

APPROVAL SHEET

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THEATRE AND THE DOUBLE:
REVOLUTIONARY CONSCIOUSNESS
IN
BARAKA AND ARTAUD

A Dissertation
Presented for the Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Elaine Isolyn Duval

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DEDICATION

For my mother and father
Olivia and Donald Duval

For giving me the vision
and for holding the candle
that has been
a constant source
of
light and love.

ABSTRACT

Amiri Baraka (1934-) and Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) both believed in the power of the theatre to effect revolutionary changes in human consciousness. Both artists advocated a theatre that would assault the spectators and awaken them to the need for change in their lives. In addition, they both espoused the concept of total theatre--a theatre in which all the arts would be used to draw the spectators into a life-changing experience. However, while Artaud stressed the metaphysical aspects of the theatre, Baraka placed great emphasis on the theatre as a political weapon, insisting that it function as a tool for liberating blacks and all oppressed peoples of the world.

While the overall shared concept of theatre reform has made Baraka and Artaud literary kin, the metaphysical-versus-political function of the theatre inevitably has placed them on divergent paths. Hence, even though Baraka drew heavily from Artaud's concept of total theatre, ultimately, he had to transform elements of the Artaudian poetics to suit his need for a politicized theatre.

Examination of Baraka's dramatic theories and works in relation to the aesthetics of his European progenitor will afford an insightful appreciation of his innovative techniques and his brilliant accomplishment in the dramatic arts. The historical-cum-aesthetic method of literary inquiry

will help in chronicling the points of convergence and divergence between the two artists, and at the same time, establish the nature of the revolutionary consciousness that they have passed on through their work in the theatre.

PREFACE

Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) has been labelled variously as a rebel and priest, a politician and poet, a prodigal and prophet, an ideologue and demagogue, an iconoclast and prodigy, as well as a pariah and hero--among many other diverse names. The fact that such a miscellaneous collection of epithets has been ascribed to one man is an index to his controversial and provocative character. But though Baraka may represent any or all of these deserving or undeserving appellations--depending on one's critical perspective--the undeniable fact is that through his impressive artistic achievement, he has transcended all of them.

The goal of this study is to chronicle Baraka's achievement in the dramatic arts, using a significant literary antecedent as the point of departure to assess his contribution to the modern history of the genre. The choice of a dramatic prototype for Baraka was, surprisingly, not difficult. For during the decades of the 1920's and 1930's, there was one artist whose denunciation of Western culture and whose revolutionary cry for theatre reform seemed to harbinger Baraka's own revolutionary mission in the theatre and in his life in general. That artist was French playwright and theorist Antonin Artaud.

Nor was it difficult to choose the dramatic mode as the

focus of this study. The reason is two-fold. In the first place, Baraka regarded drama as the most exalted form of literary expression because of its inherent capacity to incorporate all the other arts, and because of its power to resolve the dialectical motions of life. Accordingly, the development of Baraka's literary career has been marked by his ever increasing adoption of drama as his dominant mode of expression. Artaud also accorded drama the most eminent position in the hierarchy of literary genres, and the development of his literary career was likewise marked by a movement away from the poetic to the dramatic genre.

Because of the pre-eminence of drama in the Barakan canon, it deserves substantial critical attention. Regrettably, however, there has been no significant study of Baraka's dramatic accomplishments against the background of a prominent forerunner in the field of revolutionary dramaturgy. The second reason for this study has evolved out of this need. Using Artaud's dramatic theories as the springboard for an evaluation of Baraka's drama, the study will attempt to identify the points of convergence and divergence between the two artists, with the ultimate goal of locating the source of Baraka's artistry.

The study is divided into two parts. Part I, which is comprised of four chapters, establishes the biographical and theoretical framework within the ethos of revolutionary consciousness. Part II, which consists of three chapters

(including a brief conclusion), focusses on the transformation and manifestation of these theories in Baraka's plays. The study will end with an appendix comprising a personal interview with Baraka.

In a study which seeks to elucidate the works of a writer in relation to one of his literary predecessors, the question of how to arrive at that genealogical link is obviously most pertinent. If, as T. S. Eliot has asserted in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," the creation of any new work of art automatically affects the works that precede it; and if the contemporaneity of Baraka and Artaud can only be appreciated through a distinct sense of the past impinging upon the present, then the historical-cum-aesthetic line of inquiry suggests itself quite readily for the present study. Not only will the historical method of interpretation facilitate an informed exegesis and evaluation of sources and analogues, but it will also help to establish the special characteristics of an epoch which Baraka made revolutionary, and which in turn made Baraka and his works radical.

Baraka's radicalism, of course, has led to many changes in his life, including his name change in 1965. Throughout this study, the name LeRoi Jones will be used only in reference to works written before he assumed the Bantuized Muslim appellation, Imamu Ameer (later Amiri) Baraka. In all other instances, he will be referred to as Amiri Baraka. A note is also in order regarding Baraka's unconventional

spelling: to indicate accuracy in the transcription of any unconventional spelling, "sic" will be interpolated in the relevant quotations. A further note on spelling: Because my Jamaican background has schooled me in the British way of spelling, and because I will be using the word "theatre" countless times throughout this study, I will adhere to the British spelling as it is more natural to me, and therefore more likely to promote consistency. The American spelling, "theater," will be used only within quotes and titles for accurate representation.

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The completion of this study would not have been possible without the incalculable assistance I received from various sources and individuals. I would like to record my sincere appreciation to Amiri Baraka for according me an interview at his Newark, New Jersey home to discuss specific aspects of his literary career. I recall with gratitude his encouragement and his interest in my proposed study. And I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the gracious hospitality extended to me by Baraka and his wife, Amina. I would also like to thank the United States Agency For International Development (USAID) for sponsoring my interview with Baraka, and for financing the final year of my doctoral program.

Further, I record with grateful memories, the unstinting efforts of the late Congressman John Duncan who acted as a liaison on my behalf between the Jamaican and the United States governments in the processing of a Caribbean and Latin American-USAID sponsored fellowship; and for the encouragement and interest he showed in my educational pursuits ever since I first came to Knoxville, I remain sincerely grateful.

I would also like to record my indebtedness to the Organization of American States (OAS) for financing my schooling over the two-year period, 1984-1986, under the aegis of its Caribbean Fellowship Program. Special thanks are also due to Alex Haley, whose Roots Foundation awarded me a fellowship for the greater part of my doctoral studies, and whose friendship and faith in me and my work are certainly among the most prized memories of my life in Knoxville. Further, I would like to record my sincere appreciation to Bob Ballard of Pellessippi State Technical Community College for his invaluable help in solving all my computer problems during the writing of this dissertation. And to my American mother, Mrs. Sarah Moore Greene, who has been a source of constant support and love, I remain affectionately grateful.

The importance of having a dissertation committee that is committed to excellence, and equally important, committed to the academic and professional goals of its protégé, cannot be overestimated. I am grateful that I have had such a

committee. I am especially grateful to Dr. Ron Baxter Miller, my dissertation director, who, as far back as 1984, offered to be on my committee even without my asking, and who never lost faith in me along the way. Further, I would like to record my great respect and admiration for Dr. Miller, for his intellectual rigor, and for the intellectual challenges he has presented me during the research and writing of my dissertation. In addition, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Miller's untiring efforts to expand my professional horizons. For example, it was through his instrumentality that in June 1986, I attended and presented a paper at the First National Conference on Amiri Baraka's Literary Achievement at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. For this, and other professional advancements, I am deeply grateful.

My committee would not be complete, nor would I have completed my dissertation, without the sensitive support and understanding, as well as the invaluable guidance, suggestions and recommendations, freely and graciously offered by Drs. Lori Burghardt, William Shurr, George Hutchinson, and John Hodges. I am especially grateful to Professor George Hutchinson for taking the time to read my dissertation on such short notice. I remain deeply indebted to these mentors for their unstinting commitment and unqualified support.

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PART I

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL, BIOGRAPHICAL

AND

THEORETICAL MATRIX

CHAPTER I

REVOLUTION AND CONSCIOUSNESS: AN OVERVIEW

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....

Amiri Baraka, "Hymn to Lanie Poo"

Ever since Amiri Baraka emerged on the literary stage in the late 1950's, he has been applauded and recognised as an accomplished artist whose contributions in drama, poetry, fiction and the essay have been equally outstanding. However, Baraka's reputation as one of the most formidable forces in contemporary American letters is based not only on the impressive range and intensity of his prodigious literary output, but also on the enigmatic and mercurial character of the man behind the works.

If ever there were an artist whose thoughts and works represent the indelible stamp of a meteoric personality, that artist is Amiri Baraka. The man and his works represent a fierce and fiery commitment to bring about change--change in the way that blacks are perceived, and change in the way that they perceive themselves. Realizing that such new modes of perception could only be brought about by a phoenix-like fire

which would at once destroy and create, Baraka purposed that his works should be the catalyst to ignite this fire.

Accordingly, Baraka has ascribed a new and revolutionary role to black art. It should be a distinct art: it should not merely be directed to a general audience; rather, it should speak directly to and for black people, and it should reflect their discrete culture. Further, in the Barakan dictum, the black artist should assume the apocalyptic mission of recovering and raising the level of consciousness of the entire race of black people. It is therefore not surprising that as soi-disant vector of black revolutionary zeal, Baraka has inspired and influenced an entire generation of black American writers, and has been generally acknowledged as the grand sire of the Black Arts Movement which flourished in the 1960s.¹

But while Baraka's messianic mission has fired the imagination of his literary disciples and armed them with revolutionary zeal, this very impulse has also served to repel, indeed, to terrify those who feel that his extreme

¹ Among some of the writers that Baraka has influenced are: Ed Bullins, Ben Caldwell, Ishmael Reed, Ron Milner, Nikki Giovanni and David Henderson. Cecil M. Brown claims that he has had a lion's share of Barakan influence: "As a 'young black writer,' I am indebted to American and English literature, but I hold my most personal allegiance to Black Literature, and to most recent writers, like LeRoi Jones. No one, I suppose, has been more influenced than I have by Jones' work." Cecil M. Brown, "Black Literature and LeRoi Jones," in Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones): A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Kimberly M. Benston (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), p. 29.

ethnocentric posture and the resulting unbridled militancy pose a very real threat to the status quo. Accordingly, Barakan critical appraisals have been highly polarized. Of course, this is to be expected as it would indeed be difficult to be indifferent to a personality as passionately committed as Baraka. In addition, it is not surprising that such a fascinating and multifaceted personality should attract a plethora of critical responses.²

Unfortunately, much of the earlier "mainstream" criticism tended to evince negative responses. Invariably, such criticism reflected a response to the politics--rather than the poetics--of Baraka's art. For those who hold fast to the received dictum, "art for art's sake," politics is regarded as an undisguised pariah intruding in the sacred realm of art. Such critics not only balk at the idea of conjoining politics and art: they are further outraged by what they perceive to be simply unabated political invectives, strident anger and vengeful bitterness bleeding through the pages of Baraka's works. Commentators with this critical perspective obviously will have very little reservation about summarily

² As early as 1978 Werner Sollors estimated that there were already over "two thousand articles and reviews, two books, and several dissertations and M.A. theses" written on various aspects of Baraka's works. Werner Sollors, Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism" (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 265.

dismissing Baraka as a blatant jingoist or propagandist.³

Inimical responses to Baraka's works started diminishing as more and more critics sought to understand, not only the entire ethos of revolution which gave rise to the protest literature of the sixties and seventies, but specifically, the black revolutionist's goal and the revolutionary methods he chose to raise the level of consciousness of blacks. Instead of dismissing Baraka as merely a hate-ridden, venom-filled dissident, critics started looking deeper into the revolutionary thoughts and innovative artistry that would radically change the direction of Afro-American literature, especially black theatre.

Over the past decade and a half, there has been an ever increasing number of more informed and careful evaluations of Baraka's works. Among these ground-breaking studies, there have been at least six significant books exploring various aspects of the Barakan oeuvre. One of the earliest, Theodore R. Hudson's From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka (1973), attempts a somewhat detailed analysis and interpretation of various works by Baraka, with an emphasis on Baraka's thematic concerns and the aesthetic principles that govern

³ Typical of such commentators, C. W. E. Bigsby claims that "in terms of literary achievement, as opposed to political utility, the revolutionary black theatre has as yet offered very little of real note." The Black American Writer, Vol. 1, ed. C. W. E. Bigsby (Deland, Florida: Everett/Edwards, Inc., 1969), p. 25. In a similar vein, Edward Margolis indicts Baraka for transforming "himself from a serious artist to a fiercely active nationalist." Native Sons (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1968), p. 192.

his art. Kimberly Benston's monumental study, The Renegade and the Mask (1976), also explores Barakan themes within the various genres, but there is a greater emphasis on the cultural reference of these themes. In particular, Benston explores the links between Baraka's aesthetics and Afro-American music.

In his book, Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism" (1978), Werner Sollors offers an insightful study of Baraka as a black modernist/black nationalist. Sollors' interpretation of Baraka's collected and uncollected works is done within the framework of the constantly changing Barakan ideological positions. Fulfilling the need for a generic study, Lloyd Brown's Amiri Baraka (1980) is a fairly comprehensive analysis of Baraka's works within the various genres. Brown posits that each genre represents a particular aspect of Baraka's development politically and artistically.

It is obvious that by the early 1980s, there was a marked increase in critical interest in the developmental patterns of the Barakan canon. Henry C. Lacey's To Raise, Destroy, and Create: The Poetry, Drama, and Fiction of Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), (1981) is a developmental study of works produced by Baraka between the years 1960-1970. The study is an exploration of Baraka's psychic agony as he searches for identity and purpose in the midst of social, political and cultural revolution. The only book-length study that

concentrates solely on Baraka's poetry is William J. Harris' The Poetry of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic (1985). Harris uses the jazz aesthetic as a matrix for discussing the process by which Baraka transforms Western forms into Black Aesthetic forms.

All these insightful studies (representing thematic, generic, cultural, ideological and developmental approaches) have certainly led to increased understanding and appreciation of Baraka and his works. However, in view of the increasing significance that Baraka has placed on the dramatic mode as a vehicle for raising the consciousness of blacks; and in view of Baraka's own emphasis on the significance of antecedents (literary, ideological, historical/cultural), a clear need exists for a study of his dramatic heritage.⁴

Baraka's shift to the dramatic mode reflects a concurrent shift from one aesthetic and ideological posture to another. As Baraka's view of art became less solipsistic and more utilitarian, he gradually abandoned the poetic and fictional genres (he wrote only one novel--The System of Dante's Hell) in favor of the dramatic mode. In observing that it is the dramatic mode that most interests Baraka, Lloyd W. Brown

⁴ Throughout several of his works, Baraka makes reference to his literary, historical, cultural and familial heritage. In "Black Dada Nihilismus," for example, he invokes the names of several people (including his own grandfather) who he regards as revolutionary heroes. The list of names includes W. E. B. DuBois, Patrice Lumumba, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Denmark Vesey and Tom Russ, Baraka's grandfather.

opines:

This fascination lies in his perception of art as commitment and in the peculiar identity of drama itself. As both word and action the form has a special appeal to the political activist who requires, even demands, an artistic mode that is distinct from but complementary to straightforward political activism.⁵

Baraka himself regards the dramatic mode as "the most ambitious" art form.⁶ In his role as political activist, he draws heavily on the power of drama to stir the conscience of the people. He asserts that "drama can come out of the separated frame as art and actually touch the audience in a real and literal way and raise the level of consciousness of that audience."⁷ In the Barakan dictum, drama must affect the everyday lives of people; it must remind them of the existential issue of who they are.

Since the dramatic mode is accorded such an eminent role in the Barakan corpus, a study of his works in relation to his dramatic source(s) merits extensive critical investigation. Indeed, the distinctiveness of his theatrical inventiveness can be appreciated best when studied against the background of his dramatic antecedents. Because Baraka is steeped in Western literature, he has an eclectic literary

⁵ Lloyd Brown, Preface, Amiri Baraka, by Lloyd Brown (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), p. x.

⁶ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," August 27, 1987, MS., p. 14.

⁷ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," MS., p. 15.

background to draw from. His Autobiography is interspersed with quite an impressive array of names of artists who have influenced him with varying degrees of significance. A sample list of these names would include Cummings, William Carlos Williams, Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Dante, Melville, James, Hemingway, Faulkner, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Dylan Thomas, Langston Hughes, Frank O'Hara, Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg and Antonin Artaud.

Baraka has often acknowledged the influence of some of these artists.^a And many commentators have explored the influence of several of these writers on Baraka's works. For the most part however, these critics have concentrated on the literary heritage of Baraka's fiction (for example, Lloyd Brown and Kimberly Benston), and even more so on the lineage of his poetry: Harris, Benston and Sollors have all traced Baraka's connection to pre-World War II radical modernists such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, and to post-World War II avant-garde poets such as Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson and Frank O'Hara.

Unfortunately, however, there has been no substantial study linking Baraka to his dramatic progenitor(s). Of course, it is generally acknowledged that Baraka has been

^a For example, in an interview with David Ossman, Baraka mentioned some of the influences: "...at the time I got hold of Lorca, I was very much influenced by Eliot, and reading Lorca helped to bring me out of my 'Eliot Period'.... From Pound, the same concepts that went into the Imagist's poetry." David Ossman, The Sullen Art (New York: Corinth Books, 1963), p. 80.

highly influenced by all the post-Jarry revolt against received literary traditions: there is an ever lingering undercurrent of dadaist, surrealist and expressionistic impulses flowing throughout Baraka's works--a subject which will be developed more fully in chapter six.⁹

However, Baraka is too acutely self-conscious a revolutionary artist to be seen as a mere shadow or echo of a movement. Examination of his drama in relation to the aesthetics of an artist who represented the quintessential spirit of revolt that characterized avant-garde theatre, would prove more instructive, as it would offer a clearer insight into the distinctive design and artistry of Baraka's dramaturgy.

If there were one artist who could be said to be Baraka's dramatic progenitor, it would be French dramatist, director, poet and theoretician, Antonin Artaud (1896-1948). Described by Michael Benedikt as "a theatrical theorist of genius" who provided the "catalyst" for the continuation and flourishing of avant-garde theatre,¹⁰ Artaud appeared to be

⁹ The seminal event in avant-garde theatre took place on December 11, 1896, the date of the first performance at the Theatre Nouveau in Paris, of Alfred Jarry's revolutionary play, King Ubu. Two decades later (1916), the dada movement was founded, followed in 1924 by the birth of surrealism with André Breton as its leader. The term avant-garde is used here in a very general sense to mean any and all radical modernist impulses in the theatre.

¹⁰ Michael Benedikt, Intro., Modern French Theatre: An Anthology of Plays, ed. and trans. by Michael Benedikt and George E. Wellwarth (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1966), p. xxvii.

the very embodiment of revolutionary dramaturgy. Not only did he represent a confluence of various attempts to reform the theatre (though he was to reject much of the tradition of modern theatre reform, Artaud appeared at an important point on the continuum of modern theatre reformers such as Nietzsche, Richard Wagner, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, André Antoine, Adolphe Appia, Konstantin Stanislavsky, Aurélien Lugné-Poe., Gordon Craig, Jacques Copeau, Charles Dullin, and Louis Jouvet); but through his dramatic theories, he offered some definition to the direction in which modern theatre would go.

Several commentators have acknowledged the seminal impact of Artaud on modern theatre. According to Oscar G. Brockett, "Of all the avant-garde figures between the wars, Antonin Artaud...was to be the most important."¹¹ And in Susan Sontag's estimation, the impact of Artaud has been "so profound that the course of all recent serious theatre in Western Europe and the Americas can be said to divide into two periods--before Artaud and after Artaud."¹² Expressing a similar view to Michael Benedikt (quoted above), Martin Esslin declares Artaud to be one of "those powerful figures who...act as catalysts and stimulators for others by opening

¹¹ Oscar G. Brockett, History of the Theatre (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1982), p. 603.

¹² Susan Sontag, Introd., Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), p. xxxviii.

up new areas of speculation and directing the attention towards new modes of seeing...."¹³

As a catalyst, Artaud prompted the full explosion of an urge that was already seething in the theatre. Among the prized legacy that Artaud willed to Baraka was an irrepressible urge to rebel in and through his art. Even as early as his college years in the late 1950s, Baraka exhibited an inchoate spirit of rebellion, describing himself and his Howard University buddies as "outlaws" who saw themselves "as being something other than the mainstream HU student."¹⁴ The general milieu of social and political rebellion of the sixties and seventies only served to fuel this fledgling spirit of revolt.

But the consanguinity of Baraka and Artaud extends beyond just the "spirit" of revolt which led them to revolutionize the theatre in their respective epochs. Unlike the purely nihilistic gesture of the Dadaists, the iconoclastic urge of both Artaud and Baraka was directed at specific targets. Both artists were in revolt against similar aspects of Western tradition: they both denounced bourgeois sensibilities; they both condemned Western colonial mentality and Western racism. In addition, they both envisioned the restorative power of the theatre to redeem Western man out of the pit of cultural

¹³ Martin Esslin, Artaud (London: John Calder, 1976), p. 10.

