

## **Mapping the Transcultural Impulse of Postcategorical Utopia: Modernity and Its Black Counterculture in James Baldwin's *Just above My Head***

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### **Introduction**

More than thirty years after its publication James Baldwin's last novel *Just above My Head* (1979) remains curiously overlooked and underappreciated. This is a symptom of the general tendency to place more value and emphasis on his earlier work; a tendency which has only quite recently begun to be seriously questioned. The significance of this particular novel becomes quite evident, however, on the very first page, as the narrative sketches a map that connects three continents: Europe, America, and Africa. The narrative starts with a graphic depiction of the main character Arthur's death 'in a men's room in the basement of a London pub' (Baldwin 2000: 3). It then moves on to the telephone call relating the news to Arthur's brother, Hall, in New York, and to a description of Arthur's thinning hair, 'that rain forest of Senegalese hair' (2000: 3). Finally, after referring to Arthur's lover, Jimmy, in Paris, the narrative briefly focuses on Jimmy's sister, Julia, in Yonkers, New York. Having thereby evoked the geography of the Transatlantic Triangular Trade and the concomitant memory of slavery, the novel assumes an intriguing position between and beyond Western modernity and what Paul Gilroy refers to as its black counterculture in his seminal work, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). This position provides a convenient starting point for a reading of the novel in accordance with the definition of the concept of transculturation which David Attwell, following Fernando Ortiz's ideas originated in the 1940s and 50s, defines as 'processes of cultural destruction followed by reconstruction on entirely new terms' (2006: 18).

By establishing a connection to the history and geography of the black diaspora and the black experience of modernity, *Just above My Head* assumes a remarkable level of political relevance hitherto ignored by most critics. Firstly, it takes a stand against the issue of racism embedded within the ideologies and practices of modernity by portraying the devastating effects it imposes on the characters of the novel. Secondly, the text also criticizes the heteronormative

tendencies within the black counterculture, particularly black Christianity. This becomes evident primarily in the way in which the novel juxtaposes gospel performances with implications of homosexual desire and, conversely, depicts homosexual acts through allusions to gospel lyrics. This is what I refer to as *queering the gospel*. As a result, *Just above My Head* becomes an integral part of the larger thematic undercurrent which runs through the entirety of Baldwin's oeuvre: the impulse of *postcategorical utopia*, that is, an impulse towards a world where the oppressive effects of identity categories would dissolve. It is based on Baldwin's persistent denouncement of the classification of human beings according to the intersectional categories of race, sexuality, gender, class, and so on. His work portrays this kind of categorization, which is characteristic of modernity, as fundamentally oppressive, because it produces unjust relations of social and political power and violently simplifies the diversity of humanity.<sup>1</sup> In a transcultural reading, *Just above My Head* challenges the ideological premises of the two cultural assemblages – Western modernity and its black countermodernity – in which it was produced and foregrounds the vision of or the impulse towards the new cultural space of postcategorical utopia.

The central role of music in *Just above My Head* is a particularly significant issue, because music is, for Gilroy, the most important cultural manifestation of black countermodernity (1993: 36). The influence of black music is visible on various levels of the novel: in its overall form and structure, characterized by Eleanor Traylor as 'a gospel tale told in the blues mode' (1989: 15), in the numerous allusions to gospel and blues songs in the text and in the epigraphs, and in the vocation of Arthur Montana as a gospel singer. The politically subversive function of black music is emphasized in the text as it portrays Arthur's performances in the context of the civil rights movement. What makes *Just above My Head* particularly interesting is its refusal to subscribe uncritically to the ideologies of the black counterculture of modernity, as it seeks to go beyond the ideological stances and categories which have often been taken for granted, accepted as unquestionable truths, and, consequently, used as instruments of social and political power. Sexuality becomes the locus of the ideological dispute between this novel and the issue of heteronormativity which can be detected in black cultural traditions, especially in the intertwining of gospel songs and depictions of homosexuality in the text. Arthur is placed at the centre of the narrative and as the representative of black musical and religious cultures, but at the same time he challenges their ideological limitations through his nonnormative sexuality. As a consequence, Arthur becomes a personification of the Baldwinian impulse of postcategorical utopia, a transcultural messenger of a world free from the oppressive effects of social categorization, who challenges

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<sup>1</sup> For more, see Pekka Kilpeläinen (2010: 1-2).

and attempts to transcend the categories of both racism and heteronormativity, of both modernity and its black counterculture.

