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Role of Baraka As An Artist

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ABSTRACT

Baraka's career has been a persistent chronicle of controversies, most of them having been provoked by Baraka's own deliberately incendiary polemics. He has been especially notorious for his biting critiques of liberalism and of white Americans' sexuality, for his strident black nationalism, and over the past decade, for his equally uncompromising Marxist-Leninist views. He has shocked his admirers and detractors alike not only by shifting from bohemian aestheticism to New Left politics to black cultural nationalism to a brand Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thinking, but he has even changed his name as well, from LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka to Amiri Baraka to Amiri Baraka· Some observers have regarded him as confused and unstable, others have hailed him as the apostle of the Black Aesthetic or as the Father of Contemporary Black Poetry.

KEYWORDS: Black Intellectual, Afro-American, Racism, Marxism, Black Movement

INTRODUCTION

Baraka's political thinking in his poetry, with particular attention to how he has conceived the implications of a political aesthetic. Furthermore, I will try to show the specific character of both strengths and weaknesses which characterize Baraka's work as a political artist. In particular, I will try to show that Baraka's most strident and polemical poems are often not his most successful works in political terms. As political art, his poems are strongest when grounded in historical particulars--either personal or collective-and weakest or least satisfying when based on abstractions, generalized attacks, and broad exhortations. Obviously one cannot make such claims without a premise about political art. My premise is that a poet makes his most valuable contributions to the revolutionary process by expressing vividly the particularity of a given historical situation or by showing the relationship between individual consciousness and the collective historical experience. From this perspective some of Baraka's early poems and a few of his very recent ones appear most admirable, while many of his famous black nationalist poems appear more polemic than poetic.

The young LeRoi Jones was the product of a black middle-class family-a bohemian artist in revolt against middle-class values. Being black, however, gave this familiar bohemian pattern an added twist, for Jones compounded the typical bohemian attacks on middle class values with even more vociferous attacks upon the Negro middle-class. His avant-garde aesthetics made him part of tiny elite, and being black left him even more marginal. If Baraka had remained merely an avant-garde writer-and aesthete-this marginality might have posed no problem, for he could have continued to cultivate his own idiosyncrasies without qualms. However, Baraka became politicized, and this created the central crisis of his career, as he struggled to reconcile his actual commitments--personal, social, and aesthetic-with his sense of what a black writer's commitments ought to be. This struggle to reconcile his actual practice with his sense of social responsibility has shaped and sometimes disfigured both his writing and his life over the past two decades. It remains the most striking and definitive characteristic of Baraka's exceptionally

eventful career. Baraka was first politicized by his trip to Cuba shortly after the Revolution. There, he realized for the first time the possibilities of fundamental social change. Also, he was personally berated by several Latin American poets in Cuba for his claims of being apolitical.

In “Cuba Libre” Baraka confesses that he was moved to tears by their assaults upon his being "a cowardly bourgeois individualist" (Home, 42-43). His recent autobiography reaffirms the centrality of his Cuba experience in achieving his political transformation (Autobiography, pp. 163-166). The example of Cuba also demonstrated to Baraka the distinction between true liberation and the callow reformism of the Civil Rights Movement. Eventually, he fell under the influence of Malcolm X, whose spellbinding polemics sharpened Baraka’s sense of the contradiction between his life among white bohemians in Greenwich Village and his emerging sense of commitment to Black people. Not surprisingly, the movement from bohemian marginality to serious political engagement entailed a number of severe disruptions for Baraka. On the personal level, it ultimately led to the destruction of his marriage, because his wife happened to be Jewish. As a writer, it led him to redefine the character of his work and in some respects to abandon his own identity as an artist.