¹⁴ Imamu Amiri Baraka, The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka (New York: Freundlich Books, 1984), p. 77.

turpitude. Like Nietzsche, Artaud and Baraka were driven, not merely by a romantic rebellion, but by an intense sense of mission to effect amelioration in cultural conditions.

In their seminal work on the theatre, Artaud and Baraka proposed a theatre that would serve a purgative role: not only should it denounce and expose cultural and social malaise and the resulting debasement of life; it should also exorcise this malady from the audience. Towards this end, Baraka (in his manifesto, "The Revolutionary Theatre," and Artaud (in his credo, The Theater And Its Double), both proposed a type of violence in the theatre--an emotional violence that in the final analysis would be a liberating force, leaving the audience with a heightened level of consciousness.

This faith in the power of the theatre to change consciousness is an outgrowth of the Surrealist tenet of exploring varying experiences as a means of expanding the realm of consciousness. When André Breton launched the Surrealist movement in 1924, he defined Surrealism as a "psychic automatism with the aid of which we propose to express the real functioning of thought, either orally, or in writing, or in any other way."¹⁵ This possibility of reaching new frontiers in the realm of the unconscious and the conscious is perhaps the greatest legacy that the Surrealists gave to the theatre.

¹⁵ Quoted in Intro. to Modern French Theatre, p. xxiii.

Because Artaud's art was such an intensely painful exploration of his own psychic turmoil, he was strongly drawn to this aspect of Surrealism. Art could now afford him an arena in which to wage the internecine struggle between consciousness and life in all its cruelty. This concept of cruelty--that is, metaphysical cruelty (a concept which will be elucidated more fully in chapter four)--is central to Artaudian poetics. For Artaud, "It is consciousness that gives to the exercise of every act of life its blood-red color, its cruel nuance...."¹⁶

In the Barakan Weltanschauung, consciousness assumes apocalyptic significance. So powerful is the role of consciousness in determining the quality of life that the artist apodictically declares: "the holiness of life is the constant possibility of widening the consciousness."¹⁷ If art can free consciousness from its prison, then the artist has a powerful tool to deliver himself from the shackles of his own alienation. Unfortunately, in the crisis of modern culture, the artist is hard-pressed to prove this corollary to be true on any consistent basis. More often than not, he finds himself a victim of the Cartesian bifurcated consciousness. In the theatre, this split-consciousness is a representation of his alienation from himself and from

¹⁶ Antonin Artaud, The Theatre And Its Double (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 102.

¹⁷ LeRoi Jones, Home: Social Essays (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966), p. 211.

society. Art then, reflects the consciousness in motion--to use Baraka's own words, art becomes a "consciousness epic."¹⁸

This concept of art as a reflection of consciousness is Hegelian in its origin; it is also a reflection of the Kantian search for unity of the self-consciousness. In building on Kant's doctrine of the "transcendental unity of apperception,"¹⁹ Hegel developed the concept of a universal historical consciousness, representing "the final synthesis in which the Absolute Mind becomes conscious of itself."²⁰ At Howard University, Baraka's study of the thoughts of these two German philosophers obviously had a great impact on his own thoughts and works. In his autobiography, he made a cursory allusion to this influence: "Miss Byrd, who taught us social science and whapped us cross the knots with Fichte and Kant and Hegel. She was OK, some of that obviously got through, without me even knowing it."²¹ Building on what "obviously got through" from these philosophers, Baraka equipped himself to embark on his own "consciousness epic."

Both Artaud and Baraka aspired to the Kantian and the Hegelian synthesis of the bifurcated psyche. Constantly aware of the perpetual conflict of art imposing fixity upon

¹⁸ LeRoi Jones, Home, p. 212.

¹⁹ Frank Thilly, A History of Philosophy, rev. Ledger Wood (1914; rpt. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1951), p. 426

²⁰ Frank Thilly, A History of Philosophy, p. 488.

²¹ Amiri Baraka, The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, p. 75.

consciousness and consciousness imposing limitations upon the art form, the artist is ever seeking new ways of escaping this dilemma. As a means of creating and defining the limitations and the possibilities of art, consciousness becomes at once a liberating and an imprisoning agent.

Throughout the course of modern literature, different artists have sought varying methods to overcome this modern phenomenon of the disjunctive psyche. For example, T. S. Eliot, in his attempt to circumvent this excruciating duality, resolved that "Only by the form, the pattern,/Can words or music reach/The stillness...."²² But the poet is painfully aware that even this resolution cannot survive the impotence of words; for "words strain" and "decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,/Will not stay still."²³

Baraka also bemoaned the painful truth that the artist's work can become his own anathema. Unless due attention is given to what Baraka calls "art-ing," that is, the process rather than the reified object, then the "artist is cursed with his artifact."²⁴ Though Baraka concedes that the process of "art-ing" is a difficult one in which words have "the final dictation...over their users,"²⁵ he is consoled

²² T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," in T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1971), p. 121.

²³ T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," p. 121.

²⁴ LeRoi Jones, Home, p. 173.

²⁵ LeRoi Jones, Home, p. 168.

by the fact that the artist can be triumphant if he develops appropriate semantic techniques that will fully "establish the world's realities."²⁶

Both Baraka and Artaud felt driven to develop anti-art forms as a means of rescuing consciousness from this accursed continuum of fixity. Both dramatists felt that by freeing their audiences from the atrophy of decadent theatre forms, they could enter their consciousness, probe their inner realities and at the same time, change their perception of external reality. For Baraka, this "struggle to change...consciousness...is a revolutionary struggle and it can only be achieved by struggling to change external reality."²⁷ In this dilemma of consciousness, the artist is faced with the dual role of changing external and internal realities.

Reflecting some of Baraka's philosophical and aesthetic thoughts on the revolutionary role of the artist, Herbert Marcuse, in his insightful Essay on Liberation, states that while the artistic revolution involves "the dissolution of the ego shaped by the established society," it must be "at the same time a revolution in perception which will accompany the material and intellectual reconstruction of society,

²⁶ LeRoi Jones, Home, p.168.

²⁷ Amiri Baraka, "Not Just Survival: Revolution (Some Notes on Afro-American Drama)," in Daggers and Javelins: Essays, 1974-1979 (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1984), p. 51.

creating the new aesthetic environment."²⁸ The clear mandate then, is that the artist must employ revolutionary tools if he is to effect any meaningful artistic or cultural changes.

Baraka's mission to effect cultural and artistic changes was propelled by two dominant forces: the violent passions of racial conflict in America during the turbulent decades of the sixties and seventies; and his own tortured state of consciousness. In his attempt to recover the shattered fragments of what Larry Neal calls "the black diaspora,"²⁹ Baraka was faced with a challenge of gargantuan proportions: he had to discover new forms which could accommodate the specific crisis of black ethnic consciousness writhing in the matrix of a revolutionary ethos. The process would involve not only a re-definition of art on his own terms, but also a re-definition of the black Geist and a re-education of blacks regarding their own identity.

Such a search for expression and form would naturally lead the artist to ascribe a revolutionary role to language. As Herbert Marcuse has pointed out, in any such period of revolution:

The new sensibility and the new consciousness which are to project and guide such reconstruction demand a new language to define and communicate the new 'value' (language in the wider sense which includes

²⁸ Herbert Marcuse, An Essay on Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 37.

²⁹ Larry Neal, Foreword, Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask, by Kimberly W. Benston (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1976), p. xii.

words, images, gestures, tones).³⁰

In the Barakan dictum, success for the artist lies, not so much in merely mastering "the words of the users, the semantic rituals of power";³¹ rather, the artist will attain to some degree of success only when he masters that language (in the Marcusean sense of words, images, gestures, tones) in order to effect a systematic rejection of those elements that are not consonant with his world view.

In turning to his European predecessors, Baraka was searching, not so much for a model to follow, but for a revolutionary artist whose works could "suggest" the direction to the specific revolutionary path he should follow in order to wage his own struggle for self-determination for himself and for blacks in general. For Baraka, Artaud was such an artist. Though Baraka is no mere scion of the Artaudian brand of dramaturgy, he does concede, "Artaud was a great influence on me, I can't deny that."³²

The nature of this influence is both specific and general. For apart from sharing a general kindred spirit of rebellion against Western culture as outlined above, Artaud and Baraka are literary kin in some vitally important areas of theatre reform. Perhaps the most significant legacy that

³⁰ Herbert Marcuse, An Essay On Liberation, p. 32-33.

³¹ LeRoi Jones, Home, p. 169.

³² Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," MS., p. 22.

Artaud has passed on to Baraka is the concept of total theatre--that is, a theatre which gives full reins to the use of all the arts. Baraka acknowledges:

...for me, Artaud was the transitional method back to understanding the kinds of possibilities of theatre of the whole consciousness by utilizing all the arts, by exploring the full dimensions of total theatre.³³

As one of the leading pioneers who explored the full possibilities of total theatre, Artaud laid an important foundation for Baraka.

In his desperate search to discover ways of transcending the banalities and limitations of French theatre, Artaud explored various aspects of non-Western and ancient cultures. His search for ancient archetypes led him, not only to study Greek and Eastern cultures, but also to uncover some of the mysteries and magic of pre-Cortesian Mexican civilization. As a result of this quest, Artaud appropriated certain elements of these cultures for use in the creation of his anti-dramatic, anti-Western theatre. Of particular importance in the Artaudian dramatic cosmology is the significance accorded to non-verbal elements such as gesture, dance and general spectacle. Artaud's resort to non-Western and ancient cultures appealed to Baraka as it suggested to him how he could "find a kind of liberating mechanism out of Western

³³ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," MS., p. 25.

theatre forms."³⁴

For Baraka, this "liberating mechanism" meant a deliberate recourse to the primordial energies of African culture; it meant developing a new mythology and symbology based on a rich African past. Endemic elements of African culture, such as music, song, dance and folklore, could now be invoked for their power to awaken the collective ethnic consciousness of blacks. While in the past the black man's ethnic pride was lost in the wilderness of cultural alienation, now he has the revolutionary tool to effect cultural restoration and thereby determine his own destiny.

This problem of cultural alienation is, of course, not limited to blacks in America; it is a problem shared by blacks in the West Indies. The black man in the West has always had to endure the painful condition of alienation and separation: ever since he was first torn from the bosom of the motherland and brought to the West, he has had to struggle to ward off the paralysing tentacles, not only of physical separation, but also of psychological, cultural, and spiritual alienation as well.

In order to forge a new identity to counter this impotence of alienation, the black artist in the West Indies, like his American counterpart, has had to divest himself of any Western literary traditions that do not suit his purpose.

³⁴ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," MS., p. 22.

The West Indian dilemma finds eloquent and passionate expression in the works of Derek Walcott, a native St. Lucian. As "Craftsman and Castaway,"³⁵ Walcott appropriates the role of artificer and chronicler of a distinctly West Indian identity--not African, not European, though he draws from both cultures, particularly the African culture. When he vows, "So I shall voyage no more from home; may I speak here,"³⁶ Walcott is implicitly vowing to shed his European literary influences such as Milton, Dante and the metaphysical poets. Implicitly also, Walcott is acknowledging the validity of his island home. But in order to appreciate the West Indian experience even more, he feels impelled to embark on a spiritual and cultural voyage to reclaim the lost threads of his African past.

Faced with a similar need to recover the strength of a rich cultural past in order to empower the Afro-American with the tools to achieve self-determination, Baraka saw how he could benefit from the Artaudian concept of total theatre. This is not to suggest that Artaud was the first and only artist that proposed a theatre in which all the arts should be exercised. However, visionary and prophet that Artaud was, he has been able to speak to the needs of many theoreticians and practitioners of the dramatic art for almost four

³⁵ Derek Walcott, "Crusoe's Island," in The Castaway and Other Poems (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 55.

³⁶ Derek Walcott, "As John to Patmos," in In a Green Night (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 12.

decades.

It should also be pointed out that Baraka did not subscribe to all of Artaud's dramatic theories. Whereas Artaud advocated metaphysical and physical cruelty, Baraka claimed, "I wanted to transform that into actual violence on society itself, a society that I thought of as oppressive and racist."³⁷ And whereas Artaud stressed the metaphysical aspect of his theatre, Baraka advocated a politicized theatre:

I was making it [the theatre] more overtly political than Artaud. Artaud was to me the blind thrust against bourgeois sensibility and bourgeois consciousness. I wanted to make it much more overtly political and much more focussed.³⁸

For Baraka, the prototypical Black Aesthetician, the theatre cannot function as a transforming agent in society unless it functions as a political and revolutionary tool.

In addition to these points of divergence between Baraka and Artaud, there are some more obvious differences (such as nationalities, voices, milieu and histories) which separate them, yet which serve to illuminate the revolutionary consciousness which flows through their works. For while they are inextricably linked to each other through certain key concepts of reform for the theatre, they are inevitably and

³⁷ William J. Harris, "Interview with Amiri Baraka," in The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), p. 141.

³⁸ William J. Harris, "Interview with Amiri Baraka," p. 141.

irreconcilably alienated from each other by virtue of nationalities, histories and milieu. These general points of divergence and convergence between Artaud and Baraka can be subsumed under Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine's famous triad of superstructural elements which govern the works of any writer: "race, surroundings, and epoch."³⁹

The attempt to establish lines of continuity and divergence between Baraka and his European predecessor lends itself quite naturally to the Comparative Literature approach as well as to the historical line of inquiry. Baraka's special relationship to his own epoch is in part defined by his unique relationship to the rich literary tradition that he has inherited. And even while it is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of any particular influence on Baraka's literary output, it is salutary to evaluate the revolutionary claims of his works against the background of any author whose similarities or dissimilarities in focus might illuminate aspects of his works.

The main thrust of this study will be to identify the similarities and differences between Baraka's revolutionary theatre and Artaud's theatre of cruelty, and to show how Baraka transformed the theories of his dramatic progenitor to

³⁹ Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine, "From the Introduction to the History of English Literature," in Twentieth Century Criticism: The Major Statements, ed. William J. Handy and Max Westbrook (New York: The Free Press, 1974), p. 313. Taine, the celebrated mid-nineteenth century French critic, is one of the archetypal proponents of the historical method of literary interpretation.

suit his own purposes of exploring the tortured black consciousness, and instructing blacks on the methods necessary to achieve self-determination. In examining Baraka's drama in relation to one of its most important revolutionary antecedents, this study proposes to show that Baraka is still very much a part of the very tradition that he attempts to subvert; and that paradoxically, by virtue of his artistic rebellion, he has been an important agent in transforming that tradition.

Because Artaud's primary influence has been passed on through his dramatic theories; and because his own plays did not meet with a great measure of success in the theatre, this study will be limited to the impact of his dramatic theories on Baraka, and will not attempt an examination of his plays. Where appropriate, of course, Artaud's plays will be mentioned. However, as the focus of this study is Baraka's distinctive achievement in the dramatic arts, all of his major plays will be discussed in detail.

Baraka's main concern was to create a theatre that would allow him to develop his own distinct voice and reflect his own discrete culture and history. At the same time, Baraka was also searching for a theatre that could accommodate an organic fusion of form and content in order to accomplish his primary purpose of raising the level of consciousness of blacks. The study will explore Baraka's search for such a form. It will attempt to locate the specific instruments of

transformation that Baraka employs to create a distinctly black American aesthetics.

In attempting to establish Baraka's seminal contribution to the development of black American theatre, this study will also attempt to establish Baraka's special relationship with his African past. Baraka's work is infused with a sense of this African heritage: throughout his works, the accretion of certain elements of African culture, mythology, and history has been largely responsible for his modification of European cultural forms.

As he works within these two divergent cultures to create a distinctly black American art, Baraka is constantly aware of the impact of the past on the present, and the importance of the present being a modification and continuation of the past. Because he writes consciously with this overwhelming historical sense, his literary output lends itself very readily to the historical method of inquiry. As the following pages will prove, the ultimate goal of this approach is to arrive at a more enlightened exegesis of Baraka's brilliant accomplishment in his drama.

CHAPTER 2

ARTAUD AND BARAKA: REVOLUTIONARIES AND VISIONARIES

I

For me, being here has always been a condition of struggle and, hopefully, growth. These are attempts to sum up my life....

Amiri Baraka, The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka

.../The perversity
of separation, isolation
after so many years of trying to enter their kingdoms....

Amiri Baraka, "Short Speech to My Friends"

When an artist commits himself to a visionary or revolutionary goal as intensely and as fiercely as did Antonin Artaud and Amiri Baraka, he also commits himself to paying the exacting and sometimes awful price of accomplishing this goal. For such an artist, this often means a complete renunciation of stultifying traditions and a willful descent into a pre-death purgatory, where he suffers the painful exigencies imposed upon him by the demons of despair, anger and alienation. Though he suffers a crisis of consciousness in this purgatory, the intensity of his visionary zeal is fueled by this very isolation, and he emerges a raging rebel ready to exact vengeance on a decadent society.

As visionaries and revolutionists, Artaud and Baraka suffered such a fate. Because the essence of the lives and works of these two artists is change and revolution, any study of their works would benefit from a review of their biographies. And because biography--chronologically and logically--is an intrinsic part of historiography, the biographical hermeneutic of this chapter lends itself quite readily to the historical line of investigation being pursued in this study.

If, as the mid-nineteenth century French critic, Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine has established, the famous triad of "race, surroundings, and epoch"¹ is indeed the chief element governing the literary output of any writer, then an examination of the biographies of Baraka and Artaud against the social, intellectual, cultural, and historical milieu of their time should be of great exegetical value in reading their works.

Not only will the historical method of inquiry afford us a sense of the personality and the historical moment behind a work of art, but it will also help us to trace certain patterns in the development of the writer's voice, attitude, and ideology--all crucial elements which can enlighten our

¹ Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine, "From the Introduction to the History of English Literature, in Twentieth Century Criticism: The Major Statements, ed. William J. Handy and Max Westbrook (New York: The Free Press, 1974), p. 313. Taine is among the first critics to establish the historical method of literary interpretation.

elucidation of the text. If, indeed, we accept the dictum that historicity is a sine qua non of our aesthetic experience of a work of art, then we can place appropriate value on the central role that biography plays in our overall appreciation of that work.

The historical method of literary investigation will also allow us to identify a writer's place along the vast continuum of literary tradition. Through this method, we can discover how an artist is affected by tradition, and how that artist affects and sometimes changes that tradition. As the ensuing biographical account of Baraka and Artaud will show, both artists were among the prime movers and shapers of the tradition they inherited--hence the revolutionary strain in their lives and works. Indeed, it is only within this context that we can fully appreciate the magnitude of their artistic innovations.

In the final analysis, charting their biographical journeys will help us to re-live their revolutionary mission in all its intensity. And contrary to the claims of some critics (for example, René Wellek and Austin Warren)² that biography cannot change or influence critical evaluation, it is hoped that the following biographical sketch of Baraka and Artaud will help quicken the reader to the cry of revolution which pervades the works of these two artists.

² See René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, 3rd ed. (1942; rpt. New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 80.

II

I...shall no longer tolerate someone telling me, as has so often happened, "Mr. Artaud, you're raving," without committing a crime.

Antonin Artaud, "Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society"

September 4, 1896 was an auspicious date in theatre history, for on that day, one of modern theatre's most influential reformers, Antonin-Marie-Joseph Artaud, was born in Marseilles, France, to Antoine-Roi Artaud and Euphrasie-Marie-Louise Artaud (née Nalpas), both of Greek origin. Unfortunately, Artaud's life was not marked by a very auspicious beginning, for from as early as 1901, when he was only five years old, he suffered from an attack of meningitis, and this was followed in subsequent years by periodic recrudescence of severe headaches and attacks of depression from which he never fully recovered. The pain of his childhood was further intensified by the grief he suffered from the death of all but two of his eight siblings. Concern for Artaud's health led his parents to seek medical attention for him at a sanitarium at La Rouguière, near Marseilles. This visit to the sanitarium was the first of many that Artaud would make to similar institutions throughout the rest of his life.

But even in the midst of all his early pain and suffering, Artaud's interest in the arts and his predilection for artistic innovation were already winning wide public attention. In 1910, while he was a student at the Collège du Sacré Coeur in Marseilles, he founded a literary magazine in which he started publishing his own poems under the pseudonym Louis des Attides. But, as was to be the case throughout the rest of his life, Artaud's artistic pursuits were constantly interrupted by bouts of illness. Unfortunately, he became addicted to some of the drugs that were given to him while he was at the sanitarium in La Rouguière, and in 1914, he dropped out of school.

The following year he was enlisted into the Third Infantry Regiment at Digne, but after only nine months, he was discharged from the army for medical reasons--according to Artaud, for sleepwalking! He subsequently spent two years at Chanet clinic near Neuchâtel, Switzerland, and by 1920, he moved to Paris where he became a patient of Dr. Edouard Toulouse at his Villejuif clinic.