### ***Just above My Head* as a Critique of Racism**

Ideologies and practices of racism are deeply embedded within Western modernity. As Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out,

racism is strictly a modern product. Modernity made racism possible. It also created a demand for racism; an era that declared achievement to be the only measure of human worth needed a theory of ascription to redeem boundary-drawing and boundary-guarding concerns under new conditions which made boundary-crossing easier than ever before. (1989, 61-62)

Directly connected to this, modernity has also constructed what may be thought of as the ideal subject – white, heterosexual, male – on the basis of the identity categories defined and delineated by these boundaries and, simultaneously, rendered deviations from this ideal subordinate. The issue of racism also underlies the entire narrative of *Just above My Head*. It is encountered explicitly in the discussions between the characters concerning the issues of segregation, black nationalism, lynchings, and everyday survival, and, importantly, in the experiences portrayed in the text. At times in more implicit ways, racism functions as a decisive source of conflict in the lives of the characters in the novel.

The inescapable force of racism is particularly visible in the text as Arthur visits the Southern states performing in protest meetings and fund-raising rallies in the late 1950s and the 1960s. These incidents may be read as pieces of immersion narrative<sup>2</sup> as they establish the South as a mythical place, simultaneously terrifying and fascinating. Travelling through the Southern landscape, Arthur's brother, Hall, who also functions as the narrator, adopts the point of view of a fugitive slave in his thoughts:

The land was flat: no cover. Then I heard dogs yelping, yowling, barking through this landscape, looking for me. I heard the men breathing, heard their boots, heard the click of the gun, the rifle: looking for me. And there was no cover. The trees were no cover. The ditch was a trap. The horizon was ten thousand miles away. One could never reach it, drop behind it, stride the hostile elements all the way – to Canada? Round and round the tree: no cover. Into the tall grass: no cover. That hill over yonder: too high, not high enough, no cover. Circle back, no cover; pissing as you run, no cover; the breath and the hair and the odor and the teeth of the dogs, no cover; and the blood running down, the tears and the snot and the piss and the shit

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Stepto defines immersion narrative as 'an expression of a ritualized journey into a symbolic South' (Stepto 1979: 167). According to Edward M. Pavlič, 'the symbolic South [...] represents a nonresolving, always ambivalent mixture of danger and possibility' (Pavlič 2002: 19).

running out, dragged by dogs out of the jaws of dogs, forever and forever and forever, no mercy, and no cover! (2000: 399)

This passage combines collective memory and individual presence by diverting from linear time. This terrible history which Hall reimagines is a part of the black heritage, in accordance with Gilroy's view of the memory of slavery as the unifying factor of African Americans and the whole black diaspora. In spite of this, Arthur, Hall, and their friend, Peanut, feel curiously drawn to the South, a central scene of the centuries of slavery:

I think Arthur had to find out something, wanted to see for himself, exactly what had changed on these roads since he had traveled them last. Peanut was willing to teach him; Peanut was endlessly willing to see. And they both, for different reasons, in their different fashions, wanted to see what I saw, wanted to see it through my eyes. I think that they felt, obscurely – and I think I understand this – that what I saw, since I was seeing it for the first time, would cause all three of us to see what no single one of us would have been able to see alone. (2000: 396-97)

These passages clearly refer to the inherent forms of oppression within Western modernity which, as Gilroy puts it, 'lost its exclusive claim to rationality partly through the way that slavery became internal to western civilisation and through the obvious complicity which both plantation slavery and colonial regimes revealed between rationality and the practice of racial terror' (Gilroy 1993: 39). In other words, racism is not an issue external to modernity; rather, it is an inherent part of modernity itself. The above quote from *Just above My Head* also underlines the significance of communality in African American and diasporan experience, which challenges the notion of American individualism and seeks to resolve the problematic, oppressive tendencies of modernity.

