# Early Poetry: Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note

*I have the feeling people*

*think I'm depraved. A man looked*

*me in the eye in the subway and he sd.*

*Bohemian.*

*-'"Consider This" (UP 17)*

Art may be long, life is short, and a poet who stands in need of all that explanation, has only himself to blame if he waits all eternity for readers. Amiri Baraka's poetry is sometimes like music. Musical instruments with the same vibrations are, capable of responding to one anther: a note sounded on one will call forth a spontaneous response from another tuned to the same pitch. The poetry of Baraka is analogous. The reader must be in tune: in tune to some extent with Baraka to understand the progression of his thought, the depiction of his symbol and images. The reader of Baraka 's poetry must be imaginatively awake, intellectually keen and frankly whole hearted. It is useless to read his poetry critically. We must not expect to find the music of his poetry on any kind of annotated programme. We must listen, intently and patiently and not be too readily discouraged by inharmonious sounds, but wait until we hear a phrase that deeply pleases us. We must continue to be patient, susceptible, responsive, for Baraka's poetry is a hormone to be enjoyed and understood

according to the measure In which the reader is himself harmonious with the thought process of Baraka. Baraka's early poetry seems to present a definite point of view, that is the poet's keen awareness of the self, and in most of the poems, an omnipresent "I/eye" remains in the center of consciousness. Often the poet probes Into the realms of autobiography and Identity, high art and avant-gardist artists, Black magic, American popular culture, and the heroes and anti-heroes of the Western world. The intensity of personal suffering compels Baraka to invent a series of personae to dramatize his experience, Duke Mantee, the hanged man, or Wolfman or Babalu - through them the poet appears to be projecting himself. As a result, his poetry, even while presenting the struggle in himself, transcends in terms of attaining objectivity. This personal problem of a split in the self as experienced throughout this period is tragically realistic as it mirrors the fall of man in modern times resulting in a state of alienating both from his self and from the society around him. The poems as a whole, present the psychic condition of modern man - the reality of an interaction between his own self and men, and objects around him. In *Preface To a Twenty Volume Suicide Note,* "The ground opens up" and he totally gets psychologically "enveloped" - this is the poets eternal quest to remain above the thin borderline between the reality and the inner passages of his consciousness, his art and the way he looks at the world. This obviously results in a state of intense self-consciousness, that is the poet observing himself both as subject and object at the same time. Thus, self as subject

and object marks the essential duality of the poetic self of Baraka during this phase of his development as a poet.

The reader finds in his poetry Baraka a modern day Hamlet who is looking for a platform - oscillating, "each time I go out to walk the dog is imagery where the reader gets an image of a hero-a Greek legendary hero who is doing a menial job. Then again "the silly music the wind makes" gives an image of a modern man who is whizzing past but nature remains static. Nature no longer inspires man and "modern man has taken a complete turn from nature.

"Things have come to that" signifies that man is totally frustrated. "I count the stars" is an image of a naturalist who wonders at the vastness of the universe. In the last stanza of the first poem in the *Preface* the poet says that when he enters his daughter's room he finds her talking to herself which signifies a generation of compartmentalized existence. The world is engulfed into "Her own clasped hands" and she is praying may be for humanity to the "old man sitting some where" is no one but God. "No body sings anymore" the lyricism in life has come to an and it reminds the reader of Joyce's *Dubiin* - "the ashpit and the offal", humanity has lost its faculty > of imagination - Baraka paints a picture of total imaginative impotency, an imagery of Dumb choir, all very disciplined but no emotions to sprout the fountain of music.

The poems of Baraka in the early phase give a picture of a community which is compartmentalised and there is a total lack of communication, human beings are living under masks.

In the poem "Hymn for Lanie Poo", the title itself suggests that it is a prayer, a hymn sung in praise. Nature comes as a back drop and Baraka glorifies the colour Black which is the symbol of his own identity and existence and the vitality of his art. The colour Black is portrayed as a source of energy, fountain head of vitality and progression - Black according to Baraka is the inherent "Urge" in every man. "Beware the evil sun" - the sun over here is portrayed as the symbol of colonisation, the disburse of extreme power which ultimately corrupts the human mind and stains the human soul. Baraka sparsely used animal imagery but some time the readers get the feel of it - "crawl your eye balls" - is a pure animal imagery which is beetle like a parasite gnawing at the crux of human existence.

Religion to Baraka is nothing but the "chains" and he portrays the epitome of institutionalised as he says "Silly little church" where religion is a narcotic which can no longer hold the mind in a stable pattern. The ultimate nail hit in the coffin of religion comes out when the poet writes religion found in "coffee shop" an image of the all open American system where for every thing there is a price tag, a sarcastic statement to define the epitome of capitalism.

The Black nationalist sentiment reaches'its height in Baraka's writing when his imagery gives vent to his repressed feelings and he writes "White Anglo Sun" which symbolises mother America who has a step motherly attitude towards her Black sons. The sarcasm and the irony comes out in Baraka's voice when he writes America is "benevolent step mother" which clearly shows the poet that the connection which the Blacks have with the rest of America is not based on the connection of the umbilical cord but by a forced and synthetic bonding.

In the poem "In Memory of Radio" the poet brings out a series of images which portray man as an impotent object which is not living but some how existing, the dramatic and the austere language used, in order to wake the readers out of the complacency, the artificial comport of the capitalist world. The imagery shows the total lack of love in the generation, the poet stressed on the word "love" which can actually bring about a revolution in America, the love for the Black people will bring in a revolution of the American psyche.

