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AMIRI BARAKA: NOVELIST OF POLITICAL PROPAGANDA RATHER THAN SERIOUS ART

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ABSTRACT

Amiri Baraka, born Everett LeRoi Jones, has been a controversial figure in American politics and literature for the last sixteen years. As a brilliant young poet and fresh, provocative dramatist he was lionized by the literary establishment of the mid-1960s, winning two distinguished fellowships and an Obie drama awarded by his thirtieth year, and generally compelling attention, even from hostile critics, as a major new talent in black American literature and in American literature as a whole. During the racial turbulence that followed those earlier years Baraka's political activism earned him additional attention, climaxed by his national visibility as one of the major leaders of the national black convention in Atlanta in 1970. And while his poetry, drama, and political activism continue to make him a significant figure in black America, his work as art critic represents an important contribution to the debates of the 1960s and early 1970s. Consequently he has become one of the leading representatives of what is now known as the black aesthetic, or black arts movement, which still seeks to define the alleged peculiarities of the black American's art and art criticism.

Key Words: Controversial, political activism, racial turbulence, visibility, black convention,

Amiri Baraka belonged to a middle-class and his family was comparable with countless lower middle-class families in black America, with the parents earning a modest living as government workers and living in a predominantly black urban community: the mother, Anna Lois Jones, was a social welfare worker and the father, Coyt LeRoy Jones, was a postal worker. Baraka's own childhood was likewise unremarkable, except for a surprisingly early fascination with political speeches by historical figures. And it is known that he tried to write short fiction in high school.

Much of his writing in this period reflects the kind of radicalism that had been developing since the college years—an intense but vaguely defined

rebelliousness that found its targets in racism, social injustice at home, and America's role abroad, especially in Third World countries. Three major events or experiences in the early 1960s stimulated this early radicalism and provided the impetus toward Baraka's subsequent development as social critic and writer-activist—the Cuban revolution, the emergence of Third World nations in Africa and elsewhere from the postwar remnants of European empires, and the racial violence of the 1960s in America itself.

From 1965 to 1970 Baraka's writings reflect the shift from civil rights protest to a belligerent black nationalism that celebrates the presumed distinctiveness of black culture and identity in

America—his essay, *Home* (1966), his short stories, *Tales* (1967), his third major collection of poetry, *Black Magic* (1969), and the plays, *Baptism and Toilet* (1966) and *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* (1969). Much of the writing during this period centers on the stage, including not only these major works but also a substantial number of agit-prop pieces that were clearly intended as a species that were clearly intended as a species of political action—a means of mobilizing black community support for the ideals of the black nationalist program of local self-help and individual, ethnic pride. This kind of emphasis on the stage is a direct outgrowth of Baraka's increasing role as political activist during this period. And although the writings command attention in themselves, his reputation as Black Nationalist spokesman and activist clearly overshadowed his work as writer then—at least in terms of his general image. Having spent much of his adult life in conscious rebellion against the prevailing systems of his society, Baraka was strongly attracted to Karenga's highly systematized approach to the definition of black power. In Karenga and his doctrines Baraka found ready-made means of articulating socioeconomic systems (local self-help) and political organizations (local community groups) which he translated with some limited success, to fit the needs of his political activities in Newark. Having also had a lifelong interest in world religions, he was naturally drawn to the religious emphasis of Karenga's brand of Black Nationalism (Dace 1971: 24).

Altogether the exposure to Karenga stimulated Baraka's interest in and enlarged his capacity for political organization. And this capacity led to his prominent role in the planning and holding of the 1970 Congress of African People in Atlanta. In retrospect the congress proved to be a watershed of sorts. It was largely a failure when considered as an attempt to weld the disparate elements of the black community into a single and influential political force. At best it succeeded in articulating an ideal—unity with diversity—which proved to be a statement of hope (or a thinly sugar-coated admission of irreconcilable differences rather than any practical political platform. But notwithstanding its lack of any solid political achievement, the congress won national recognition for Baraka as an effective

organizer and persuasive political leader: in the mass media, at any rate, he was the one who received much of the credit for whatever sense of unity and purpose did emerge from the congress.

The various changes in Baraka's political positions have tended to encourage a certain skepticism, even cynicism, about the man, especially about the depth of his ideological commitments. The actual ideological shifts have, of course, been obvious enough—the early apolitical rebellion of the beat generation, then the militant civil rights activism, followed in turn by black separatism and Marxist-Leninist socialism. The thinness or untidiness that has marked his adoption of these varying positions has also been obvious. But there is really no basis on which his sincerity or commitment to the ultimate issue can really be doubted. And that ultimate issue has remained consistent throughout all the twists and turns of his ideological choices: he remains steadfastly and deeply antipathetic to American mainstream culture—its social structure, its racial caste system, and its socioeconomic values. And the consistency with which he has remained a rebel against the mainstream has actually been highlighted, rather than diminished, by the very enthusiasm with which he continually seeks new approaches to change. Given his past record there is little reason to doubt that more ideological changes are possible, even likely. But it is also probable that he will continue to be motivated by the same deep-seated rebelliousness that has engaged him for much of his adult life—as activist and as writer (ibid: 26).