Although the most vivid and dramatic depictions of racial terror in the text take place in the South, the presence of racism is visible also in New York, for example as Hall narrates the reactions of white personnel at a shop:

There can be a great many advantages to being black; for example, in those years anyway, when you walked into such a store downtown, everybody dropped whatever they were doing and hustled over to serve you at once. If you had any sense, you didn't give them a lecture on how you knew they'd come rushing over to you because they knew you were a penniless thief. No, you smiled, and you smiled at the house dick, idly buffing his fingernails next to the panic button, and let them try to guess where you carried your wallet, if you had one. (2000: 99)

The fact that racism is a viable force not merely in the South is further evidenced in the text as the family of Hall and Arthur discuss the process of desegregation in Washington. Their father argues that "[t]hey ain't going change their laws for us –

it just ain't in them. They change their laws when their laws make *them* uncomfortable, or when they think they can see some kind of advantage for *them* – we ain't, really, got nothing to do with it" (Baldwin 2000: 300, italics in original). These examples confirm the significance of racism, in its various guises, as one of the forces shaping the everyday existence of black American characters in the novel.

Music appears as an important form of resistance against racism; it is the main vehicle of the utopian desire that seeks to counter the ideologies of racism and to imagine resolutions. The trope of call and response is central in this respect, and it is visible in *Just above My Head* on various levels, ranging from the level of the narrated events of the novel, particularly the interaction between Arthur and his audience, to the level of the narrative and the overall structure of the novel. Arthur's role as a gospel singer is explicitly political, first, because he functions as a personification of the political urgency of the traditions of black Christianity and black culture in general. Secondly, this role is also overtly political on the surface level of the narrative as a result of the various references to and depictions of Arthur's participation in the civil rights movement. This is also where the revolutionary utopian potential of black music receives its clearest manifestation.

An example of this can be found at a fund-raising rally in a church in Atlanta during one of Arthur's trips to the South. The white policemen and motorists surrounding the church represent the ideologies of white supremacy, and their function is to uphold the status quo of racial oppression sanctioned by legislation:

The 'motorists' outside carried guns and clubs and had not been assigned to this place, this evening, for the purpose of protecting our lives. They were there to protect their stolen property, every inch of this land having been stolen: the government of the United States once passed laws protecting my 'owners' against theft. Our lives had meant nothing then; our lives meant nothing now. The impulse and the assignment of the motorists was to find an opportunity to hang us. (2000: 405)

This clash between the representatives of Western modernity and its black counterculture is invested with a strong sense of racial tension and hostility. The air of fear inside the church is, however, drastically transformed when Arthur begins to sing a gospel song, 'God Leads His Dear Children Along.'

It was an old song: it sounded, at this moment, and in this place, older than the oldest trees.

*Through shady, green pastures,  
So rich and so sweet*

There was an indescribable hum of approbation and delight: for, at this moment and in this place, the song was new, was being made new.

*God leads His dear children along.*

I watched my brother with a new wonder, feeling the power of the people at my back, and all around me. *It seemed to us, to us who heard him, that he was singing about us.* And so it did, as though a design long hidden was being revealed. *He is – us.* (2000: 406, italics in original)

The power of community and tradition conveyed by this passage expresses a utopian impulse, a desire for change, which stands contrary to the stagnating ideological force of white supremacy. The trope of call and response assumes an important role in this scene; first implicitly, without any audible signs, without language:

Without a sound, I heard the church sing with him, anticipating one line, one beat, ahead of him.

*God leads His dear children along. [...]*

The church had still not made a sound: it was as though all their passion were coming through that one voice. And now, it was not only this time and this place. The enormity of the miles behind us began to be as real as the stones of the road on which we had presently set our feet. [...] The church had still not made a sound, yet it was filled with thunder. [...]

If I had been among the motorists, or if I had been the governor, I think I would have been afraid. I might even have fallen on my knees. (2000: 407-08, italics in original)

The power of shared cultural memory and tradition enables the audience to anticipate Arthur's performance, which binds them together and creates a strong sense of community. This is an instance of how cultural and social memory functions, as James Fentress and Chris Wickham point out, 'as an expression of collective experience: social memory identifies a group, giving it a sense of its past and defining its aspirations for the future' (Fentress and Wickham 1992: 25).

