

Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

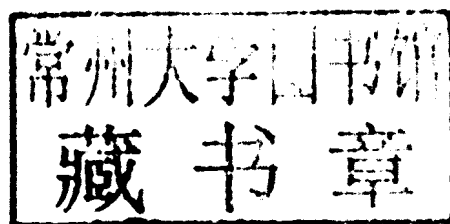
113

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 113

Michelle Lee
Project Editor



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Preface

Poetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, PC offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by PC supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

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PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, PC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a PC volume.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Edited by Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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Amiri Baraka

1934-

(Born Everett LeRoy Jones; also wrote under the names LeRoi Jones and Imamu Amiri Baraka.) American poet, playwright, essayist, short story writer, and novelist.

For additional information on Baraka's life and career, see *PC*, Volume 4.

INTRODUCTION

An important figure in contemporary African-American literature, who was once associated with the Beats, Baraka is known for his experimental rhythm patterns and his use of free verse. As a champion of Black Nationalism, he has produced politically inspired poetry, plays, essays, and novels that have generated critical controversy as some commentators consider his work racist, misogynistic, homophobic, and anti-Semitic. He has nonetheless been a major influence on succeeding generations of African-American writers.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Baraka was born Everett LeRoy Jones on October 7, 1934, in Newark, New Jersey. His parents were Gerald Roi Jones, a postal supervisor, and Anna Lois Russ Jones, a social worker. He attended Barringer High School in Newark, graduating at the age of fifteen, and earned a scholarship to Rutgers University. In 1952, he transferred to Howard University and changed the spelling of his first name to LeRoi. He left Howard without a degree, flunking out according to some accounts, and then served in the U.S. Air Force for three years as a gunner. In 1957, Baraka moved to New York City and became acquainted with the Beat poets in Greenwich Village. He married Hettie Roberta Cohen, and founded, along with Cohen, the literary journal *Yugen*, which published the work of such well-known writers as Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Jack Kerouac, Charles Olson, and Robert Creeley. At the same time, he was working in a bookstore and becoming known for his music criticism as well as for his own poetry. In 1960, Baraka visited Cuba, after which he produced his well-known essay, "Cuba Libre," named the Longview Best Essay of the Year in 1961. His experience in Cuba, along with the murder of black activist Malcolm X, contributed to his increasing dedication to political causes. He abandoned his association with the Beat poets, left his

white Jewish wife and their two children, and moved to Harlem. He took up the cause of Black Nationalism and began producing essays and poetry designed to establish an African-American identity. In 1966, Baraka married Sylvia Robinson, and two years later, converted to Islam, taking the name Imamu Amiri Baraka; his wife changed her name to Amina Baraka. In 1974, Baraka publicly embraced Marxist-Leninism and dropped the title Imamu from his name. His association with Marxist-Leninism caused him to reconsider the anti-white and anti-Semitic stance he had taken earlier while affiliated with Black Nationalism. In 1979, he accepted a teaching position at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, but was arrested for a domestic altercation and sentenced to a half-way house in Harlem, during which time he began writing his autobiography. Baraka also taught at Rutgers University in the 1980s, but was denied tenure.

After the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, Baraka was again embroiled in controversy. Serving as Poet Laureate of New Jersey at the time, he produced the poem "Somebody Blew Up America," which suggested that Israel was involved in the 9/11 attack. The Governor of New Jersey called for Baraka's resignation, but was unable to force him from the position and instead abolished the post a mere three years after it had been established.

In addition to the Longview award, Baraka has received the John Whitney Foundation fellowship for poetry and fiction (1962); a Guggenheim fellowship (1965-66); a National Endowment for the Arts grant (1966); a Poetry Award from the National Endowment for the Arts (1981); the American Book Award (1989), the Langston Hughes Award (1989), the PEN/Faulkner Award (1989), and the Before Columbus Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award.

