

Poetry of the 1950s to 1960s and The Dead Lecture

Its
small dull fires. Its
sun, like a greyness
smearred on the dark. (DL 37}

The clash between the 1950s and the 1960s is dramatically apparent in Cuba Libre Baraka's account of his trip to Cuba in July 1960. He travelled with a group of Black writers and intellectuals. In Cuba, Baraka met Fidel Castro and other representatives of the new government, as well as Latin American intellectuals. His descriptions of these meetings make "Cuba Libre" one of his best essays and a touchstone for his growing disaffiliation with the American system and with aesthetic protest.

Challenged to explain his politics, Baraka portrays himself as defensive of his aesthetic position.

"Look why jump upon me? ...Cm a poet. ..what can f do? I write, that's all. I'm not even interested in politics!' [H 42]

The Cuban experience is of central importance to many contemporary Afro-American radicals, was one cause (and in the view of

some critics, the cause) of Baraka's transformation from aesthetic to political protests from a belief in the end of ideology to a new politicized awareness. Baraka's development since 1960 may be interpreted as a search for "direction" and "purpose", a real "alternative" to "America" but he perceived these new ideas -as well as much of the Cuban trip -within the older framework of aesthetic protest rather than in the context of a political theory or an ethnic ideology. He sees the limitations of the Bohemian approach, but still shares its central assumptions. Baraka's dissatisfaction with "*What I Brought to the Revolution*," the title of the first part of "*Cuba Libre*," is clear, but "*What I Brought Back Here*," part two of the essay, is merely the beginning of a vague rethinking:

"The new ideas that were being shoved at me, some of which I knew would be painful when I eventually got to New York" (H-61). The negative evaluation of the 'pre-Cuban' past is unequivocal; "The rebels among us have become merely people like myself who grow beards and will not participate in politics (H-61)."

But the anticipation of the 'post-Cuban' future is pessimistic and demonstrates the pervasiveness of aesthetic protest even in the act of criticism; the essay ends not with the prospect of a real 'alternative' but with the nihilistic statement that there is none.

"We are an old people already. Even the vitality of our art is like bright flowers growing up through a rotting carcass. But the Cubans, the other new peoples (In Asia, Africa, South America) don't need us, and we had better stay out of their way." (H-62).

"Newness," the goal of all modernism, is limited to other, 'younger' nations, and Baraka does not question his American ness in the Cuban confrontation. He sees no possibility for an identification of Black Americans with those 'young' peoples or the Third World and considers himself a member of an 'old' society; (the pronoun 'we' In 'Cuba Libre' never stands for Afro-Americans.) Baraka sees the contrast between the "radical humanism" of Fidel C-o (H-53) and the world of "the Elsenhower's, the Nixon's, the DuPonts" (H-42) a conflict between youth and old age. Perhaps, the attractiveness of the Cuban experience lay less in its revolutionary egalitarian philosophy than in the youthful vitality of the country and its leaders.

The central difficulty Baraka faced with the Cuban inspiration was how to translate a vaguely political impulse into a new aesthetic that would be meaningful for an "old" country. Harold Cruse showed that Baraka, because of his literary avant-gardism, could not possibly work on a common basis with communist Afro-American writers. Baraka's rejection of their protest literature was even more explicit than Cruse implies. Thus, "Cuba Libre" is full of polemical, cutting remarks about the old-fashioned

communists in the travel group who ask "embarrassing" questions about "integration and want to see pictures of Negroes in Cuban school books."

Baraka's "Bright flowers," the first poems written during and after the Cuban visit, are as ambiguous as his essay. In "Betancourt" (p 36-40), the poem that introduces the theme of Cuba and a new sense of people and movements, Baraka relates to the new challenge not in political, but in aesthetic-erotic terms. Dated 30 July 1960 Havana, the poem asks the important question "What are influences?" (p 36) When Baraka uses the term "E1 hombre" (p 39), he perhaps refers to Fidel Castro and alludes to William Carlos Williams. The poem "Betancourt" pictures Cuba as a revolutionary pastoral setting.

*Not
In the gardens
Of Spain, but some
New greenness (P 37)*

Another "Cuban" poem "The Disguise" (UP 33), is apparently addressed to Sra. Betancourt and shows the poet's turn from "self to "outside world". In the pre-Cuban poem "Consider This" (1959), Baraka articulated the difficulties of looking at the "street", since the poet's own mirror image in the window pane is always superimposed upon the world,

You cannot look out the window at the street

There is nothing there but your own weaving (UP 17, sectional)

In 1961, in the post-Cuban *'The Disguise,'* Baraka attempts to "open" this window.