Baraka is a modern Black American poet, and T,S. Eliot represented, for Baraka, an objective art of structural containment and tight aesthetic control. It is therefor not surprising that Baraka referred to his "earlier" "Eliot period" as a "shell" (UI I) which he had to break out of, since Eliotic " rhetoric can be so lovely, for a time. . . . .but only remains so for the rhetorician" (UN 6, P. 425). Allusions to Eliot, whom Baraka later calls "the

*I am what I think I am. You are what*

*I think you are. ("Audubon, Drafted" DL 56)*

"Reality" is an extension of the "I": there are no "standards." So conceived, the "r" is not only the omnipresent speaker, but also the truest subject for poetry. Only rarely does Baraka create another consciousness, from whose point of view the poem develops; and when he does, as in "Duke Mantee" (p. 35) the "other" is really part of the self. Having absorbed "Duke Mantee" poetically, Baraka can use the name as a *nom de plume* in a later essay {Un 23),

The narcissistic poet may question himself as love and see love-making as a form of masturbation with somebody who probably never "really remembered my name" ("Love Poem" UP 37). Or he may scrutinize his roles as a husband ("For Hettie in Her Fifth Month" p. 14), as a not yet "suicided" father ("Preface ...". 5), and, again and again, as a tormented poet ("Vice" p. 27) who is locked in with "dull memories and self hate, and the terrible disorder/ of a young man" ("The Turncoat" P. 26).

There are many moments of lightness, of irony, and humor, especially as the poet plays with the ambiguities of his alienation or with the process or verbal creation. "In Memory of Radio" inverts the word "love".

Missouri lad who wishes himself into a Saville (sic) Row funeral" (R21), the American who buttons himself up in an English suit, and thus chooses and English death, are plentiful throughout Baraka's writings, and especially striking in *Preface,* as the following examples may illustrate:

| | |
|---|---|
| *the evening* | *the evening is spread* |
| *spread against the windows* | *out against the sky* |
| *("Duke Mantee' P35)* | *("Prufrock")* |
| *Respect the season* | *But at my back in cold* |
| *and dance to the rattle* | *blast I hear* |
| *of its bones* | *The rattle of the bones* |
| *Winter rattles* | *I do not find* |
| *like the throat* | *The Hanged Man* |
| *of the hanged man.* | *The Hanged Man* |
| *("From an Almanac* 2" *P 43-44)* | *("Waste Land")* |

In 1959, in the poem "The Plumed Serpent" (a D.H. Lawrence title), Baraka apparently offers an account of his relationship with Eliot. In a World of " old Anglos dying" the poet demands " a glass of water for the speaker who is English. "Later in the poem, Baraka invokes Olson and accepts the necessity for "the destruction of the old temple." If this temple refers to the shell of Eliot's rhetoric, the strategy of overcoming Eliot is expressed in Eliotic terms, in a phrasing close to Eliot's "The Hippopotamus". "On this church I build my rock" ("The Plumed Serpent" UP

16). Baraka constructs his poetry on, and out of, the ruins of his Eliot shell and moves beyond.

## 2. GENEALOGY AND IDENTITY

The "difficult" character of much of Baraka's poetry originates in the anti-Eliotic stance. Many poems are informed by Baraka's tenet that the creative "climax" can never be the reader's, in "Look for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today," the poet asks cryptically.

> *Was James Karolisa a great sage?*
>
> *Why did I let Ora Matthews beat him up*
>
> *In a bathroom? Haven't I learned my lesson.* (P. 15)

The references are only understandable in the light of Baraka's later publications: they are school friends whose names recur throughout his works (e.g., SD 28, 31, 37, 44, 54, and 65ff) and whose story is finally told in *The Toilet.*

This example illustrates how expressive poetry may lead Baraka toward his pressing themes, regardless of their impact on, or even their intelligibility to contemporary readers. The freedom of "How You Sound?" is the freedom of the creator who may poetically explore street language and bathroom settings and who has no responsibility to convey "reality" to audiences. Thus, Baraka states quite "correctly" in a later poem:

*& Love is an evil word.*

*Turn it backwards/see, see what i mean?*

*An evil word. & besides*

*Who understands it?* (P 12)

Baraka's first published poem, "Slice of Life" (UP 1), is set in the "railroad station of segregated hartsville. South Carolina, the home town of Baraka's grandparents. There the angel-poet encounters three toilets, "one marked MEN, one/Marked WOMEN, and the third marked OTHERS." Metaphorically identifying racial discrimination and secret sexual otherness, the humorous poem concludes: "I wonder, could they have known?" (UP1). In "The Gift of the Unicorn" (UP 5), published later in 1958, Baraka links the angel metaphor with that of another spiritual outsider, the "unicorn," a Yeatsian image of the writer "Caught up in his own corny fictions." "Central Park in Winter" (UP 6) uses the antagonism of a poetic " I " against "white and irrational" signs that read "No parking," "No littering," and "No picnicking," and likens the alienated self to "exiled statues" in the park. The Beat poet perceives the "square" New York skyline as a "herd of symmetrical gangsters" and is beset with "those fears all spies must feel." "The Last Roundup" (UP 7) develops the theme of alienation out of a confrontation between the sensitive poet and the object of his rejected love, a "blonde" fellow student and fighter. The poet admits to "inhaling" the blonde one's "sensual eyes" although the visionary is rejected and treated as a "traitor."