MAJOR WORKS

In 1961, Baraka published the highly acclaimed *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* under the name LeRoi Jones. It reflects the aesthetics of the Beat lifestyle with which he was affiliated at the time. His next major effort, *Black Magic* (1967), containing the poem "Black Art," is considered a ground-breaking work in the development of a black literary aesthetic. Critic Lynn Nwuneli (see Further Reading) regards it as "the most

crucial volume of poetry in the entire Black Arts Movement of the U.S. from the 1960's." Baraka's 1995 volume *Transbluesency: The Selected Poems of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones (1961-1995)* contains poetry emblematic of every period of his career, reflecting his ever-changing ideological and aesthetic perspective. Baraka's most recent works of poetry include *Beginnings and Other Poems* (2003) and the controversial *Somebody Blew Up America and Other Poems* (2003).

In addition to his poetry, Baraka has published a number of plays, among them *Dutchman* (1964), for which he received an Obie Award, *The Slave* (1964), and *A Black Mass* (1966), as well as novels, short stories, and essay collections. He has also produced several volumes of highly acclaimed music criticism, including *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963), *Black Music* (1967), and *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues* (1987). In 1984, Baraka published *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Baraka's career has been characterized by controversy, based in part on his politics, but also on the work informed by his political thinking. His changing identities as well as his shifting ideological perspectives have generated a certain amount of cynicism among a number of critics, who believe his best work was produced during his early career as LeRoi Jones, before he abandoned the avant-garde aesthetics embraced by the Beats. David L. Smith notes that the poet has been considered "confused and unstable" by some, while others believe him to be "the apostle of the Black Aesthetic." Smith traces the development of Baraka's political aesthetic and the poetry that reflected it, finding that the "most strident and polemical poems are often not his most successful works in political terms." James A. Miller reports that "popular opinion often suggests that Baraka's politics—first his black nationalism and, definitely, his Marxist-Leninism—have had disastrous consequences for his art." Miller, however, does not see a distinctive break between Baraka's early work and the poetry he produced in the 1980s, claiming that the differences are more "a consolidation and refashioning—a revision—of the concerns which have preoccupied him throughout his public career." Nwuneli has studied the dialectical nature of Baraka's poems, reporting that they are "simultaneously statement and response, action and thought, revelation and a stage in the development of consciousness." She believes that what many critics have missed about Baraka's work is "that the complexity and validity of his vision cannot be dissociated from the complexity and integrity of his art."

In a 1989 essay, Smith discussed the popular culture motifs employed by Baraka in his poetry. According to Smith, the poet "has apparently regarded popular

cultural artifacts as quintessential repositories of cultural values," although the critic notes that his earlier attitude was one of "reverential nostalgia," whereas later in his career, Baraka was more likely to regard them as "deplorable manifestations of a depraved culture." Erik Reece finds parallels between the "contrariety" to be found in the careers and lives of Baraka and William Butler Yeats. However, where Reece sees both poets longing to be free of Western thought and values, he feels Baraka's goal is the destruction of Western concepts of science, rationality, and economics, through "arting, an active poetics where metaphors are wielded like pistols."

Mary Ellison examines the poems inspired by Baraka's knowledge and appreciation of jazz and blues—including "I Love Music," "Class Struggle in Music," and "Ballad Air and Fire." Walton Muyumba has studied the jazz influence of the so-called transitional phase of his poetry, when Baraka turned from the bohemian aesthetic to the Black Arts Movement; the critic concludes that Baraka's strategy for establishing a black identity involved bringing together poetry and jazz improvisation. According to Muyumba, Baraka, in his transitional poems, "turns to jazz improvisation as a literary resource for articulating the human complexity of African American life."

