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## Defiance Against God

### A gay reading of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* by James Baldwin

In this paper I will attempt to give a gay reading of James Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Basically, I have a double aim. Firstly, I wish to take part in the formation of the Gay Literary Canon with my focusing on a novel by Baldwin where the homosexual content is not perceived as obvious, and is thus marginalised by most gay literary critics. Secondly, I hope to contribute to the academic emergence of Gay and Lesbian Studies in Hungarian scholarship.

First I propose to explain the critical term "gay reading," the tool I use in my reading. Then I intend to show how otherness and self-identity, the central themes of Baldwin's works, intersect in a homophobic society. Next, with a more provocative point, I suggest an analogy between blackness and gayness; not only because both of them are outcasts, but also because they are portrayed as sources of the possibility of forging one's higher self-identity. Finally, I will give a detailed reading of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* concerning sexuality. I hope to show that the mechanism of racial hatred and homophobia can be paralleled as long as the racist and heterosexist society looks upon the black and the gay man as alien "other" – as "nigger" and "faggot."

Gay and lesbian literary criticism is mostly interested in the literary aspect of sexuality. Our reading of a literary text is not to be considered valid today before sexuality in and around it has been addressed to challenge the cultural determination of the heterosexist values that are everywhere celebrated as if they were values per se. The method gay literary criticism uses is gay reading, and the interpretative position of the "gay reader" can be occupied by a woman or a non-gay man; by referring to her/him as "he" is just the product of an oversimplifica-

tion. The gay reader does not only read for inscriptions of his own condition, for texts that will confirm a social and private identity established on a desire for other men, because in that case (s)he could not be a woman or a non-gay reader.

Gay reading is based upon the common experience of male homosexuals. These people are constantly besieged by signs, making them particularly skilful readers. The structures of secrecy and disclosure that organise gay male experience lead them to scrutinise the behaviour of other men for signs of same sex desire on multiple levels. Not only do gay men consume signs, but they also produce them. To mark their identities, they use a variety of signifiers with a homosexual meaning which only those initiated into this subculture are capable of decoding. The gay critic reads literary texts searching for signs about homosexuality hidden in the subtext, and in many cases, when the gay reader is a gay man himself, his reading will become also a hunt for histories and identities that subconsciously trace a desire felt not by the author but by the reader, who is most acute when searching signs about himself.

James Baldwin's vision of otherness is very closely related to the vision of the self, thus the search for self-identity, the identity of a black gay man in a racist homophobic society is one of the central themes of his works. Almost all his main characters are involved in an agonising quest for the self. Reaching an authentic self and forging an identity depend on self-knowledge and, according to Baldwin, this can be achieved through suffering. If suffering is endured creatively, it can offer the possibility of obtaining a genuine sense of identity. Hence suffering has a humanising power and redemptive effect. Blackness and gayness can correspond to each other in Baldwin's fiction, as both of these are social constructions, and they also assume metaphorical functions; they are both sources of agony as well as means of redemption, and the forging of a self-identity.

In "The Black Boy looks at the White Boy," Baldwin says:

I think that I know something about American masculinity which most men of my generation do not know because they have not been menaced by it in the way that I have been.<sup>1</sup>

The male homosexual is also menaced by definitions of manhood that are used to denigrate his existence and individual dignity. Baldwin is passionately involved with the problems of both racism and homosexuality, so that his portrayal of

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<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin. "The Black Boy looks at the White Boy." *Nobody Knows My Name*. London: Corgi, 1965, p. 172.

racial conflict within the society often lends special authority to his analysis of that society's sexual stereotypes, and vice versa. He testifies to the difficulties of achieving a satisfying personal identity in a society which superimposes its conceptions of the "Negro" or the "faggot" upon individuals and which creates erroneous images of people only to persecute them with those same images.

