

Imagination and Reality

You're much too sensitive for a place like this. (T 24)

But my

country. My people. These dead souls. I call my people.

Flesh of my flesh. (T 22}

An image can be conjured up by a single word, a rush of phrase, in a line or in successive lines. Some times an entire poem might convey an image. Every image we come across, is placed in its exact position, by a conscious poet by particular choice of words.

Imagery is the content of thought where attention is directed to sensory qualities - that is mental images, figures of speech and embodiments of non discursive truth. The world is in a constant flux, it is chaotic, partial and unstable and yet the world that is delivered to our minds is a stable, constant and ordered universe. This creating order out of the disorder is the work of imagination, "Art creates an idea of order where, to the inartistic or unphilosophical observer, life is only a whirl of action and a chaos of emotion". (John Gassner 1954 XII). The poets and seers expressed their imagination through images.

Imagery in poetry can be very various. Psychologists identify seven kinds of mental images - those of sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, bodily awareness and muscular tension, all are available to poets and all are used by poets. Though not to the same extent. Browning uses tactile imagery while Shelley's imagery emphasises movement, Blake and Coleridge placed the poet in a special situation treating imagination as divine. The romantic transcendentalism, when the world reappeared as the garment of God, and the abstract and general resided in the concrete and particular, poetry came to embody the sacred and images to be symbols of an indwelling deity. In modernism and post modernism the Interest is focused on the images themselves, which are an inescapable part of language, and therefore an integral part of a poem's thematic base.

A poet cannot present the colour to the eyes as does the visual artist or the music to the ears as does the musician. He has to employ words to call up images of the which he wishes to represent and an appropriate metre to convey music, but in Amiri Baraka's case to give vent to his angst, the repressed emotions, and his search for identity.

In Baraka's psyche, there has always been a battle between the imagination and the real-world. Baraka was attracted to the world of the imagination because there he could be anyone and have anything he wanted. In his Beat days (the late 1950s and early 1960s), the propensity for fantasy displaced history and ethnicity from his work; feeling kinship

with the other Beats, he could say that he was "as any other sad man here/American" (P; p. 47). In "In Memory of Radio," a typical beat poem, he celebrates the imagination:

Am I a sage or Something?

Mandrake's hypnotic gesture of the weel<?

(Remember, I do not have the healing powers of

Oral Roberts...

I cannot, like F.J. Sheen, tell you how to get saved

and rich

I cannot even order you to gaschamber satori like Hitler

O- Coody Kinght

*Saturday mornings ive listened to Red Lantern & his under-
sea folk.*

At 11, Let's Pretend/& and we/and I, the poet still do.

Thank God!

p12

In this poem Baraka not only valorizes "pretending," he also rejects the role of poet as an active agent in world. At that time Baraka felt that the poet's function was not to save the real world but to create alternative ones that did not need saving. This is a tendency of the Beat artists. For example, in his 1959 apology for his poetry, Ginsberg chides those who want to bring political reality into poetry:

A word on the Politicians: my poetry is Angelica Ravings, and has nothing to do with dull materialistic vagaries about who should shoot who the secret of individual Invagination. which are transconceptual & non'VeitaUI mean unconditional Spirit-are not for sate to this consciousness, are no use to this world, except perhaps to make it shut its trap & listen to the music of the Spheres. (C p20)

Baraka's uncollected 1958 poem, "Axle's Castle," probably referring to both Edmund Wilson's study of French Symbolism and Vipers de L Isle-Aden's poetic drama, projects one main feint of the Beat aesthetic: that the imagination is more important than reality. The hero of the poem lives in an Arthurian castle in the heart of Greenwich Village:

*A huge rusty thing
with a roaring moat
and red flags strea-
ming from its towers.*

*Each evening, after selling his truit
the man dashes out the back door giggling
obscenely, and leaps on his white horse
rushing across the countryside: across
bleecker St. to McDougal, down McDougal
till the castle can be seen outlined
against the water, stuttering in some
effusive glow like an illuminated trunk. (UWp 35)*

The castle is the dream world, providing a fortress against the mundane. For the Beats like Ginsberg and Baraka, the poem could be a fortress against reality. He illustrates this inclination when he discusses another avant-garde poet, Gregory Corso, who also rejected the mundane: "rare goonish knowledge with reality—hip piss on reality also-he prefers his dreams. Why not? His Heaven is Poetry.... What a solitary dignitary! He's got the angelic power of making autonomous poems, (like god making brooks." (Ginsberg: 1958) Thus Ginsberg boldly declares that the poet no longer has the responsibility to reflect reality in the mirror of art; his only responsibility is to create delightful dreams. Such Beat attitudes nullified the notion that traditional art was the mirror of nature. But unlike other Beat poets even when Baraka lived in Axel's Castle, his disassociation from reality was not total. Despite living in a fairy tale castle the protagonist of Baraka's poem knows that the world outside has not disappeared:

After the meals, the man tells the wife of the big world.