Many scholars have considered Baraka's poetry racist, sexist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic. His poem "Black Art" has been denounced for its reflection of his apparent belief that whites and their culture should be destroyed. Sherry Brennan (see Further Reading) acknowledges that "it is a difficult poem, in its race and gender violence"; however, she contends that it is also "a remarkably tender poem," as it "calls, at its end, for virtue and love." Piotr Gwiazda discusses the elements of "racial revenge" and "sexual aggression" that characterized Baraka's poetry during his affiliation with the Black Arts Movement, as well as the anti-Semitic charges leveled against the poet after the publication of "Somebody Blew Up America." The critic considers the controversy surrounding the poem reflective of the "long-standing and still largely unresolved tension between aesthetics and politics in American poetry."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note [as LeRoi Jones] 1961

The Dead Lecturer 1964

Black Magic 1967
It's Nation Time 1970
Spirit Reach 1972
Afrikan Revolution: A Poem 1973
Hard Facts 1975
AM/TRAK 1979
Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones 1979
Reggae or Not! 1981
The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues (poetry and essays) 1987
The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader 1991
Transbluesency: The Selected Poems of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones (1961-1995) 1995
Eulogies 1996
Funk Lore: New Poems, 1984-1995 1996
Beginnings and Other Poems 2003
Somebody Blew up America and Other Poems 2003

Other Major Works

A Good Girl Is Hard to Find (play) 1958
Yugen [editor and publisher] (journal) 1958-62
Blues People: Negro Music in White America [as LeRoi Jones] (essay) 1963
The Baptism: A Comedy in One Act [as LeRoi Jones] (play) 1964
Dutchman [as LeRoi Jones] (play) 1964
The Slave: A Fable [as LeRoi Jones] (play) 1964
The Toilet: A Play in One Act [as LeRoi Jones] (play) 1964
The System of Dante's Hell: A Novel [as LeRoi Jones] (novel) 1965
A Black Mass [as LeRoi Jones] (play) 1966
Home: Social Essays [as LeRoi Jones] (essays) 1966
Tales [as LeRoi Jones] (short stories) 1967
Black Music (essays) 1969
Four Black Revolutionary Plays: All Praises to the Black Man [as LeRoi Jones] (plays) 1969
The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka (autobiography) 1984
Daggers and Javelins: Essays, 1974-1979 (essays) 1984
The Fiction of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka (short stories) 2000
The Essence of Reparation: Afro-American Self-Determination & Revolutionary Democratic Struggle in the United States of America (essays) 2003
Tales of the Out and the Gone (short stories) 2006
Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music (essays) 2009
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CRITICISM

Kimberly W. Benston (essay date 1976)

Benston, Kimberly W. "Baraka's Poetry: The Vision in Verse." In *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask*, pp. 97-145. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

[In the following excerpt, Benston examines the literary, social, and political issues that inform Baraka's poetry.]

I PREFACE TO A TWENTY VOLUME SUICIDE NOTE AND THE DEAD LECTURER

Imamu Baraka began his literary career in the late 1950s as a poet. Ensconced within the coterie of "beat" and bohemian dilettantes residing in Greenwich Village, Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) was immersed in the concerns and methodology common to the beats and the tradition from which they emerged. As publisher and coeditor (with his wife Hettie Cohen) of *Yugen*, one of the best "little" literary magazines of the 1960s, Baraka was intimately involved with the work of such poets as Allen Ginsberg, Gilbert Sorrentino, Gregory Corso, Jack Kerouac, Robert Creeley, and Charles Olson—all of whom had poems published in *Yugen* at one time or another. It is within and against the tradition these poets represent that Baraka's early poetry must be read and measured.

Surely the most essential aspect of the tradition of modern poetry into which Imamu Baraka stepped as a young, precocious black American over fifteen years ago is the exploration of self-awareness I mentioned in chapter 1, a process begun with the German Romantics Novalis and Hölderlin, the English Wordsworth, the American Edgar Allan Poe, and particularly with the French Baudelaire. Poetry itself, and thus the act and agent of the poetic process, became the object of extraordinary concern and, as Jacques Maritain said, "poetry was engaged more and more deeply, more and more irremediably, in a spiritual experience of its own."¹ The private life of the poet himself, especially under stress of psychological crisis, became a major theme. The poet was now an extraordinary person who lived in a higher and more imaginative order of experience than that of nature or the existing social structure. Even in the late Romantic tradition represented by Tennyson, Swinburne, Arnold, and Meredith, one finds the growing sense of an essential opposition between the human spirit and its environment, and can trace even in them the fear that nature might be unfriendly, that man might not be a free agent, that immortality and progress might be illusory, that the accounts of life might reveal a balance of suffering over happiness. As this "Neutralization of Nature" (I. A. Richards's phrase) proceeded, the

poet increasingly created his own world. But this private universe was not illumined by the "inner light" of Milton's "paradise within," which is rejected as sentimental; rather, it was colored by vulnerability, self-torturing confession, and the proliferating imagery of doubt and failure which characterizes such works as Pound's "Mauberly (1920)," Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and Merwin's *The Lice*.