The poet's early tendency to explore the theme of alienation, takes the form of an identification with spiritual and visionary outsiders (angels, unicorns, "spies") against a square, white or blonde opponent. The symbolic association of whiteness and evil is a literacy strategy which subtly reflects both Baraka's sense of racial alienation and his literary debt to Melville, In his 1959 short story, 'The man who sold pictures of god" (UF3), Baraka alludes to the *Moby-Dick* chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale." A canvas salesman is apparently mistaken for an avant-gardist nihilist who sells paintings with "absolutely nothing on them". "The whiteness of the canvas was purely symbolic."

Baraka maintains an ironically alienated relationship to himself as a Black man and a Bohemian in one of the best *Preface* poems, "Hymn for Lanie Poo". In the fourth part of this poem, reprinted separately in Langston Hughes's anthology *New Negro Poets, U.S.A.,* Baraka immerses himself into his specific *New York* local in order to create a Whitrinanesque cosmic genealogy for himself. Like Langston Hughes, Baraka speaks of rivers; and when the author or "Lanie Poo" stares at the Hudson, he, too, imagines more than his prosaic "place of origin," his "step mother" city,Newark on the other side. The rising horizon, the sun itself, becomes a father image for the alienated poet who is thus elevated to a son of sun.

*Each morning*

*I go down*

*to Gansevoort St.*

*and stand on the docks.*

*I stare out*

*at the horizon*

*until it gets up*

*and comes to embrace*

*me. I*

*make believe*

*it is my father.*

*This is known*

*as genealogy.* (P 9)

This poet's elevated cosmic origin Is a source of strength, but it is a social liability in America, where racist folklore assigns a quality of "evil" to the sun: "Beware the evil sun ....Turn you black" (p 6). In a parallel passage in *Blues People,* Baraka explains this correlation of sun and blackness:

*"You are black ....which means you lived too close to the sun. Black is evil." "You are white ....' which means you lived too far from the sun. You have no color...no soul." (BP 10).* These are equally logical arguments.

The relationship toward the sun becomes a central metaphor for the attitudes of Black Americans toward their own blackness and their African

heritage. This sun, which can "turn your hair/crawl your eyeball/rot your teeth" (P. 6), is using this country as a "commode" (P, 9). The square "firemasons," the staunch civic, and more conservative civil rights organizations of the Black middle class, organize parades which have no recognizable connection with Black identity; they wear hats with brims and "beware the sun" - just as Baraka's sister Sandra Elaine (whose childhood nickname, "Lanie Poo," appears prominently in the title of the poem) evades her Blackness: she "doesn't like to teach in Newark/because there are too many colored/in her classes" (P 11).

> O, *generation of ficticious*
>
> *Ofays*
>
> *I revere you...*
>
> *You are all so beautiful (P 11)*

Baraka ridicules the attitude of the Black bourgeoisie because its self-evaluation is based essentially on a self-hating reverence for "ofays" (which, translated back from pig Latin is really the plural of " a foe") and a desire to become this enemy, by turning white. These "faux Negres," having lost their own group identity, are characterless,

> *smiling & glad/in*
>
> *the huge & loveless*
>
> *white-anglo sun/of*
>
> *benevolent step*
>
> *mother America, (p. 12)*

"Lanie Poo" sounds the familiar theme of aesthetic opposition to the Black bourgeois past; and it is therefore not surprising to hear Baraka's recorded introduction to the poem on the Library of Congress tape of 1959.

"It's about what E. Franklin Frazier called the *Black Bourgeoisie,* it tries to equate modern life, modern Negro life in America, with the life... in some unknown African tribe."

Against the middle-class fear of the "evil" sun, Baraka posits his "genealogy" as a conscious negation of the Black middle class self-denial. He evokes scenes of a wild, Bohemian, imaginary Afro-America. Physical pleasures, wild hunting scenes and feasts dominate his exotic countervisiohs, as he enjoys the "uncivilized" and the obscene, everything the "freemasons" would reject.

Baraka's exoticism remained recognizably indebted to the Bohemian cult to the exotic primitive, of "Crow-Jimism," of "The White Negro."

*All afternoon*

*we sit around*

*near the edge of the city*

*hacking open*

*crocodile skulls*

*sharpening our teeth.* { p 6)

Baraka's poetic montage ironically contrasts images of urban America and Tarzanlike, exotic notions of an "Africa" in the Bohemian mind and he says,

> / *wobble out to*
> *the edge of the water*
> *give my homy yell*
> *& 24 elephants*
> *stomp out of the subway*
> *with consecrated hardons.* •
>
> *she had her coming out parity*
> *with 3000 guests*
> *from all parts of the country.*
> *Queens, Richmond, Togoland, The Cameroons* .. (p 7)

Reminiscent of Eliot's lists of cities, this latter passage creates a fantasy setting combining New York boroughs with West African nations from which many Afro-Americans originally came, and a New York subway (one of Baraka's obsessive literary settings) with identifiably male elephants stomping about the cities. Among the party guests are Hulan Jack, Tarzan, and John Coltrane, During the feast, the poet yokes Eliot's "Phoenician" in "The Burial of the Dead" with the American ritual'of The burger cookout and yells cannibalistically:

*"Throw on another goddamned Phoenecian."'*

*We got so drunk (Hulan Jack*

*brought his bottle of Thunderbird),*

*nobody went hunting*

*the next morning,* (p. 7)

After this communion with cheap wine, the poet spends a week in a fantasy land of genesis, reminiscent of popular accounts of the seven days of the creation of the earth. The activities range from gulping down monkey foreskins to trying to get some sculpting done, from watching television to catching a 600-pound ape. Baraka alludes to William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity wih* the lines,

*Read Garmanda's book, "14 Tribes of*

*Ambiguity," didn't like it.* (P 8)