In the light of Baraka's development as a writer it is not surprising that he is strongly attracted to the Maoist criteria which he quotes here with approval. Here in the scientific socialism of "Marxism-Leninism" and in Mao Tse-Tung's writings he finds a theoretical framework for those aesthetic values which have always been inherent in the lifelong tension between artistic form and political commitment in his work. It is also appropriate that Baraka should expound these values in the introduction to his most recent collection of plays. First, the introductory essay itself and two of the plays (*The Motion of History* and *S-1*) constitute some of his most detailed statements on politics and art from a socialist perspective. The insistence on the

unity of art and politics within that perspective is particularly significant here because it is yet another example of the manner in which Baraka's political attitudes remain consistent at the most fundamental level, despite his movement from one ideological group to another. Hence the aesthetics of scientific socialism are comparable with those of the young radical rebel of the early 1960s and are really indistinguishable from some of the black aesthetic criteria of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Banes 1993: 136).

Second, the socialist ideal is peculiarly attractive to Baraka the dramatist, or more specifically, to Baraka the revolutionary dramatist. As a genre in which the distinction between word and act is blurred, drama is the means of achieving that unity of political action and literary word which has always been crucial to Baraka. Hence that interest in the word as act which dominates much of the later poetry culminates in the drama—especially in the later plays. In these plays the dramatic synthesis of language and action is both the symbolic and literal example of Baraka's ideal of the word as action. Indeed in Baraka's drama, even in the earlier works but especially in the more recent revolutionary plays, the very idea of dramatic form is both an aesthetic principle and a political concept: the play as action is integral to the revolutionist's idealistic activism; dramatic form as motion through time and space is compatible with the revolutionary view of history as constant change (ibid: 136). But curiously enough, although his theory of dramatic art is so integral to his political principles and practice, Baraka's achievement as a dramatist is decidedly uneven. Indeed, on the basis of those very socialist standards which he himself invokes, Baraka is least effective as a dramatist in the later revolutionary plays of his Black Nationalist and socialist periods. In one sense Baraka's insistence on the greater legitimacy of the act, as opposed to the word, does conform with the socialist ideal when "act" is understood as dramatic action: that is, the play itself is an activity that combines the formal action of dramatic art with the activism of a political ideal. And in this light it is understandable that the drama would increasingly become Baraka's preferred medium in recent years (Watts 2001: 135).

But in another sense the distinction between act and word seems to be carried, in practice, to the point where Baraka actually fails to live up to his socialist or Maoist ideal of art. His dramatic practice often leaves the impression that "act" should be understood simply as political action, rather than as dramatic action that combines artistic form with political content. On the one hand Baraka the artist obviously approves of the Maoist insistence on the unity of artistic form and political idealism. But on the other hand Baraka the political activist finds it increasingly difficult to maintain that unity in dramatic practice. On the whole we can still detect in his work, even at this stage, the familiar interplay between social commitment and a sense of the special nature of artistic form. But increasingly that balanced tension between the artistic and the political has slackened. As a result some works are little more than ideological statements by the politico who perceives his plays simply as a political act—as a political slogan or poster. As we have noted earlier, the politico's choice of an art form—the drama in this instance—as a political medium always involves a deliberate and crucial distinction between political statement and political art, at least in theory. And it would therefore be erroneous to ignore that implied or explicit distinction even when we are dealing with Baraka's baldest and least imaginative plays. But notwithstanding all of this it is clear that Baraka the political advocate has made it increasingly difficult for Baraka the dramatist to maintain an effectively balanced approach to drama as commitment and artistic design. And his later plays have progressively suffered as a result.

In chronicling his development as a dramatist Baraka's introduction to *The Motion of History* ignores his early plays, produced or published between 1963 and 1965. This omission is not surprising, in light of Baraka's disparaging references, in his preface to *Black Magic*, to his early poetry. More often than not Amiri Baraka has little patience with, or admiration for, the works of the non-revolutionary LeRoi Jones. Moreover, the early plays tend to concentrate on the exploration of social contradictions and individual paralysis; but this exploratory approach is not likely to appeal to the revolutionist Baraka in view of his preference for

drama that emphasizes symbolically decisive and transforming action. Yet on the whole it is reasonable to suggest that Baraka's own revolutionary aesthetic—the synthesis of political commitment and artistic design—is much closer to being realized in these early works than in his subsequent, more explicitly revolutionary, plays (ibid: 137).

Of course from Baraka's current socialist perspective the nature of the political commitment is not altogether admirable in these four plays—*The Baptism, The Toilet, Dutchman, and The Slave*. These are not plays of revolutionary advocacy—not even *The Slave*, as we shall see in due course. Instead each work is a highly effective analysis of American society from a viewpoint that has not yet clarified itself beyond a passionate but ideologically vague radicalism. But notwithstanding that vagueness the commitment to the need for social change dominates each play. And at the same time this sense of commitment is integrated with Baraka's dramatic form with much more consistency than he is able to achieve in subsequent years.

