

## Exiled in Paris: The Beginnings

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Baldwin's reasons for quitting New York were in essence the same as Wright's—in a letter written home he spoke of “a violent anarchic, hostility-breeding” pattern,<sup>1</sup> with race at the bottom of it, which was eroding the fabric of his identity—but the circumstances of his arrival could hardly have been more different. No chauffeur-driven car to meet him, no room reserved at the Trianon-Palace, no Gertrude Stein, no “beautiful, absolutely beautiful” at the revelation of the wide boulevards and the quays. He had holes in his socks and \$40 in his pocket. He was a ragamuffin with a big talent. His suitcase held a change of clothes, the manuscript of a half-finished novel, copies of the Bible and the works of Shakespeare, which he carried with him everywhere, and something by each of his more modern heroes, Dostoyevsky and Dickens. He had not an ounce of Wright's success—in New York he had stumbled from one badly paid job to another, trying to help his widowed mother feed a family of eight—nor a cent of his healthy bank balance. His stepfather had died insane, he had lost the Christian faith which had sustained him through every crisis, and had, on the same day, so to speak, accepted the burgeoning of his homosexuality—not welcomed in Harlem, where he lived, nor in the church in which he had served as a young minister. About the only thing of value he carried with him to Paris was the address of Richard Wright.

Baldwin and Wright had met in New York. Too callow to aspire to approach the older writer on equal terms, Baldwin had nevertheless been helped by him to gain a fellowship in order to buy time to go on with his novel. It went under the provisional title “Crying Holy.” When Wright saw the first fifty pages in 1944, it was a mess. But Wright was sufficiently convinced of the talent of its author, and of the promise of the work itself, for him to recommend Baldwin for an award from the Eugene F. Saxton Memorial Trust. That was five years earlier; the

money had long since been spent and “Crying Holy” was still a mess. One of his reasons for quitting America (“I didn’t go to Paris,” Baldwin would say later. “I left New York”) was to try and turn the mass of pages into a novel. And yet another reason—though he shrank from admitting it—was that Richard Wright was there.

Baldwin arrived, by air, on November 11, 1948. A friend from New York met him off the connecting train and led him straight to St.-Germain, where Hoetis was at the Deux Magots, engaged in the latest phase of the continuing *Zero* editorial meeting which was to last throughout that winter. Hearing of the imminent arrival of Baldwin, whom he knew vaguely from Greenwich Village, he arranged for Wright to be present. When Wright saw his protégé, he rose and welcomed him, as he always did in New York, with a smile and a paternal “Hey, Boy!” These were the first friendly words that Baldwin heard in Paris, and just about the last he would hear from Richard Wright.

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Baldwin was a noticeably tense young man, slight in stature, with extravagant hand gestures and a facial expression that could veer from tragic to comic, encompassing everything in between, in a moment’s conversation. Immediately after his arrival, as he put it to a journalist who spoke to him about it later, “he ‘went to pieces,’ a process begun at home but hastened by his exposure to the chill of Paris. . . . ‘I’d gone to pieces before I left New York. But I really did go to pieces when I got to Paris.’”<sup>2</sup> Going to pieces was a part of Baldwin’s defense against the world; and also, by now, a part of his style—something which, as a friend meeting him then for the first time noticed, “explained everything and excused everything.”<sup>3</sup>

Hoetis settled him into a cheap hotel—and for Baldwin it had to be cheap indeed—on the rue du Dragon, a few doors down, as he surely noticed, from a house in which Victor Hugo had once lived. After a few days, Hoetis returned with some other acquaintances and they par-