The feeling of cultural unity is radically enhanced by the intensification of the call and response pattern as Arthur's call begins to arouse more and more response from the crowd:

I felt a vast heaving, a collective exhaling, as though no one had been able to breathe until Arthur had reached the end of the beginning of the song. And now, indeed, I heard the voice of an old woman, saying, as out of the immense, the fiery

cloud of the past, *yes, child, sing it*, and Arthur stepped forward, stretching out his arms, inviting the church to bear witness to his testimony:

*Have you been through the water?  
Have you been through the flood?*

And the answer rolled back, not loud, low, coming from the deep, *Yes, Lord!*  
(2000: 408, italics in original)

In this reciprocal communicative process, the response of the people urges the singer on, until Arthur's voice changes from a single voice singing a song to a multitude of voices carrying the burden of centuries of oppression; an array of voices which reaches far beyond the confines of the present time and space, on that particular evening in that particular church in Atlanta, and adopts a distinctly subversive role and function as a protest against the history of racial discrimination. This scene also encompasses the constituents of what Craig Werner defines as the gospel impulse, which consists of the burden, bearing witness, and the vision of universal salvation (Werner 1994: 269). The people in the church are bearing witness to the burden of the history of racial oppression and, simultaneously, envisioning salvation, a better future. At that moment, gospel adopts the function, as Werner suggests, of 'connecting past with future' (1994: 220) and becomes a form of resistance in the present. In other words, the collective memory of slavery is restored to the surface and the present of the narrative, and becomes a requisite for imagining alternative futures. The collective memory of slavery evoked by the call and response strategy between Arthur and the audience is evidently an instance of such counterhistory, or, to put it in the terms used by Gilroy, the counterculture of modernity, which seeks to undermine the claim to universal authority of the version of history endorsed by Western modernity.

It is interesting to notice that in Arthur's performance, the gospel song 'God Leads His Dear Children Along' is reconceptualized as a chronotope<sup>3</sup> in which the spatio-temporal history of black America is condensed. It carries the memory of slavery and other forms of institutionalized racism, the suffering and the fear, and, importantly, the strategies of resistance and survival, the relief and the hope, all interwoven into the texture of the song and the shared communal experience of

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<sup>3</sup> According to M. M. Bakhtin's definition, a chronotope is '[l]iterally, "time-space." A unit of analysis for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented. The distinctiveness of this concept as opposed to most other uses of time and space in literary analysis lies in the fact that neither category is privileged; they are utterly interdependent. The chronotope is an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring' (Bakhtin 1981: 425-26). Gilroy makes use of the concept by establishing the image of the slave ship as a chronotope which encompasses the memory of slavery and its various implications shared by the peoples of the black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993: 4).

the fund-raising rally. Spatially speaking, this marks the tension between the relative shelter of the church and the danger posed by the surrounding representatives of white supremacy. In temporal terms, the song and the collective act of call and response bring together the history and present of racial terror and, on the other hand, the progressive force of the civil rights movement which represents the hope for change. In this way, the song encompasses the past, the present, and the future. This is the utopian dimension of African American culture represented by a gospel song.

What must not be ignored, however, is the fact that there are certain ideological contradictions in the tradition of black Christianity. The first source of ambivalence is the ideological role of Christianity in justifying the institution of slavery and the alleged inferiority of peoples of African descent. The second is the ambivalent function of Christianity among African Americans as not exclusively a revolutionary but also a reactionary force which has tended to render progressive impulses harmless by endorsing passive and fatalistic attitudes. As Mikko Tuhkanen points out, the ambivalent role of religion becomes manifest in African American texts which ‘suggest that spirituality, *like everything else*, is an inherently double-edged tool whose potential for dismantling the master’s mansion is never clearly separated from its ability for neat housekeeping,’ and that this ambivalence must be acknowledged in order to avoid simplifying generalizations, and for black religion to have any reconstructive power (Tuhkanen 2005: 100, italics in original). In *Just above*, this ambivalence comes through in the way in which the text comments on the lyric of ‘God Leads His Dear Children Along’: ‘*Are you washed in His blood?* And that mighty silence fell again, as Arthur paused, threw back his head, throwing his voice out, out, beyond the motorists and the governor, and the blood-stained trees, trees blood-stained forever’ (Baldwin 2000: 409; italics in original). In other words, the text problematizes the conception of being washed in the blood of God by juxtaposing it with the powerful metaphor of the bloodstained trees that instantly evoke images of blacks lynched and mutilated by white mobs.