Why Baraka should feel such profound misgivings is not apparent from the poem itself, but to understand those reasons is essential to an understanding of Baraka's peculiar envelopment s a political poet. Most importantly, Baraka’s efforts himself with their black people estranges him from his white friends. Because the racial polarization of American society manifested itself in especially extreme form in Baraka's own life, he very literally had to choose sides-or so he thought. The world of Baraka's" soft loves" is the white old Greenwich Village, where Baraka’s as poet, dramatist, editor and essayist was a leading figure. Furthermore, he had published Blues People, (1963) which remains even twenty years later the finest sociological analysis ever written of Afro-American music. Yet all this, Baraka felt, was irrelevant to the needs of "the poor."But more fundamentally, Baraka clearly associated political activism with ugliness and violence-with essentially anti-aesthetic impulses. A fear, had he not been living ‘the artist’s life’ and producing the highest sort of literary art? This is why the poem begins: “They have turned, and say that I am dying”. Ultimately, Baraka seems to agree with the judgment of his bohemian

friends. He is driven along the : “an roads” away from the Village by his conscience and conceit, feeling that he has something to offer the poor but that they have nothing to offer him. This makes him a sort of martyr. This poem is a remarkably honest and moving expression of a man's struggle with himself. Yet it also reveals some of the profound limitations in Baraka's political thinking. Most obviously, it reveals a kind of self-righteousness which could easily veer off into outright demagoguery-a plunge which Baraka has taken more than once. It establishes the poet in an assumption of superiority and orients the poet toward a didactic, declarative style. Indeed, Baraka even omitted “Substitute for the Dead Lecturer” from his Selected Poetry (1979), probably because of embarrassment over the poem's confession of weakness. This insistence on appearing strong, on avoiding expressions of indecision or self-doubt has characterized Baraka's poetry since about 1966, and it has limited him as a poet, both by narrowing his range of concerns and by undermining the complexity of perception and association which distinguishes poetry from polemics. Finally, considering that Baraka was a serious student of Hege one would expect more of an understanding of dialectical development than his stark either attitudes in this poem suggest. He clearly values the product of a developed political consciousness over the process of a developing one. Again, this reductive tendency leads Baraka toward an overly simplified, exclusive political aesthetic which focuses on narrow areas of experience rather than toward an inclusive aesthetic which captures the full complexity of actual experience. This eventually led to a crippling redundancy in Baraka writing. Despite its ambivalence, however, I would argue that “I Substitute for the Dead Lecturer” has considerable value as a political poem-specifically, as a political lyric. It is valuable precisely for its honest rendering of the difficult process of Baraka’s movement toward political commitment. The fact that the poem contains no exhortations or attacks does not diminish its actual political value, nor does its am-bivalence undermine its potential to move others toward political commitment. When we regard this poem in the context of Baraka’s career, we can appreciate much more fully his personal courage and seriousness. While the poem does not pretend to have all the answers, it presents an example which can inspire others. We know, after all, that despite his doubts and anguish, Baraka did abandon bohemia. Yet at the same time, we can see certain ideological problems implicit in his thinking problems which carry over into his subsequent work. And no poem better exemplifies

both the strengths and the weaknesses of Baraka's political poetry than "Black Art." "Black Art" was first published in January of 1966.

One of Baraka's most controversial poems, it rapidly became a central icon of the Black Arts Movement, and at the same time, it also became a favorite target of those critics who regarded the black aesthetic as an anti-aesthetic. Notorious for its violent language and racial polemics, celebrated for its programmatic clarity and declarative force, "Black Art" remains one of Baraka's most compelling and troubling poems. For anyone concerned with Baraka's conception of a black political aesthetic, this poem is a crucial document. "Black Art" has been properly regarded as the definitive statement of a new direction in Baraka's poetry. yet paradoxically; most critics have failed to note the degree to which the poem merely reiterates concepts which Baraka had developed many years earlier. Indeed, the poem even retains significant vestiges of the liberal faith which Baraka himself has always attacked with such devastating effectiveness. The presence of so many contradictions beneath the poem's clarion rhetoric makes "Black Art" a perfect symbol of Baraka's aesthetic during the late 1960s. From the opening line, the poem endeavors to exemplify the aesthetic principles which it advocates. When it asserts that "Poems are bullshit unless they are teeth or trees or lemons piled on a step," it tries to assume the object-like quality which it recommends and substitutes blunt, forthright language for euphemism or "bullshit." like quality which it recommends and substitutes blunt, forthright language for euphemism or "bullshit."