By the end of World War II the consciousness of a cleavage between imaginative life and modern social conditions (popularized by Pound, Eliot, Herbert Read, and others) had taken a particularly dark turn. For behind it lay the pervasive feeling that the vision of a humanistic and liberated mankind, which only a few modern men (for example, Auden and Spender) continued to extol, had already become a cruel delusion. Many of the better young poets turned their attention to political and cultural criticism and, as M. L. Rosenthal has observed,² organized their attack around the central perception of the individual (and particularly, of course, the poet) as both the generator and the victim of brutal cultural crisis.

These, then, are the focal issues which conditioned the intense soundings of beat poets in the 1950s. The opening thrust of Allen Ginsberg's visionary-demonic "Howl"—"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked"—may be taken as emblematic of the beats' self-oriented, despairing perception of the cultural wasteland they saw before them. None of these poets, however, felt more poignantly or recorded as vigorously the pains and desires of his alienated soul than did Imamu Baraka. Every line of his first book of poems, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1957-60; hereafter referred to as *Preface*) carries the direct charge, overtone, or echo of self-criticism. For example:

but this also
is part of my charm.
A maudlin nostalgia
that comes on
like terrible thoughts about death.

How dumb to be sentimental about anything
To call it love
& cry pathetically
into the long black handkerchief
of the years.

"Look for you yesterday
Here you come today
Your mouth wide open
But what you got to say?"

—part of my charm

old envious blues feeling
ticking like a big cobblestone clock.

[from "There *Must* Be a Lone Ranger!!!"]

These poems are full of such ironic exorcisms of the "sentimental," the tender, and are infused with a sense of a past ill-used and irrecoverable, which the ticking of clocks and laments of the blues uselessly catalogue. They reveal a tireless descent to the inner spaces of consciousness, resulting in the self-exposing vulnerability and candor that is the mark of the poetic tradition I have just described. Operating by way of a perplexed, exploited, and often curiously withdrawn egocentricity, this solipsistic descent is often revealed by an imaginative fixation upon the concept of microcosm. Selectively viewing the surrounding landscape, the poet makes the ontology of any object of that landscape dependent upon his being, and things gain life only through him. As he surveys the world from within, "locked in with dull memories & self hate, & the terrible disorder of a young man" ("The Turncoat"), increasingly confused and frightened by "the uncertainty / of what I am saying, who / I have chosen to become, the very air pressing my skin" ("The Insidious Dr. Fu Man Chu"), he constantly admits an essential distrust of public worlds and seeks protection by making a little room, made of words, his everywhere:

Safe now, within the poem, I make my
Indiscreet avowals, my indelicate assumptions
As if this gentle fire that bathed my flesh
was rancor, or fear, or any other of life's idiot progeny.
It is the walls of these words protect me
Throw a fierce cordon
around me, that I may 'signify'
to my heart's content.

[from "The A.B.C.'s"]

It is obvious, however, that the "safety" here proposed appears to him a suffocating entrapment, and he mocks the impulses of his shallow 'signifyin' as an "idiot's progeny." Fearful of the external world, dissatisfied with self-generated structures, he attempts a desperate turning away from literally everything:

The moon
sits over the North river, underneath
a blue bridge. Boats & old men
move through the darkness. Needing
no eyes. Moving slowly
towards the long black line
of horizon. [. . .]

I sit inside alone, without
thoughts. I cannot lie
& say I think of you. I merely sit
& grow weary, not even watching
the sky lighten with morning.