He begins the poem with what may be the most cogent image for his Bohemian mask and for his desire to move away from an expressive and narcissistic aesthetic.

When you spoke to me, I turned. I thought.

away from the grey glass, in to the world. (UP 33)

The "grey glass" implies both the mirror-windows into the poet's self. And his "white," or, in Black English "grey" identity. Once the window to the world is open, the "blinds" cannot keep the sun and red air out for long

Bed air pushed on the blinds made them clatter,

but nothing happened. (UP 33)

In a state of unresolved yearning for change, the poet tries to recall the setting of his conversation with Sra. Betancourt, but cannot proceed beyond a repetition of the beginning of the poem:

*nothing nioves. (when you spoke to me,
I thought I'd turned gotten to it,
but a truck moved by
must have obliterated the rest of
your thot.)*

Baraka cannot formulate a solution to the confusion in his own head, he cannot decode the "Indian knots behind my eyes" which have affected his vision. Aware of his old disguises, the poet has not reached a new sense of self or reality.

*(I thought
I'd turned)
The window hung open, red air
blew in (UP33),*

Baraka could now see his own social role as that of a poet-"mediator" between the black and the white. On the one hand, he organized an interracial "On Guard For Freedom Committee" in Harlem where he maintained that it was not "necessary to restrict whites from participation. More than that, he said he could not understand why Harlem Negroes should hate whites. On the other hand, he translated the attitude of the young nationalist Harlemites to white liberal audiences". (Sollars: *Populist Modernism*).

One of the crucial developments in Baraka's artistic self-definition after 1960 is his expansion of the formula given in *"How You Sound?"*, "I must be completely free to do just what I want, in the poem" so that the last three words lose their confining meaning. After Cuba, Baraka is eager to extend the freedom of spontaneous art to include political freedom, in a conscious analogy to the supposed "progress in the arts" (H 77), Baraka states in "Tokenism: 300 Years for Five Cents" that "It is not 'progress' that the majority of Negroes want, but Freedom" (H 70). Making "freedom" a political just as much as an aesthetic demand means asking writers to be socially committed. In his "Brief Reflections on Two hot Shots," Baraka maintains that, unlike James Baldwin, a writer "must have a point of view, or he cannot be a good writer. He must be standing somewhere in the world, or else he is not one of us, and his commentary then is of little value. (H 118)."

in other essays from 1961 to 1963, Baraka's ambivalence in describing himself both as a Negro who sees a bus full of people and as an anti academic writer in the "modern tradition" becomes more and more obvious. While increasingly critical of his fellow Bohemians, he still identifies his art as part of the modern movement. The 1961 essay "Milneburg Joys (or. Against 'Hipness As Such)" (UN 17) begins with an elusive discussion of the opposing worlds of "uptown" (Black New York) and "downtown" (the place of Bohemia):

Someone (if you work "uptown") will tell you yours is the bird world
"Mine is real." (UN 7, p.41).

Baraka's aesthetic and political writings of the early 1960s is full of contradictory impulses. Yet at the time of his greatest theoretical confusion he wrote many of his best poems, plays, and fictions. More than that, the very contradictions within his increasingly divided self are an important source of his creativity.

In many ways, Baraka's second poetry collection. *The Dead* Lefurer (1964) appears strikingly similar to Preface. There are in this new volume, many "Pure" Beat poems. Concerned with love (DL 9,17,36) or the function of poetry (DI 10).

In "The invention of comics" the poet explores his heritage, as he did in "Lanie Poo," again, there are strong echoes of Eliot.

*I am soul in the world: in
the world of my soul the chirled
light form the day
the sacken land of my father. (DL 37)*

Sometimes the poet gives a new slant to old images, as in "Suns" (DL 47), Sometimes he openly rejects previous poetic practices, as in

"without preface" (DL 10), and occasionally, he forms new lyric entitles that were altogether unthinkable in *Preface*, as in "Black Dada Nihilism" (DL61-64). Significantly the transformation of Baraka's poetry from the 1950s to the 1960s can be measured by the way in which the imagery of death is developed.