The cool world. The hard and different world of the outside.

The world of inflationary prices and rotting fruit ("UW" p. 35)

Baraka's middle-class protagonist is not totally separated from reality because economics binds him to it. Similarly, economics also helped draw Baraka out of the world of imagination- a difficult feat because of his commitment to fantasy. But unlike Gatsby, the self-creating hero of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), a book Baraka admired, this avant-

garde poet wanted to break out of the solipsism of his imagination. He proclaimed.

And reality was the feeling I wanted, and escaped to from a fantasy world (T. p 93)

The major reason Baraka sought to leave his commitment to imaginary world, was that during the early 1960s, he was forced to come to terms with the reality of contemporary black protest. In a recent interview he reflected " But I know a lot of what had moved me to make political statements were things in the real world, including poetry that I read, but obviously the Civil rights movement upsurge, the whole struggle in the South, Doctor King, SNCC, the Cuban Revolution—all those things had a great deal of influence on me in the late 50s and early 60s" (HI P-24). The historical struggle of black people forced Baraka out of his imaginative refuge and forced him into the realm of economics, politics, and race. In the *Dead Lecturer* Baraka declares:

The poor have become our creators

The black. The thoroughly

Ignorant.

(P27)

in this poem, Baraka describes how the struggle of the black masses compelled him to re-create himself as a politically engaged artist

who had to renounce his apolitical bohemian self. Guilt about the black masses made him rethink his ideas about poetry and the world:

*My own mode of conscience, And guilt always the obvious
connection.*

*They (the whites) spread you in the sun, and
leave you there one of a kind, who
has no son to call this to. (DL p 47)*

As an avant-grade artist Baraka felt he was a freak, a Black who had cut himself off from the black tradition. Moreover, he felt guilty because he had always been a moral being.

Like other American writers. Baraka perceived that the condition of black people in America calls for the black man to preach for justice. Ralph. Ellison even suggested that this is the black man's duty. In the epilogue to *Invisible Man* (1952), the protagonist thinking over his grandfather's last words, wonders if the old man had meant that "We had to take the responsibility for all of it, for the men as well as the principle because we were the heirs who must use the principle because no other fitted our needs? Not for the power or for vindication, but because we, with the given circumstance of our origin, could only thus find transcendence?" (*Invisible Man* p56).

During the early sixties, Baraka, acknowledging his connection with the black masses, assumed the preacher's role, realizing as he did that he could not live in a world of art for art's sake any longer. It seemed to him that he had to exorcise the avant-garde poetics and world view and find one more consonant with his new imperatives. Metaphorically, he had to move out of Axel's Castle. During the 1960s, Baraka searched for a new black art based on black life. In "Rhythm & Blues", from *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), he portrays the avant-garde poetics and world view as inadequate for the Black artist.

*Such act as would give us legend, This is the man
who saved us
Spared us from the disappearance of the sixteenth note, the
Destruction
of the scale. This is the man who against the black pits of
despa'ring genius
cried "save the Popular Song." (DL p47)*

As this poem declares, Baraka does not want to be remembered as the black man who saved the west. Here, the sixteenth note and the scale symbolize "Western arts metaphorically. Baraka wants to create a new black *m[is]c* rather than save the old white one. In "Rhythm & Blues," he declares: "I am deaf and blind." These lines describe a time of spiritual crisis when Baraka felt that he had lost his mooring in the white world.