[from "The Death of Nick Charles"]

The result, of course, is stagnation and an even more intense solipsism. As boats move toward presumed destinations and old men, as if mocking the youthful observer's wasting of time, move easily along darkened

paths, the poet, like the lifeless buildings, like the passive moon, merely sits alone; and finally, as the dark sky is lightened by a new day, he wearily slips into the deep, dark, unconscious areas within. The pervading feeling is one of impotence and immobility, brought on, it is true, by a most noble nature ("I cannot lie / & say I think of you") that refuses to take action without the sanctification of some thought.

Yet the speaker heard in these poems is in a state of virtual paralysis, and from this inevitably comes the fixation upon *death* which the very title of the volume evokes. Indeed, we find in an astonishingly large number of these poems what Rosenthal identifies as the "one distinctively modern quality in literature: . . . the centrifugal spin toward suicide in the speaking voice":³

As simple an act
as opening the eyes. Merely
coming into things by degrees [. . .]

There are unattractive wild ferns
outside the window
where the cats hide. They yowl
from there at nights. In heat
& bleeding on my tulips [. . .]

No use for beauty
collapsed, with moldy breath
done in. Insidious weight
of cankered dreams. Tiresias'
weathered cock.

Walking into the sea, shells
caught in the hair. Coarse
waves tearing the tongue.

Closing the eyes. As
simple an act. You float.

[from "Way Out West"]

Between the simple blink of an eye a whole lifetime passes, "coming into things by degrees," the sweetness of youth imperceptibly swept away amid lies and under the "insidious weight of cankered dreams." The life that lies "outside the window" is wild, fearful, and bleeding its pain upon cultivated beauty: an analogue to the life behind the opened eyes. And with little else observed or achieved, death is chosen, though a final violence accompanies the ultimate relief ("course waves tearing the tongue"). The lemming-like image of suicide by drowning is common in these poems (for example, "**The Bridge**": "when you touch the water, & it closes, slowly, around your head . . . & you, (when you have let the song run out) will be sliding through unmentionable black") and shows a clear affinity to James Dickey's work of the same period:

Wait for a coming / And swimming idea.
Live like the dead / In their flying feeling.
Loom as a ghost / When life pours through it.⁴

But whereas Dickey conceives of this process as regenerative and a liberation into nature ("Let flowing create / A new, inner being: As the source in the mountain / Gives water in pulses") Baraka can see it only as desperate escape.

If we often find Baraka seeking death in *Preface*, it is in refuge from a dying civilization and ravaged landscape. Beside the essential motif of the self and its confusions and failures, the concern with "the moldy breath" of culture, the uselessness of "beauty collapsed," is the major theme of these poems. In works such as "**In Memory of Radio**," "**Look for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today**," and "**There Must Be a Lone Ranger!!!**" Baraka throws together a collage of mythic elements (drawn principally from the popular media of comics, radio drama, and the Hollywood hero cults remembered from the late 1930s and early 1940s) and ironically mourns its defabrication. The Shadow, Kate Smith, the box-top world of Battle Creek, Michigan (home of Kellogg's cereals), Tarzan, Superman, the Lone Ranger—all are rounded together by a "maudlin nostalgia" and are mockingly simpered over. It is with genuine anguish and consequent despair that he registers the death of more meaningful and more painfully developed myths and the ideals they once manifested (see, for example, "**The A.B.C.s**"). Reinforcing the idea of the death of mythic tradition is the inability to remember, to connect to a past, either individual or collective:

& 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.

[from "The Bridge"]

And as the poet attempts to 'only connect' to this past, the ghosts of its now-dead forms tauntingly pass before him, and time indifferently ravishes on:

How can it mean anything? The stop & spout, the
wind's dumb shift. Creak of the house & wet smells
coming in. Night forms on my left. The blind still
up to admit a sun that no longer exists. Sea move.