When heterosexual prejudice joins forces with racial convictions, the complexity of the individual writer's work is lost in a set of emotional generalisations. Cleaver, for whom homosexuality is a "sickness," attacks Baldwin by likening him to the black homosexual who, deprived of his masculinity by worship of the white man, turns his self-contempt on other blacks, while fawning on his white lover.<sup>2</sup> Cleaver colludes in the white man's myth of the Negro's sexual potency, to dismiss the black homosexual as a traitor, a carrier of some white "disease." The knowledge that Baldwin, as one who has been menaced by it, claims about American masculinity, has an authority which in turn menaces the preferred images of manhood, both black and white. He puzzles over his own definitions in ways which explode the idea of narrowness in the experience of a racial and sexual minority. In his analysis the Negro or the homosexual are "inventions," or, as we would say today, constructions which reveal, ironically, more about the mainstream culture. Just as he portrays the African American, so the heterosexual confronted with his "blackening" of the outcast homosexual can be brought to a greater self-awareness. This idea is made satirically explicit in Baldwin's remark in *Dialogue with Nikki Giovanni*:

People invent categories in order to feel safe. White people invented black people to give white people identity. [...] Straight cats invent faggots so they can sleep with them without becoming faggots themselves.<sup>3</sup>

In various ways Baldwin's novels reflect the difficulties of individuals for whom the question of personal identity bears an urgent relation to that of social survival, because of their colour or sexuality. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* explores the extent to which inner drives can be contained within the available, approved models of society. One of the aims of Baldwin as a writer, very much like those of Henry James, another figure in the American gay canon, is to examine the problem of learning to live in a society whose manners, conventions and pre-

<sup>2</sup> Elderidge Cleaver. "Notes on a Native Son." *Soul on Ice*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963, p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni. *A Dialogue*. London: Penguin Books, 1973. pp. 88-89.

judices often threaten individual integrity. It seems to be of crucial importance in Baldwin's works to come to terms with that society's demands and to be able to make the necessary compromises without giving up one's essential self determined by race, gender, ethnicity and sexuality, to be clear about one's identity.

When *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was published in 1953, racial issues were as concerns most literary critics acceptable, but homosexuality was not and so the homosexual content is hidden in several codes which I intend to decipher in my reading. Many gay literary critics neglect Baldwin's first novel, not even mentioning its homosexual theme. I found only in *History of Gay Literature* a few lines referring to the possibility of a gay reading of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.<sup>4</sup> The homosexual content is not obvious for the heterosexual reader, but this is what makes it more challenging for the gay critic to give a gay reading of the novel.

In his first novel, Baldwin gives the reader an account of a young man's turbulent adolescence in which intimations of his homosexual awakening are structurally integrated into the process of a seemingly religious conversion. In what follows, I would like to prove that the central event of the novel, Johnny's conversion, functions as a kind of realisation of his homosexuality as well as his defiance against God. God in the novel does not seem to be the God of love, but, like any oppressor, gives the rules to the oppressed and confines their lives with limitations. God in this context appears to be emblematic of the white, heterosexist society; consequently, it seems to me that though *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is a novel written by a black writer about black people, set in Harlem and in the deep South, it is yet not essentially only a "Negro novel" but one of a more universal meaning.

With his first novel, Baldwin opened a new chapter in the history of mainstream African American literature, as O'Neal claims.<sup>5</sup> Baldwin may be seen as a black American writer to distance himself from the Black Church by his overt portrayal of its lack of authentic Christian commitment. Baldwin's treatment of homosexuality as the most acceptable form of love was not compatible with Christian teachings; he not only shocked black scholars but also opened a

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<sup>4</sup> Gregory Woods. *A History of Gay Literature*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Sondra A. O'Neal. "Fathers, Gods, and Religion: Perceptions of Christianity and Ethnic Faith in James Baldwin." *Critical Essays on James Baldwin*. Ed. F. L. Standley and Nancy V. Burt. Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1988, p. 140.

new way for non-Christian African American literature deprived of Biblical foundation.

Baldwin's childhood and the fictional parallels in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* obviously indicate the autobiographical references, such as the religious elements along with the writer's hatred for his stern stepfather, a Pentecostal preacher.