The move to Paris to live with Dr. and Mme. Toulouse was propitious on more than one count: in the first place, Artaud's health began to improve; and secondly, he came closer to fulfilling his ambition of pursuing a literary career. For in Dr. Toulouse, Artaud found not only a very accomplished psychiatrist, but also a man with considerable literary interests. Apart from writing many literary,

philosophical and scientific articles, Dr. Toulouse was also an editor of some note. From as early as 1912, he founded a literary magazine called Demain, which he continued to edit himself until he discovered Artaud's literary gifts and subsequently passed on that responsibility to his protege.

From quite early after their meeting, it was clear to Dr. Toulouse and Artaud that their relationship would be a mutually beneficial one. Dr. Toulouse needed someone to relieve him of some of his editorial responsibilities; and Artaud needed an outlet for his artistic creations, which included poetry and essays on his views of literature and the theatre. With much encouragement from Dr. Toulouse, Artaud started publishing some of his early artistic efforts in Demain. His undoubted literary gifts did not go unnoticed by Mme. Toulouse. Obviously pleased with their rare literary "find," Mme. Toulouse is reputed to have described Artaud as "An utterly exceptional being, of that race which produces Baudelaires, Nerval's or Nietzsches."³

In addition to providing Artaud with an outlet for publishing his early writings,⁴ Dr. Toulouse helped to launch Artaud's career in the theatre by introducing him to some of the artists and directors who were involved in

³ Memoir by Mme Toulouse in La Tour de Feu, pp. 63-64 (1968). Cited by Julia F. Costich, Antonin Artaud (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), p. 12.

⁴ By 1923, Artaud was publishing his writings in several journals, including L'Ere nouvelle, Images de Paris, and Le Mercure de France.

reshaping modern French theatre. Perhaps the most consequential of all these initial introductions was Artaud's meeting in autumn of 1920 with the acclaimed and influential director of the symbolist Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, Aurélien Lugné-Poe.⁵ It was Lugné-Poe who gave Artaud his first acting role--a non-speaking role in Henri de Régnier's Les Scrupules de Sganarelle. Lugné-Poe was highly impressed with Artaud's performance, describing him as an "astonishing artist" who was "sensitive in the highest degree, intelligent, tormented with beauty."⁶ Despite this high acclaim for his first performance, Artaud never worked with Lugné-Poe again. Whether it was that Lugné-Poe simply did not employ him again, as Ronald Hayman states;⁷ or whether Lugné-Poe did not offer Artaud the sort of challenges that would satisfy his ambitions in the theatre, as Bettina L. Knapp suggests,⁸ it is not very clear.

⁵ Lugné-Poe's influence in the theatre was so significant that Oscar G. Brockett claims: "Lugné-Poe influenced almost every departure from realism between 1893 and 1915." Oscar G. Brockett, History of the Theatre 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, Inc., 1982), p. 563. Lugné-Poe's repertory consisted mainly of symbolist plays. He staged plays by dramatists as diverse as Ibsen, Hauptmann, Maeterlinck and Alfred Jarry.

⁶ Quoted by Ronald Hayman, Artaud and After (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 41.

⁷ Ronald Hayman, p. 41.

⁸ Bettina L. Knapp, Antonin Artaud: Man of Vision (New York: David Lewis, 1969), p. 7.

However, at this point there was no turning back for this rising star in the theatre. For soon after Artaud stopped working for Lugné-Poe, he had the good fortune of meeting the famous actor and director, Firmin Gémier (1869-1933). Gémier was most renowned for his efforts to create a theatre for the masses, and also for his creation of the role of Ubu for Lugné-Poe's 1896 production of Alfred Jarry's play, Ubu Roi. After seeing Artaud at an audition, Gémier enthusiastically recommended the talented young actor to Charles Dullin, the celebrated actor and director who founded the Théâtre de l'Atelier. Dullin immediately accepted Artaud into his famous theatre/school. This was a very significant step for Artaud, for his sojourn at the Théâtre de l'Atelier laid the foundation, not only for the development of his acting skills, but also for the development of his ideas on theatre reform.

As one of the foremost innovators in French theatre during that era, Dullin was among the first theoreticians to espouse the concept of total theatre. His rejection of naturalism and his emphasis on gesture, mime, music and spectacle were very appealing to Artaud. Although Adolphe Appia (1862-1928) and Gordon Craig (1872-1966) had made important contributions towards the idea of the whole theatre, Artaud felt that Dullin was doing more than his predecessors to effect such a theatre. It was through

Dullin's influence that Artaud started crystalizing his own ideas of total theatre.

Artaud's experiences at Dullin's school also had a great impact on his personal life. It was at the Atelier that Artaud met the beautiful Rumanian actress Genica Athanasiou, who was also one of Dullin's students. Artaud fell madly in love with Genica, and soon they developed an exciting and at times tempestuous relationship, which lasted for about seven years, ending in 1927. Described as "perhaps the only woman to have succeeded in sharing Artaud's life,"⁹ Genica offered Artaud the possibility of harmonising the sensual and the intellectual elements of his life. Since they also acted in some of the same plays, they shared an intimacy both on stage and off stage. A great admirer of Genica's acting abilities, Artaud was himself influenced by her improvisations.

While at the Atelier, Artaud not only acted in several plays, but, as he started developing his own ideas of what the theatre should be like, he also started designing costumes and decor for many of these works. Nineteen twenty two was a particularly busy year for Artaud. During that year, he designed the costumes and decors for such works as Les Olives by Lope de Rueda and Life is a Dream by Calderón. Artaud made an impressive impact with the spectacle that he created for these plays, particularly Calderón's Life is a

⁹ Naomi Greene, Antonin Artaud: Poet Without Words (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), p. 20.

Dream, in which he played the role of Basilio, the King of Poland. In addition, he played important roles in Molière's The Miser, Pirandello's The Pleasure of Honesty, Alexandre Arnoux's Moriano et Galvan (for which he also designed the costumes and the decor), Regnard's The Divorce, Francesco de Castro's L'Hôtellerie, and Cocteau's adaptation of Sophocles' Antigone.

Amidst this flurry of acting assignments at the Atelier, Artaud retreated to Marseilles in the summer of 1922 to view a troupe of Cambodian dancers at the Colonial Exhibition. Their performance in the reconstruction of the Angkor temple had a profound effect on Artaud. For from this early date, he started developing his own ideas about the role of dance, mime and spectacle in the theatre.

All in all, the year spent at Dullin's theatre/school was an intensely productive period for Artaud. According to Tom Driver's account, Artaud played no less than twelve roles while at the Atelier.¹⁰ In all of these roles, Artaud displayed superior acting abilities, always putting his own peculiar stamp on his presentations. Perhaps his most outlandish appearance was during his final performance at the Atelier in the role of the Emperor Charlemagne in Alexandre Arnoux's play Houn de Bordeaux. In his review of Artaud's performance, Marcel Achard claimed:

¹⁰ Tom F. Driver, Romantic Quest and Modern Query: A History of the Modern Theatre (New York: Delacorte Press, 1970), p. 354.

It would be impossible to be less genuine, to introduce more vain grandiloquence into lyricism, to stimulate the excitement of being in command more artificially. He gave the great emperor an improbable voice and a tormented appearance, remaining extraordinarily antipathetic.¹¹

However, Artaud's rendition of this role drew mixed responses. For while he impressed Marcel Achard, he left Dullin dumbfounded and perturbed when he insisted on casting the Emperor crawling towards the throne on all fours. The disagreement over the interpretation of the role of the Emperor caused a strain in what was an otherwise compatible relationship between Artaud and Dullin. Artaud the rebel wanted to express his individuality, so following his controversial performance in Arnoux's play, he left Dullin's troupe.

Soon after Artaud left the Atelier, he became affiliated with another luminary in the French theatre, Georges Pitoeff, actor and director at the famous Comédie des Champs-Élysées. However, Pitoeff assigned Artaud only minor roles in his productions. Artaud's overly intense acting style was beginning to cost him roles. Because of this unfortunate fact, which was compounded by Artaud's growing disenchantment with the extant French theatre, he felt even more propelled to formulate his own ideas of what the theatre should be.

During this period of busy activity in the theatre, Artaud was also engaged in pursuing other aspects of his

¹¹ Cited by Ronald Hayman in Artaud and After, p. 47.

literary career. In addition to editing Demain and other periodicals, he also edited an anthology of Dr. Toulouse's works entitled, Au Fil des Préjugés. In 1923 Artaud published his first collection of poems under the title Tric-Trac du Ciel ("Backgammon in the Sky"), and during that same year, he founded a miniature literary review called Bilboquet.

However, the most consequential literary activity for Artaud in 1923 was his correspondence with Jacques Rivière. The now famous correspondence started rather inauspiciously as a result of Artaud's letter of response to Rivière's rejection of his poems for publication. Artaud tried to defend the integrity of his work, and in so doing, he gave expression to a substantial body of thought covering various aspects of the artistic process. In a letter dated June 5, 1923, Artaud wrote to Rivière:

I suffer from a horrible sickness of the mind. My thought abandons me at every level. From the simple fact of thought to the external fact of its materialization in words. Words, shapes of sentences, internal directions of thought, simple reactions of the mind--I am in constant pursuit of my intellectual being. Thus as soon as I can grasp a form, however imperfect, I pin it down, for fear of losing the whole thought.¹²

Rivière, who was editor of the prestigious Nouvelle Revue Française, felt that Artaud's letters had more literary

¹² Antonin Artaud, "Letter to Jacques Rivière," in Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, trans. Helen Weaver, ed. & intro. Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), p. 31.

value than his poems, and so he encouraged Artaud by continuing to write to him. The correspondence between the two men continued for approximately one year and at the end of that period, Revière published the letters in Nouvelle Revue Française.

As a result of this publication, Artaud, the man and his works gained wide publicity. What started out as Artaud's private confessional regarding his inner torture, soon became a public statement reflecting his growing Weltschmerz regarding not only the literary scene in Paris (particularly the theatre), but also the general cultural conditions in France. In effect, Artaud was beginning to reject many of the generally accepted notions about art.

It was therefore no coincidence that in September 1924, only a month after the publication of the Artaud-Rivière correspondence, Artaud joined the Surrealists, a group of men who, like him, were in revolt against certain aspects of European literature and art. Having gone through his own series of crises over the inadequacy of verbal expression, Artaud was strongly drawn to the Surrealists' resolution to reject any techniques which restricted conscious and unconscious thought.

Remarking on the consanguinity in thought and spirit between Artaud and the Surrealists, André Breton, their chief spokesman, wrote some years later: "I appreciate ... the great role suffering played in leading him to this total

rejection, which we all shared but which he formulated in the most fitting and ardent way."¹³ In this statement, Breton unintentionally was singling out one of the distinctive qualities which eventually was to contribute to making Artaud a prophet and visionary for succeeding generations of dramatists, including Baraka.

In recognition of Artaud's abilities and passions, Breton appointed him editor of the third issue of the official journal of the movement, La Révolution Surréaliste (April 15, 1925). The issue was devoted to the promulgation of the Surrealists' credo among a wide cross section of the European community. Some of the articles (many of which were written by Artaud himself), were addressed to such figures as the Chancellors of European Universities, the Pope, "the followers of Buddha," and "Medical Directors of Lunatic Asylums."¹⁴

Artaud took advantage of this medium to express some of his own ideas of art. In addition, he expressed himself freely in another literary organ of the movement, Disque Vert, and as the first director of the "Bureau for Surrealist Research," he had access to their entire collection of automatic writing, dreams, and other materials used to research the effects of conscious and unconscious thought.

¹³ André Breton, Entretiens: 1913-1952 (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), p. 109. Quoted by Naomi Greene, p. 22.

¹⁴ Naomi Greene, Antonin Artaud: Poet Without Words, p. 22.

Despite Artaud's intense involvement with the Surrealists, and the obvious benefits that accrued to him and to the group as a result of this association, there were some fundamental differences in philosophical outlook, which eventually led to his expulsion from the group in December 1926. There are conflicting accounts of the exact reason for the rift. According to Ronald Hayman, "Artaud's rupture with the group occurred after he had tried...to act as mediator between Breton and Jean Paulhan,...editor of the N.R.F. [La Nouvelle Revue Francaise]...[who] refused to accept Breton's demand for complete freedom from editorial censorship."¹⁵ And in Naomi Greene's view, the Surrealists could not identify themselves with "the mystical aspirations expressed in a number of Artaud's poems."¹⁶

However, the most widely accepted reason for the split--and the one which Artaud himself acknowledges in his writings--is a political one.¹⁷ The Surrealists had a different concept from Artaud regarding the meaning of "revolution." While Artaud was beginning to conceive of revolution primarily in artistic terms, especially in terms

¹⁵ Ronald Hayman, Artaud and After, p. 63.

¹⁶ Naomi Greene, Antonin Artaud: Poet Without Words, p. 23.

¹⁷ In his essay, "In Total Darkness, or The Surrealist Bluff" (1927), Artaud explains: "The whole root, all the exacerbations of our quarrel, turn on the word 'Revolution.' Further, he refers to the Surrealists as "Amiels of the Communist revolution." Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, p. 139 and p. 140.

of reform in the theatre, the Surrealists were thinking of revolution in political terms, and as a result, several of them joined the Communist party.

Unfortunately, this move completely alienated Artaud from the Surrealists, for he was unflinching in his view that political revolution alone could not change the inner nature of man. In the essay, "In Total Darkness, or The Surrealist Bluff" (1927), he repudiated the Surrealists' position, while defending his own apolitical stance. Ironically, his disaffiliation with the politicized Surrealist group would become symbolic of one of the major points on which Artaud the artist and Baraka the artist would hold differing views, a subject which will be discussed more fully in chapter five.

Amidst all the welter of activities with the Surrealist group, Artaud was also intensely engaged, not only in the theatre, but also in film. In fact, during this period Artaud turned more and more to the cinema as a source of income. Having the advantage of a close relative in the film industry (Artaud's uncle, Louis Nalpas was a film director), Artaud received roles in numerous films, about twenty-five in all during his career on the screen.¹⁸ He played roles in such films as Carl Dreyer's The Passion of Joan of Arc, Marcel Vandal's Graziella, and Brecht's Threepenny Opera.

¹⁸ Tom Driver, Romantic Quest and Modern Query, p. 354.

However, Artaud's greatest passion was for the theatre. His aggregate experiences in all the other areas of the arts had only served to intensify his vision of a reformed theatre. Realising that it would be difficult to effect any revolutionary changes in the existing theatre, Artaud decided to form his own acting company so that he could freely experiment with his new ideas. With generous financial assistance from well-known psychiatrist Dr. René Allendy and his wife, Artaud founded the Alfred Jarry Theatre in the autumn of 1926, in collaboration with ex-Surrealist Roger Vitrac, and Robert Aron, the essayist.

In the manifesto announcing the founding of the Alfred Jarry Theatre (published November 1926 in Nouvelle Revue Francaise), Artaud lamented the non-existence of "an absolutely pure theater"¹⁹ and vowed to redress this serious problem through his newly created theatre. Reflecting aspects of his Surrealist background, Artaud's credo for the new theatre outlined his intention to explore the fantastic and the bizarre, the ephemeral and the real. The credo also proposed a new kind of relationship with the spectator: he must "be shaken and antagonized by the internal dynamic of the spectacle that will unfold before his eyes."²⁰

In light of the cultural degeneracy which he saw afflicting all areas of Parisian life in the 1920s, Artaud

¹⁹ Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, p. 155.

²⁰ Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, p. 157.

felt that going to the theatre should be serious business for the spectator. In summing up the goals of the Alfred Jarry Theatre, Artaud wrote:

What we are driving at is this: that with each performance we put on we are playing a serious game, that the whole point of our effort resides in this quality of seriousness. It is not to the minds or the senses of the spectators that we address ourselves but to their whole existence. Their existence and ours. We stake our own lives on the spectacle that unfolds on the stage.²¹

The manifesto on the Alfred Jarry Theatre is an important part of the Artaudian canon, as it contains formative ideas on what he eventually gave the name, Theatre of Cruelty--a concept he promulgated in his most important work, The Theatre and its Double (1938).

When the first performance of the Alfred Jarry Theatre was eventually staged at the Théâtre de Grenelle, on June 1, 1927, it marked the beginning of a very controversial, though short-lived history of performances for the troupe. The triple bill for the evening consisted of works by the three collaborators: Artaud's Le Ventre Brulé ou la Mère Folle (Burned Belly or The Mad Mother), Robert Aron's Gigogne, and Vitrac's Les Mystères de l'Amour.

From its very first performance, the Alfred Jarry Theatre was unfortunately plagued by financial problems. Though the Théâtre de Grenelle was filled to capacity, at the end of the evening's performance there was a deficit of approximately

²¹ Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, p. 156.

7000 francs, which Robert Aron ended up paying out of his own pocket. After this rather inauspicious beginning, the Alfred Jarry Theatre presented only a few more plays, some of which were very controversial (for example, an unauthorized version of Claudel's Partage de midi (Noontime Division)). Eventually the Alfred Jarry Theatre closed in 1930 after failing to raise money for the venture.

Artaud's faith in his vision for a metaphysical theatre was renewed in 1931 when he saw a production of Balinese Theatre at the Colonial Exhibition in Paris. He was impressed by the fact that in the Oriental theatre, the audience was subject to a metaphysical experience because of the very nature of the performance. Recognising in their performance the power of certain non-verbal elements, such as gesture and spectacle, to communicate mysteries to the unconscious mind, Artaud realised he had found the key to creating the type of metaphysical theatre he had always envisioned. He wanted to realise a theatre in which gesture would become a kind of symbol representing a certain magic on the stage.²²

Based on his experience with the production of the Balinese dancers, Artaud started a series of essays in which he formulated his own theories for the theatre. The first of these articles, entitled "On Balinese Theatre," was published in the October 1931 issue of the Nouvelle Revue Francaise. Over the next two years, Artaud was to write all the other

²² Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, p. 161.

essays which comprise his seminal work, The Theatre and its Double.

In addition to his commitment to establishing a sound theoretical base for his new theatre, Artaud was indefatigable in his efforts to concretize these theories on stage. Towards this end, he sought the patronage of the Nouvelle Revue Francaise. His first proposal was for assistance with the production of a play by Alfred Savoir, La Pâtissière du Village. However, Artaud's suggestions for the staging of this play were so far-fetched, that Lucio Jovet, the director of the NRF, had no choice but to reject the proposal.

Still, Artaud remained determined to establish what he was by now designating the Theatre of Cruelty, so he went elsewhere for support. This time, he tried to persuade Dullin to allow him to direct Brecht's Woyzeck. However, his efforts to raise money and to enlist Dullin's backing floundered under premature press exposure. This unfortunate press leak caused a rift in Artaud's relationship with some of the leading *littérateurs* associated with the NRF. The unwholesome situation was further exacerbated when Artaud witnessed some of these directors implementing ideas which he maintained were his own.

Notwithstanding these major setbacks, Artaud was still intransigent in his resolve to found an independent theatre.

By now convinced that he could not look to the established literary community for support of his innovative ideas for the Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud decided to write and produce his own plays. His first effort towards this end was the play, Les Cenci, an adaptation of the story of the Cenci family first published in Stendhal's Chroniques Italiennes and made popular in Shelley's play, The Cenci.

With the writing and staging of Les Cenci, Artaud finally seemed destined to fulfil his dreams for the theatre: he had received ample financial backing through the efforts of a Parisian aristocrat, Lady Iya Abdy (an aspiring actress who was given a role in Les Cenci); he had found an available theatre (the Théâtre des Folies-Wagram); he had created a script that seemed to be the perfect vehicle for the implementation of his theories for the Theatre of Cruelty; and he had assigned himself the leading role.

However, Artaud's high optimism received a devastating blow after negative reviews greeted the first performance of Les Cenci. Desperate to prove that there was validity in what he was doing in the theatre, Artaud persisted with further performances of Les Cenci. But he was dogged by ever diminishing audiences and intensified negative criticisms, now exacerbated by increasing financial woes. So in May 1935, after seventeen performances of the play, Artaud finally relinquished all hope of establishing the Theatre of Cruelty.

But Artaud did not exit the stage with a whimper. He

lashed out at the Parisian community, attributing the failure of the Theatre of Cruelty, not to his so-called theatrical excesses, but rather to the decadence of a bourgeois audience who had lost touch with reality. He was a prophet of the stage, but his contemporaries in the theatre did not understand him; he was the voice crying in the wilderness of cultural turpitude, but his own generation turned a deaf ear to him.

Disillusioned and defeated, Artaud sought refuge in another culture, but he was determined that it should be one that had not been contaminated by the diseased European culture. Artaud chose to visit Mexico, for there he felt he could draw strength and inspiration from a first hand observation of the primitive rituals and cults of the Indians. After his visit to Mexico, he recorded his fascination with the pristine elements of their culture in his book Au Pays des Tarahumaras (In the Land of the Tarahumaras), published in 1945.