[from "The Turncoat"]

Baraka describes the death and ruin of culture's myths and heroes with words "blown in the winters, thru windows, lacking sun" ("**From an Almanac**"). The winter scene viewed through these windows is barren, cold, and desolate. As the poet recoils from rotting corpses strewn along this landscape, he finds only the stench of his own curiously cold sexual impulses (see, for example, "**Roi's New Blues**"). Many of these poems, as with much of Baraka's poetry generally, are permeated by vivid sexual imagery and freely exploit the senses as the medium of compelling experience; yet

in the works of this early period of distraught and disaffected sensibility, the senses cannot suffice to consummate experience, and no poem is freely resolved in the too too solid flesh. The irreconcilability of Goya-esque and sexual images of the flesh in “**From an Almanac (2)**” is an excellent illustration of this dilemma:

The flesh

hung
from trees. Blown
down. A cold
music. A colder
hand, will grip
you. Your bare
soul. (Where is the soul's place. What is
its
nature?) Winter rattles like the throat
of the hanged man. Swung
against our windows.
As bleak
as our thots. As wild
as that wind
we make (between
us).
Can you dance? Shall
you?

If the landscape of Baraka's early poetry is barren of myth, if the figures found there (principally the poet himself) are, like Kerouac's Rimbaud, “eaten by the disease of overlife,” then it is not surprising that the voice of these works is that of an *ironic* speaker. This can best be demonstrated by a brief survey of the poetic style which conveys the temperament elucidated thus far.

The poetic doctrine that directly influenced Baraka in his early “beat” phase was, of course, that of “projective verse” (or “open-field composition”) as advocated by Robert Creeley and Charles Olson, the chief documents of which are Olson's *Letters to Origin* and his essay “Projective Verse.” The main thrust of this rather confusing and confused theory is the idea of poetry as a vital process of “instant by instant” progression of both meaning and the musical “breathing forward” of the very syllables that, sounded together, create a poem's harmony. This manner of poetic creation, the “energy” by which one perception moves instantly upon another, is placed above any concerns for finished construction or preconceived meaning. “From the moment [the poet] ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION—puts himself in the open—he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself.”⁵ These ideas are augmented repeatedly by such maxims as “Form Is Never More Than An EXTENSION OF CONTENT” and “HOW ANYTHING IS SAID IS AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT IS SAID THAT IT IS WHAT IS SAID.” Such seemingly contradictory statements freely coexist, unresolved, in Olson's writings. These ideas are really the slightly misguided progeny of the Imagist theories, and the Imagists are the projectivist's

true spiritual fathers. Indeed, the projectivist doctrine offers little beyond what the Imagists had already conceived, and the original Imagist theory offers a better tool for analysis than the projectivist formulations to which Baraka adhered.

The Imagists play a major role in what Maritain called poetry's “search for the purification of poetry itself of all extraneous or adventitious elements, or of a search after the pure essence of poetry.”⁶ The Imagist theory, evolved by Poe from his culling of Coleridge and made popular by Pound, maintained that language itself can be reality and advocated its dissolution from the nomenclature and syntax of the practical world. It held that an image should be born and then die into another, that any sequence of images must be, as Dylan Thomas said of his own poems, a sequence of creations, recreations, destructions, contradictions. This is the process occurring in these lines of Baraka's:

who sees all things
as love, who sees
the nature
of himself, the flatness
of the room, the evening
spread against the windows
soft, who
stares quietly
into the shadows
listening
to the moon's
light
dropping softly
on the rug.

[from “Duke Mantee”]

The vital tension felt here stems from the poet's obvious desire to create an image that is concrete, exact, a summation of all experience; an image that itself sees and feels, that has all the sense and emotional qualities of the poet himself; an image that acts for him and consecrates the event taking place *now*, the thing which will never be repeated in quite the same way, and which, quite likely, would ordinarily not even be noticed as it happens. Little “meaning” is apparent, but an interplay of emotion and association, a definite feeling that cannot be described in ordinary discursive speech, is achieved by images of an incredible delicacy.