In his long essay, *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin undoubtedly says that in his first novel he was writing out of his own experience.<sup>6</sup> Yet in his childhood he experienced the victimising white power and the degradation and brutality of the Harlem ghetto. For him, who was growing up in Harlem, damnation was a real danger. In his above-mentioned essay Baldwin gives account of his childhood fears:

For the wages of sin were visible everywhere, in every wine-stained and urine splashed hallway, in every clanging ambulance bell, in every scar on the faces of the pimps and their whores, in every helpless, newborn baby being brought into this danger, in every knife and pistol fight on the Avenue.<sup>7</sup>

Gayle suggests that "no writer knows the ghetto or its people better than Baldwin, and the frequent depictions of the city in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* express the squalor, the impersonality, poverty and the various crimes that threaten with corruption."<sup>8</sup> The Black Church offered shelter and refuge to Baldwin from the terrors of the streets, thus safety and God became synonymous for him, and the Church served as a kind of survival strategy when he was young.

By the time *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was ready for publication, Baldwin had formally broken away from the Church in Harlem; indeed, by 1954 he was no longer a member of any Church. However, this formal renunciation of the ministry was by no means a reliable indication that he had truly won that freedom from the terror of sin which the break was meant to imply. Macebuh says that despite Baldwin's break with the Church, the habits of his thought formed over a period of twenty years were not to be ignored totally merely by a formal declaration of separation.<sup>9</sup> I will try to show how Baldwin's need to

<sup>6</sup> James Baldwin. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Dial Press, 1963.

<sup>7</sup> Baldwin. *The Fire Next Time*, p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> Addison Gayle. "Cultural Nationalism: The Black Novelist in America." *Black Roots Bulletin*. Vol.1. (1971), p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Macebuh. *James Baldwin: A Critical Study*. London: Michael Joseph, 1973, p. 51.

destroy the apocryphal vision of the life which the Church had taught him led in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* to a compassionate but heretical representation of the religious life in the novel.

From the beginning of the novel it is clear for the reader that the writer's use of religious symbolism is of central importance. The title is the first line of a Negro spiritual, which refers to the gospel, the good news, that Jesus Christ is alive. The subtitle of Part One is "The Seventh Day," another Biblical allusion that sets the particular situation of the fourteen-year-old John Grimes' conflict with his stepfather about family relations, Christian belief, and racial attitudes into a very broad context. "The Seventh Day" refers to the creation story of Genesis. Johnny's fourteenth birthday is like the seventh day of creation: both mark the end of a creative process, the moment at which a completed whole emerges – in Johnny's case through the awakening of self-identity. The essence of this religious symbolism is to keep the reader aware that the main character's struggle in society is full of elements of supposedly universal significance.

Johnny's stern stepfather, Gabriel, has a speaking name in Biblical terms. His name literally means "God's messenger." This can be seen as Johnny's defiance against the vengeful God, who, in the character of Gabriel, embodies white homophobic society. Johnny both fears and hates his stepfather, and so he also makes an attempt to break away from his ties to Gabriel's God and from the ties of theological terror. However, God is an abstraction against whom/which rebellion does not seem to make too much sense in practical terms, so Gabriel, who in many respects is identified with God, becomes the actual object of Johnny's fear and hatred. Johnny's loathsome feelings become more and more intense as he gradually perceives his emotions in such a way that homosexual love is a real, conceivable possibility, one that he realises to be questioned, even negated by Christian theology. The negation of the possibility of love is extended from the personal to the communal level, and it becomes the root of oppressions of minority groups in society. Fear and despair serve as base of the protagonist's defiance which culminates in his "getting a new religion."

It is the technique of flashbacks that Baldwin uses to portray the lives of the "saints," through which one gains a perspective of Johnny's conversion. The definition of sin is construed from various aspects in the novel as well as the sin of the characters. All the major characters who pray in the church are, in some way, sinful.