Finding white poetry, totally inadequate for his poetic needs, he desperately sought new forms:

*The
Shake and chant, bulled electric motion, figure of what
There will be
As it sits beside me waiting to live past my own meekness
My own light skin. (DL 47)*

For Baraka to sign again, he would have to take on black forms as much as the "shake and chant", which would require him to be brave, to live past his meekness into a new artistic role that declared and affirmed his ethnicity. The poem continues, seeking mighty and vital black creations:

*Bull of yellow perfection, imperfectly made, imperfectly
understood, except as it rises against the
mountains, like sun
but brighter, like flame but hotter. There will be
those
Who will tell you it will be beautiful. (DL 47)*

The rising bull of this passage is a recurring symbol for the black, the ethnic self. The bull suggests the spirit of the new black art, an art that black people would find beautiful because it would be and ethnic art, a post white form.

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political poet, Baraka used objectivist techniques to signal the need to destroy the white world:

We want "poems that kill"

Assassin poems, poems that shoot

Guns.

Baraka's 1960 trip to Cuba provided him with an alternative both to the avant-garde and to liberal politics. This trip was one of the transforming experiences of his life. Surely the Cuban revolution provided him with an alternative he could not find in America, when he returned from Cuba he had shifted from being a Beatnik. While in Cuba, he was attacked for his "bourgeois Individualist" stance and defended himself by saying. "Look, why jump on me? I'm in complete agreement with you. I'm a poet...what can I do? I write, that's all, I'm not even interested in politics". (H p12)

Stuck by this third-world attack on his North America poetics, Baraka began to reevaluate his poetic values. Although it took the political upheavals and struggles of the 1960s in America to make him a full-scale political poet, this period gave birth to the idea of incorporating radical politics into his poetry. It also gave birth to his disillusionment with postmodernist politics and poetics. The Cuban revolution in its early stages was also inspiring to Baraka because it was an ideal for his emerging revolutionary ideas. Unlike their jaded counterparts in America who

disdainfully stood apart from the American political and social process, Baraka found that the young and energetic intellectuals in Cuba were actually engaged in government and were involved in the process of transforming their country into a more humane place. Soon after his trip he asserted, "Bankrupt Utopia see tell me no Utopias. I will not listen". (BMP p38). Baraka's trip to Cuba did not provide the model for his new political poetry; however, it did provide the new consciousness to become a third world artist. Being tired of the western tradition, Baraka struggled to tear himself from a love that he felt paralysed him. In fact paralysis is a major theme of many of his pre-black nationalist poetry. To escape it he had to: "Let the combination of morality and in humanity begin" (DL p29).

He wishes to achieve a higher goal of black liberation. He had to harden himself to the white avant-garde to become a black revolutionary artist. That this was not an easy task is attested to in much of the poetry in the volumes between *The Dead Lecturer* (1964) and *Black Art* (1966); these are the poems of struggle and pain that exhibit the self dehumanization demanded of one who seeks to destroy an old order of which he or she is a part. It is increasingly clear that all groups who have been oppressed by the society in which they have found themselves must go through some kind of self-brutalizing process before they can find a voice of their own.

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*Let the combination of morality
and inhumanity
begin.*

(DL p29)

For Baraka to escape his own guilt, he had to find another mode of art which would be appropriate for the black masses. In the poetry of this period (1961-1965), we see Baraka's desperate attempt to exorcise the white world from himself.

*I don't love you. Who is to say what that will mean
I don't
love you, expressed the train, moves, and uptown, day
later
we took up and breathe much easier
I don't love you (BMP p55}*

Here Baraka tries the magic spell of "I don't love you" to tear himself from his friends downtown. The subway expresses movement. It is the movement away from his psychic paralysis, uptown to his active, revolutionary black self.

In "Citizen Cain" Baraka explores the need to escape his old life and find a new one:

*Roi, finish this poem, someone's about to need you, Roi
Dial the mystic number, ask for holy beads.....*

*work out your problems
like your friends on some nice guy's couch. Get up and hit
someone like you useta. Don't sit here trembling under the
hammer. Fate like a season of abstract reference. Like an
abstract executions where only ideas are shotfull of notes.
Don't sit there drowned in your own bad writing, get up and
throw that ball, tvfove your lips, cut, like the white boys,
for ten more vards.....*

*Ask the white man
For your passport and qui it, little Jesus. Your time is up
In this particular feeling. In thi particualr throb of meaning
Roi, baby, you blew the whole thing.*

(BMPp8)

The poem presents Baraka's realization that if he is going to be a black revolutionary artist, he cannot be like his white friends. Unlike them, he cannot work out his problems on a psychaitrist's chair because his problems are not personal, they are political and, therefore, communal. Strongly feeling this, he can no longer escape the world by writing bad poetry - that is, poetry defined by his evolving black standards, subjective

poetry not committed to political action. Like a football player he must move to action and out of the world of mere abstract ideas, the bohemians' world, "Where only ideas are shot full of holes." In the closing lines of the poem Baraka prepares to leave the white world and its vision of reality. By this time Baraka wanted poem to act directly on the mind of the people.

