Ethan Stone

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Dr. Clark

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How to "Feel Right:" Questions and Analyses from Henry James and James Baldwin

Question: In her essay "Feeling Right in The Ambassadors," Anne Langendorfer posits that Henry James's contribution to the nineteenth-century idea of "feeling right" in The Ambassadors was less about telling the reader what it meant to "feel right" and more about exploring the notion as "the meeting point between emotion and ethics for both characters and readers" through the character of Lambert Strether and his struggles with his many ethical conflicts of interest (251). James Baldwin also comments on the notion of "feeling right" by critiquing the sentimentality utilized in protest novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. As Baldwin states in his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," "sentimentality… is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty" (2). While both James and Baldwin suggest how we ought not to think about "feeling right," they write less on how we should think about it. What, then, does it mean to "feel right?" Is it a question of morals/ethics? Or personal satisfaction, as Langendorfer suggests? How, according to James, Baldwin, and others, can we come to "feel right," if at all? How do these authors portray what "feeling right" looks like? Can we identify characters who might model "feeling right"?

Although Henry James and James Baldwin differed in their approaches to many topics, such as nationalism, race, and sexuality, they both valued the importance of feelings in their literature. For James, these feelings funnel into "the meeting point between emotion and ethics," as Anne Langendorfer states in "Feeling Right in *The Ambassadors*," referring to as this state as "feeling right" (251). Baldwin also concerns himself with "feeling right," though he does so alongside criticism aimed at "feeling right" without substance, which he dubs "sentimentalism" in his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" (14). Both James and Baldwin, while valuing emotion, avoided writing bald-faced sentimentalism into their plots and characters, as both authors found different issues with the overly broad-yet-shallow moral/ethical blanketing sentiment could bury an otherwise meaningful story in. While many of both authors' works center on feelings and their

potential abuse, I want to focus specifically on James's *The Ambassadors* and *Daisy Miller*, Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, and *Just Above My Head*, and critical texts by Anne Langendorfer and Christopher Freeburg. I will also be including Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for context concerning sentimentalism and its social dangers. In this essay, I argue that "feeling right" is not a purely emotional state brought on by disengaged thoughts and beliefs but should instead derive from conscious actions and cognitive processes which challenge people's preconceived notions and change not only how they think, but also behave. Before arriving precisely at what "feeling right" is, I want to clarify what it is not to help clarify why it is so important to avoid conflating "feeling right" with sentimentalism.

Baldwin attacked the dangers of sentimentalism throughout his authorship, but he emphasized this point most clearly in his collection of essays *Notes of a Native Son*, specifically the essays "Everybody's Protest Novel" and the closely related follow-up text "Many Thousands Gone." In "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin claims sentimentality is "the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty" (14). Baldwin is cautious of "feeling right" and critical of sentimentality because these notions of apparent virtue are often as damning if not more so than outright conflict because they hide within a skin-deep level of sympathy; therefore, if one is to "feel right," they must have conviction and sincerity beyond the tepid fear which Baldwin states is what fuels sentimentality, particularly in the protest novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which Baldwin lambasts in "Everybody's Protest Novel."

Baldwin fears the underlying terror of sentimentality because sentimentality can just as easily be driven by terror as any other emotion leading a person to feel better about themselves.

In Chapter V of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, Stowe writes "This is God's curse on slavery!—a bitter, bitter, most accursed thing!—a curse to the master and a curse to the slave! I was a fool to think I could make anything good out of such a deadly evil…I thought, by kindness, and care, and instruction, I could make the condition of mine better than freedom—fool that I was!" Stowe, rather than fomenting action, writes what Baldwin calls a "theological terror," using the Christian faith to shame readers into feeling bad about slavery and similar injustices. The issue, then, lies in where the text's message ends; yes, readers feel bad after reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and perhaps they will talk about it some to spread its message, but by virtue of being a sentimentalist novel, the text has already done the work of making readers feel virtuous without the need to compel them to also perform virtuous acts; the reading *was* the virtue, therefore acting as a starting and ending point for virtuous action. The dangers of "feeling right" in a sentimentalist capacity do not end with what we would now call "virtue signaling," but also extend to outright ignorance of the problem these texts attempt to address.

