fact that he, particularly, continues to be active inside us, in uncanny ways.

Over the past ten years (from the time of the publication of Mabanckou's *Lettre*, in fact) a shifting group of those engaged with Baldwin, academics and non-academics, has been meeting – irregularly – in order to try to determine what he might mean for us. On occasion the depth of the participants' investments in Baldwin has been a cause for comment. Yet it was only relatively late in the sequence of meetings that the issue of *how* we remember Baldwin became both explicit and, as it did, a matter also of contention.

In June 2014 we met at the Université Paul-Valéry in Montpellier, at a colloquium organized by Claudine Raynaud and Quentin Miller. During the course of the discussions Brian Norman, a smart Baldwin scholar, expressed his unease at the reverence and the false intimacy shown to Baldwin. He didn't like the use of the name « Jimmy », which had popped up now and then, nor was he impress-

sed by the habit, which he saw taking shape on the horizon, of deferring to « Jimmy » regarding contemporary matters about which he, Baldwin, would have had no basis to form an opinion.

Straight away, opinion was divided. There were those who concurred, convinced that there was something « manic » (to use Melanie Klein's term) in such determination to recruit the dead for the purposes of the living [5]. And there were others who objected, imagining that conversing with the dead was not only a legitimate component of living but also that it provided a fruitful means – or a good enough means – to recognize, and to live with, whatever loss it was that people were experiencing.

At the start, in the way of these things, positions were polarized between those who thought the dead were dead. Their adversaries, on the other hand, were appreciative of the notion that the dead continue to be alive inside the psyches of the living. And – still in the way of these things – once the session had closed, disengagement had occurred, and the very decent coffee had been imbibed, everyone relaxed, and it became apparent that the binary which had prevailed was, of course, false. The dichotomy had emerged in the heat of the moment.

Looking back, though, there was one curious feature about the discussion. In this conference devoted to Baldwin no one (I hope I remember this correctly) suggested that we might actually turn to Baldwin – to his fiction and his essays, from *Go Tell It on the Mountain* onwards – in order to explore how he imagined the relations between the dead and the living, in the circumstances of his own life. For any future convention about Baldwin this could prove a valuable issue to explore.

There was a pleasant surprise as well. After the event it became clear why Brian Norman should have raised the issue. He was just about to publish his own study, entitled *Dead Women Talking : Figures of Injustice in American Literature* [6], a wonderful book, with enticing chapter headings (« Dead Women Gossiping » and « Dead Women Heckling », for example). It's also a great critical piece on American literature, working within the full compass of the canon, although sadly with no Baldwin. In his readings Norman chose not to use the term « ghosts », preferring to imagine his « undead women » who

[5] KLEIN (Melanie), « A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States », in MITCHELL (Juliet), ed., *The Selected Melanie Klein*. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1986, 256 p.

[6] NORMAN (Brian), *Dead Women Talking : Figures of Injustice in American Literature*. Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, 240 p.

felt compelled to talk as « posthumous citizens », which I believe to be a commendable formulation, one which continues to pass through my mind [7]. It opens many good avenues of inquiry. It also signals an affective-political means by which we might remember, and engage with, Baldwin.

Of course, there is a paradox underlying Norman's project. The dead women, or « undead women », whom his study evokes, work as the medium through which *the living* can tell the stories that possess them. These « posthumous citizens » become part of ourselves, and indeed function as projections of ourselves.

Mabanckou's *Letter to Jimmy* raises many of these questions, and more, in relation to Baldwin. It forces us to ask how our own projections can be serviceable. The book does not do this in ways that I find effective, or to which I adhere. But its virtue is that it dramatizes the questions of how we, the living, work with Baldwin. It opens up for reflection the part we play in his continuing afterlives.

Of course, putting our words into the mouth of James Baldwin is a hazardous business. Yet all of us who read Baldwin, or write about him, find that that's what we are obliged to do. It is, in one sense, the work of criticism : to make past texts live for us. It is also to be aware of what is at stake. We need to recognize the inherent precariousness of our work as critics. This seems especially so in the case of Baldwin, precisely because of the apparent « hospitality » of his prose (to use a Derridean term). His is a seductive mode of writing. He requires us to maintain our critical sensitivities at exactly those moments that he most seduces us.

We are left with a relay of questions. At what point does our « talking » with Jimmy / Baldwin become self-serving, in that through him we hear only our own voices, echoing back to ourselves ? What is lost when we speak of a figure we never knew ? When do the entirely proper « conversations » we choose to have with the deceased Baldwin lose themselves, collapse and edge toward the manic ? How can our own imperatives be pursued while, simultaneously, we remember and respect Baldwin for the person and writer he was ? When is it wiser that we maintain our counsel, and let Baldwin rest in peace ?

■ Bill SCHWARZ

[7] Though the idea of ghosts shouldn't necessarily be dispensed with so quickly. I've always liked Salman Rushdie's formulation : « What's a ghost ? Unfinished business, is what » – RUSHDIE (Salman), *The Satanic Verses*. London : Viking, 1988, 546 p. ; p. 129.