The creative vision, intended to negate Black middle class attitudes, reaches its zenith with the figure of a "wild assed" (p 6) *B0ilu^0^0im* Black goddess, who is seen through the filter of a Bohemian imagination of Black wildness:

*The god I pray to*

*Got black boobies*

*Got steatopygia.*

It is this filter which again and again reconstitutes the imaginary character of the world created, and which ultimately leaves the poem

resigned and unresolved. The poet regrets that Africans and Afro-Americans are "civilized;" they are "wild assed trees" (p 6) who have been transformed, under the spell of the Western world, into "chamling/wlcker baskets" (p 6). Baraka's Bohemian fantasy negates this metamorphosis and envisions Black self-liberation through inversion and re-creation:

*We all know*
*These wicker baskets*
*Would make wlld-assed trees.* (P. 8)

The poem thus plays "wrong" way of being Black against each other and utilizes as he criticizes the ambivalence of white prejudices without arriving at a suggestion for a "correct" Black consciousness. Baraka sides with his unrepressed Black goddess and with a masturbatory self-affirmation against the ridiculous Black Christians in the "silly little church" who allow a preacher with "conning eyes" to trick them into some supposedly "real" happiness (P. 9-10). But there is also self-criticism of what Baraka calls, in German/Yiddish, "die schwartze Bohemian" (P. 10). Black Bohemians are not depicted as a pioneer group on the road to a true Black identity; they lack any kind of meaningful connection with people and with Black communities, e.g. Hariem, "uptown" (P. 11). The Black Bohemian may have a secret Black goddess with Black breasts and a big bottom, but is taken breathless by any white woman who passes the coffee shop. Despite his belief that "white cats can't swing" (P. 11), the Black

Bohemian interrupts his conversation to exclaim "Man Lookatthatblonde/wheweel" (P. 10). He talks about Zen, Gandhi and "Mr. Lincon" and retains so littie of his own cultural identity as a Black man that even his French coffee seems symbolic of his Bohemian integrationism, "Caf6 Olay." The memory of white Bohemians who became racists in their later careers adds seriousness, and the section ends on a sad note with the Black Bohemian's rationalization:

*It just that it's such a drag to go*

*Way uptown for Bar B Cue,*

*ByGod...*

*How Much? {P^^)*

In "Lanie Poo," Baraka reflected upon his own alienation and questioned Bohemian self-definitions, however, he did not transcend an ironic criticism of various possibilities of "false" blackness. The poem's motto, "vous etes des Negress," taken from Arthur Rimbaud's "Une Saison en Enfer" (1873), is appropriate, Rimbaud was one of the cultural heroes of the Beat Generation, and Baraka first published Kerouac's famous "Rimbaud" poem in *Yugen.* In Rimbaud's "Saison," the white-Black value scale is inverted so tat whites can be criticized as "false negroes." The decisive Rimbaud passage was translated by Edmund Wilson in Axell's Castle.

"I have never been a Christian; I am of the race who sang in torture; I do not understand the law; I haven't the moral sense, I am a brute; you are dojng wrong. Yes, my; eyes are closed to your light. I am a nigger, a beast. But 1 may be saved. You yourselves are false niggers, savage and grasping madmen. Tradesman, you are a nigger; magistrate, you are a nigger; general, you are a nigger; emperor, pid itching palm, you are a nigger; you have drunk of a contraband liquor from Satan's distillery." (P27)

This comes close to the ambivalent concept of the noble savage who can criticize bourgeois. Western civilization (merchants, bureaucrats, generals, emperors) for being *truly* savage in the pursuit of hypocrisy, war, profit, and Christian order, Similarly, Rimbaud wrote to his family about "negres blanc does pays dtts civilises." Tanle Poo" shares Rimbaud's Bohemianism and is a comprehensive literary-formulation of Baraka's own contradictions. The poem also explores a. specifically Barakian imagery which recurs in many other works.

The image of the sun as a Black father and as a touchstone for a Black identity is crucial in Baraka's poetry. "Columbia the Gem of the Ocean" (UP 21) invokes a Hudson- "Landschaft" after sunrise "and though you're uptown, still your black hair does reflect it." "One Night Stand" (P 21-22) can be read as a poem about the migration of Southern Blacks to the cities of the North, adding a historical dimension to the poet's insecure sense of identity.

*We are foreign seeming persons. Hats flopped so ttie sun*

*can't scold beards; oddstioes, bags of books & cliicken*

*We fiave come a long way, & are uncertain wliich ofttte .*

*masks is cool.* (P 22)

In "For Hettie in Her Fifth Month," the expectation of a "multto" child is fictionalized,by the image of the Black poet's white:

*in a chair by the window*

*one finger holding the blink back*

*so that what sun's left*

*washed into your womb.* (P 14)

"Scenario VI" moves from an initial minstrel act in which the poet balances his cane "tilting the hat to avoid the sun" (p 22) through a stream of images to a final sequence which returns to the tone of "Lanie Poo" in a post-Thoreauvian Week on the Summer and Indus rivers:

*Sylvia has come out her smashing oranges & jewelry ...*

*.... We make it in great swirls out to the terrace,*

*which overlooks Sumer... & the Indus river, where next*

*weeks probably all Mnds of white trash will ride in*

*on stolen animals we will be amazed by. {P* 23)

"Ostriches and Grandmothers" (P 20-21) employs the sun imagery to urge a stronger expression of a black identity beyond all masks and stances:

> *all meet with us, finally: the*
>
> *uptown, way-west, den of inconstant*
>
> *moralities.*
>
> *Faces up: all*
>
> *My faces turned up*
>
> *To the sun.* (P 20)

The connection between bourgeois and Bohemian masks remains a source of tension, which is only occasionally and temporarily resolved in poetic adaptations of Blackness through Black music:

> *The bridge wilt be behind you, that music you know, that place.*
>
> *you feet when you look up to say, it is me, & I have forgotten,*
>
> *all the things, you told me to love, to try to understand, the*
>
> *bridge will stand, high up in the clouds & the light, & you.*
>
> *(when you have let the song run out) will be sliding through*
>
> *unmentionable black.* (P 26)

Baraka keeps approaching his Black identity through genealogy. His short story, "Suppose Sorrow Was A Time Machine" (UP 1), first published In 1958, pursues Baraka's real genealogy, not an imaginary one as "son of sun". This story follows the northern migration of his maternal

grandparents, from Dothan, Alabama, to Beaver falls, Pennsylvania, and to Newark, New Jersey. "Slice of Life" approaches its subject metaphorically, using the angel as a symbol of the outsider situation; "Suppose Sorrow Was a Time Machine," however, ventures into family history as part of ethnic history.,

In Dothan, Alabama, at the turn of the century, Baraka's Grandparents, Thomas Everett and Anna Cherry Brock Russ, owned a general stores, which was burned down twice by "unholy bastrads" white racists - and which the grandparents-to-be rebuilt into "the biggest funeral parlor in the country" (UF 1, p. 10): "so fancy, the niggers killing each other so that they can get all excuse to go to it." But the funeral parlor was also burned down, and by 1917, the Rasses had moved to Beaver Fall to "sell eggs, produce. Best liquor in the country" (UF 1, p.10) and, eight years later, to Newark to "Russ Super General Store" which closed its doors during the depression. Possibly, Tom Russ was hit "in the head with a street lamp" and died in "Greystone Sanatorium, 1943" (UF 1, p. 11), when his grandson, the narrator of the story, was nine years old.

The story has the potential for a Black *Buddenbrooks,* yet, although Baraka was so deeply affected by his family history that he incorporated it in *Blues People* (96), included Tom Russ in the gallery of black heroes in the poem "Black Dada Nihilismus" (DL 64), and dedicated *Dutchman and The stave* to his grandparents, he never narrated the story in the epic

dimensions it would require. Instead, he used H.G. Wells's time machine to reach out for his grandfather's spiritual "vibrations," and wrote an experimental story, an address by the still unborn author to his grandfather:

"Say that you are Tom Russ, It is Dothan, Alabama, U.S.A. 1898. You are a Negro who has felt the ground vibrate .... I know you Tom, You are my" grandfather. I am not born yet but I have felt the ground vibrate too. (UF1 p.9).

The unborn narrator feels that his grandfather's fate imposes an obligation on him:

"I hear they finally hit you in the head with a street lamp, Tom. Is that so? Gave you a cane and a wheelchair, and made you sit by the wood stove nodding and spitting, trying desperately to remember exactly when and where it was the ground vibrated. But do you realize that your unborn grandson has finally got here? Or is it that he's still unborn and only the body managed to make it right now". (UF I, p. 11).

At the end of the story, the young author claims his inherited sorrows; he seems to be summoning his grandfather's spirit in that ritual of invocation of the dead, which frequently precedes a call for revenge:

"Tom, are you listening? Don't stare like that. Tom, Tom, O my god". (UF1,p. 11)

The early short story is exceptional in its treatment of the author's real past; more characteristic is the 1959 poem "Parthenos" (UP 10), in which the past is remembered in a Ferlinghetti allusion, merely as

> another street, with more trees ...
>
> an insipid suburbia of the mind. (UP 10, P 23)

In "Parthenos," Baraka purchases an invented maternal genealogy and traces " a straight line ... backwards till it stops/infinity? (the white sleek things of a woman)" and "beyond the straight line/catching the sun in her eyes/the moon in her thigh. / very early / when night was a pickaninny on a pony." The poem then turns into what is characterized as "(chantnow)" and playfully explores the poet's multiethnic American mothers:

> *My Chinese mother*
>
> *is full of compassion*
>
> *my Japanese mother*
>
> *dances all day*
>
> *1 have a white mother*
>
> pa/e as a bone, *with*
>
> *red moons smeared in*
>
> *her cheef^s, who thinl<s*
>
> *nothing of vanishing*
>
> *trailing leis of orange flame. (UP 10, P 24)*

And continuing the metaphor of an exotic, multiracial, imagined maternal lineage, "Parthenous" proceeds:

*My Black mother*

*was a witch doctor*

*a crazy womar) with* a *red cape*

*hucl<lebucfiing beneath ttie pyramids.*

*before beyond the night.*

*at the end of the straight line.* (UP 10, p.24)

This Oedipal pursuit of a man's heritage into his fictional mother's womb culminates in the laconic remark "Only the mothers survive " (UP 10, p. 26). Tal<en together, "Lanie Poo" and "Parthenos" replace a "real" ancestry (UF 1) with a complete, fictional, cosmic genealogy of the Bohemian visionary, who was, perhaps, created by a sun-ray hitting a virginal lunar womb" (UP 10, p. 26), But "Parthenos" also expresses the remembrance of yet another womb like home for the young poet-to-be: the world of American popular culture.

*when I was young*

*I'd take the radio*

*under the covers*

*and let it play*

*ail night*

*and when morning came*

*toss it* across *the room*

*Stanng at it disdainfully* (UP 10, P25)

The radio as a tossed-away lever god is emblematic of Baraka's love hate relationship with popular culture.