Let me give examples of the characters' sin to illustrate my point. Florence, Gabriel's sister, is dying of cancer, and it is her fear of death that drove her to the evening prayer, where she asks God for forgiveness of her sins. When she was quite young, she left her dying mother and she came North in the hope of making her life better; she left her brother alone to nurse their mortally ill mother. If we consider Florence's sin as hateful malice against Gabriel, Gabriel's is, despite his pretensions to moral rectitude, that he is basically unable to love anybody. Elisha's sanctity is "corrupted" by his innocent affair with Ella Mae, and his sexually motivated love for Johnny.

Johnny realises his "sin" when he wakes up on the morning of his fourteenth birthday. His feeling guilty seems to weigh on him heavily as he is convinced that nothing can save him. Johnny came under the influence of a new Sunday school teacher, the seventeen-year-old Elisha, the nephew of the pastor. On the occasion of their first meeting Johnny's reaction is immediate, it is as if he exchanged his fear of God for his admiration and love for Elisha:

[...] he was distracted by his new teacher, Elisha [...] John stared at Elisha all during the lesson, admiring the timbre of Elisha's voice, much deeper and manlier than his own, admiring the leanness, and grace, and strength, and darkness of Elisha in his Sunday suit, [...] But he did not follow the lesson, and when, sometimes, Elisha paused to ask John a question, John was ashamed and confused, feeling the palms of his hands become wet and his heart pound like a hammer. (13-14)<sup>10</sup>

Johnny's reaction here is depicted in the same way as a heterosexual boy's when he falls in love with a girl at first sight, so it seems possible that Johnny admires Elisha with homoerotic love. The actual cause of his desperate fear of damnation is that roughly at the same time as he first meets Elisha, Johnny begins to masturbate - or in his view to "sin" - to the accompaniment of homoerotic fantasies:

He had sinned. In spite of the saints, his mother and his father, the warnings he had heard from his earliest beginnings, he had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone, thinking of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to whose urine could arch higher, he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak. (20)

<sup>10</sup> All parenthesised references are to this edition: James Baldwin. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. London: Penguin Books, 1991.

This transformation is not only the development of his sexual self at puberty, but also the increasing realisation that a significant aspect of his burgeoning sexuality is focused on the bodies of older boys, Elisha most of all. Already assumed guilty about his sexual transgression, he is then all the more guilt-ridden when he interprets the fantasies that accompany these moments of transgression. Not only is he becoming a sinner, but also his sin is that of the sodomite. At the end of Part One of the novel, Johnny tries to find out what Elisha might be thinking about and doing in bed:

And he watched Elisha, who was a young man in the Lord. [...] What were the thoughts of Elisha when night came, and he was alone where no eye could see, and no tongue bear witness, save only the trumpet-like tongue of God? Were his thoughts, his bed, his body foul? What were his dreams? (69)

There is a kind of hope involved here, to a certain degree, that Elisha's bed and body are indeed foul, maybe foul enough in an ideal world to deserve sharing. One may conclude, here, that when he goes to bed, Johnny's own thoughts and body are also "foul" with his fantasies about Elisha.

I suppose that Johnny's "sin" is not a guilt of the flesh but a fundamental one that disturbs the "proper" relationship between man and God. His sin is not merely that he has become aware of his desire, but that, in refusing to admit his guilt by falling at the feet of God, he placed himself in opposition to God:

The darkness of his sin was the hardheartedness with which he resisted to God's power; in the scorn that was often his while he listened to the crying, breaking voices, and watched the black skin glisten while they lifted up their arms and fell on their faces before the Lord. For he had made his decision. He would not be like his father, or his father's fathers. He would have another life. (20)

In spite of his defiance and his determination to have another life, Johnny remains as much a victim of his fears of God as those who are willing to accept his power. Johnny's relationship with God is primarily characterised by fear, but it is also fear that serves as a basic element in his complex relationship to his stepfather, Gabriel. The reader is given sufficient account of Gabriel's hatred towards his stepson. Johnny is not the offspring of an immaculate conception, for he is the son of a bondswoman, Elizabeth.