### **Queering the Gospel**

What makes *Just above My Head* particularly important is the fact that it is not content to establish itself uncritically as a part of the black counterculture of modernity. Instead, it questions and contests the ideology of heteronormativity adopted from the white patriarchy of Western modernity and, at times, intensified by black cultural traditions. One of the most important examples of this may be found in the homophobia prevalent in the Black Power movement, Eldridge Cleaver’s attack against Baldwin’s homosexuality being an infamous instance of this (1968: 122-37). *Just above My Head* reaches beyond the horizons of black



countermodernity towards the horizon of postcategorical utopia. This is exactly what may be regarded as the transcultural dimension of the novel. The main vehicle of this political act is Arthur, who represents the traditions of black music and Christianity, but, simultaneously, violates and challenges their conventions through his transgressive, nonnormative sexuality. This is manifested in the novel particularly in the way in which the depictions of the performances of the gospel quartet, the Trumpets of Zion, in which Arthur sings as a teenager, are criss-crossed with implications of homosexuality and, on the other hand, in the use of gospel lyrics and religious language to portray homosexual acts. In other words, *Just above My Head* engages in a process of deconstructing and undermining the normative position of heterosexuality and, by extension, of any essentialized conceptions of identity by seeking to transcend the limitations and taboos imposed on the concept of sexuality in the context of Western modernity and its black counterculture.

*Just above My Head* adopts an explicit stance against the heteronormativity within black counterculture through a process which may be termed the queering of the gospel. This radical questioning and challenging of the heteronormative tendencies of black Christianity and other forms of black cultures enables the novel to be read in terms of literary transculturations. This transgressive and subversive function is evidenced, first, by the way in which the text narrates a performance of the Trumpets of Zion following the falling in love of Arthur and Crunch, a member of the gospel quartet:

Crunch and he were moving together, here, now, in the song, to some new place; they had never sung together like this before, his voice in Crunch's sound, Crunch's sound filling his voice [...]

*none*  
*amazing grace – !*  
*none but the righteous*  
*yea, little fellow, come on in!*  
*shall see God. [...]*

Crunch and Arthur wiped their brows carefully before they dared to look at each other. Peanut struck the chord, *Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh*, and Crunch stepped forward with the guitar, singing, *somebody touched me and*, they sang, *it must have been the hand of the Lord!* (2000: 200-01, italics in original)

The intertwining of gospel lyrics and sexual allusions in this excerpt are obvious, particularly in phrases such as 'yea, little fellow, come on in' and 'somebody touched me and [...] it must have been the hand of the Lord.' This scene also exemplifies the call and response strategy: as they sing together, Arthur delivers a phrase, the call, to which Crunch responds, line by line. In so doing, Crunch and

Arthur are signifyin(g) – to use the term coined by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in order to refer to the self-reflexive and subversive functions of black artistic forms (Gates 1989: xxiv) – on each other and, most significantly, on the tradition of gospel music in particular and on the black counterculture of modernity in general. This is where the political urgency of the text reaches its crux by establishing a connection between homosexuality and the tradition of gospel music, which, in the context of the heteronormative tendencies of the black counterculture of modernity, becomes a transgressive and transcultural ‘socially symbolic act’ (Jameson 1982: 76, 78-82).

In addition to introducing sexual allusions to a performance of gospel, the text, also, conversely, makes use of gospel lyrics to describe acts of homosexual love. For example, a passage in the novel interlaces the lyrics of an African American spiritual, ‘My God Is so High,’ with an explicit depiction of the love-making of Arthur and Crunch:

*So high, you can't get over him.*

Sweat from Arthur's forehead fell onto Crunch's belly.

*So low [...] you can't get under him.* Arthur rose, again, to Crunch's lips. *So wide. You can't get around him.* It was as though, with this kiss, they were forever bound together. Crunch moaned, in an absolute agony, and Arthur went down again.