## 3. POPULAR CULTURE:

The central theme of "Look For You Yesterday, Here You Come Today" is the poet's "maudlin nostalgia" (p 17) for the popular culture of his youth: "When will world war two be over?" (p 16). Baraka's interest in America's modern mythology amounts to an obsession with comic-book heroes and code words, with radio programs and Hollywood movies, since "what's best in popular culture is really what's strongest in this society" (UI20).

It has been suggested that Baraka's use of popular culture is limited to an early "clearing" period, at the end of which (approximately at the time of "Look For You Yesterday") the "heroes" were discarded, or that his use of popular culture essentially demonstrates the struggle of the Black poet with the American myth of innocence, against which the concept of "soul" is pitted. But these interpretations do not go far enough in explaining Baraka's pervasive use of popular mythology, both in his early poetry and in his literature of Black nationalism and Maoism.

This mythology possibly constitutes the largest single literary influence on the writer, who, in the short story, "The Screamers," called pulp cowboy magazines "the truest legacy of my spirit" (T 74). Not

surprisingly, Baraka's first attempts at writing were a comic strip, "The Crime Wave," and science fiction short stories for his high school paper.

"Look For You Yesterday" is, in Baraka's own words on the Library of Congress tape, "about my vision of my childhood, some of the^things that have stayed with me and how I used these things to show that I am gradually getting older." The process of aging, the "cobblestone clock" that commands the author each morning to rise "& rot a little more" (p 16), the "terrible thoughts about death" (p 17) are contrasted with a nostalgic attempt to reach out for his lost childhood:

> *All the lovely things I've known have disappeared.*
> *I have all my pubic hair & am lonely.*
> *There is probably no such place such place as Battle Creek, Michiganl*
> *Tom Mix dead in a Boston Nightclub*
> *before I realize what happened. .*
> *People laugh when I tell tern about Dickie Dare!*
> *What is one to do in an alien planet*
> *where the people breath New ports?*
> *Where is my space helmet, I sent for it*
> *3 lives ago ... when there were box tops.*
> *What has happened to box tops?*
> *O, God... I must have a belt that glows green*
> *in the dark. Where is my Captain Midnight decoder?*
> *I can't understand what Superman is saying!*
> *There Must Be A Lone Ranger!* (P. 16-17)

The function of popular culture in "Look for You Yesterday" is similar to that of a time machine. Baraka's popular heroes help the poet in search of lost past and take him back to his childhood. But the author's loneliness, the fact that people laugh at his nostalgia, and the doubtful tone of his questions indicate that the popular culture of the poet's youth has been consumed and forgotten by; the people, and that he is now one of the few witnesses who remember that it ever existed. What was once culture for the millions has now, in an ironically elitist turn, become a secret password, a code understood only by those few visionaries who are "dumb" enough "to be sentimental about anything" (P 17).

The radio is a medium in which God reveals himself through magic and miracles, through hypnotic gestures, coded messages, and transformations, and this epiphany is the legacy for the poet, those imaginative power of pretending can lead to sudden shocks of awareness, called "satori" in zen, of the inverted connection between love and evil. In this sense, the initiate to the radio cult has become a "sage"; although lacking the "real" power of a German dictator or the governor of California to order executions, he has the power of knowledge, the capacity to understand and use the magic of words:

*Am I a sage or something?*

*Mandrake's hypnotic gesture of the week?*

*(Remember, I do not have the healing powers of Oral Roberts ...*

*/ cannot, like F.J. Sheen, tell you how to get saved & rich'.*

*t cannot even order you to gaschamber satori like Hitter or Goody Knight*

*Saturday mornings we listened to Red lantern & his undersea folk*

*At 11, Let's pretend/& we did & I, the poet, still do, Thank Godl*

*What was it he used to say (after the transformation when he was safe*

*& invisible & the unbelievers couldn't throw stones?)" Heh, heh, heh,*

*Who knows what evillurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows."*

*O,* yes *he does*

*O, yes he does. (P* 12-13)

The sacral magic of popular culture is similarly invoked in "Metaphysical Ode to Birth" {UP 19), which celebrates the old radio programs and, "after a hard day turning on the radio," achieves a moment of surprise with the announcement "Ladies and gents, a short talk by God." "The Making of a Poem from a Paint Can" (UP 20), and occasional poem from the year 1959, echoes "In memory of Radio" and ascribes to "Mandrake's hypnotic gesture of the week" the power of metamorphosis, of "changing Lothar into a Hershey bar." These uses of popular culture correspond to Baraka's anti-bourgeois and anti-objective strategy; breaking the Eliot shell with the help of narcissism and street language is paralleled by elevating popular art to the level o divine inspiration.

Now white victims and clowns, puppets and villains are central to American popular mythology, and Baraka increasingly identifies himself with this ethnic dimension. In the early works, this strategy is just beginning

to emerge. "Where is Mu?"(UP 13), a "satirical poem dedicated to Kenneth Koch," resembles the spirit of "Look for you ..." in the poet's lament for his "seven years of hired education washed away by the cold breath of art," and in his nostalgic invocation of Mu as a "childhood vision of an adventurer" and as a savior. "Save me, WIU. Collect me in your outrageous bosom" is the desperate Invocation of Mu, the poet's "gentle boy-god" and "illegal celestial connection." The figure of Mu, however, is also the son of Ra in Egyptian mythology, which fascinated Baraka, who is introduced as an Egyptian, Pre Western point of refuge from "this idle posturing." This Bohemian Gypsy-Egyptian opposition to the west is strengthened by Baraka's uses of Black music and by his strategy of inverting the stereotypical roles assigned to non-whites in American popular culture. It is thus significant to note that the poem with the blues title "Look for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today" ends when the Lone Ranger's silver bullets are gone:

> *& Tonto way off in the fiills*
> *moaning like Bessie Smifli.* (P 18)

The spirit of Mu may well be seen looming behind Baraka's concern for popular culture and opposing the mood of pure nostalgia. The persistence of ethnic victims as buffoons poses the question of whether or not mass culture is contradictory to a true people's culture. Lorca,

represents a point of departure for a political and ethnic popular art in one of Baraka's earliest poems.