Conceiving her life, Elizabeth has experienced both fall and redemption. With Richard, whom she was going to marry, she brought an illegitimate child



into the world, but through Gabriel her sin is retrieved. She fell in love with Richard and came North with him to Harlem, where they worked and hoped to get married soon. One night he is arrested and accused of a crime he has not committed. When denying the accusation, he is beaten up savagely by the police. When he is finally released, he commits suicide. After this tragic event Elizabeth retreats from life. Her subsequent marriage to Gabriel is a form of penitence for her "sin," her having given birth to an illegitimate child.

When Gabriel prays on the night of Johnny's conversion, his thoughts of his own youth come back, of his boring marriage to Deborah and his short, adulterous affair with Esther. At the age of sixteen, Deborah was raped by white men. Gabriel marries her, a woman considered unattractive by the neighbours, with the hope of controlling the sexual desires of his flesh. However, he soon enters into an adulterous relationship with Esther, to whose pregnancy he cannot respond in a responsible way: he neither supports Esther, nor reveals the truth to Deborah. Esther dies at childbirth and later her son is killed in Chicago. Soon after the death of Gabriel's illegitimate child, Deborah dies childless. Gabriel moves North, where he meets and marries Elizabeth, and he promises her to raise Johnny as his own son.

In Johnny's mind the objects of his fear are ultimately inseparable. In terms of their threat to his existence, there is no significant difference between God, Gabriel, and the racist and heterosexist society that emerges as a threat to destroy him. The God in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* appears vengeful and loveless; similarly, Gabriel is also driven by insane and self-consuming hatred, as he is not able to love.

The contents of Gabriel's life seem to be a moral evasion; his family and his friends exist for him merely as a contrastive basis for his pretentious sanctimoniousness. He hates his sister, Florence, because she has always refused to support his assumption of his own moral superiority. When she is praying in tortured pain in the church, he is very pleased as he thinks that God's vengeance finally catches her and brings her low:

Gabriel turned to stare at her, in astonished triumph that his sister should at least be humbled. [...] She knew that Gabriel rejoiced, not that her humility might lead her to grace, but only that some private anguish had brought her low. (73)

Gabriel is unable and unwilling to face the darker side of his own self. He is the secret father of an illegitimate child and at the same time a preacher of the

gospel. In order to perpetuate his sanctimonious image, he sacrifices everybody's life around himself. His relations to women are mostly characterised by an egocentric drive to destroy the co-operative engagement that can transform sexual intercourse from passion to love. He never regards his wives or Esther more than neutral mediums through whom his being the Lord's anointed one can be demonstrated and justified. He feels as if his women should be obligated to him forever for being the chosen vessels through which his heroism must flourish. Gabriel's misogyny is quite obvious; he despises Elizabeth, as well as Deborah, his first wife, because in his eyes they are "fallen women."

Gabriel's principal victim is Johnny, Elizabeth's illegitimate child, in whom he sees his own sin. When he disowns her son, he disowns the darker side of his self, too. Bone says that his psychological attitude is white.<sup>11</sup> The mechanism Gabriel uses throughout the novel is the scapegoat mechanism, which is part of the nature of any oppression. Gabriel is to some extent equivalent to God, so he can be identified with the white homophobic society. He thinks that he is immaculate, so to say "white," without any stain. If he is the saintly, the saved, the elected, then logically there must be the evil, which is the black. He would rather the illegitimate child paid the price of his sin.

From the point of view of Christian teachings, one would expect the God of this novel to avenge himself on Johnny and Elisha, as he did on Richard and Elizabeth. If we consider that the two boys love each other, and yet their love does not come to an end as abruptly as Richard's love for Elizabeth, there is the suggestion at the end of the novel that their love grows rather than dies. I think this is so because homosexuality, in Baldwin's works, is portrayed as the only valid form of love. From this point of view one can easily understand why heterosexual intercourse in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, as well as in Baldwin's other novels, is often depicted as brutal – when, for example, Deborah is raped, or when Gabriel makes love to her later; when he has intercourse with Esther, and when Johnny observes his parents in bed, it is always portrayed to the reader as an ugly and disgusting show.