After his eleven-month sojourn in Mexico, Artaud returned to Europe in November 1936, but he never returned to any serious work in the theatre. In fact, because of his seriously failing health, Artaud's life after his return to Europe was unfortunately marked by prolonged institutionalization in several asylums, including a clinic in Ivry, where, in March 1948, he died dejected and defeated.

Yet, among a precious few at that time, there was a shared sense of loss because of Artaud's failure. André Frank's poignant description of the nadir of Artaud's career revealed his faith that one day the rejected prophet would be heard:

I remember a terrible evening in the theatre, when Antonin Artaud for the first time showed the cramped, 'remote' face, cut off from the world, which has become the face by which we know him today. A financial failure, a chain of incomprehensions, had decided his fate: Artaud, the tragic genius, Artaud the prophet and magus, had come into existence.²³

Of course, that faith has been fulfilled in the many directors and dramatists, including Baraka, who have been influenced in one way or another by Artaud's vision for a reformed theatre.

III

I am real, and I can't say who
I am. Ask me if I know, I'll say
yes, I might say no. Still, ask.
I'm Everett LeRoi Jones, 30 yrs old.
A black nigger in the universe. A long breath
singer,
wouldbe dancer, strong from years of fantasy
and study.

LeRoi Jones, "Numbers, Letters"

²³ André Frank in Lettres d'Antonin Artaud à Jean-Louis Barrault (Paris, 1952), p. 65. Cited by Martin Esslin in Artaud (London: John Calder, 1976), p. 42.

The man we know today as Amiri Baraka was christened Everett LeRoi Jones when he was born in Newark, New Jersey, on October 7, 1934.²⁴ Since then, this self-styled "long breath singer" has had many songs to sing. But the bard turned politician has had to change his tunes many times-- though he has retained essentially the same message: he has bellowed and screamed; he has shouted and exhorted; and he has chanted and preached, all in an effort to rouse his audiences to new and higher levels of consciousness. The process through which he has grown "strong from years of fantasy and study," has been revolutionary for the most part, and has been marked by much pain and crisis.

Unlike Artaud, who endured much pain and sickness from when he was a very young boy, Baraka experienced a stable and relatively happy childhood, nothing foreshadowing the turbulence that was to characterize much of his adult life.

²⁴ Actually, his given name was spelt "Leroy." Baraka was in the business of name change long before he became very radical. He himself best explains the change of spelling: "...since I had gone away to school, actually just before I left, I had started spelling my name with an 'i' on the end instead of as it was given, Leroy. My justification was that my father's name, seeing his birth certificate named him Coyette Leroy, was French, so why wasn't the 'y,' 'i'? But also I'd read that summer, just before I went away, Roi Ottley's New World A Comin and I think that's what did it. At any rate, after my first year at Howard I spelled my name with a capital 'R' and an 'i' at the end. LeRoi." Amiri Baraka, The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka (New York: Freundlich Books, 1984), p. 87. Baraka assumed the appellation, Imamu Amiri Baraka in the late sixties. He later dropped "Imamu." For greater details regarding this name change, see Werner Sollors, Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism," p. 262.

Proudly reminiscing on those bygone days of calm and balm, Baraka wrote in his Autobiography: "There was a security to my home life...a security that let me know that all, finally, was well. That I'd be all right...."²⁵ His parents, Coyette Leroy Jones, a postal supervisor, and Anna Lois Russ Jones, a Tuskegee graduate and a social worker, were the ones responsible for providing Baraka with the nurturing environment of his early youth. In addition, the young LeRoi Jones drew strength and inspiration from his grandparents, and this influence was so great that he later hailed one of them, Thomas Everett Russ, as one of his heroes.²⁶

The fact that Baraka was obviously a highly gifted child was perhaps the one thing that stood out in his otherwise "normal" childhood.²⁷ During his school days at Barringer High, his fledgling artistic talents were already being noticed in his penchant for writing comic strips and science fiction. Upon graduating two years early from high school, Baraka was given "a couple of scholarship offers through the Cotillion," in recognition of his high scholastic

²⁵ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 13.

²⁶ In "Black Dada Nihilismus," Baraka places Tom Russ among a group of prominent black revolutionary leaders, and the publication of his first major plays, Dutchman & The Slave is dedicated to him.

²⁷ For a more detailed account of Baraka's childhood, see Theodore R. Hudson, From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka: The Literary Works (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1973), pp. 3-5.

achievement.²⁸ Actually, as Baraka revealed in his autobiography, he did receive more than a "couple" of scholarship offers; he received three offers, but he ended up accepting a pre-med scholarship to Rutgers University.

It was at Rutgers that the Barakan Weltschmerz started taking root in a manner that was at once insidious and portentous. Deliberately estranging himself from the oppressive bourgeois mentality around him at Rutgers, Baraka realised that he would never fit into that environment. Expressing the pain of this alienation, he wrote years later, "I felt even worse than at Barringer, completely isolated.... I knew I was in some strange place then."²⁹ After only one year at Rutgers, Baraka decided he wanted to go to a school that he could identify with socially and culturally. He chose Howard University.

But Howard University was even more disquieting for Baraka. Contrary to what he was expecting, the "Capstone of Negro Education"³⁰ did not offer an effective antidote to the Rutgers experience. He was alarmed at what the Howard

²⁸ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 63.

²⁹ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 65. It was while he was at the predominantly white Barringer High School that Baraka became consciously aware of his alienation from mainstream America. According to Baraka, "At Barringer it was the amazingly dull process of being an outsider that I was involved with." Autobiography, p. 39. The entire first chapter of his autobiography is replete with references to his fledgling sense of alienation.

³⁰ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 77.

University experience was doing to blacks: it was teaching them to be white.³¹ Even more unsettling for Baraka was the startling realization that there was to be very little respite from this influence; for the entire school "reeked of it, that stiffness and artificiality, that petty bourgeois Negro mentality!"³² Consumed by his disillusionment, Baraka's attention started drifting away from his liberal arts education to his growing dissatisfaction with the existing order of things.

At this point in his development though, the fledgling dissident was not yet fully equipped with the tools with which to vent his dissatisfaction. But he did already have two useful weapons that he would eventually use to wage his warfare: his liberal arts education, including a good literary background and good writing skills; and his first-hand experience of the social and cultural malaise around him. Disillusioned, but armed with these tools, Baraka dropped out of Howard University in 1954.

After his truncated stay at Howard, Baraka went into the Air Force, which he mockingly referred to later as the "Error

³¹ Baraka in Interview with Judy Stone, "If It's Anger...Maybe That's Good," San Francisco Chronicle, August 23, 1964, p. 42. Cited by Theodore R. Hudson, From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka, p. 9.

³² Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 77.

Farce."³³ Though Baraka often admitted that going into the Air Force was a form of "escape" for him,³⁴ he was also quick to concede that it turned out to be a great learning experience: "in every way, like it or not, pleasant or not, the service was my graduate school or maybe it was undergraduate school."³⁵

It was during his Air Force tenure that Baraka started honing his writing skills. He started off by keeping a journal and making daily entries. Soon he was writing voluminously--both poetry and prose--and before long, he was submitting some of these for publication in such established journals as The Atlantic Monthly, Harper's, and The New Yorker. Though these journals rejected Baraka's early literary attempts, he remained undaunted in his resolve to write. In addition, he read voraciously, resolving to read something every day. In the midst of this welter of literary activities, he found himself "drafted into the world of Quattrocento, vers libre, avant-garde, surrealism and dada, New Criticism, cubism, art nouveau, objectivism, "Prufrock," ambiguity, art music, rococo...."³⁶ While in the service in Puerto Rico, Baraka's job in the library not only exposed him

³³ In Baraka's Autobiography, the chapter relating his experiences in the Air Force is entitled, "Error Farce." See Autobiography, pp. 94-123.

³⁴ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 94.

³⁵ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 114.

³⁶ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 121.

to a wealth of reading material, but also gave him time to read.

However, Baraka was to bear the brunt of much negative scrutiny and criticism from within the ranks of the Air Force, because of his intellectual pursuits. He was subjected to a series of gruelling interrogations regarding his suspect reading and writing activities, and was subsequently accused of being a communist. Based on these accusations, he was given a dishonorable discharge from the Air Force.

But it was not all a loss for Baraka. For while he was in the service, he not only had time to discover the wonders of the literary world, but he also benefited from his trenchant observation of the repressive and decadent system represented by the Air Force. If his Howard University experience exposed him to the "black sickness," his Air Force stint brought him in touch with the general malaise that plagued the whole American society. His untimely discharge from the force only served to aggravate and intensify his antipathy towards the status quo. By the time he left the Air Force, he was ready to challenge the existing system. Baraka the non-conformist, Baraka the rebel, had finally come of age.

In the wake of his discharge from the service, Baraka was drawn to the Village in New York, where he became associated with the artistic community of the Beat generation

for two main reasons: he finally felt liberated because of the general atmosphere of intellectual and artistic freedom and experimentation among the Beats; and he could identify with their general disaffection and rebellion against mainstream America. For Baraka at that time, the Village was the most auspicious choice of places to be:

It was what I needed, just come out of the extreme opposite. Suddenly, I was free, I felt. I could do anything I could conceive of....I felt liberated....assured in myself that this, finally, was what I had been looking for. Not only as the place where my intellectual pursuit would take place, but the life there, as I knew it, as it seemed to me then, this was the life I wanted.³⁷

Baraka's debut into the Beat world was at The Record Trader--a jazz magazine, where he worked for a short period, during which time he developed even more interest in jazz than he had back in his Howard University days. It was also at the Trader that Baraka met Hettie Cohen, a Jewish-American who was the Trader's secretary. A friendship developed very quickly between the two, and on October 13, 1958, only a few weeks after their meeting, they were married in a Buddhist temple.³⁸

The couple's home at West 20th Street later became the center of much intellectual and artistic activity, attracting dozens of writers and artists of other media, many of whom

³⁷ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, pp. 126-127.

³⁸ For a more detailed account of this aspect of Baraka's life, see Theodore Hudson, From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka, pp.12-14.

would stay over for week-end "non-stop rap sessions."³⁹ Baraka soon became closely associated with many of the intellectual luminaries of the time, including Black Mountain poets Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, and the New York School of poets such as Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch and John Ashbery.⁴⁰

In this matrix of intellectual ferment, Baraka was himself involved in a welter of artistic activities, including writing, editing, critiquing and publishing. In 1958, along with Hettie Cohen, he founded and co-edited an avant-garde literary magazine, Yugen or Zazen, as he refers to it in his autobiography.⁴¹ Baraka's first literary publications appeared in the first two issues of Yugen, and by 1962 when the final of its eight issues was out, the magazine had published the works of numerous fledgling artists, as well as several more well-established ones, including Philip Whalen, Ed James, Tom Postell, Diane

³⁹ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 155.

⁴⁰ Baraka was very highly influenced by these poets, especially Olson. He alludes to this influence in his autobiography: "The Black Mountain people linked me to a kind of Anglo-Germanic School, more accessible than the academics, but still favoring hard-edged, structured forms. Olson and Creeley were its twin prophets, but Olson had the broader sword, the most 'prophetic' stance. His concerns touched me deeply...." Autobiography, p. 158.

⁴¹ Explaining the choice of title, Baraka cites the origin of the word "zazen": "It was a Zen word, a special quality of being, a texture of perception reflected by the term 'mystery.' It had to do with attaining a high state of grace and relationship to divinity in whatever you did, especially in the arts." Autobiography, p. 151.

DiPrima, Steve Korret, Gregory Corso, Bobb [sic] Hamilton, Gary Snyder, A. B. Spellman and Allen Ginsberg. With the publication of Yugen, Baraka laid an important block in establishing himself as a literary figure; as he phrased it, "With Zazen, I had plugged into a developing literary world and I was beginning to see its outline."⁴²

It was during this period, also, that Baraka collaborated with Diane DiPrima to found and coedit yet another avant-garde literary magazine, The Floating Bear. He also collaborated with DiPrima in 1962 to found the American Theatre for Poets, an experimental theatre group set up to give renditions of the works of various poets and dramatists in coffee houses through the Village community. In addition, it was around this time that Baraka became seriously involved in jazz criticism and the general promotion of jazz: he started writing critical articles for regular publication in Down Beat, a jazz magazine; and he became actively involved in sponsoring jazz concerts to promote non-conformist musicians such as Archie Shepp and Ornette Coleman. This involvement was to have a profound effect on his later writings on black music, as well as on the overall influence of music in his works.

Baraka's prolific Beat period also gave rise to a rapid escalation in the number of his works published in various off-beat as well as more established magazines. As quickly as

⁴² Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 152.

he turned out his poems, essays, reviews and letters to the editor, he had them published in magazines such as Kulchur, The Naked Ear, Burning Deck, Wild Dog, Diplomat, Quicksilver, Birth, Metronome, Nomad, Birth, Odyssey, Epos, The Jazz Review, White Dove Review, Evergreen Review, Massachusetts Review and The Trembling Lamb.

Baraka's acquaintance with the works of Antonin Artaud dates back to this period. In his capacity as editor at Totem Press, Baraka edited Michel McClure's For Artaud. But Baraka was also exposed to Artaud's work through the publications of John Fles, who really "dug" Artaud, according to Baraka.⁴³ Before the 1965 publication of Baraka's only novel, System of Dante's Hell, parts of the book were published by John Fles in the issue of The Trembling Lamb featuring Artaud's work.⁴⁴ From the Artaud canon, Fles chose to publish "Van Gogh, The Man Suicided by Society," regarded by Werner Sollors as "an archetypical text in avant-gardism."⁴⁵ Baraka certainly identified with the spirit of avant-gardism in Artaud's work, for in my interview with him, he spoke enthusiastically about reading "The Man Suicided by Society," claiming "it certainly impressed me."⁴⁶

⁴³ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 167.

⁴⁴ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 167.

⁴⁵ Werner Sollors, Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a 'Populist Modernism', p. 274, n. 30.

⁴⁶ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," August 27, 1987, MS., p. 23.

In his role as editor of Totem Press, Baraka made another important contribution which was to have a profound effect on the course of his life and works. One of his poems, "For You," was included in a Totem Press anthology entitled, Jan 1st 1959: Fidel Castro. The following year, Baraka was invited to visit Cuba "as part of a delegation of black artists and scholars whom the Cuban government wanted to spread the word to."⁴⁷

Baraka recorded his observations of this trip in an essay entitled, "Cuba Libre," the first essay revealing an explicitly politicized Baraka. The essay, which was first published in 1960 in the Evergreen Review, was later included in Baraka's first book of essays on politics and poetics, Home: Social Essays. Baraka subsequently published four more books of essays: Blues People (1963) and Black Music (1967), both about the history of black music; Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965 (1969) and Daggers and Javelins: Essays, 1974-1979 (1984), both containing collections of social and political essays.

Even though some of these essays are brilliant, and certainly all are thought-provoking, it was primarily for his accomplishments in the poetic and the dramatic modes that Baraka was hailed "King of the Lower East Side" during his

⁴⁷ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 163.

Beat days.⁴⁸ During this period, he published two books of poetry: Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note (1961) and The Dead Lecturer (1964); and three plays: The Toilet (1963), Dutchman and The Slave (1964).

However, the most widely acclaimed of all these works is the Obie award winning Dutchman, which premiered on March 24, 1964 at the Cherry Lane Theatre in the Village, and was immediately a resounding success. Riding high on the phenomenal success of Dutchman, Baraka started receiving what seemed like an avalanche of accolades, in addition to numerous awards, including the Obie Award (1964), the Yoruba Academy Fellowship (1965), and visiting lectureships at the New School for Social Research (1962-65) and at the University of Buffalo (1964).

Despite being lionized and hailed as the heir apparent to James Baldwin,⁴⁹ Baraka was experiencing an intensified sense of estrangement from the establishment. As a matter of fact, he looked with a jaundiced eye at the "barrage of attention and unbalanced huzzas" that he was receiving.⁵⁰ The "renegade/behind the mask"⁵¹ was now ready to speak out

⁴⁸ In his autobiography, Baraka alludes to a Sunday magazine article in the Herald Tribune, which donned him the title, "King of the Lower East Side." Autobiography, p. 188.

⁴⁹ David Llorens, "Ameer (LeRoi Jones) Baraka," Ebony, August 1969, p. 75.

⁵⁰ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 189.

⁵¹ LeRoi Jones, "A Poem For Willie Best," in The Dead Lecturer (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 26.

boldly, to reveal his full identity and to declare unequivocally his mission as a committed artist:

So as I wrote that article, "LeRoi Jones Speaking," there came over me this terrific sense of purpose and focus....What the "fame" Dutchman brought me and raised up in me was this absolutely authentic and heartfelt desire to speak what should be spoken for all of us. I knew the bullshit of my own life, its twists and flip-outs, yet I felt, now, some heavy responsibility. If these bastards were going to raise me up, for any reason, then they would pay for it!...because even if I wasn't strong enough to act, I would become strong enough to SPEAK what had to be said, for all of us, for black people, yes, particularly for black people, because they were the root and origin of my conviction, but for anyone anywhere who wanted Justice!⁵²

Whereas his experiences in college and in the Air Force had engendered a nagging though undefined Weltschmerz; and whereas this was metamorphosized into a veritable--though still subdued--rebellion following his Cuban visit; now in the wake of the general critical ferment that Dutchman attracted, it seemed that the brimstone was finally added to the fire of Baraka's anger. The full-fledged revolutionist was now ready to explode.

Actually, there were some other crucial factors which also served to instigate the spirit of revolt in Baraka. The race riots which raged through the major cities of the U.S. in the mid-sixties only served to heighten the polarization between blacks and whites--forcing dissidents like Baraka to adopt a more and more ethnocentric posture. Perhaps the straw that broke the camel's back for Baraka the rebel was the

⁵² Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 189.

assassination in 1965 of Malcolm X, regarded by many as a hero. Baraka vowed: "For Great Malcolm a prince of the earth, let nothing in us rest/until we avenge ourselves for his death.../let us never breathe a pure breath if/we fail...."⁵³

Baraka realised that he could not effectively rally his cause by remaining comfortably ensconced among the apolitical literati of the Village. During this time, he became increasingly more vociferous in voicing his antipathy towards the status quo. Summarizing this period of crisis and change in his life, he wrote:

I guess, during this period, I got the reputation of being a snarling, white-hating madman. There was some truth to it, because I was struggling to be born, to break out from the shell I could instinctively sense surrounded my own dash for freedom. I was in a frenzy, trying to get my feet solidly on the ground, of reality.⁵⁴

In March 1965, Baraka finally broke "out from the shell" of the Village coterie and went "seeking revolution":⁵⁵ he left his family and his Beat friends, and in a "dash for freedom," headed uptown to Harlem to position himself to fulfil his revolutionary mission. Now "back in the homeland to help raise the race,"⁵⁶ Baraka organized and directed the

⁵³ LeRoi Jones, "A Poem for Black Hearts," in Black Magic Poetry 1961-1967 (Indianapolis & New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1969), p. 112.

⁵⁴ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 194.

⁵⁵ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 201.

⁵⁶ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 202.

Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BART/S), a cultural center catering exclusively to black artists and black audiences. In addition to taking drama and poetry reading out into the streets of Harlem, the center offered classes in playwriting, poetry, history, music, painting and martial arts.⁵⁷

Most important of all, the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School fulfilled the role of helping to raise black national consciousness. The Harlem group soon became a model for the formation of similar centers in major cities throughout the U.S. Unfortunately, BART/S, which was funded by the Federal Office of Economic Opportunity, came under attack for alleged racist activities, including violence towards whites. Federal funds were withdrawn and the project floundered because of the ensuing controversy and lack of support.

Following the collapse of BART/S, Baraka left Harlem in late December 1965 and returned to his hometown, Newark, to start a new life. In 1966, he met and married a black woman, Sylvia Robinson (now Amina Baraka). As Baraka became more deeply involved in the black separatist phase of his career, he experienced a phenomenon that was peculiar to the sixties--the "negro to black conversion."⁵⁸ This conversion

⁵⁷ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 213.

⁵⁸ For an informed and insightful discussion of this phenomenon, see Sigmund Ro's essay, "The 'Negro-to-Black Conversion' In Contemporary Afro-American Autobiography: Two

or rebirth was commonly marked by a renunciation of old "slave" names and an appropriation of names that were culturally more relevant, and therefore more fitting for the celebration of a new identity. Obviously pleased with his own name change, Baraka remarked:

The name change seemed fitting to me. Not just the flattery of being approached by these people [Muslim leaders], especially Heesham, and not just the meaning of the name Blessed Prince, but the idea that I was now literally being changed into a blacker being. I was discarding my "slave name" and embracing blackness.⁵⁹

Following his rebirth as a black separatist, Baraka felt even more committed to his mission to use art to raise the culture and teach a new value system in the black communities, thereby transforming them. Towards this end, he organized a black community/arts center called Spirit House, which catered primarily to inner city Newark.