Significantly, "Lines to Garcia Lorca" (UP 2) begins with a Negro Spiritual song which *serjes* as a motto and which is linked, in the end, to Lorca's voice, "laughing, Laughing/Like a Spanish guitar." "Lines" ascribes a religious importance to music in oppressive situation. The violent death of the Spanish poet at the hands of Franco's fascists, is reenacted by the reader of Lorca's poem, and similarly, we are to assume. Black music can actualize in the listener the memory of Black suffering. The laughter is the laughter of a sun/iving art, collected by Buddhist, "orange-robed monks." Poetry is thus seen as a people's strength against political oppression.

"April 13" (UP 9) brings Lorca's Spanish theme home to a Puerto Rican neighborhood in New York which is contrasted with the Andrews Sisters at Radio City Music Hall. The poem uses elements of outsider imagery, e.g., the opposition to "blondes" or "snow," in order to raise the larger question of the role of oppressed minorities at home and of cultural imperialism abroad; this is done, however, with the help of the self-consciously trite cliche of cats and mice.

*Out the window:*

*HUO DE PUTA!*

*HIJO DE PUTA!*

*This is probably a Job*

*for a social worker.*

*One with blonde stringy hair*

*& lipstick stains on her mustache.*

*Last night it snowed ...*

*today, some old dirty cat*

*is crouched on the black fence*

*thinking about the various kinds*

*of mice.*

*There was a time*

*when Radio City Music Hail*

*was really a great place.*

*Hot summer, 1942: Everybody sang*

*"working for the yonkee dollahhh"*

*& something about* Caca-co/9.

*HIJO DE PUTA*

*MARDICON, PINDEO, CHOLITO etc.*

*Things are happening slowly.*

Among Baraka's early poems, "Lines to Garcial Lorca" and "April 13" are exceptional in their statements on cultural politics. The dominant concern in this period is less for social action than for an immersion into a self which is tormented, and often suicidal.

**4. SUICIDE AND BEYOND**

The poem "The Death of Nick Charles" (p31-34), Dashiell Hammett's detective novel. *The Thin Man,* develops the suicidal theme.

*Sad*

*long*

*motion of hair*

*pushing in my face. Lies.*

*Weakness, hatred*

*Of myself. Of you*

*For not understanding*

*This. Or not*

*Despising me*

*For the right causes* ,., (P 32)

After pessimistic considerations of love and loneliness, the poem ends with oblique reference to darkness and blackness and suicidal sleep, from which there is no satori awakening. The "Glorious death in battle" (p31) of the beloved popular heroes seems to have been taken literally.

*Boats & old men*

*Move through the darkness ...*

*Sea birds*

*Scalding the blackness ...*

*I merely sit*

*& grow weary, not even watching*

*the sky lighten with morning*

*&now*

*I am sleeping*

*& you will not be able*

*to wake me.* (P 34)

These suicidal lines correspond to the serious meaning of the bizarre title of the collection (possibly influenced by Langston Hughes's short poem, "Suicide's Note" whereas the title poem, "Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note" (p 5) - dated March 1957 but dedicated to Kellie Jones, born 16 May 1959 - corresponds to its ironically contradictory form.. as William Fischer says:

*To bring so much heavy apparatus to bearpreface and volumes-on a mere not, is to mock the ostensible value to the poems themselves.* (Fischer p270).

The title poem elaborates the contrast between the poet's nihilistic ways and his young daughter's unsheltered religious faith. For this modern Hamlet "Things have come to that": and "the broad edged silly music the wind/Makes when I run for a bus ..." has replaced the songs of his childhood; "Nobody signs any more". The difference in the perspectives of father and daughter is most clearly articulated in their relationship to god, who is very real for the praying daughter, but only an absence, a "no one." for the poet:

*And then last night, f tiptoed up*
*To my; daughter's room and heard her*
*Talking to someone, and when i opened*
*The door, there was no one there...*
*Only she on her knees, peeking into*
*Her own clasped hands.* (P 5)

The recurrence of Baraka's themes and motifs unifies the early poetry; but the playfulness and the nostalgia increasingly give way to a sense of suicidal despair. Baraka's suicidal and agonistic poetry reflects the death of the "Anglo shell," which at times appears like the death of the poet himself. The writer who is almost "Suicided" by the cultural dead weight of "objective" art, often doubts whether he can extricate himself from the decline of the West. In "Consider This" (UP 17), Baraka ironically accepts a European tradition, as seen by Henry James, when he says:

> *And those lovely cathedrals at Charires*
>
> *your* way of saying j{
>
> / *must... love them*
>
> *I have no other voice left.*