‘Little fellow. Baby. Love.’

*You must come in at the door.* (2000: 211, italics in original)

In this context, a phrase such as ‘you must come in at the door’ is given a distinctly sexualized meaning. It is also important to note the phrase ‘little fellow,’ which appears both in the scene of the gospel performance and in this passage, thereby connecting these two parallel textual strategies of transgressing and challenging the heterosexism evident in black religious and musical cultures.

The intertwining of homosexual desire and gospel music is manifest in the novel also in the context of the relationship between Arthur and his pianist, Jimmy. An example of this occurs as they are practicing:

So he stopped, and turned toward Jimmy to indicate a break; but Jimmy, very deliberately, with great impertinence, and looking Arthur straight in the eye, banged out the opening of ‘Just a Closer Walk with Thee.’

Arthur caught his breath, and nearly cracked up, but had no choice but to follow Jimmy's lead:

*Grant it, Jesus,  
if You please.  
Daily, walking, close to Thee.  
let it be,  
dear Lord,*

*let it be.*

I had no idea, then, of course, how direct, and as it were, sacrilegious, Jimmy was being [...] but, however that may be, his call was very direct and moving, and brought from Arthur a response which seemed to ring out over those apocalyptic streets, and caused me, and the two men standing at the church door with me, to look back and see where that sound was coming from. (2000: 561-62, italics in original)

The song is recontextualized as Jimmy's confession of his love for Arthur, a call to which Arthur responds, and this response defiantly encounters the racist, homophobic world outside of the church and, simultaneously, the air of heteronormativity inside the church. Through this transcultural intertwining of homosexuality and gospel, the text performs a profoundly political act.

## Conclusion

*Just above My Head* responds in interesting ways to a transcultural reading. The novel portrays and negotiates a complex encounter of two opposing but interrelated cultural assemblages, here conceptualized as Western modernity and its black counterculture. This results in the emergence of the idea of a third cultural entity, postcategorical utopia, which denounces the heteronormative tendencies of black cultures and the ideologies of both racism and heteronormativity prevalent in Western modernity. In other words, the fundamental premise of black counterculture, that is, its opposition to the ideologies and practices of racism, is preserved, but the heteronormativity inherited from Western modernity is radically challenged.

What complicates the message of *Just above My Head* is Arthur's untimely death at the age of 39, torn between the contradictions of his nonnormative sexual identity and the cultural traditions he represents. As Lynn Orilla Scott has pointed out, the reason for Arthur's tragic demise can be traced to the issue of internalized homophobia which Arthur cannot transcend, and which fuels his negative self-judgment stemming from the fear that he has betrayed his family and heritage by his transgression against the heteronormativity of black cultural traditions (Scott 2002: 161). This is illustrated in the text as Arthur's lover, Jimmy, points out that '[i]t was only when he got scared about what *they might think of what he'd done to their song – our song* – that he really started to be uptight about our love' (2000: 577, italics in original).

It may be argued that Arthur's death, in effect, stops the novel from adopting an overly idealistic and celebratory tone. On the other hand, although Arthur himself falls prey to the forces of the suppressive ideologies of modernity, partly replicated by its black counterculture, the utopian impulse of the novel is carried on in Jimmy's words:

I will testify that, to all the gods of the desert, and, when they have conked my throat with sand, the song that I have heard and learned to trust, my friend, at your brother's knee, will still be ringing.

And will bring water back to the desert, that's what the song is supposed to do, and that's what *my soul is a witness* is about. (2000: 576, italics in original)

The song remains, but it has been signified on, that is, its message has been altered, and to quote Gates, subjected to 'repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference' (Gates 1989: xxiv). The story of Arthur's life and death has signified on the original meaning of this old spiritual, 'My Soul Is a Witness,' by disposing of the reservations which it has contained. The song can now bring water to all those who struggle to survive in the desert, without limitations in terms of the categories according to which human beings have been redeemed or condemned. Reconceptualized in this way, the song becomes Baldwin's ultimate tabernacle of the transcultural impulse postcategorical utopia, the vision of a New Jerusalem that continues to live on. This is the utopian outcome of the transcultural encounter of Western modernity and the black counterculture in Baldwin's final novel.

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