Drawing from the invaluable lessons he learned from the BART/S experience, Baraka was determined to continue his crusade for cultural and artistic programs that were relevant to the needs of the community. His insistence that art should be functional, that it should be "as essential as a grocery

Patterns," in Sigmund Ro, Celebration and Rage: Essays on Contemporary Afro-American Writing (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1984), pp. 69-84. The essay includes a discussion of Baraka's "conversion."

⁵⁹ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 267.

store,"⁶⁰ was already being manifested in the goals and activities of Spirit House. In his interview with Saul Gottlieb, Baraka explained:

Spirit House is a black community theater owned by the people in the community. It's the only one in Newark. We have a repertory system--we not only change the plays but we have films or poetry readings or lectures as well. Anything the community wants--sports, music, parties, meetings, classes; something is going on every night. The plays are only on weekends. We have a permanent ensemble of actors; they're in most of the plays, and of course, we use a lot of kids. We do a lot of children's plays, too.⁶¹

With Newark as his base (Baraka still lives in Newark), and Spirit House reaching out to the community through its varied programs, Baraka continued to be indefatigable in his efforts to build a culturally unified and politically strong black community. Towards this end, he founded or helped to establish several other organizations between 1966 and 1968. These included the Stirling Street News Paper--a "compilation of neighborhood news gathered and edited by community youth";⁶² Jihad Productions to publish and promote the works of black artists; United Brothers of Newark, a politically based community group; the Afrikan Free School, organized to teach children not only to read and write, but also about

⁶⁰ Saul Gottlieb, "They Think You're An Airplane And You're Really A Bird! An Interview With LeRoi Jones," Evergreen Review, 12 (December 1967): 53.

⁶¹ Saul Gottlieb, "They Think You're An Airplane And You're Really A Bird!" p. 52.

⁶² David Llorens, "Ameer (LeRoi Jones) Baraka," p. 80.

their cultural heritage; and the Black Community Development and Defence Organization, which, along with about thirty eight other organizations, made up the politically powerful Committee for United Newark.

Today, well over twenty years since Baraka organized the first of these influential groups, he is still fiercely committed to establishing community projects and mobilizing the talents and energies of the black community. When I interviewed him at his Newark home in late August 1987, he informed me that:

Just a few weeks ago, on August 7, we opened Kimako's Blues People. It is going to be a performance-based community arts group, featuring music, culture, drama, dance. We are really just getting started. It will be in line with the other projects, similar to Spirit House, but hopefully on a higher level....We will be more conscious of what we are doing, and therefore, hopefully will be more able to achieve the specific goals that we outline. In the past, sometimes we only had a general, and not a specific idea of what it was we wanted to do. Now we have a much more specific idea of what we want to achieve, so hopefully we can achieve that.⁶³

While I was at Baraka's home for the interview, there was an air of general excitement and anticipation as various community people (mainly youths), and volunteer workers hustled to and fro doing last minute preparations to the stage and the lighting for the second scheduled performance

⁶³ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting And Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," MS., pp. 2-3.

of Kimako's Blues People,⁶⁴ slated for the following night. A jazz ensemble was expected to perform. The performance was well publicized throughout the community, and I subsequently learned that it was very well attended.

What is perhaps somewhat surprising is that though Baraka is still as passionately committed to the development of the arts in the community as he was during the sixties and seventies (as evidenced, for example, in his recent formation of the vibrant Kimako's Blues People), his present involvement lacks the political intensity that characterized his Black Nationalist period and catapulted him into national prominence as a politically astute leader.

It was, for example, largely as a result of Baraka's political skill in mobilizing various groups that Newark's first black mayor, Bob Gibson, was elected in 1970.⁶⁵ During the 1967 Newark riots when Baraka was arrested and charged with unlawfully carrying firearms, he also displayed his political savvy when he successfully appealed the ruling of an all-white jury who had sentenced him to two and a half years in prison. It was also during this phase of Baraka's

⁶⁴ Kimako's Blues People, which is located in the basement of Baraka's house, is named in memory of his sister, Kimako (Elaine), the one he criticized in "Hymn for Lanie Poo" for her assimilationist stance. She later embraced Baraka's politics and was given the name Kimako. She died tragically a couple of years ago.

⁶⁵ For a fuller account of Baraka's involvement in this political campaign, see Theodore R. Hudson, From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka: The Literary Works (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1973), pp. 33-34.

political activism that he became acquainted with the theories of cultural nationalist Ron Karenga--an experience which helped both to shape and to solidify his own cultural and political theories.

Back in 1965 when Baraka left the Village bound for Harlem, declaring that he was "seeking revolution," he did not have a defined body of thought to give him specific directions as to how he could bring about this revolution. Ron Karenga and his Kwaiaida doctrine provided Baraka with a prototype for such a system of thought. It was while he was teaching at San Francisco State College in 1967 that Baraka met Ron Karenga and had the opportunity to observe the workings of these doctrines in Karenga's "US" organization. Greatly impressed by the "seeming depth and profundity of his Kwaiaida doctrine," Baraka eagerly set out to learn all he could about it.⁶⁶

As a black revolutionary committed to raising black national consciousness, Baraka was attracted to Karenga's teaching that the minds of the people hold all the potential for cultural and political revolution:

Karenga did a great deal of work with culture. It was he who, with the organization, pushed a program that called for first having a "cultural revolution, to win the minds of our people," and then the political revolution would be a matter of course. So he put together a group of rituals,

⁶⁶ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 253.

holidays, and programs that were aimed at politicizing black people with blackness.⁶⁷

Since Baraka was a political activist who liked to translate ideas into practical organizations and structures that would have some immediate bearing on improving the lives of people, he was very amenable to Karenga's teachings. In what was perhaps his most important essay written during his black nationalist period, "7 Principles of US Maulana Karenga & The Need for a Black Value System," Baraka outlined the essence of these teachings.⁶⁸ The seven principles or "Nguzo Saba," as they are called in Swahili, are: Umoja (Unity), Kujichagulia (Self-Determination), Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility), Ujamaa (Collective Economics), Nia (Purpose), Kuumba (Creativity) and Imani (Faith).

In Baraka's estimation, the entire Nguzo Saba faith stands as a resounding reminder that "our purpose must be the restoring of our people to their traditional greatness."⁶⁹ In addition to giving some kind of definition to the Barakan brand of black nationalism, the Kawaida doctrines served to enhance Baraka's ability to organize and unify socio-political and cultural organizations.

Baraka's expertise in political organization was largely responsible for whatever limited success evolved out of the

⁶⁷ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 252.

⁶⁸ Amiri Baraka, Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965 (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 133-146.

⁶⁹ Amiri Baraka, Raise Race Rays Raze, p. 140.

two major political conventions for blacks held in the 1970's: the 1970 Congress of African People in Atlanta, and the 1972 Black Congress in Gary. At both of these conventions, Baraka was credited for applying Karenga's concept of Umoja or Unity within the race. As a result, though neither congress resulted in national political unity for blacks, there was at least some form of conciliation among the disparate factions.

In the midst of this welter of political activities and responsibilities, Baraka never neglected his serious commitment to art. Indeed, for Baraka--in practice as well as in theory--political engagement was always a sine qua non of the artistic experience. Assiduous in his literary output, Baraka produced several important works reflecting his politics and poetics during his hectic black nationalist period. In keeping with Baraka's increasing emphasis on the appropriateness of the dramatic mode as a vehicle of instruction, most of the works produced during this period were plays or agit-prop pieces. These works include Baptism and The Toilet (1966), and Four Black Revolutionary Plays (1969). During this time, Baraka also published his collection of short stories, Tales (1967), and his collection of poetry, Black Magic Poetry (1969). For the most part, these works reflect the black nationalist's commitment to ethno-cultural issues.

By the early 1970's, Baraka's commitment to the black nationalist cause started losing ground, reflecting the general decline in the impact of the movement nationwide. Despite the limited gains of the two black congresses in which Baraka played such an important role, he was extremely disappointed in the failure of the movement to effect political power as well as cultural and economic strength for blacks on a national level. In Baraka's estimation, a people who were seriously seeking self-determination could not look to black nationalism for the answer; for the movement had clearly failed to "provide the consciousness for us to liberate ourselves."⁷⁰ His disillusionment was exacerbated by his growing disdain for elected black officials whose rise to power turned them into oppressors instead of champions of the oppressed. After careful scrutiny of his nationalist involvement, Baraka came to the conclusion that:

I was no longer a nationalist, I knew clearly that just black faces in high places could never bring the change we seek--all of us who are conscious or describe ourselves as advanced or progressive. I could see my own life and those tasks I had declared for myself with new light. I had seen Gibson and domestic "neocolonialism," I had been to Africa and seen that same boy at work over there holding the people down. It was clearer to me that only socialism could transform society, that the whole world must be at the disposal of the whole

⁷⁰ Amiri Baraka, "Why I Changed My Ideology," Black World, July 1975, p. 30.

world, that all of us must benefit by each other's existence....⁷¹

At the General Assembly of the Congress of Afrikan People (CAP) held in Newark on October 7, 1974, Baraka made an official announcement of his ideological switch from nationalism to the Marxist-Leninist brand of socialism. The entire CAP organization followed suit and declared its allegiance to Marxism, and by 1978, the organization was completely transformed in name and nature into the Revolutionary Communist League.

Through such organs as his monthly newspaper, Unity and Struggle (formerly known as Black New Ark), and through such works as The Motion Of History And Other Plays (1978), Daggers And Javelins: Essays, 1974-1979 (1984), and The Music (1987), Baraka has been propagating the new ideology: the struggle for liberation can no longer be seen only in ethno-cultural and political terms, nor simply in terms of black versus white; rather, it should be defined in terms of liberation for the underclass, for all oppressed people. In "Why I Changed My Ideology," Baraka expanded on this:

In struggling to liberate our people, we have come to understand that, especially in America, it is fantasy to think that we can struggle for our own liberation and be completely oblivious to all the other struggling and oppressed people in this land. Or throughout the world for that matter.⁷²

⁷¹ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 311.

⁷² Amiri Baraka, "Why I Changed My Ideology," p. 36.

In his new commitment to waging a class struggle as the most effective means for achieving national liberation, Baraka had no reservation about repudiating his former espousal of certain nationalist views, especially his narrow views of culture.⁷³ Rather than seeing his ideological switch as evidence that he is skittish and unstable or lacking in commitment, Baraka has come to view his various periods of change as salutary and even necessary, thinking it "strange that an individual can go through life and not have any changes at all."⁷⁴

It is interesting to note however, that though Baraka's life has been characterized by several drastic changes, he has not changed his ideological position since 1974. As a matter of fact, twice during his opening remarks in my interview with him, he fervently asserted, "I am fundamentally a Marxist now."⁷⁵ Of course, given the pattern of Baraka's life, it is not difficult to identify the operative word in this statement. What Baraka is "now" is not necessarily what he will be anytime in the near future. For Baraka's chameleonic life seems to be a constant series of perepetia, each one as dramatic and unpredictable as the previous one.

⁷³ Amiri Baraka, "Why I Changed My Ideology," pp. 30-31.

⁷⁴ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting And Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka, MS., p. 1.

⁷⁵ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka, MS., p. 1.

Amidst the ever changing dialectical motion of Baraka's life, the one constant seems to be his unswerving commitment to help the black race achieve self-determination and thereby gain the tools to control its own destiny socially, culturally, and politically. In choosing the dramatic genre as the vehicle of consciousness for accomplishing this monumental task, Baraka allies himself posthumously with Antonin Artaud. For even though Artaud shied away from any overt political involvement, he did ascribe a revolutionary role to the theatre, and has left a valuable legacy of teachings on the subject. As beneficiary and revisionist of some of these tenets, Baraka continues the tradition of revolutionary dramaturgy initiated by his predecessor.

As the foregoing biographical evidence of their lives has shown, both artists were driven by a common impulse to revolt against the status quo, especially against bourgeois sensibilities; and both purposed to use their art, especially the drama, as the mode of revolt. In addition, both artists regarded culture as the life-blood of the people, and so both sought to recover what they ruefully perceived to be the lost greatness of their respective cultures.

Naturally, their attempt to deconstruct the tradition they inherited was, to a great extent, influenced by differences in their cultures. While the Theatre of Cruelty called for reforms in the Parisian community, and by extension, the European community, the Black Arts theatre of

Baraka was rooted in black racial consciousness, the consciousness of an aggrieved race of people.

This emphasis on race--the black race--is perhaps the chief point of divergence between the revolutionary thrust of Baraka and that of his European predecessor. It is racial consciousness that determines the ethnic forms that dominate Baraka's brand of total theatre--a subject which will be discussed more fully in chapter five; and it is also racial consciousness that has given rise to the predominantly politicized theories that characterise Baraka's revolutionary theatre and at the same time alienate him from Artaud, as the succeeding three chapters will demonstrate.

CHAPTER 3

REVOLT ON MT. PARNASSUS:

BARAKA'S REVOLUTIONARY THEORIES

I am deaf and blind and lost and will not again sing your
quiet verse. I have lost
even the act of poetry, and writhe now for cool horizonless
dawn.

LeRoi Jones, "Rhythm and Blues,"

The Black Arts theatre, the theatre of LeRoi Jones, is a radical alternative to the sterility of the American theatre. It is primarily a theatre of the Spirit, confronting the Black man in his interaction with his brothers and with the white thing.

Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement,"

Amiri Baraka's refusal to continue singing the song of his Euro-American tradition is fraught with one glaring irony: he is a product of that tradition, having been well-schooled in and by that tradition, as his university education at Rutgers and Howard has manifestly proven. The difficulty of deconstructing a tradition while working within the delimitations of that very tradition is surely the most challenging artistic feat that Baraka has had to face. For a writer as acutely aware of his own place in tradition as Baraka, the central issue is to re-define that tradition to reflect his own perception of "race, circumstance, and epoch,"--the three key determinants of a writer's voice and

place in history, according to the celebrated historicist, Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine.¹

Baraka was ideally suited to re-define the Euro-American tradition for blacks, for by temperament and vision, he was the quintessential embodiment of the revolutionary ethos of the sixties and seventies. As noted in chapter two, Baraka's revolutionary zeal was fired primarily by his acute racial consciousness, and the need to effect urgent changes for blacks. But Baraka realized that before he could use his art to effect some of these changes, he had to re-define the theory and practice of art for the black artist and his black audience. It would take a veritable rebel to bring about such a reformation, and during the turbulent decades of the sixties and seventies, Baraka was such a rebel.

However, the generally acknowledged assessment of Baraka as a rebel--a rebel who dared to initiate a revolutionary theatre for blacks--has often overshadowed the equally significant hieratic sensibility that initially engendered his vision to create such a theatre. That Baraka is a rebel is certainly an indisputable fact; but though he no longer uses the title "Imamu" (meaning "spiritual leader"), he is also a veritable priest of the Black Arts Theatre, which was launched in the early sixties.

¹ See Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine, "From the Introduction to the History of English Literature," in Twentieth Century Criticism: The Major Statements, ed. William J. Handy and Max Westbrook (New York: The Free Press, 1974), p. 316.

When Winona Fletcher canonized Baraka as the "high priest of the Black Revolutionary Theatre,"² she was intimating that the seemingly incompatible roles of priest and rebel are, in fact, not mutually exclusive, but are part of an inextricable force necessary to effect change in the black theatre, and by extension, in the black community. In Baraka's dramatic manifesto, "The Revolutionary Theatre,"³ (a treatise which is now generally accepted as representing the prototypical tenets of the entire Black Arts Movement),⁴ he created his own proscenium in which to act out the role of rebel-priest of black liberation, and at the same time, he set the stage for other black liberators to follow his example.⁵

² Winona L. Fletcher, "Consider the Possibilities: An Overview of Black Drama in the 1970's," in Essays on Contemporary American Drama, ed. Hedwig Bock and Albert Wertheim (Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, 1981), p. 142.

³ First published in Baraka's first collection of social and political essays: LeRoi Jones, Home: Social Essays (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966), pp. 210-215.

⁴ For critics who acknowledge Baraka as the "chief cornerstone" of the Black Arts Movement, see, for example, Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in The Black American Writer, Volume II: Poetry and Drama, ed. C. W. E. Bigsby (Deland, Florida: Everett/Edwards, 1969), p. 193; Clayton Riley, "On Black Theater," in The Black Aesthetic, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971), p. 303; Kimberly W. Benston, "The Aesthetic of Modern Black Drama: From Mimesis to Methexis," in The Theater of Black Americans, ed. Errol Hill (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), I, p. 77; and Toni Cade, "Black Theater," in Black Expression: Essays by and about Black Americans in the Creative Arts, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Weybright & Talley, 1969), p. 137.

⁵ Several black dramatists have followed Baraka's inspirational lead and produced their own manifestos. Among them are: Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in The Black

Though several pre-1960 black dramatists had made significant inroads on the American stage (these include William Wells Brown--whose The Escape, or a Leap For Freedom: A Drama in Five Acts (1858) is thought to be the first play written by a black American--through to Garland Anderson, whose play, Appearances (1925) was the first black play to première on Broadway); and though several of Baraka's more immediate predecessors (for example, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Loften Mitchell, Alice Childress and Lorraine Hansberry) staged important plays both on and off Broadway, they were all still working within a tradition whose raison d'être was essentially antipodal to--and hence inimical to--the promotion of black culture and black identity..

In the Euro-American theatre--a theatre dominated by white audiences--the tradition of audience-actor separation is diametrically opposed to the spirit of black theatre, whose aetiology is to be found in the spiritual, emotional and cultural bond that traditionally exists between the black playwright-actor and his audience. Of further disquieting implication is the fact that not even the modern theatre of revolt has been able to offer the black playwright a suitable break from this tradition. In fact, from the perspective of

American Writer, ed. C. W. E. Bigsby, II, pp. 187-202; Ed Bullins, "The So-Called Western Avant-garde Drama," in Black Expression, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr., pp. 143-146; K. William Kgositsile, "Towards Our Theatre: A Definitive Act," in Black Expression, ed. Gayle, pp. 146-148; and Ronald Milner, "Black Theater--Go Home," in Black Aesthetics, ed. Gayle, pp. 288-294.

the black playwright, the audience-actor separation of the traditional Western theatre can be seen as a fitting synecdoche for the condition of even greater alienation that characterizes the theatre of revolt, especially the theatre of the absurdists.

Since, by the early sixties, it became quite obvious that "the black dramatists [were] not heirs to that type of madness"⁶ that characterized Western theatre, the issue of a viable alternative was a very pressing one for the black revolutionary artists of that decade, especially their leading spokesman, Amiri Baraka. In his own blunt refusal to accept the legacy of the traditional American theatre, Baraka instead accepted the challenge to effect the establishment of an "anti-Western,"⁷ or a "post-American form" for the black artist and his audience.⁸ As the avowed shaman of the new black theatre, one of his prime missions would be to exorcise all stultifying and atrophied forms out of the extant Euro-American theatre. In place of this drama of stasis, negation, and neurosis, he proposed a more vital theatre in which the various elements of black culture and black consciousness

⁶ Ed Bullins, "The So-called Western Avant-garde Drama," in Black Expression, ed. Gayle, p. 144.

⁷ LeRoi Jones, "The Revolutionary Theatre," in Home, p. 211.

⁸ Amiri Baraka, "What the Arts Need Now," in Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965 (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 34.

would come together synergistically to promote a positive black identity.

Exercising the rebel's impatience (for by the early sixties, he could no longer contain his vexation over the disquieting fact, that for far too long, the richness and the glory of the black theatre had been obfuscated by the stigmata foisted upon it by the Euro-American tradition), Baraka declared the end of the epoch of merely administering palliatives to this sick tradition. What the rebel-priest now demanded was a complete radicalization of the American theatre to accommodate the needs of blacks. He cogently pontificated this charge in his seminal manifesto on the new black theatre:

The Revolutionary Theatre should force change; it should be change. (All their faces turned into the lights and you work on them black nigger magic, and cleanse them at having seen the ugliness. And if the beautiful see themselves, they will love themselves.)

.....
The Revolutionary Theatre is shaped by the world, and moves to reshape the world, using as its force the natural force and perpetual vibrations of the mind in the world.⁹

As a powerful instrument of change, the Revolutionary Theatre is commissioned with the responsibility of effecting a total reordering of the black Weltanschung. In order to accomplish this, the new theatre should effect a speedy recovery and complete restitution of all elements of black culture back to their pristine glory. And because its

⁹ Home, pp. 210, 212.

objective is to force spiritual as well as psychical revolution, the Revolutionary Theatre should cause blacks to see themselves more truthfully, and therefore cause them to have a fuller appreciation of the beauty and grandeur of the black "soul."