Baraka, however, takes this concept to its logical extreme, espousing a poetic which appears fundamentally anti-poetic. It also presents it as an anti-rational, as we can see in the deliberate randomness of teeth, trees and lemons. So ultimately, "Black Art" seems to be a rejection of order in favor of disorder and of art-poetry-in favor of activism, effectiveness and physicality. The poem expresses not just a desire for poems to become physical things but more specifically for poems literally to embody and enact forms of human "the hip world live flesh coursing blood" but poems which are made of these things. In short, these words are not merely lively they are living and impassioned. This conception takes Baraka beyond conventional objectivist aesthetics. These aggressive poems attack, kill and strip naked the enemies of black people. In other words, they engage in actual political struggle rather than simple commenting on politics.

Black art, for Baraka, means art which brings about changes to improve the situation of Afro-Americans. But interestingly, five different categories of Afro-Americans come under attack. First, the poem targets “niggers in jocks”- presumably, those blacks with nothing on their minds except sports.

Baraka struggles with this limitation, which is the main challenge facing any progressive political artist. Not surprisingly, his racially-defined polemic finally collapses back upon itself. Interestingly, this problem manifests itself even in the structure of the poem. The poem is divided, conceptually, into two sections: an attack on the enemies of black folk and a celebration of black folk and values. Though the poem aspires ultimately to be a celebration of blackness, it devotes forty-one of its fifty-five lines to attack rather than affirmation. The negative part of the poem is much longer and also, revealingly, contains by far the better writing. Lines such as “Let there be no love poems written until love can exist freely and cleanly" or "Let the world be a black Poem” are pale and tepid alongside “Black poems to smear on girdle mamma mulatto bitches whose brains are red jelly stuck between 'Elizabeth Taylor’s toes.” The latter lines adhere to Baraka's opening call for the physicality of strong images: “Hearts Brains Souls splintering fire.” The former, by contrast, are vague, abstract and embarrassingly close to what Baraka’s opening line labels “bullshit.” In one sense the unbalance of the poem reflects Baraka’s somewhat careless attempt to combine two different concepts within the same metaphor. The poem plays on the notion of “art” as magic. Hence, “black art” suggests a vindictive magic: literally, the form of voodoo which is used against one’s enemies. In fact, the cover of Baraka’s book Black Magic Poetry shows a white clay doll, blond-haired and blue-eyed, skewered with hat pins. The first section of the poem, then, functions as a hex. Baraka does not extend the metaphor effectively, however, into the affirmative section of the poem. Though real voodoo in actuality has many applications as a healing art, Baraka does not draw upon those possibilities.

CONCLUSION

Baraka exploits the powerful racially defined emotions of Afro-American people to illustrate hat black consciousness must despise and reject. When he affirms blackness at the end of the poem, however, none of his language is grounded in a comparable source of emotional

energy. Hence, the poem's conclusion is comparatively allowed and ineffective, however much one admires its sentiments. Obviously, this poem has notable's strengths. Its tastes in forceful terms an objectivist, activist aesthetic, and no poem render a more memorable at along of the negative participants Afro-American life. Mucho f the poem is, indeed, a virtuoso performance. Nevertheless, its final affirmatives action falls far short of the standard established in the first forty-one lines. Much of that failure seems to follow directly from Baraka's use of racial identification. This creates problems in part because Baraka provides no clear definition of what he means by blackness. The term seems merely of distinguish right-thinking, self-loving Afro-Americans from those other Afro-Americans who adulate or consort with white people. Such a definition is vague at best.

Even more significantly, the concept of race itself functions in our culture as an instrument of oppression. Its implications are overwhelmingly negative. Race provides Baraka with an amplest source of negative energy in the poem, but it offers no basis for affirmation. To provide such a foundation for his affirmative claims, Baraka would have to draw more effectively on the diverse resources of Afro-American culture than he succeeds in doing here. The concept of race as we commonly know it originated as a justification of chattels livery, and after emancipation, it served to justify the continued exploitation and oppression of Afro-American people.

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