On the whole the unevenness of Baraka's drama is fairly representative of his general achievements as a writer. For even at its least distinguished his writing reflects a continuing tension between the decidedly unsubtle ideologue and the committed artist, between a passion for literal political statement and an interest in art as an imaginatively conceived, expressive, and committed design. And this tension remains in the background even when the interest in imaginative art is merely theoretical. Moreover, as the genre that spans his writing career his drama appropriately reflects a major constant in his writings. That is, despite his ideological shifts, his themes and their underlying social attitudes have remained fairly consistent (Allen 1969: 166).

Consequently, his perception of American society is invariably bleak. He always envisions a society of moral corruption and human decay whenever he contemplates America. This moral revulsion at America as a wasteland has a twofold effect. On the one hand it inspires those images of violence and death which characterize much of Baraka's work, ranging from the early radicalism and the black protests and moving to the later

revolutionism of the Black Nationalist and socialist periods. And, on the other hand, this revulsion also triggers a passionate commitment to life, that is, to the moral and social rebirth which he envisages in his successive alternatives (ethnic, socialist, and so forth) to the American wasteland. Moreover, the moral overview of America is always integrated with his racial themes. The black American's plight as racial victim is both a primary concern in its own right and an important symptom of America's pervasive ills. And this remains true even in the deliberate emphasis on nonracial criteria in the socialist drama where the issue of racial violence and divisiveness is emphasized as the sign of exploitive and oppressive ruling elite. Racial anger and moral outrage have always been inextricably interwoven in Baraka's work. Consequently, the thematic complexity of his more substantial work has easily eluded critics, both hostile and sympathetic, who respond only to his ethnic militancy. Finally, it is necessary to recognize the degree to which the shock tactics of moral outrage really arise from the fact that Baraka is a familiar kind of moral idealist, one whose idealism motivates the wasteland images of the "Beat" poetry, the black revolutionism of the middle years, and the more recent themes of socialist revolution (Brown 1980: 166).

The underlying thematic continuities of Baraka's work are complemented by certain consistencies in his approach to certain forms or techniques. The images of sight and sound which he emphasizes as a narrative technique in his only novel and in his short stories go back to his earliest poetry. And at the same time these images are adapted to the requirements of the Black Nationalist poems where the sounds of political statement are indistinguishable from the forms of politically committed art. In the drama the morality play tradition and the interest in ritual forms continue from the earliest plays to the later revolutionary works.

The continuity of certain forms attests to a strong degree of artistic self-awareness in Baraka the writer. This is the kind of self-awareness that springs from his lifelong commitment to the integration of theme promise than practice it makes for a complex context in which to examine Baraka, one in which the

reader must be constantly alert to the actual or possible relationship between form and content, rather than neglecting one in favour of the other. This is the major reason for the enormous demands that Baraka's work, even at its worst, places on the reader. At its worst the work suffers from a narrowness of vision and a shrillness of tone that frequently distort the effects of whatever structural achievements might exist. But his best writing is challenging in the other sense: the closely knit relationship between theme and form requires a painstaking attention to the manner as well as the substance of statement—a requirement that has often proven too difficult for those who are overly hostile toward or enthusiastic about the substance (ibid: 167).

Finally, Baraka's achievement as a writer should also be weighed on the representative nature of his political activism and art. In fact, his career as a whole can be seen as a political weather vane of sorts. The early period reflects that combination of concerns which influences much of American literature and politics in the late 1950s and early 1960s: there is a growing uneasiness about America's world role and the country's relationship with the Third World, and there is increasing recognition that the black civil rights movement raised questions about American society in general as well as about racial relationships. The middle period, the years of Baraka's Black Nationalism, coincides with the militancy of black America's black power movement and the racial riots in the cities. Finally even the more recent conversion to socialism is symptomatic, notwithstanding the fact that scientific socialism is not a popular movement in America at this time. His current ideology and writings are representative in that racial confrontation in black American politics since the early 1970s. Although Baraka denounces the "black petite bourgeoisie" who simply exploited Black Nationalism in order to feather their nests in the mainstream culture, Baraka's own switch to scientific socialism is as much an admission of the failure of Black Nationalism as is the opportunism that he condemns in the black middle class.

The decline of ethnic politics in black America reflects a marked decrease in political energies, a decrease that can be attributed to the opening of some doors to the mainstream and to the

death, imprisonment, or discrediting of the political leaders of the 1960s. Baraka himself is a good example of this decline of political energies. As a scientific socialist he is in the least imaginative phase of his life as a political writer. This relative lack of creativity is not really the fault of the ideology itself. It seems, more likely, to be the reflection of a certain intellectual flabbiness on Baraka's part. Not only in the forgettable poems of *Hard Facts* but also in the plays and essays of the later years, Baraka seems to find it increasingly difficult to go beyond the accepted clichés of political dogma. It has appeared progressively easier for him to offer hackneyed and literal statements in lieu of artistic forms that are both imaginative and socio-politically significant. Of course the current flabbiness is not necessarily terminal. In light of his career as a whole Baraka is unlikely to remain pedestrian as a political activist or mediocre as an artist. And whatever further developments occur in that career they will, in all likelihood, be closely linked with the literary and political atmosphere of his time. His significance as a mirror of his society has been one of his most enduring characteristics.

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