In the Barakan frame of reference, the ultimate telos of this revolutionary thrust in the black theatre is "to expand our consciousness,"¹⁰ that is, to bring about the development of a heightened black consciousness and black identity leading finally to self-determination for black people. Realizing the enormity of this responsibility, Baraka apodictically declares that "The Revolutionary Theatre must EXPOSE! Show up the insides of these humans, look into black skulls."¹¹ In other words, it must be a theatre where the "nakedness of the human spirit is paraded."¹²

Echoing this imperative, K. William Kgositsile opens his dramatic manifesto:

TESTIFYING. And what shapes people your mind? Our theatre will be a definitive act, a decisive song. There will be portions of actual life unveiled. All the things we could have been. All the things we are. All the things we will be....¹³

¹⁰ Home, p. 215.

¹¹ Home, p. 210.

¹² Home, p. 214.

¹³ "Towards Our Theater: A Definitive Act," in Black Expression, ed. Gayle, p. 146.

Baraka remains intractable in his conviction that only through such an exposure can the Revolutionary Theatre free the black spirit of the demons of degradation and entrapment, and show "all the things we are"--that is, a people full of strength and "soul" even in the midst of a sick society; a people full of life and beauty, defying the spiritual and cultural death blows of an oppressive culture. Further, Baraka maintains that the revelations of this theatre should not only cause a visceral response from all members of the audience, but it should quicken them to effect meaningful transformation in their lives:

...what we show must cause the blood to rush, so that pre-revolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they will find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught.¹⁴

The lessons that Baraka proposes to teach through the Revolutionary Theatre are motivated by both positive and negative impulses. The most important lesson is, of course, the inculcation of positive black identity and values, leading ultimately to heightened racial consciousness among blacks universally. But Baraka realized that if blacks are to develop this positive identity, they must be always ready to renounce and nullify any element in the subtending culture that stands in the way of their goal. As a result, the Revolutionary Theatre is imputed with the responsibility of

¹⁴ Home, p. 213.

teaching blacks how "to strike back against any agency that attempts to prevent this widening" of consciousness.¹⁵

While the black playwright is teaching these new values and these new and revolutionary survival tactics, he is at the same time exercising his hieratic offices by "preaching virtue and feeling, and natural sense of the self in the world."¹⁶ In part, Baraka's credo reads like a homiletic discourse aimed at winning over converts to the new ideology of universal black consciousness. He sermonizes with declamatory fervor on the vital role of this theatre:

This should be a theatre of World Spirit. Where the spirit can be shown to be the most competent force in the world. Force. Spirit. Feeling.¹⁷

As an emissary of the oppressed who takes his "priestly" calling very seriously, Baraka utilizes the revolutionary stage to point out the distinctions between the Manichean dualities of virtue and vice, good and evil, innocence and corruption, and beauty and ugliness. If at times he converts the stage into a platform for homilies, it is because he feels that blacks must exercise strong ethical character in the racial struggle. Further, he is convinced that it is only by being able to recognize the distinction between evil and good forces that blacks will be able to repudiate the atrocities of the common adversary and emerge triumphant. K.

¹⁵ Home, p. 211.

¹⁶ Home, p. 213.

¹⁷ Home, p. 212

William Kgositsile aptly sums up this proviso in his blueprint for black theatre:

The desired and desirable will be seen through elegant images and symbol abstracted from life. The undesirable, the corrupting, the destructive, will be portrayed in a grotesque manner, its sinister qualities driving us to the mercy killing of the villain.¹⁸

In his role as champion of this new black sensibility, the black playwright has a deep sense of moral commitment to his audience, and as a result, he is committed to producing art that is pre-eminently moral. Reflecting the credo of the entire Black Arts Movement, Larry Neal asserts:

It is a profound ethical sense that makes a Black artist question a society in which art is one thing and the actions of men another. The Black Arts Movement believes that your ethics and your aesthetics are one. That the contradictions between ethics and aesthetics in western society is [sic] symptomatic of a dying culture.¹⁹

Of course, Neal's sentiments reflect Baraka's prior statement on the subject. Noting that "Wittgenstein said ethics and aesthetics are one," Baraka affirms, "I believe this."²⁰ Persuasive leader that he has been, Baraka obviously has had very little trouble convincing Larry Neal and the other disciples of the Black Arts Movement of the efficacy of this credo for the black theatre.

¹⁸ K. William Kgositsile, "Towards Our Theater: A Definitive Act," in Black Expression, ed. Gayle, p. 147.

¹⁹ Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in The Black American Writer, ed. Bigsby, II, 190.

²⁰ Home, p. 212.

The merger of ethics and aesthetics was not the only union that Baraka sought to effect in the Revolutionary Theatre. Recognizing the vast potential of this new theatre to proselytize its audiences and cause them to practice the new ideology, Baraka was determined to effect a powerful alliance between politics and art--a tour de force which is perhaps his most salient contribution to the Movement. In the Barakan theatre--a theatre which is principally concerned with promulgating a new value system for blacks--efficacy of medium is equal to efficacy of message, or, to use Baraka's words, "Art is method."²¹

Because this tenet is so central to the Barakan canon, he has enunciated it with no less trenchant force and evangelical conviction elsewhere in his writings. In his collection of essays, Raise Race Rays Raze, Baraka reiterates that the exigencies of the black revolutionary cause necessitate a synthesis between art and politics. In particular, his advocacy of a politicized art is fueled by his mission to use art to raise the consciousness of blacks. According to Baraka, in this new aesthetics:

There is no such thing as Art and Politics, there is only life, and its many registrations.) If the artist is the raised consciousness then all that he touches, all that impinges on his consciousness must be raised.²²

²¹ Home, p. 212.

²² Amiri Baraka, Raise, p. 129.

Although Baraka is perhaps the most articulate proponent of these dicta, several other important artists in the Black Arts Movement have followed his lead in issuing manifestos on the necessity for a politicized theatre. Of note is Larry Neal's observation that:

...the political values inherent in the Black Power concept are now finding concrete expression in the aesthetics of Afro-American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians, and novelists. A main tenet of Black Power is the necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms....The Black artist takes this to mean that his primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people.²³

As the epitome of the "raised consciousness" of black people, the black revolutionary artist seeks not so much to "protest," but to promote black history and black culture, and affirm the integrity of the black spirit. Through this approach, the black artist can appeal to all that is positive in his audience, and ipso facto, he can have a profound impact while establishing the foundation for transforming this audience. This is the beginning of consciousness raising, or the "process termed 'altering consciousness'."²⁴

In the black artist's mission to recover and protect a discrete black culture, the degree to which he attains success will, to a great extent, be dependent upon the degree to which he is willing to probe the existential issues of

²³ Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in The Black American Writer, ed. Bigsby, II, 187.

²⁴ Ed Bullins, The Theme Is Blackness: "The Corner" and Other Plays (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1973), p. 3.

black life. His success or failure will depend on the answer that he can give to Richard Wright's searching question:

Shall Negro writing be for the Negro masses, moulding the lives and consciousness of those masses toward new goals, or shall it continue begging the question of Negroes' humanity?²⁵

If Baraka's Revolutionary Theatre initiated the revolution for "moulding the lives and consciousness of those masses toward new goals," the theatre of the other artists in the movement continued "carrying some germs of Black consciousness...bent on effecting revolutionary change."²⁶ The goal was always the same--that is, transforming consciousness. As Ed Bullins recapitulates: "Working from these premises, then, Black theater becomes a citadel of evolving consciousness."²⁷

In order for the Revolutionary Theatre to fulfill its primary role of "altering consciousness," the black playwright must analyze and interpret events in the real world. As chronicler of real life issues, he must be:

Precise. Specific. From the particular to the general to the universal to the cosmic, and on back to the single instance of love in the west market street barber shop....The potential is unlimited. The consciousness of men themselves must be raised.²⁸

²⁵ Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in Black Aesthetics, ed. Gayle, p. 318.

²⁶ Ed Bullins, The Theme Is Blackness, p. 7.

²⁷ Ed Bullins, The Theme Is Blackness, p. 12.

²⁸ Amiri Baraka, Raise, pp. 128-129.

Even in his Orphic role of priest and prophet, the black artist must be able to give meaning to the dreams and aspirations of his audience; he must be able to take the dreams of black people and "give them a reality."²⁹ Further, he must "isolate the ritual and historical cycles of reality" for his black audience.³⁰ By interpreting the various elements of black life and restoring the lost faith of his audience, the revolutionary dramatist makes a significant step in furthering the process whereby blacks can cope with their own existential struggles and come to terms with their own reality vis-a-vis that of the mainstream culture.

If the Revolutionary Theatre is to transform dreams into reality, and if it is to function as a political weapon, then a sine qua non of its existence is that it must also be social. In the Barakan aesthetics, the social theatre is transformed from "drawing rooms into places where real things can be said about a real world, or into smoky rooms where the destruction of Washington can be plotted." Baraka expresses a similar and equally scathing imperative in one of his more volatile poems--"Black Art":

We want "poems that kill."
 Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
 guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
 and take their weapons leaving them dead
 with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland.
Knockoff
 poems for dope selling wops or slick halfwhite

²⁹ Home, p. 211.

³⁰ Home, p. 211.

politicians Airplane poems....³¹

It should be pointed out that although Baraka has acknowledged that the dramatic mode is the most effective vehicle for promulgating socio-political messages that will ultimately lead to national liberation,³² he feels that all black art should perform that same vital function:

Theater that does not do this is bullshit, any art that does not do this, no matter on what level it speaks, lyric, scream, funky shake, is no where. Black Theater has gotta gotta gotta raise the dead, and move the living. Otherwise it is a teacup in a cracker mansion.³³

Because the "high priest of the Revolutionary Theatre" is not ruled by a purely nihilistic impulse, his primary aim is not merely to "Accuse and Attack all that can be accused and attacked"; rather, he is propelled by an unwavering conviction that the black race can be united into a collective consciousness if properly instructed and inspired by the black artist, especially the black playwright. He should instruct his audience on such socio-economic/socio-political matters as:

The creation of Cities. Of Institutions.

³¹ LeRoi Jones, "Black Art," in Black Magic: Collected Poetry, 1961-1967 (Indianapolis & New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1969), p. 116.

³² Elaine Duval, "Reasserting And Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," August 27, 1987, MS., pp. 8-9.

³³ Amiri Baraka, Raise, p. 115.

Governments. Treaties. Ceremonies. Public rituals
of The Actual World. The Nation.³⁴

In the Barakan aesthetics, "These are the only things worthy
of the true Black Artist's consciousness."³⁵

In order for the Revolutionary theatre to express fully
the entelechy of the black Geist, not only should it be
created by black playwrights, but it should also be peopled
with black actors, and equally important, it should speak
directly to and on behalf of blacks. In the Barakan dramatic
forum, this is perhaps the most important condition for a
meaningful black theatre. Both the artist and the audience
should always be cognizant that:

Our selves are revealed in whatever we do. Our art
shd [sic] be our selves as self conscious, with a
commitment to revolution. Which is enlightenment.
Revolution is Enlightenment.³⁶

As commander of this revolution, the black artist carries the
brunt of the responsibility to raise the consciousness of
black people. Since there can be no surrogate for this
mission, Baraka forewarns "all that we do as black artists
must commit us collectively to revolution."³⁷ Reflecting a
similar position, Stephen E. Henderson asserts:

³⁴ Amiri Baraka, Raise, p. 129.

³⁵ Amiri Baraka, Raise, p. 129.

³⁶ Amiri Baraka, "The Fire Must Be Permitted to Burn
Full Up: Black 'Aesthetics,'" in Raise, p. 118.

³⁷ Amiri Baraka, "The Fire Must Be Permitted To Burn
Full Up: Black 'Aesthetic,'" in Raise, p. 121.

Black writers do not write for white people and refuse to be judged by them. They write for black people and they write about their blackness, and out of their blackness, rejecting anyone and anything that stands in the way of self-knowledge and self celebration. They know that to assert blackness in America is to be "militant," to be dangerous, to be subversive, to be revolutionary, and they know this in a way that even the Harlem Renaissance did not. The poets and the playwrights are especially articulate and especially relevant and speak directly to the people.³⁸

Because the black artist draws his source material "From the life and history of the [black] people,"³⁹ he is morally and socially obliged to direct his art back to the black community. According to Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community."⁴⁰ In order for the revolution to affect the community and bring about a "restoration of our national sovereignty as a people," the black artist must return to his roots. This is so crucial to the success of the Black Arts Movement that Ron Milner, one of its chief proponents, devotes his entire manifesto to

³⁸ Stephen E. Henderson, "'Survival Motion': A Study of the Black Writer and the Black Revolution in America," in Mercer Cook and Stephen E. Henderson, The Militant Black Writer In Africa And The United States (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), p. 65.

³⁹ Amiri Baraka, "Black Art, Nationalism, Organization, Black Institutions," in Raise, p. 97.

⁴⁰ Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in The Black American Writer, ed. Bigsby, II, 187.

directing black artists to "go home" to their communities, psychically, mentally, aesthetically and physically.⁴¹

The general call for an ethnocentric theatre reflecting a discrete black culture would naturally necessitate the creation of a theatre that is peopled with black heroes. Initially, Baraka calls these heroes "victims"--that is, victims of a system that needed to be "accused" and "attacked." Because the Revolutionary Theatre is designed to expose the degeneracy of the dominant society, and because one of its main objectives is to raise the consciousness of blacks, this theatre would cause the "victims" to be aware of "the strength in their minds and their bodies."⁴² In addition, the heroes of this theatre would draw strength from the intense sense of communality that they share with their audiences, who Baraka also identifies as "victims":

Our theatre will show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are the brothers of victims, and that they themselves are victims if they are blood brothers.⁴³

However, as these "victims" attain higher and higher levels of consciousness, they gradually shed all vestiges of the "pre-revolutionary temperaments" and eventually emerge as

⁴¹ Ron Milner, "Black Theater--Go Home!" in Black Aesthetic, ed. Gayle, p. 287.

⁴² Home, p. 211.

⁴³ Home, p. 213.

"new kinds of heroes."⁴⁴ But these new heroes are by no means mere epigones of the former generation of heroes. Having successfully challenged the existing order of things, they are no longer "the weak Hamlets debating whether or not they are ready to die," but they have been metamorphosized into veritable champions of the black revolutionary cause.

Baraka makes it clear unequivocally that the Revolutionary Theatre is not a theatre designed to pamper pusillanimous victims; rather, it is a theatre whose objective is to produce heroes like "Crazy Horse, Denmark Vesey, Patrice Lumumba."⁴⁵ In other words, the Revolutionary Theatre sets out to produce heroes who can motivate the masses into participating in actual revolutions:

The force we want is of twenty million spooks storming America with furious cries and unstoppable weapons. We want actual explosions and actual brutality: AN EPIC IS CRUMBLING and we must give it space and hugeness of its actual demise.⁴⁶

Baraka is of the opinion that America has sunk so deep into moral and spiritual turpitude that only some upheaval of cataclysmic proportions can purge such a malady and restore some moral order to society. Recognizing the vast potential of the Revolutionary Theatre to bring about such an apocalypse, Baraka creates a new generation of heroes who are

⁴⁴ Home, p. 214.

⁴⁵ Home, p. 215.

⁴⁶ Home, p. 214.

relentless in their mission to raze rays and raise the race⁴⁷.

The type of violence that Baraka proposes for the Revolutionary Theatre is meant to be purgative in nature, and is contrived be so far reaching in its effects that, not only would it raise the black race, but it would also create a new world order for all oppressed peoples. But Baraka is by no means merely advocating a metaphysical violence to achieve racial consciousness. He is also calling for real violence, actual destruction of evil in whatever form it exists. In his essay, "What Does Nonviolence Mean," Baraka explains with trenchant clarity exactly what type of violence he intends for this theatre:

...I advocate a violence, a literal murdering of the American socio-political stance, not only as it directly concerns American Negroes, but in terms of its stranglehold on most of the modern world.⁴⁸

Baraka's clarion call for metaphysical and physical violence set the tone for the climate of insurgency and warfare that characterized the works of the rebel artists of the sixties and seventies. According to Clayton Riley, "Black theater is a theater of warfare."⁴⁹ It is a theatre of real

⁴⁷ Implied in the title of Baraka's collection of essays, Raise Race Rays Raze.

⁴⁸ LeRoi Jones, "What Does Non-violence Mean," in Home, p. 151.

⁴⁹ Clayton Riley, "On Black Theater," in Black Aesthetic, ed. Gayle, p 309.

battles and holocaust portending the destruction of Armageddon. In Baraka's view:

It must show horrible coming attractions of The Crumbling of the West. Even so Artaud designed The Conquest of Mexico, so we must design The Conquest of White Eye, and show the missionaries and wiggly Liberals dying under blast of concrete.

.....
This is a theatre of assault. the play that will split the heavens for us will be called THE DESTRUCTION OF AMERICA.⁵⁰

The theatre of assault is a theatre of horror and of heart-rending spectacle which is designed to move people to understand "what the world is and what it ought to be."⁵¹ In the spectacle of this theatre, people "will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony."⁵² And when the holocaust is over, there will be "wild screams of joy, from all the peoples of the world."⁵³ In the final analysis, Baraka envisions a revolutionary theatre that would resonate with earth-shaking consequences not just for blacks in America, but for all the oppressed and dispossessed peoples of the world, most of whom are non-whites.

Baraka's ambitious blueprint for the Revolutionary Theatre has had important and irreversible consequences not only for the role of the black artist, but also for the direction of black theatre. His attempt to create a theatre

⁵⁰ Home, pp. 211, 215.

⁵¹ Home, p. 213.

⁵² Home, p. 213.

⁵³ Home, p. 211.

with new forms and with a new subject matter reflecting the culture and general interest of new black heroes, has initiated an important movement in American arts--the Black Arts Movement. As avatar of this movement--in particular, the Revolutionary Theatre--Baraka embodies all that black theatre is and is still striving to be.

In forging a new theoretical base for black theatre, and by extension, black art in general, Baraka has confronted the challenges of a unique historical moment--a unique confluence of issues inextricably related to race, epoch, and circumstances.⁵⁴ In the process, Baraka has created a new tradition and a new world order for blacks. By changing the tradition to accommodate the needs of the Black Aesthetics, Baraka has re-defined the terms of his own special relationship to that tradition. Though this "special relationship" may be defined as "revolutionary," it is possible to locate analogues and sources within the broader literary tradition which will help us to determine the degree of continuation or divergence from that tradition, and hence the degree of innovativeness--often a vexing question in literary criticism.

In order to determine the extent of Baraka's deviation from, or conformity to, his revolutionary antecedents in the theatre, it is manifestly salutary to read his works against the background of an artist with whom he has both strong

⁵⁴ For more detailed discussion of Taine's triad, see Handy and Westbrook, pp. 309-317.

literary affinities and disaffiliations. In this way, it will be possible to get a broader historical sense of his literary accomplishment. According to T. S. Eliot, it is this historical sense that makes a writer aware of his own unique place within the broader tradition:

the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.⁵⁵

Baraka was determined to secure such a "simultaneous existence" and a "simultaneous order" for black literature. In looking back to Artaud, we will be able to ascertain whether there is any "simultaneous existence" between his revolutionary theatre and Baraka's; we will be able to determine--if only obliquely--what makes him at once an ally and an alien to Baraka and the new order that he attempted to effect through his art.

⁵⁵ T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in Handy and Westbrook, p. 29.

CHAPTER 4

SOURCE OF THEORIES: ARTAUD'S THEATRE AND THE DOUBLE

If the theater is an amusement, too many serious problems demand our attention for us to be able to divert the least particle of it to anything so ephemeral. If the theater is not an amusement, if it is an authentic reality, then how are we to restore its rank as reality, how are we to make each spectacle a kind of event? This is the problem we must solve.

Antonin Artaud, "The Alfred Jarry Theater"

I

The above pronouncement by Antonin Artaud well over six decades ago could appropriately be translated as a contemporary reading of Amiri Baraka's concern for black American theatre within more recent years. Indeed, a careful examination of Baraka's dramatic theories and practices will undoubtedly leave the reader with distinct echoes of Artaud's overriding concern that the theatre should serve a vital role in the community, that it should not merely be a place for entertainment, but that it should actually function as a transforming agent that would quicken the spectators into new and higher levels of consciousness, thereby mobilizing them to change the way they perceive themselves and consequently, change the way they live.

That the theatre is a very serious business for these two revolutionists is reflected in Baraka's pronouncement that it

should be "as essential as a grocery store,"¹ and in Artaud's injunction that the spectator should "go to the theater the way he goes to the surgeon or the dentist...knowing, of course, that he will not die, but that it is a serious thing...."² In other words, the spectator should go to the theatre with the intent and purpose of being transformed. His consciousness should undergo a cleansing and he should leave the theatre with a higher level of consciousness.