In addition, the beauty of Baraka's early verse seems to answer the *symboliste* aim, expounded by Mallarmé, of “evoking an object in delicate shadow, without ever actually mentioning it, by allusive words, never by direct words.” Many of the passages already quoted reveal a most refined use of analogy, suggesting complex emotion by an accumulation of direct images, each perhaps linked to the central idea by only one element, yet, by its interaction with other images, evoking the final synthesis. Many of these images are, in fact,

more subtle in aim and technique than the direct and shadowless constructs of the Imagists. Thus, as in *symbolisme*, the poetic symbol in many of these poems means primarily itself in relation to the poem, and the unity of the poem is best apprehended as a unity of mood. Images (for instance, the sitting moon of "**The Death of Nick Charles**," or "the window's dumb shift" of "**The Turncoat**") really "point" to nothing beyond the poem, but by pointing to other images in the poem, articulate a predominate emotion or mood. Hence the effect upon the reader approaches the *symboliste* ideal of incantation, a rich harmony of sounds and unrestricted richness of meaning, and the essence of the method is the spontaneity of *improvisation*:

I love you (& you be
quiet, & feel my wet mouth
on your fingers, I
love you
& bring you fish
& oranges. (Before the light fails
we should move to a dryer place,
but not too far from water.) I
Love you &
you are singing. What song
is that? (The blinds held up
by a wind, tearing
the shadows. I
Love you [. . .]

& you are singing. What song
is that The words
are beautiful.

[from "**The Clearing**"]

Lines such as these realize the ideal of Poe's *Poetic Principle* of the poetic as the lyrical, and they are contained in the discontinuous structures that Frye isolates as the chief form of the ironic age. They utilize several of the most notable methods of the ironic procedure: avoidance of direct statement; mere juxtaposition of images without explanatory linkage, betraying an aversion to the rhetorical; the elimination of punctuation clarifying the identity of the speaker; a baffling, even shocking use of the demonstrative adjective adding to the isolation of the poet by his intentional vagueness and difficulty (e.g. "*that* wind we make," "*those* mad doilies"). The sense of contrast between the internal and external, the individual and social, the mind and nature, which we have noted in these poems, is characteristic of modes closest to the ironic. The language used in revealing these oppositions is, furthermore, the rougher and psychologically charged idiom of the ironic mode; it is the idiom of a passionate naturalism, the record of a microphone held up to nature but edited with the kind of sardonic humor Ishmael Reed was to exploit more systematically a decade later:

Any kind of sincerity
Guarantees complete disregard. Complete abnegation.

"Must dig with my fingers / as nobody will lend me
or sell me a pick axe!" Axe the man who owns one.
Hellzapoppin. The stars might not come out tonight

& who the hell can do anything about that?? Eh,
Milord / Milady / The kind Dubarry wasn't. Tres slick.

[from "To a Publisher . . . cut-out"]

Finally, the attitude of the poet toward his activity is that of the ironic author. Words, the entrapping "cordon" of "**The A.B.C.s**," the "clown gods" of "**From an Almanac**," are often seen as inadequate devices for cutting down to the elemental, the pure. The best statement of this failure is made by the poem "**Vice**." Here, self-expression is seen as the debris of random perversities and boredom which the poet discharges upon the innocently unconcerned:

Sometimes I feel I have to express myself
and then, whatever it is I have to express
falls out of my mouth like flakes of ash
from a match book that the drunken guest
at the grey haired jew lady's birthday party
has set on fire, for fun & to ease the horrible
boredom.

& when these flakes amass, I make serious collages
or empty them (feinting a gratuitous act) out the
window
on the heads of the uncurious puerto rican passerby.

The poem continues in the form of a self-mocking drama: after a ludicrous gloss upon the fortuitous events that constitute "Act I," we are told "there doesn't seem to be any act 2. The process is stopped," and the poet deprecates his wasted effort with the realization that "all this means nothing is happening to me in this world." Ultimately, the aesthetic act degenerates into a jungle of observation:

Asked to be special, & alive in the mornings, if they
are gray
& I am still alive, (& green) hovering above all the
things I
seem to want to be apart of (curious smells, the high-
noon idea
of life . . . a crowded train station where they
broadcast a slice,
just one green slice, of some glamorous person's
life).
& I cant even isolate my pleasures. All the things I
can talk about
mean nothing to me.