Baldwin writes more about sentimentalism in "Many Thousands Gone" wherein he claims sentimentalists seek to "feel right" by ignoring the persistent reality of the past, as he states, "it is a sentimental error…to believe that the past is dead; it means nothing to say that it is all forgotten, that the Negro himself has forgotten it" (30). This state of ignorance, while producing the effect of "feeling right" by preventing people from feeling wrong about their past and its consequences, is inauthentic and disingenuous; it masks the reality of an ever-present and continually developing history which demands constant reckoning if anyone is to attain the "meeting point between emotion and ethics" Langendorfer states is key to "feeling right." If flimsy sentimentality and intentional ignorance are antithetical to "feeling right" for Baldwin, however, then the opposite must also be true; that is to say, that conscious recognition of our

place in history/our effects on others and dealing with those realities more closely approaches "feeling right." In *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin writes a scene which the primary narrator Hall, his brother, and his friends travel to a church in the South to sing gospel. In this scene, Hall listens to a white man called Reverend Williams preach, and Hall "began to wonder if he was white" because "Reverend Williams was not incoherent," as Hall claims white Americans are incoherent insofar as they do not face their history as a white nation (403). Part of "feeling right," then, is coherence: recognition of one's place in the world, as well as their relationship to themselves and others. Henry James also appears to value coherence as a function of "feeling right," which the reader sees most visibly in *The Ambassadors*.

The Ambassadors can be read as a man's difficult and contemplative journey towards "feeling right" about himself and his place in the world, offering a model for how to work toward "feeling right." As Langendorfer notes, *The Ambassador's* insistence on utilizing vagueness and ambiguity in its language is not merely an artistic flourish, but instead the method by which the reader themselves approaches "feeling right" alongside Lambert Strether, since Strether must also contend with the ambiguity of the situation his mission has planted him in. Because Strether's situation is so ethically complex, the text too must be complex to adequately mirror Strether's journey.

Experience may be another component of "feeling right," especially considering James's emphasis on Strether's maturity. As James writes in the Preface of *The Ambassadors*, "I rejoiced in the promise of a hero so mature, who would give me thereby the more to bite into---since it's only into thickened motive and accumulated character, I think, that the painter of life bites more than a little" (3). It is perhaps because of Strether's experience that he knows what it means to "feel right," as he has lived long enough to know where he stands in relationship with others and

himself. In having enough experience to know himself, especially through the events of *The Ambassadors*, he has a strong enough ethic that he can overcome the instant emotional gratification of choosing to stay with Maria and can instead make the more "mature" decision to return to Woollett.

Additionally, Langendorfer claims, in part, that "feeling right" is a matter of fulfilling one's duty to others and themselves, as she writes, "[Strether's] feelings for Maria are strong, but they are not stronger than his feelings about his commitment to being right and his assuredness that he understands her feelings about him" (257). This point is important to consider when thinking back to the value of ethics in the equation of "feeling right," as this decision to leave is emotionally difficult for both Strether and Maria, yet both seem to understand its necessity. Scholar Christian Freeburg likewise comments on the importance of making difficult decisions to truly "feel right" in his book chapter titled "Baldwin and the Occasion of Love." In this text, Freeburg notes how "both [Baldwin's] disdain for sentimentality and his critiques of U.S. racism are defined by his portrayals of moral and spiritual courage," further reinforcing the need for works alongside emotions (181). Freeburg, in accordance with both James and Baldwin, also notes the role vulnerability plays in "feeling right:" "Baldwin encourages his readers to think beyond the limits of history, into a spiritual affirmation of individual existence and an acceptance of whatever consequences reality may bring" (188). In being vulnerable, we are able to open ourselves up to honest conversations and make real changes.

Returning to James, we can observe an additional aspect of "feeling right" as maintaining one's character regardless of others' opinions. Daisy Miller of *Daisy Miller* models this concept well, as she is characterized by her lack of willingness to compromise on her beliefs, as James writes here: "'Where then would he have proposed her to walk? The Pincio is not the streets,

either; and I, thank goodness, am not a young lady of this country. The young ladies of this country have a dreadfully poky time of it, so far as I can learn; I don't see why I should change my habits for *them*'" (47). James seems to agree with Baldwin insofar as noting the importance of developing a personal ethic and maintaining that dedication, especially in the face of resistance. "Feeling right" seems to arise most readily during difficulty, as it is during conflict, both internal and external, that we see a more developed and sophisticated emotional-ethical satisfaction.

Although "feeling right" will likely always reside within the realm of subjectivity simply because emotion and personal ethics also bob in and out of this realm, James and Baldwin show how we can more closely approach this state of being through vulnerability, experience, perception, and a willingness to stand firm in the face of adversity. Likewise, several of James and Baldwin's characters, such as Lamber Strether of *The Ambassadors*, Daisy Miller of *Daisy Miller*, and Hall Montana of *Just Above My Head*, all portray various aspects of what it means to "feel right" and the routes we can take to get there to avoid the pettiness and social uselessness of sentimentality. After these examinations and analyses, "feeling right" is perhaps less about being satisfied and more about the good work which can be done while achieving that satisfaction.