But the poet does have an inner voice which survives the suicidal temptations to die with the shell. This voice ultimately transforms agonism into antagonism as it is raised to the scream of "Black Dada Nihilism's." The confrontation of inside and outside, of life and death, sharpens. The *Preface* poems occasionally envision a "new turn." "Theory of art" (P 40-41) . vaguely anticipates "a dark singular consciousness" and the terror that will be caused by "the animal sleeping", when he wakes, "The New Sheriff' (p42) alludes to Baraka's childhood heroes of the Lone Ranger type and subtly elaborates a contrasting imagery of cruelty/virginity, color/whiteness,

and inside/outside that foretells, in Eliotlc terms, more radical changes to come:

*There is something*

*in me so cruel, so*

*silent it hesitates*

*to sit on the grass*

*with the young white*

*virgins* (P 42)

The turning toward "new" things is critically reflected in the last poem of the volume, which departs from *Preface to* a *Twenty Volume Suicide Note* in its more communicative title, "Notes for a Speech." Instead of the valedictory and suicidal soliloquizing of some earlier poems, there is, in this poem, the strengthening of the gesture of "speech," of finding oneself and others in the verbal process. The theme of the .speech, however, is an assessment of the isolation of the Black Bohemian from other Black people, his alienation from Africa and the Black American community. While implying dissatisfaction with this alienation, the poet cannot resolve the fact that "African blues/does not know me" (p 47), a lyrical reminder of Counter Cullen's famous question "What is Africa to me," and ends, instead, on a resigned note:

*My color*

*is not theirs. Lighter, White man*

*taili. They shy away. My own*

*dead souls, my, so called*

*people. Africa*

*is a foreign place. You are*

*as any other sad man here*

*American.* (P 47)

A possible reason for this return to' resignation may be that the poem was written as the intended end to *Preface;* but it may also be that the poet, who achieved the strongest anticipatory thoughts in his most expressive and most personal poems, assumed a more formal and almost essayistic role in his "Notes for a Speech," the conclusion of which, significantly, resembles the last paragraphs of "Cuba Libre." "Notes for a Speech" contains very little that is cryptic, no obscure personal references, no "names" and almost no Beat peculiarities except in the line arrangement. At the end of *Preface* Baraka sees his alienation as a symbol of the estranged situation of "any other sad man" in America.

The library Congress recordings of Baraka's early poetry reinforce the impression of an alienated poet who talks to himself. His voice is rarely raised beyond the occasionally ironic emphasis of point ("There Must Be A Lone Ranger!!!); and usually, the raised voice is combined with a tone of ironically undercut frustration, as in sending "lewd poems" to Uncle Don's radio program for children and emphasizing: "IF ONLY HE WOULD READ THESE ON THE AIR" (p 19). The poet has fears of being inaudible, or of not being able to communicate an Ironic sadness, since the Beat aesthetic

frowned upon communication as something secondary to art. Indeed, the most striking "oral" effects are the frequently ironic reference to silence, the antithesis of speech-art.

On the printed page, Baraka could develop his poetic voice without the inhibiting interference of editors; unlike most earlier Afro-American writers, he started his literary career as a writer and an editor and could, like Whitman, approach the literary market from a position of relative strength. A writer with "his own offset press in the back room," Baraka was an active editor involved not only in several crucial journals of the New York Beat coterie *(Yugen, The Floating Bear, & Kulchur),* but also in the Totem Press and Corinth Books publication of such important writers as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Frank O'Hara, Charles Olson, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen.

Despite Baraka's active participation in the literary life of New York's "New Bohemia," the works of his first period of creativity increasingly show signs of a desire to transcend their own limitations and to take the freedom of his aesthetics at face value. The Bohemian's relationship to himself, his art, his subject, and his audience is challenged, and the questions of ethnic identity and the social function of art remain unanswered. After hardly more than two years with the Beat Generation, Baraka began to tire of his literary milieu, a fatigue expressed implicitly and explicitly in his early works.and letters. Thus, he wrote to Loewinsohn on November 30, 1959:

*I am so goddamned thoroughly tired of this beatnick shit I'm screaming.*

This dissatisfaction with the media exploitation of all things beat was so total as to include everything except his writing. He had defined his *ennui* in a previous letter to Loewinshon in the following striking manner:

*I want to get the fuck out of all of it. This fucking city, the goddamn editor publisher shit . . . . .every fucking thing that's keeping me from writing, form thinking, from even taking a leisurely shit in peace. I can't do all this much longer .... &I DAMN SURE WONT.*

*...Loveroi*

(James Weldon, Johnson, Collection Rare Books and Manuscript)

Baraka was, of course, not the only Beat writer who wanted to "get out"; by 1950, discontent was spreading among those whom America labeled "beatniks." An article by John Fles in the *Village Voice,* written upon the suicide of a close friend, is indicative of the mood:

... the revolution which started with "Howl" in 1956 and "On the Road" in 1957 is ending .... The old idols-insanity (Artaud), junk (Burroughs questioning seriously. But the old social-consciousness routine, as Ginsberg et al. Have shown us, is dangerous to literature the desert of the 30s and absurd as commitment. The commitment still essentially has to remain romantic, i.e., to ourselves, to our art and to what values we can make ... may be the reality we think we see is different than it seems; maybe it calls for the different involvements than the reality of the late 40s

and early 50s when the Beat Generation, as a literary fact, came into being. Maybe there is a middle ground between the opportunistic and philistine Pollyannaism of Henry Luce and, oppositely, suicide: and that this is the role of the committed artist.

Bohemian artists still defined themselves within the intellectual framework of aesthetic protest ("romantic commitment"), but struggled for new roles. The era of "pure" Bohemianism was coming to end, and Baraka was soon on the barricades "against hipness as such" (UN 17).