Organizable experience is dead and meaningless, curiosity deadened by the insipidity of mass culture. In the poems of *Preface* the poet often cannot impel his imagination beyond this harsh accounting of aesthetic energy as little better than "vice."

Much of what characterizes the poems in *Preface* continues in the works of *The Dead Lecturer* (ca. 1960-63): the self-orientation and self-criticism; the obsession

with death (both of the individual and of culture); the uses and constructs of image and idiom common to the ironic mode. But alongside these familiar elements there exist three basic new tendencies: (1) the attempt to construct new myths from a new language of symbols; (2) a growing concern with the social or public world; (3) a new tenderness and more freely lyrical tone. The nature of these important developments can be understood by studying just a few of the volume's poems.

In *Preface* there are scattered remarks and allusions that indicate the poet might be black or have a particular interest in black people. However, it is only with the final poem, "**Notes for a Speech,**" that Baraka comes to terms with his isolation and despair as a specifically *black* individual. The poem is a beginning attempt to deal with his relation to and alienation from his roots in the African and American aspects of his blackness. It opens with an explicit rejection of African identity, one that Baraka sees as intolerably foreign:

African blues
does not know me. Their steps, in sands
of their own
land. A country
in black & white, newspapers
blown down pavements
of the world. Does
not feel
what I am.

If the African spirit is no more for him than for any literate Westerner, what of the specific black souls whom Baraka self-consciously calls "my people":

(And who are they. People. To concern
myself, ugly man.[. . .]
My color
is not theirs. Lighter, white man
talk. They shy away. My own
dead souls, my, so called
people.

The distance established here between Baraka and his "people" is significant: he isn't even of their true color, his language is of another culture—the white man's. Thus a further dimension is added to the stagnation already experienced in preceding poems. He is in limbo between cultures, lured into the language and fantasies of a people from whom he is alien by birth, and thereby severed from his racial roots. Finally, with the possibility of linkage to Africa a vain illusion, he remains, perforce, among the tragic figures of his native landscape:

Africa
is a foreign place. You are
as any other sad man here
american.

This important poem may be taken as a private collection of fragments, suggestions, and queries in prepara-

tion for a more public and definitive statement: *notes* for a *speech*. Perhaps the first version of this statement is the eight-part poem in *The Dead Lecturer*, "**A Poem For Willie Best.**" This is the first sustained attempt by Baraka to answer his own call for black writers to tap "the emotional history of the black man in this country as its victim and its chronicler" and, in doing so, to "propose his own symbols, erect his own personal myths." Willie Best (the Hollywood character actor "Sleep 'n' eat") appears in this poem as the archetypically black victim, at once suffering and chronicling his woe:

The face sings, alone
at the top
of the body. All
flesh, all song, aligned. For hell
is silent, at those cracked lips
flakes of skin and mind
twist and whistle softly
as they fall.

The poem stretches for mythic associations, backgrounds, and echoes to give universal significance to the individual shedding of lies and false roles ("those cracked lips . . . as they fall") of this misnamed, misused but spiritually ascendant figure. Thus section 2 is fraught with allusions to the Christian myth, the "born in to death held fast to it" of the Incarnation, the "lover spreads his arms . . . the fingers stretch to emptiness" of the Crucifixion. In section 3, the mythic status of Willie Best, against a background of Oedipal echoes, is strongly established:

At a cross roads, sits the
player. No drum, no umbrella, even
though it's raining. Again, and we
are somehow less miserable because
here is a hero, used to being wet.
One road is where you are standing now
(reading this, the other, crosses then
rushes into a wood.

5 lbs neckbones.
5 lbs hog innards.
10 bottles cheap wine.

(The contents

of a paper bag, also shoes, with holes
for the big toe, and several rusted
knives. This is a literature of
symbols. And it is his gift, as the
bag is.

(The contents

again, holy saviors [. . .]

All this should be

invested.

Actor, musician, performer, trickster, the black hero sits at a crossroads offering, not merely the shallow catharsis of watching a suffering protagonist, but a "literature of symbols," a series of alternatives. No definite