When a poet's first volume is entitled *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* and ends with "Notes for a Speech," the title of his second collection is *The Dead Lecturer*, we may assume that the poet's preoccupation with his own agony has reached its terminal point and that the "*Dead Lecturer*" of the title is none other than the poet himself. Yet there is a living and increasingly affirmative voice in Baraka's poems of the first half of the 1960s, a voice which often alludes to, and sometimes distances itself from the earlier "suicide note".

"Footnote to a Pretentious Book" (DL 42) is harshly critical of *Preface* and its portrait of the artist as a suicided man".

*You could say of me,
That I was truly
Simpleminded. (DL 453)*

There is, then a dead lecturer who once composed that quiet suicide 'note, and a new poet of politics, war, rhythm and blues.

"An Agony. As Now" (DL 15-16) continues just this struggle within the poet as a creative but early lethal confrontation between lively, suffering inside and metallic, deadly outside which affects the very eye of poetic vision.

*I am inside someone
Who hates me. I look
Out from his eyes, smell
What fouled tunes come in
To his breath. Love his
Wretched women. (DL "JS")*

The "enclosure" of "white hot metal" is the composite image of artistic reification and alienation, political confinement, and ethnic masquerade.

Abandoning the "quiet verse" of *Preface*, Baraka lets "the thing inside" scream, as it is being scorched black by the white hot metal. This image is emblematic of the art of *The Dead Lecturer*, wrested from the unbearable pressures and frictions of iron body masks. It is the scream of pain and feeling, flesh and soul, of ethnic and political suffering and it is the dada scream which annihilates the "withered yellow flowers" of "Western poetry" from Joyce Kilmer's trees to Eliot's hollow men and Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mai*.

At this point, Baraka experiments with the methods of destroying and rebuilding language. He ventures into the communicative extremes of "silence" and "screaming" and he makes the "bad words of Newark" part of his poetry. Silence was prominent in much of the low-keyed "quite verse" of *Preface*, and is still prevalent in *Lecturer*. It is now, however, a much more aggressive version of silence, as "Short Speech To My Friends" suggests.

A compromise

Would be silence. To shut up, even such risk

as the proper placement

of verbs and nouns. To free the spit

In mid air, as it aims itself

At some valiant intellectual's face. (DL 30)

In "Black Dada Nihilismus" (DL 61-64) Baraka develops the Black scream as the heart of his aesthetic -, and the visions of racial violence are a touchstone of the distance Baraka traveled since *Preface*. The first part of the poem forcefully rejects the culture of the powerful: its life-sucking deadness, its Christian facade; its assimilation and genocidal minority politics. Against the murderous hypocrisy of the oppressors, however, Baraka posits no working class conscious vision of liberation, but only the lumpenproletarian gesture of sanctified and self gratifying violence.

*Murder, the cleansed
purpose, frail, against
God, if they bring him
bleeding, I would not
Forgive, or even call him
Black dada nihilismus. (DL 61)*

Baraka refers to Jewish assimilation in the harsh and puzzling image of the,

*ugly silent deaths of Jews under
The surgeon's knife. (To awake on
69th street with money and a hip
nose. (DL 61-62)*

Plastic surgery is seen as a self-deceptive acceptance of the beauty-ideal of the oppressive culture and a middle-class gesture of ethnic betrayal. At this point, Baraka sees other ethnic groups, and especially Jews, as a metaphoric extension of Blacks.

Part two of "Black Dada Nihilismus" carries this identification of "black art" as an alchemistic concept and as a vehicle for ethnic upheaval to its frightening end as a irrational counter image to the bourgeoisie, Black and White. Baraka embraces Egyptian astrology and medieval alchemy,

not to find gold, but to initiate the victims of the West. At the end of the poem it's the scream.

Come up, black dada

Nihilismus. Rape the white girls, Rape

Their fathers, cut their mothers throats throats. (DL 63).

The poem ends with a prayer to a "Kind" African god. Damballah:

May a lost god damballah, rest or save us

Against the murders we intend

Against his lost white children

Black dada nihilism's. (DL 64)

Baraka's poetry of the 1960s reflects the transportation of the struggle between "literature" and "life" from the "inside" of the poet's consciousness to the "outside" of American political and ethnic reality. In this process, the expressive elements of aesthetic protest confront the demands of political and ethnic protest.