If theatre is to fulfil a role "as essential as a grocery store," something in its very nature should link it organically with its audiences, so that they would not be able to escape its transforming effects, even if they tried to. Recognizing the failure of the theatre of his day to bring about such a rapprochement with its audiences, Artaud sought to create a theatre that would have the effect of leaving its spectators "terrified and awaken [sic]"³ into the desired new levels of consciousness.

In his search for appropriate paradigms for the new brand of dramaturgy that he proposed, Artaud reverted primarily to

¹ Saul Gottlieb, "They Think You're An Airplane And You're Really A Bird! An Interview With LeRoi Jones," Evergreen Review, 12 (December 1967): 53.

² Antonin Artaud, Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, trans. Helen Weaver, ed. & intro. Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), p. 157.

³ Diary of Anais Nin, 1931-1934, (New York: Swallow Press & Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), p. 193. Quoted by Naomi Greene, Antonin Artaud: Poet Without Words (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), p. 37.

non-Western sources. In light of the undeniable consanguinity between Artaud and Baraka that has been identified so far in this study, it is not surprising to discover that some of Artaud's theories might have their source in elements of black American theatre. In a 1930 brochure, "The Alfred Jarry Theater and Public Hostility," Artaud acknowledged that he resorted to select elements of non-European tradition when he was searching for a viable alternative to the decadence of French theatre of his day:

The Théâtre Alfred Jarry refuses to list all the fragmentary influences it might have been subjected to (such as: Elizabethan theater, Chekhov, Strindberg, Feydeau, etc.) and only will mention...the indisputable example furnished by the Chinese, Negro-American, and Soviet theaters.⁴

Because Artaud did not elaborate on the specific nature of the black American influence, it is open to conjecture and speculation. Perhaps the key to some of Artaud's meaning lies in the present attempt to locate Baraka's theoretical sources in some of Artaud's own theories.

Of course, it is difficult to ascertain the exact influence of one writer upon another. Indeed, the question of

⁴ Antonin Artaud, Oeuvres Complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), II, pp. 45-46. The quotation is Eric Sellin's translation. Cited in Eric Sellin, The Dramatic Concepts of Antonin Artaud (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 51. As Sellin notes, Artaud does not elaborate on what he means by "Negro-American" theatre. However, it is safe to say that though Artaud does not explain which aspects of black American theatre influenced him, his undeniable admiration for that theatre is evident in his statement of sources. At least this statement contains the seeds of what eventually blossomed into a kindred spirit linking Artaud to Baraka.

sources and analogues is perhaps one of the most indeterminate elements of literary criticism. A writer might consciously choose certain literary prototypes, or he might be unconsciously drawn to them. In any event, the concern with sources or analogues should pass or fail the critical litmus test based strictly on whether or not the results promote an informed exegesis of a work of art.

Since this study is concerned with the elucidation of Baraka's drama against the background of Artaud's theories of theatre reform, the historical approach can help to establish the basis of contemporaneity of these two writers whose alienation through race and milieu have been the more acute because they belong to different ages. Further, through the historical line of inquiry, we might be able to identify certain patterns and continuity in the flow of revolutionary consciousness generated in the theatre through and by Baraka and Artaud.

II

In the age of confusion in which we live, an age filled with blasphemies...an age in which all values, artistic as well as moral, seem to be dissolving into an abyss that nothing in any previous age of the mind can give an idea of, I was foolish enough to think that I could create a theater, that I could at least initiate this attempt to revive the universally despised value of the theater....

Antonin Artaud, "Manifesto For A Theater That Failed"

Antonin Artaud seemed to have been born with one all-consuming mission in life: to reform the French theatre of his day. This near-religious calling became increasingly intensified as he witnessed the ever worsening state of cultural and moral degeneracy that threatened the very existence of the theatre. This is not to suggest, however, that Artaud discounted the significant work being done by many of the directors and dramatists of his day. In fact, he admired several of these reformers--for example, Aurélien-Marie Lugné-Poe (1869-1940) for his anti-realistic presentation of Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi, and his subsequent contribution to the departure from realism in the theatre; Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949) whose drama explored a series of mysterious analogies which appeal to deep levels of the subconscious; Charles Dullin (1885-1949) who was one of the first to introduce the concept of total theatre; and Jacques Copeau (1879-1949) for his advocacy of a return to the bare

platform stage and his attempt to restore the "poetry of the theatre."⁵

But while Artaud admired certain aspects of the work of some of his contemporaries in the theatre, he thought their ideas lacked the necessary revolutionary force to effect the needed drastic changes. Because Artaud's efforts to collaborate with the directors and dramatists of his day led to constant frustration and inevitable failure due to this lack of common vision for reform, he had no recourse but to establish his own revolutionary theatre.

Fired by his intense sense of mission to restore the theatre to its pristine glory, Artaud formulated an impressive series of manifestoes, which together constitute his most significant contribution to theatre reform. Though the exegetical focus of this chapter will be his magnum opus, The Theater And Its Double, the discussion will also include selections from his celebrated letters, as well as from the less well-known writings on the Alfred Jarry Theatre, all of which are of seminal importance in modern theatre reform.

The Theater And Its Double, which was written over the five year period, 1931-1935, and first published by Gallimard in Collection Métamorphoses in 1938, is a compilation of a series of essays, notes and letters--thirteen of them in all--namely, "The Theater and the Plague," "Metaphysics and the

⁵ Oscar G. Brockett, History of the Theatre, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1982), p. 578.

Mise en Scène," "The Alchemical Theater," "On the Balinese Theater," "Oriental Theater and Occidental Theater," "No More Masterpieces," "The Theater and Cruelty," "The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto)," "Letters on Cruelty," "Letters on Language," "The Theater of Cruelty (Second Manifesto)," "An Affective Athleticism," and "Two Notes." In addition, a preface entitled "The Theater and Culture" is included.

The main arguments of The Theater And Its Double are subsumed under three contrapuntal themes--the theatre as a plague, the theatre as alchemy and the theatre of cruelty--each linked to the other by the concept of the "Double." As a prologue to the discussion of these key Artaudian themes, it would be instructive to consider the concept of the Double, whose centrality to the Artaudian vision is suggested by its careful inclusion in the title of his major work.

In the Artaudian poetics, the Double has multiple meanings, some of which Artaud explained in a letter to Jean Paulhan, dated January 25, 1936. In that letter, Artaud wrote:

...if the theater is the double of life, life is the double of the true theater....This title will correspond to all the doubles of theater which I thought I had found over so many years: metaphysics, the plague, cruelty.

The reservoir of the energies made up of Myths which men no longer incarnate is incarnated in the theater. And by this double I mean the great magic element ("agent") of which the theater, in its

forms, is only the figuration while we wait for the theater to become that element's transfiguration.⁶

In the Artaudian dictum, if true theatre is the expression of the quintessential Double, which is life itself, then it has a tremendous responsibility to transform the dramatic event into one which will cause the spectator to experience true life. In the essay, "The Alchemical Theater," Artaud is careful to explain that this real life experience he is talking about in the theatre is not the "direct, everyday reality" which he thinks is "as empty as it is sugar-coated,"⁷ and which he blames for the disrepute into which French theatre had fallen. The kind of real life experience he is alluding to is "of another archetypal and dangerous reality."⁸ For Artaud, when the theatre holds the mirror up to life, it should reflect, not the "sugar-coated" reality, but one which reveals the most elemental nature of man. The theatre itself will become a transfiguration of life and, in turn, will cause a transfiguration in the spectator. In this way, the spectator can attain a deeper knowledge of his true self--a vitally important function which Artaud felt the extant French theatre was not fulfilling.

⁶ Oeuvres Complètes, V, pp. 272-73. The quotation is Eric Sellin's translation. Cited in Eric Sellin, The Dramatic Concepts of Antonin Artaud, pp. 93-94.

⁷ Antonin Artaud, The Theatre and its Double, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 48.

⁸ Antonin Artaud, The Theater And Its Double, p. 48.

In addition to operating within the larger Double of life, the theatre can be seen as the reflection and expression of another very important Double--the plague. In the essay, "The Theater and the Plague," Artaud drew a parallel between the power of the theatre to effect a transfiguration, and the power of the plague to bring about "extreme purification"⁹ in the wake of its ravaging attack. Especially in view of Artaud's conclusion that the dissolution of values in the theatre was a direct reflection of the cultural and social malaise that engulfed the larger society, the image of the theatre as a plague that will cause "extreme purification" was particularly appropriate.

Artaud was not the only artist to view the beneficent powers of the theatre and the plague analogously. In The City of God, St. Augustine also compared the potential of the plague and the theatre to bring about "the most mysterious alterations in the mind of...an entire populace."¹⁰ But whereas St. Augustine went on to oppose the use of the stage for this purpose, "wishing to avoid this plague that corrupts souls,"¹¹ Artaud ascribed great value to the metaphorical transformation of the stage into a plague, and therefore sought to capitalize on its vast potential for his Theatre of Cruelty.

⁹ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 31.

¹⁰ Quoted by Artaud in The Theater and its Double, p. 26.

¹¹ Quoted by Artaud in The Theater and its Double, p. 26.

Since one of the chief goals of the Theatre of Cruelty is that the audience should be visibly impacted by the actions on the stage; and since, as Artaud has said so forcefully, the spectator should go to the theatre the same way he goes to the dentist or the surgeon--that is, to be operated on--the image of the theatre as a plague exorcising the evil out of man while leaving his vital organs intact was particularly appealing for Artaud.

The plague then, for Artaud, was not so much a disease, but a scourge, an instrument of purgation and catharsis that destroyed in order to create a new moral and social order, and that was how he was proposing that the theatre as the Double of the plague should function. In fact, Artaud was so strongly convicted about this vital role for the theatre, that in the essay, "The Theater and the Plague," he defended this analogy with declamatory fervor and poetic intensity:

If the essential theater is like the plague, it is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is the revelation, the bringing forth....It appears that by means of the plague, a gigantic abscess, as much moral as social, has been collectively drained; and that like the plague, the theater has been created to drain abscesses collectively.¹²

This faith in the power of the theatre to bring about a catharsis in its audience is, of course, Aristotelian. But whereas in the Poetics Aristotle focussed on the powerful emotions of pity and fear to effect such a catharsis, Artaud

¹² Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, pp. 30-31.

was primarily interested in getting to the root of all the vile emotions in man--all his cruelty and violence--in order to have these purged. Further, Artaud felt that only a force of cataclysmic power like the plague could purge man of all his evil tendencies. Because the plague is viewed as a "redeeming epidemic,"¹³ it is therefore both "victorious and vengeful."¹⁴ The theatre, as a double of the plague, should be likewise "victorious and vengeful."

Artaud was also interested in the metaphor of the theatre as a plague for another very important reason. Throughout his life, he was continually groping for ways to release the pain of his own tortured consciousness--a quest which was in part responsible for his attraction in the early 1920's to the Surrealists and their attempt to liberate the imprisoned consciousness. If the plague is capable of liberating man from repressed evil forces that could eventually lead to his complete annihilation, then the theatre, as its Double, is also capable of redeeming man from the evil that would govern his consciousness and his instincts and eventually destroy him. The bifurcated and tortured consciousness can only reach a state of complete equipoise after being purged by a force as absolute as the plague. Artaud summarized with trenchant clarity the parallel action of the plague and its Double upon the mind of man:

¹³ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 31.

¹⁴ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 27.

The theater like the plague is a crisis which is resolved by death or cure....Similarly the theater is a disease because it is the supreme equilibrium which cannot be achieved without destruction. It invites the mind to share a delirium which exalts its energies; and we can see, to conclude, that from the human point of view, the action of theater, like that of plague, is beneficial, for impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world; it shakes off the asphyxiating inertia of matter which invades even the clearest testimony of the senses; and in revealing to collectivities of men their dark power, their hidden force, it invites them to take...a superior and heroic attitude....¹⁵

Though the Double of the plague suggests important alternatives to the extant French theatre, it is limited in its representation. Artaud therefore turned to another important Double--alchemy--in an effort to define his ideas of reform for the theatre. The analogy between alchemy and the theatre also springs from Artaud's attempt to achieve a synthesis of the bifurcated consciousness by purifying it of destructive and tormenting evil forces. According to Bettina L. Knapp, the alchemical process offers Artaud a suitable Double for the theatre because "both are reflections and externalizations of unconscious and primordial dramas within man. Both actor and alchemist create their realities by means of symbols and through illusion."¹⁶ For Artaud, the attempt to arrive at the pure essence of the human mind--that is, a

¹⁵ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, pp. 31-32.

¹⁶ Bettina L. Knapp, Antonin Artaud: Man of Vision (New York: David Lewis, 1969), p. 97.

mind uncontaminated by evil--could only be achieved by a metamorphosis akin to the alchemical process.

Artaud was further attracted to the idea of the "Alchemical Theater" for two conjunctive reasons: both alchemy and the theatre operate in the realms of the ideal and the material, and both serve as a representation of spirituality.¹⁷ As the spiritual Double for the process whereby matter is turned into gold through "fiery purification,"¹⁸ alchemy becomes the representation of the quest for spiritual or divine principles. By an analogous process, the theatrical experience should:

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that Baraka also links the alchemical process with the artistic process. But he associates this process specifically with "black arts." To him, the black artist creating a new black art in the "black labs of the heart," is essentially an alchemist performing his hermetic skills. See LeRoi Jones, Home: Social Essays (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966), p. 252. In the poem, "Black Dada Nihilismus," Baraka also invokes the magic of alchemy as a metaphorical representation of "black art." However, as Werner Sollors has noted, "Baraka embraces...medieval alchemy, not to find gold, but to initiate the victims of the West, that 'grey and hideous space,' into the 'blacker art which will lead to rebellion.'" Werner Sollors, Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism" (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 92. Whereas Artaud is drawn to the concept primarily because it is representative of spirituality and a purified consciousness, Baraka is attracted to the concept because it offers him a paradigm for black art. Baraka's positive view of alchemy is therefore rooted in his ethnic sense of art. According to Larry Neal, "the term 'Black Art' is of ancient origin, but it was first used in a positive sense by LeRoi Jones." Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in The Black American Writer, ed. C. W. E. Bigsby (Deland, Florida: Everett/Edwards, Inc., 1969), II, p. 190. It is no doubt from this positive sense of "black arts" that the term "The Black Arts Movement" has evolved.

¹⁸ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 49.

...resolve or even annihilate every conflict produced by the antagonism of matter and mind, idea and form, concrete and abstract, and to dissolve all appearances into one unique expression which must have been the equivalent of spiritualized gold.¹⁹

A theatre which is the "equivalent of spiritualized gold" is surely the ideal alchemical theatre. It follows naturally that Artaud would admire the Orphic and Eleusinian Mysteries precisely because he felt that they achieved such an ideal.²⁰ He therefore devoted his entire life to trying to create a theatre that would attain to this ideal.

Despite this general admiration for the alchemical theatre, and despite the poetic brilliance with which Artaud expresses his admiration for it, the metaphor of the alchemical theatre does not pervade the Artaudian poetics as ubiquitously as do the more well known Doubles of the plague and cruelty, especially the latter. In fact, the metaphor of cruelty is the most important Double that Artaud has created for the theatre. It is therefore not surprising that when he eventually established his own theatre in the early 1930's, he named it The Theatre of Cruelty. The seminal role of this innovative theatrical Double will be examined in the following section.

¹⁹ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 52.

²⁰ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 52.

III

We cannot go on prostituting the idea of theater whose only value is in its excruciating, magical relation to reality and danger.

.....

Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theater is not possible. In our present state of degeneration it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds.

Antonin Artaud, "The Theater of Cruelty" (First Manifesto)

The fact that cruelty is the most fundamental element in the Artaudian dramatic cosmology accounts for his pre-eminent preoccupation with it in his theoretical writings. Realizing that this concept of cruelty that he invented was a difficult one--and one subject to countless misinterpretations and misapplications--Artaud assiduously formulated and re-formulated this concept in a desperate endeavour to define his meaning and intentions, both for himself and for his sometimes unsympathetic contemporaries. The result has been a near ubiquitous reference to the word "cruelty" in his works after its first mention in 1932 in a series of letters to Jean Paulhan.²¹ Artaud subsequently drafted a number of letters, manifestoes and essays on cruelty. Of these, "The Theater and Cruelty," The Theater of Cruelty (First

²¹ Some of these letters, dating from September 13, 1932, are among the most consequential that Artaud has written, and will be alluded to in this section of the study.

Manifesto)," "The Theater of Cruelty (Second Manifesto," and "Letters on Cruelty" comprise four of the most important chapters in The Theater and its Double, and will be the focus of discussion in this section.

Even a cursory glance at these letters, manifestoes and essays on cruelty will quickly reveal the great extent to which Artaud struggled to clarify the meaning of this key concept. Of course, it is not difficult to surmise that this is primarily attributable to the fact that, inevitably, the concept conjures up images of brutality and sadism. Accordingly, Artaud invariably felt the need to preface his definitions of cruelty by proclaiming what it is not. For example, in the first of the "Letters on Cruelty," Artaud tries to allay the fears of his reader with the assurance that "[t]his Cruelty is a matter of neither sadism nor bloodshed, at least not in any exclusive way."²² Further, he qualifies his meaning by warning that "[t]he word 'cruelty' must be taken in a broad sense, and not in the rapacious physical sense that it is customarily given."²³ What, then, is cruelty in the Artaudian sense?

Artaud's concept of cruelty arises from his philosophical conviction that man has been subject to pain and suffering ever since his original separation from transcendental unity, a separation which has been responsible for his tortured

²² Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 101.

²³ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 101.

state of consciousness. Ever since man has been severed from the original state of unity, the sum of all his actions has been a quest for reconciliation with that unified consciousness. Like Friedrich Nietzsche, Artaud aspired toward attaining the Dionysian principle that would break "the spell of individuation and [open] a path to the maternal womb of being"²⁴ --that is, both artists believed in the power of the theatre to reunite man with the Oneness of Being.

In the wake of Nietzsche's now famous postulation that God is dead, the metaphysical dilemma of modern man has been the more agonizing and cruel in the Artaudian sense; for the loss of the Judaeo-Christian myths has served only to intensify his binary view of the cosmos. For Artaud, cruelty is this tortured state of consciousness. In fact, in the Artaudian metaphysics, every act of life--from birth to death--is a part of this cruel consciousness:

There is no cruelty without consciousness and without the application of consciousness. It is consciousness that gives to the exercise of every act of life its blood-red color, its cruel nuance, since it is understood that life is always someone's death.²⁵

The concept of cruelty also has its philosophical

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, "From The Birth of Tragedy," in Tragedy: Vision and Form, ed. Robert W. Corrigan, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 343.

²⁵ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 102.

foundation in Gnostic Determinism.²⁶ The view that life is controlled by a superior determinism over which man has no control lends to the concept of cruelty the sense of necessity, the sense of an inexorable discipline which Artaud saw at the center of all human activity. As a result, Artaud concluded that:

Life cannot help exercising some blind rigor that carries with it all its conditions, otherwise it would not be life; but this rigor, this life that exceeds all bounds and is exercised in the torture and trampling down of everything, this pure implacable feeling is what cruelty is.²⁷

The view that man is controlled by inexorable juggernaut forces also embodies the notion that these forces are inherently evil, and that even man's best effort to do good will simply result in a cruel struggle. Artaud blames life for all the cruelty and evil evident in man, claiming that:

...life, metaphysically speaking, because it admits extension, thickness, heaviness, and matter, admits, as a direct consequence, evil and all that is inherent in evil, space, extension and matter. All this culminates in consciousness and torment, and in consciousness in torment.²⁸

The weakness of this argument is, of course, that Artaud seems to be suggesting that man is not entirely responsible for his evil acts. Life and the external forces that they inflict upon man are imputed with the blame. Several critics

²⁶ For a fuller discussion of the Gnostic foundation of the concept of cruelty, see Ronald Hayman, Artaud and After (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 188.

²⁷ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 114.

²⁸ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 114.

have questioned the soundness of Artaud's argument. For example, though Ronald Hayman conceded that these ideas on cruelty were "interesting and attractive," he concluded that "the linguistic assumption was confusingly retrogressive."²⁹ In a similar vein, Naomi Greene claimed that "Artaud's belief that life is cruel also seems related to his own problems, for whenever he attempts to prove or justify that belief, the reasons he advances are less than convincing."³⁰ Artaud himself was not unaware of these inadequacies and made bold to confess them, especially in his letters. In one letter to Jean Paulhan, he wrote:

As for the drawing up of the Manifesto, I realize that it is abrupt and in large measure inadequate.

I propose unexpected, rigorous principles, of grim and terrible aspect, and just when everyone is waiting for me to justify them, I pass on to the next principle.³¹

It is, of course, no secret that much of Artaud's theories and practices evolved out of his own agonized attempt to still the warring antinomies within and without him, and that he was undoubtedly attracted to the dramatic mode because of the possibility it afforded him of giving dialectical expression to this conflict in process.

²⁹ Ronald Hayman, Artaud and After (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 83.