In "A Poem Some People Will Have to Understand," -Baraka explains:

*We have awaited the coming of a natural
Phenomenon. Mystics and romantic, knowledgeable
Workers
Of the land
But none has come.
But none has come.
Will the machine gunners please step forward?*

(BMPp6)

In this poem the "people who would have to understand", are the white liberals, Baraka's old "friends", they would have to understand that violence would occur because the usual liberal channels had not brought about any change in the condition of black people. In fact, the liberals are ironically labeled mystics and romantics to emphasize their ineffectualness in the social realm. Finally, it is clear, the only avenue left for Baraka was violence, "Let the dada machine gunner step forward!"

Cuba changed Baraka's political consciousness, as he formulates third world necessities here, they differ so radically from America's political consciousness, as he formulates third world necessities here, they differ so radically from America's necessities that solutions proposed by white Americans are irrelevant. But, even though Cuba changed Baraka from a rebel (someone who is disconnected with his society but does not try to overthrow it) to a third-world revolutionary (someone who is trying to overthrow his society and its vision of reality), he did not immediately identify himself with the West in the midst of his new sympathies:

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, and the other new peoples (in Asia. Africa. South America) don't need us, and we had better stay out of their way. (H p 62)

Baraka did not find his new vitality, (cease being the *dead lecturer*), until he became a third-world poet who, was vigorously alive in his new black skin, and could say,

We wear the Life sign, the ankh.

(Rp19).

In "Philistinism and the Negro Writer" (1966), Baraka argued for ethnic diversity:

I found myself publishing that writing which I thought was the most valuable. Not the writing that reflected those tired white lives again, but necessarily those people white and black people who were taking about a side of America that was more valuable because it hadn't been talked about Allen Ginsberg, who gives the Jewish memory of dissent in this culture; since this culture asks and has asked all immigrants to strip themselves of the very things that would make their own culture valuable, so that the Italian who comes to America becomes an American and the Italian thing is lost. The Jew who gets into America is and American and the Jewishness is lost, and so now they want to break, your back, too, Negro, so that when you go into that place, there will be no dissent, there will be no dissent at all, so that you will be faceless, too, and your literature will reflect some kind of tired thirst for, perhaps, luxury and comfortable ignorance.

(AB p 61)

Baraka did not want to lose his ethnicity. Like the black musician, Baraka wanted to keep the funk, the reality. to keep his art crude and real. So "Baraka inverts uncongenial bourgeois form and Ideas, making them black by turning them into, their opposites." (Harris, *Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka*. (p 91).

Among the first of the 'uncongenial' bourgeois forms, Baraka recognized and attacked, were white bourgeois images and stereotypes of blacks. Believing that popular culture shapes black reality as well as reflecting white middle - class reality, Baraka most often inverts bourgeois forms taken from the world of popular culture. Contemplating images of blacks created by the white imagination, has become a way for him to penetrate black reality because he can articulate the way black people

have responded in the roles whites have imposed on them. For instance in "A poem for Willi Best" from *The Dead Lecture* (1964), Baraka takes the image of Wille Best (1916-1962) who as sleep 'n' Eat, black buffoon, was featured in a number of Hollywood movies of the 1930s and 1940s. Sleep 'n' Eat is a black stereo type created by the white mind. He is

Lazy

Frightened

Thieving

Very potent sexually

Scars

Generaliy inferior

(but natural)

rhythms. (p26)

Notwithstanding the degrading stereotype, for Baraka "This is literature, of symbols. And it is his "Willie Best's Gift" (DL, P.20). Here the poet presents the actor as a rebel against his role. Best is more than a figment of white image who has extended his role beyond its white creator's intentions. The black actor, the man, has sized the symbol and reinterpreted it, and the poet both articulates Best's interpretations and further the actor's task through reinterpretation of his own. Baraka glosses over the poem:

Willie Best present the black as the minstrel the black the bizarre funny person, the black as the victim, and this black minstrel victim having to come to grips with that - with this victimhood, with his minstrelsy In order to change that (HI p25).