Premarital sex is seen in Gabriel's dreadful theology as sin, consequently Elisha is scolded for his harmless affair with Ella Mae. For him, then, homosexuality should be much more hateful, since it does not have any potential of producing offspring, and practically, Johnny and Elisha's wrestling incident

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<sup>11</sup> Robert A. Bone. "The Novels of James Baldwin." *Images of the Negro in American Literature*. Ed. Seymour L. Gross and John Edward Hardy. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966, p. 273.

happened in the temple of God. It seems that both boys enjoyed physical closeness to each other while wrestling, so Baldwin's description of the two boys' incident appears homoerotic. It is worth mentioning here that in Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, it is also a wrestling match which serves as a prelude to the main character's first homosexual love-making. Since homosexual love in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* remains only a possibility, the highest peak of the corporal intimacy between Johnny and Elisha stops at the level of wrestling. Gabriel did not know about the two boys' wrestling incident in the temple, but it must be his heterosexist obtuseness that prevents him from seeing the erotic element in Elisha's evangelical zeal.

It is not until the end of the novel that Johnny's relationship with Elisha re-emerges as a significant theme, although it is clear that Elisha has remained an outstanding presence in Johnny's thoughts throughout the narrative. In Part Three, Johnny is lying in front of the altar, and a series of visions pass through his mind. His Freudian fantasies of damnation express the state of the soul when pushed into outer darkness by a punishing father, who is the emblem of the white, homophobic and hostile society.

When Johnny is "saved," he is still trying to negotiate a space in which he would live possibly as a gay man, somewhere between his resentment of his father and his desire for Elisha. It is Elisha's voice that guides him through his confusion, and it is his promise of prayers for his "little brother" that helps to diminish Johnny's anguish, and it is his kiss that resolves and ends the novel:

And he kissed John on the forehead a holy kiss. [...] The sun had come full awake. It was waking the streets, and the houses, and crying at the windows. It fell over Elisha like a golden robe, and struck John's forehead, where Elisha had kissed him, like a seal ineffaceable forever. (254)

In my interpretation, Johnny is confirmed in his homosexuality by the kiss, and this kiss is merely an irreversible first step towards complete sexual union with another man or other men, and in religious terms is less "holy" for that.

Many critics, like Gérard, describe Johnny's conversion as the acceptance of his blackness.<sup>12</sup> I agree with Gérard with the addition that blackness and homosexuality in the novel correspond with each other concerning the protagonist, Johnny. His conversion is not only accepting his blackness but, as it is ex-

<sup>12</sup> Albert Gérard. "The Sons of Ham." *Studies in the Novel*. Vol. 3, Summer 1971, p. 161.

pressed in the last lines of the novel (“‘I’m ready,’ John said, ‘I’m coming. I’m on my way.’”), also his homosexuality.

*Go Tell It on the Mountain* is not a religious novel, although assuredly religion is a significant aspect of it. The novel is a lyric celebration of the struggles of such weak characters as Johnny and Elisha, who realise their true potentials in life through their love for each other. Homosexual love, especially when it expresses itself in the temple of God, is the highest form of defiance against God, since it seeks to invalidate the power from external forces expressed in the theological form which oppresses people.

At the beginning of the novel, Johnny’s sin is that he tries to substitute God with Elisha and to exchange his fear of God for his admiration and love for Elisha. At the end, when Johnny is lying on the “threshing floor” in front of the altar in psychic pain, it is Elisha’s intervention that rescues him from the abyss. Quite ironically, when Elisha is sure that Johnny has been “saved,” there is indeed the indication of Johnny’s release from the power of God’s vengeance. Love in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* remains only a possibility. The novel closes with Baldwin’s giving notice of the liberating power from theological terror, through Johnny and Elisha’s discovery of a new, heretic, but more congenial religion, the religion of love.