In large part, the inversions of Baraka's art from *The Dead Lecturer* onwards are aimed at awakening the potential killer, the revolutionary Bigger Thomas, in the submissive black. Exposing or inverting popular image of the Blacks is important to Baraka because he believes, these images exercise tremendous power over the behaviour of the Blacks by providing negative role models. Like Whitman, he thinks, one function of art is to supply appropriate role models or (to use Whitman's term) archetypes. Therefore, it is imperative to him that images of heroic Blacks, of Uncle Toms, be replaced by images of heroic blacks, of Malcolm Xs, because heroic images will inspire heroic behaviour. In "A Poem for Black Hearts" Baraka demands, "Black man quit stuttering and shuffling and act like Malcolm, Black and strong in his Image" (BMP, pi 2)

In addition to images from popular culture, Baraka also inverts other white images in his search for new black ones. Asserting that the whites (rather than blacks) are the animals, he commands his black reader to "*leave the beast/in its snowy den*" (BMP, p167) and asserts, "*To turn their ('Whites') evil backwards to live*". (BMP p192) Taking the common white stereotype of blacks wielding ranges he forms a new image by adding a significant adjective to indicate that these heroes are defending their people

against the oppressor: *'Thin heroic blade the razor. Our flail against them'* (SP p11) In *Black Magic* written during the cultural nationalist period when reversal of black/white relationships was a major goal, he repeatedly restructured common images of the blacks by referring to the blacks as the "heroes" playing with the images of the Africans projected in Tarzan movies. He raises them to significance:

*remembering dances for Tarzan
until the Jungle pots
boil darkness and the hot
sun fashions it into
black heroes*

Certainly, one clue to Baraka's Inversions, lies in the poem that concludes "State/Meant" the last essay in *Home*. In this poem his penchant for punning and his quest for new black images come together in a complex word play:

*we are unfair and unfair
we are black magicians, black art
s we make in black labs of the heart
The fair are
fair and death
ly white
the day will
and we own,
the night*

Here, puns on the meaning of "fair" (both "light-skinned" and "even-handed"), the suggestion of the supernatural black powers pitted against white impotence, and, most significantly, the transmutation of Langston Hughes's imagery of day and night in "Dream Variations" "*To fling my arms wide/In some place of the sun,/To whirl and to dance/Till the white day is done./Then rest at cool evening / Beneath a tali tree/ While night comes on gently/Dark like me*". (Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems*). "From the lighthearted to the ominous, show Baraka's militantly inverting black/white relationships in his creation of images that will at once give blacks new confidence and inspire them to become revolutionaries." (Harris, *The Poetry & Poetics of Amiri Baraka* p 98)

By inverting this white form this symbol of the degraded black, Baraka presents the black minstrel as a Christ figure:

*A Cross, The gesture, symbol, line
arms held stiff, nailed stiff, with
no sign, of what gave them strength.
The point, become a line, a cross, or
The man, and his material driven in*

(Dip 19)

Although the title *Hard Facts* applies to only one book, it suggests the direction of all his poetry after *Preface*. He wanted an art of hard facts that would expose that ends of money power and luxury and would drive

the black sane that is into political action that would aid in the destruction of America.

It is clear that Baraka wants to change the public image the white man has fashioned to characterize the Black Men (because there are references black men identify with in the West) since that is what is run on them each day by white magic like the radio television movies and so on - the Mass Media the Daily News does it with flicks and adjectives. (H, p 247) In *Black Magic* 1969 art is used to counter the white magic of the mass media, the image makers. And in *Home*, (his 1966 collection of essays) Baraka states "*The Black artist ...is desperately needed to change the images his people identify with, by asserting. Black feeling. Black mind Black Judgment*" (p.248). *This is a succinct expression of cultural nationalism that the artist's function is to change the cultural imagery with which his people identify.*

*the ground, if the head rolls back
and the mouth opens, screamed into
existence, there will be perhaps
only the slightest hint of movement
no swear, no help will come, no one
will turn to that state on again.*

Baraka has shown degraded Blacks as Christ symbols who seek revenge for wrongs done to them. In the poem the troubled actor comes out. *I am tired/ of losing /I got to cat cha' (DL p.25).*