³⁰ Naomi Greene, Antonin Artaud: Poet Without Words, p. 118.

³¹ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 114.

Acknowledging the central role of drama in the resolution of the conflict of consciousness, Artaud wrote:

Drama is the mind's most perfect expression. It is in the nature of profound things to clash and combine, to evolve from one another. Action is the very principle of life.³²

The inclusion of this important Artaudian dramatic precept in the final essay of The Theater and its Double is significant in that it reveals the metaphysical impulse behind all the essays that comprise that volume. Artaud's effort to create parallel symbolisms for the theatre through the various manifestations of the Double (especially the all-important Double of cruelty), is part of his attempt to enter the stillness in the whirlwind in his life through dramatic resolution. The whole concept of cruelty hinges on this important premise, as Artaud so desperately wants us to understand:

I have therefore said "cruelty" as I might have said "life" or "necessity," because I want to indicate especially that for me the theater is an act and perpetual emanation, that there is nothing congealed about it, that I turn it into a true act, hence living, hence magical.

And I am searching for every technical and practical means of bringing the theater close to the high, perhaps excessive, at any rate vital and violent idea that I conceive of it for myself.³³

³² Antonin Artaud, "Preface to Maurice Maeterlinck," Douze chansons (1923). Quoted by Maurice Saillet, "In Memoriam: Antonin Artaud, in Antonin Artaud," The Theater and its Double, trans. Mary Caroline Richards, p. 148.

³³ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 114.

The rest of the discussion in this section will focus on the nature of this "technical and practical means" that Artaud proposed for the Theatre of Cruelty.

III

[T]he truth is that the Balinese Theater offers us in finished form themes of pure theater on which the stage effects confer a dense equilibrium, a gravitational solidity that is fully materialized. This impression is extraordinary.

Antonin Artaud, "Unfinished Letter to Jean Paulhan"

It is now generally acknowledged that the seminal ideas for Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty evolved out of his encounter with the Balinese Theatre at the Colonial Exhibition in Paris in 1931.³⁴ Not surprisingly, all the essays of The Theater and its Double (which were written between 1931-1935--significantly, after the encounter with the Balinese Theatre) reveal evidences of this all-pervasive Oriental influence.³⁵

³⁴ Actually, as was alluded to in Chapter 2 above, Artaud's first encounter with Oriental theatre occurred in Summer 1922 when he viewed a troupe of Cambodian dancers at the Colonial Exhibition in Marseilles. Though Artaud was aware of his nascent attraction to the theatre of the Orient, it was not until the decisive event of the 1931 Balinese production that he started giving concrete expression to his ideas for the Theatre of Cruelty.

³⁵ Although all the essays of The Theater and its Double have the undoubted stamp of the Oriental influence, some of the essays deal more explicitly and in some cases, exclusively, with this influence. These essays include: "On the Balinese Theater," "Oriental Theater and Occidental Theater," and "The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto)."

It was only after that watershed event that Artaud could formulate and give cogent expression to his theatrical concepts.

In the mid-1920's when Artaud was searching for suitable paradigms for the Alfred Jarry Theatre, he almost reached a point of despair, claiming ruefully that:

It would be useless to search in the mass of spectacles presented every day for something that corresponded to any idea one might have of an absolutely pure theater.³⁶

Reflection on some of the reasons for Artaud's repudiation of Occidental theatre (for example, the emphasis on individual psychological conflicts and the preponderance of the written word on stage), makes it manifestly clear why Artaud would be so attracted to the Oriental theatre represented by the Balinese dancers. In a letter to Jean Paulhan, Artaud describes his fascination with the theatre of the Orient "with an intense feeling of intellectual sympathy," claiming that:

...it [the Balinese theatre] constitutes an affront to our old Western conceptions of theater. It does more than present us with an astonishing production, an astonishing exploitation of all the means that can be employed in the reduced and limited space of a stage. The Balinese Theater reveals the secret existence of a kind of authentic theatrical language of such power that it seems to eliminate the very mental gestures that seem to

³⁶ Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Helen Weaver, p. 155.

have given birth to it, that it renders all translation into words impossible and useless....³⁷

As the examination of the Doubles of the plague, alchemy and cruelty has revealed so far, Artaud was primarily concerned, not so much with the external realities and sham appearances which had led to the prostitution of the French theatre; rather, he was deeply preoccupied with the ontological issues of man's existence in a cruel world. In his attempt to render a just representation of these ontological issues, Artaud advocated a theatre that would be a "metaphysics-in-action," a metaphysical drama that ultimately would be able to deal with the spiritual and metaphysical aspects of man's existence in a cruel world. Against this background of the Artaudian metaphysics, it is not difficult to appreciate the infinite theatrical possibilities offered by the Balinese dancers, whose consummate performance transformed the stage experience into a glorious religious rite of ancient appeal through their hieratic presentation of dance, music, gesture and general spectacle. If there is one overriding reason why the Balinese troupe is able to accomplish this magnificent feat, it is because:

this theater is based upon age-old traditions which have preserved intact the secrets of using

³⁷ Antonin Artaud, "Unfinished Letter to Jean Paulhan," in Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, trans. Helen Weaver, p. 208.

gestures, intonations, and harmonies in relation to the senses on all possible levels.³⁸

It follows naturally that a theatre that is "based upon age-old traditions" would be able to evoke images of a mythic past, and as a corollary, it would be able to imbue contemporary theatre with a mythic presence. Artaud was attracted to the mythic possibilities suggested by the Balinese dancers for two important reasons.

Firstly, the Balinese theatre offered a fitting paradigm of the sort of pure, pristine element that Artaud wanted to restore to the theatre. Secondly, in his search to unify his own tortured consciousness, Artaud was attracted to the possibilities that myths offered to dissolve the distinction between abstract and concrete phenomena.³⁹ The name of a thing and the thing named are of equal significance in mythic thinking. According to Naomi Greene, myth "confuses matter and its attributes, whether those attributes are immaterial forces or material substances."⁴⁰ The primitive rituals of

³⁸ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 47.

³⁹ This mythic possibility no doubt played an incalculable role in Artaud's concretization of all stage elements and his transformation of the mise en scène into a veritable metaphysical and spiritual entity. Several critics discuss the importance of myth in Artaud's dramaturgy. For a more substantial discussion, see, for example, Bettina L. Knapp, Antonin Artaud: Man of Vision, pp. 87-89; Naomi Greene, Antonin Artaud: Poet Without Words, pp. 113-159.

⁴⁰ Naomi Greene, Antonin Artaud: Poet Without Words, p. 132.

the Balinese dancer held the key to Artaud's discovery of the mythic possibilities for the Theatre of Cruelty.

Artaud was further impressed by the Balinese dancers because their performance suggested to him a mode of liberation from the ossified forms of language that had limited his expression for so long.⁴¹ Now he could explore the infinite ideographic value of certain signs, gestures and attitudes through the theatrical performance. Rather than representing insignificant aspects of the mise en scène, "this objective and concrete language of the theater"⁴² could be exploited for its capacity to communicate certain symbols and images to the spectator--a function that would not have been possible through the normal discursive language that had dominated the Occidental theatre.

Due attention to the nature of this new language, this

⁴¹ Artaud's famous Correspondence with Jacques Rivière (1923-24) contains many poignant passages revealing his agony and frustration over the tyranny of words. In one of these letters dated January 29, 1924, Artaud complained: "There is something which destroys my thought; something which does not prevent me from being what I might be, but which leaves me, so to speak, in suspension. Something furtive which robs me of the words that I have found, which reduces my mental tension, which is gradually destroying in its substance the body of my thought, which is even robbing me of the memory of those idioms with which one expresses oneself and which translate accurately the most inseparable, the most localized, the most living inflections of thought. I shall not go on. I do not need to describe my state." In Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, trans. Helen Weaver, ed. Susan Sontag, p. 35.

⁴² Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 91.

"poetry in space,"⁴³ is crucial to a full understanding of Artaud's overall conception for his Theatre of Cruelty. By this "objectification"⁴⁴ of the stage, Artaud was by no means advocating a complete abolition of language in the theatre; rather, he was trying to restore the possibility of exploring, beyond the confines of word, certain theatrical experiences:

That is to say: instead of continuing to rely upon texts considered definitive and sacred, it is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theater to the text, and to recover the notion of a kind of unique language half-way between gesture and thought.⁴⁵

Because the Balinese dancers were able to express this unique language through their fusion of all elements of theatre--music, dance, gestures and general spectacle--they symbolised the quintessential pure theatre that Artaud aspired to create.

In his blueprint for the Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud outlined specific recommendations for the creation of his version of pure theatre. He realised that any synthesis of the disparate elements of theatre would require specific techniques, so despite his tendency to be vague, he actually itemized and gave limited definition to these techniques. Among the key elements considered are: the mise en scène, the

⁴³ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 39.

⁴⁴ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 53.

⁴⁵ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 89.

spectacle, objects, masks and accessories, musical instruments, light and lighting, costumes, the stage and the auditorium, the actor, the works, and the program.

Because the mise en scène is imbued with special metaphysical characteristics, and because it offers the playwright limitless possibilities of touching the spectators through the senses and communicating with the innermost recesses of their beings, it is accorded a pre-eminent role in Artaudian dramaturgy, a point which he underscores repeatedly throughout his theoretical writings. In "Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène," for example, Artaud asserts that "it is the mise en scène that is the theater much more than the written and spoken play."⁴⁶ And in a letter to Jean-Richard Bloch, he justifies the preponderance of the mise en scène over the written text:

Because for me the point of departure and touchstone of real theater is mise en scène, if the term is understood in its profound sense of the visual, auditory, and spatial power of the theatrical style of a written work.⁴⁷

In "The Theater of Cruelty (First Manifesto)," Artaud repeats this all-important definition of the mise en scène, claiming that it should be viewed, "not simply as the degree of

⁴⁶ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 41.

⁴⁷ Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Helen Weaver, p. 203.

refraction of a text upon the stage, but as the point of departure for all theatrical creation."⁴⁸

Closely linked to Artaud's concept of the mise en scène is his notion of the role of the metteur en scène. Claiming that the director is really the one who embodies and gives expression to a cosmic vision of the stage, Artaud proposed to effect this new stage language by giving absolute autonomy to the metteur en scène. In fact, Artaud exalted the role of the director so highly that he asserted:

...it is in the use and handling of this language that the old duality between author and director will be dissolved, replaced by a sort of unique Creator upon whom will devolve the double responsibility of the spectacle and the plot.⁴⁹

In the Artaudian dramatic cosmology, therefore, the director assumes an almost mystical vocation, for he has the awesome task of reconciling external and internal realities for the theatre-goers, and of uniting playwright, actors, and spectators through his transformation of the stage space.

Following exactly the model of the Balinese theatre, Artaud proposed a spectacle that would be a grand harmonious concatenation of all elements of the stage space--concrete and abstract, material and immaterial, physical and spiritual. Such a spectacle would contain:

a physical and objective element, perceptible to all. Cries, groans, apparitions, surprises, theatricalities of all kinds, magic beauty of

⁴⁸ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 94.

⁴⁹ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 94.

costumes taken from certain ritual models; resplendent lighting, incantational beauty of voices, the charms of harmony, rare notes of music, colors of objects, physical rhythm of movements whose crescendo and decrescendo will accord exactly with the pulsation of movements familiar to everyone, concrete appearances of new and surprising objects, masks....⁵⁰

The masks that Artaud intended for the Theatre of Cruelty would be "enormous" and of "strange proportions," and would be a concretization of every expression and every verbal image.

Artaud was so bent on giving concrete expression to all elements of the stage that he regarded musical instruments as objects, but more important, he regarded them as a requisite part of the set. In addition, Artaud felt that the sounds that these instruments produce should have a concrete presence. And if contemporary musical instruments could not produce such sounds, ancient instruments should be used instead. If all else failed, instruments with "new range and compass" should be invented "based upon special combinations or new alloys of metal."⁵¹

Like music, light is accorded a special role in the

⁵⁰ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 93.

⁵¹ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 95.

Artaudian theatre.⁵² Speaking analogously of light and music, Artaud recommends that:

In order to produce the qualities of particular musical tones, light must recover an element of thinness, density, and opaqueness, with a view to producing the sensations of heat, cold, anger, fear, etc.⁵³

To create this effect, it might be possible to devise new lighting equipment, just as it was necessary to invent new musical equipment to create certain sound effects. Because the action of light upon the mind was so important in Artaud's estimation, and because he thought that all

⁵² It should be pointed out that Artaud was not the first to exploit the effects of light and music on the stage. Adolphe Appia (1862-1928), who was highly influenced by Wagner's music-dramas, did some pioneering work in reforming the stage by exploring the potential of light and music to unify all stage elements; and Gordon Craig (1872-1966), who also conceived of the theatre in visual terms, made a significant contribution through his experimentations with screens and other aspects of staging. Perhaps one of his greatest legacies is the concept of the Ubermarionette, his idea that the dramatist should be a "superpuppet without any ego but capable of carrying out all the demands" of the stage. Oscar G. Brockett, History of the Theatre, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1982), p. 565. For more details on the contribution of these two pioneering theatre reformers, see Brockett, pp. 563-565; and Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, Century of Innovations: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since 1870 (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 200-211. Artaud no doubt was aware of the efforts of his predecessors, but there is no mention in his works of any specific influence they might have had on him. By the time Artaud wrote his manifestoes, these ideas were already present in the French theatre. But perhaps his unique distinction is that he built on their ideas in a manner that rendered them accessible to succeeding generations of dramatists and directors.

⁵³ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 95.

contemporary lighting equipment was inadequate, he recommended that they be updated or discarded completely.

Just as Artaud placed great value on the potential of theatrical lighting to stimulate the mind, he was also convinced that effective costuming could be a stimulus for the imagination. Warning that modern dress should be avoided as much as possible, Artaud points to the advantage of "certain age-old costumes, of ritual intent,"⁵⁴ claiming that they have a greater potential to stir the imagination because they symbolize the rich heritage of an older tradition, and because of their power to evoke images of the beauty of that tradition.

Since, for Artaud, the ultimate goal of the dramatic experience was to touch the mind of the spectators and transform their inner beings, he was concerned that nothing should interfere with nor prevent such a rapprochement. Accordingly, Artaud proposed to "abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind."⁵⁵ Through abolishing the architecture of the stage, Artaud hoped that:

A direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle, between actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 96.

⁵⁵ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 96.

⁵⁶ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 96.

Artaud's proposal for an open stage was in part representative of his rejection of naturalistic, illusionistic theatre. Using the Oriental culture as his model (in particular, certain sacred temples of Tibet), Artaud wanted the entire theatre to be a stage in which the "diffusion of action over an immense space"⁵⁷ would engulf and assimilate the spectator in an osmosis-like action.

In order to promote this fluidity of action, Artaud proposed that galleries be built around the periphery of the hall as was done in certain primitive cultures. This type of construction would allow the actors to move from one part of the room to another, and would lend a certain height and depth to the flow of the action. In all of this action, the role of the actor is both passive and active. Artaud explains:

The actor is both an element of first importance, since it is upon the effectiveness of his work that the success of the spectacle depends, and a kind of passive and neutral element, since he is rigorously denied all personal initiative.⁵⁸

This denial of any personal initiative for the actor is one of the important points of departure between Artaud and one of his most militant dramatic progenies, Amiri Baraka--a subject which will be discussed in Chapter 5, following. For in the Barakan communal theatre, the actor and audience are

⁵⁷ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 97.

⁵⁸ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 98.

linked through spontaneous interaction, which sometimes results in improvisations.

Of course, the thematic concerns of both dramatists also differ radically, as the following chapter will likewise demonstrate. In his manifesto, Artaud states vaguely that the Theatre of Cruelty would "make attempts at direct staging, around themes, facts, or known works."⁵⁹ He then goes on to list a miscellaneous collection of plays that could possibly be staged by the Theatre of Cruelty. The list includes: An adaptation of one of Shakespeare's "apocryphal plays"; a play of extreme poetic freedom by Leon-Paul Fargue; an extract from Zohar highlighting violence; the story of Bluebeard accorded a new idea of eroticism and cruelty; the Fall of Jerusalem, showing "the blood-red color that trickles from it"; a Tale by the Marquis de Sade, "in which the eroticism will be transposed...to create a violent exteriorization of cruelty."⁶⁰

The one factor that seems to link these plays is the recurrent element of cruelty. But perhaps Artaud went overboard with his concept of cruelty. For apart from the fact that none of these proposed plays was ever staged, the one play that was staged by the Theatre of Cruelty--Artaud's own adaptation of Shelley's and Stendhal's story of the Cenci--was a dismal theatrical failure, lasting for only

⁵⁹ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 98.

⁶⁰ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 99.

seventeen performances. Artaud attributed this failure to the spiritual apathy and moral and social decadence of his French audience. Whatever the reason, Artaud was a visionary who was ahead of his time.

Apart from the general spirit of violent rebellion that he has bequeathed to succeeding generations of theatre revolutionaries, he has also left one of the most powerful paradigms of the vast possibilities offered by total theatre, with particular emphasis on the limitless potential of spectacle. In my interview with Amiri Baraka, he admitted that he benefited most from this aspect of the Artaudian poetics. He was particularly attracted to the concept of spectacle in Artaud's proposed play, "The Conquest of Mexico," and purposed to use it as a model:

Artaud saw...the "Destruction of Mexico" as spectacle, a great tragic spectacle, a great empire being destroyed by the rise of Western colonialism. I saw the specifics as different, but what I thought we shared in common was the desire to have spectacle as part of the theatre again, to have the theatre being able to capture great events--broad, earth-shaking, historical events, not just little cocktail party chatter, not just drawing room comedy, or comedies of manners of the well-made play--but to write a play that could actually be called "The Destruction of Mexico"...I mean, something that great. So that is what I began to conceive. I thought...well, yes, I will write a play with that kind of fantastic dramatic scope, only about things that I am interested in, which in essence is the destruction of Western imperialism.⁶¹

⁶¹ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," August 27, 1987, MS., pp. 23-24.

"The Conquest of Mexico," which was intended to be the first spectacle of the Theatre of Cruelty, but which was never realised, exists only in a fragmentary form, as Artaud never completed it. However, it represents Artaud's most sweeping dramatic proposal, pitting race against race, culture against culture, religion against religion, in a fantastic mosaic of images, gestures, dance, and rites. Baraka feels that this sense of "total emotional involvement"⁶² generated by such spectacle is undoubtedly the high point of the theatrical experience. And for Artaud, the special language of gesture and symbol--which is an integral part of the spectacle--communicates "an overwhelming stage experience"⁶³ to the spectators and links them in an inseparable bond with the actors.

It seems evident then, that in the Barakan and Artaudian dramatic cosmos, spectacle is an important component of the concept of total theatre. Both artists realised the vast potential of spectacle to stir the imagination: to evoke images of antiquity; to translate dreams into a reality quivering with images of the grotesque and the beautiful; and to provoke the spectator to reach within his innermost being so that he can leave the theatre in the Artaudian manner--"terrified and awaken[ed]." Perhaps, most important of all

⁶² Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," MS., p. 25.

⁶³ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 57.

for both Artaud and Baraka, spectacle offered a magical means of recreating myths and ritual in the theatre. But as chapter five, following, will demonstrate, their methods of accomplishing this is radically different.

However, for Baraka, the dramatic possibilities suggested by Artaud's concept of spectacle were of seminal importance, as they provided him with a "transitional method back to understanding...theatre of the whole consciousness."⁶⁴ In practical terms for Baraka, this meant that Artaud's concept of spectacle and total theatre suggested how he could "get back to the traditional, the non-Western theatre, the African theatre...to get back to the theatre of the total use of the senses."⁶⁵ Baraka realised that if he were to appeal to the mythic consciousness of blacks he would have to create a theatre of ritual and spectacle rooted in black history and black tradition.

In locating the source of key elements of Baraka's dramatic theories in his European predecessor, the historical method establishes the basis of consanguinity between the two artists, especially their vision to restore the theatre to its traditional greatness through ritual, myth, and spectacle. But perhaps more crucial for the highly politicized and overtly ethnocentric Baraka, it establishes

⁶⁴ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," MS., p. 25.

⁶⁵ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," MS., p. 24.

the need for radical divergence to reflect his socio-political ideology, and hence, the need to transform his dramatic legacy.

PART II

TRANSFORMATION
AND
APPLICATION OF THEORIES

CHAPTER 5

TRANSFORMATION OF THEORIES:
EVOLUTION OF BARAKA'S DISTINCTIVE VOICE

What are
influences?

[.....]

(I think
I know now
what a poem
is) a
turning away...
from what
it was
had moved
us...

LeRoi Jones, "Betancourt"

I

When Baraka wrote "Betancourt" in the wake of his Cuban visit, his fledgling revolutionary consciousness was a perfect tabula rasa for the overpowering influences of arch-revolutionist, Fidel Castro, and his revolutionary Cuba. The influence of this prototype of revolutionary consciousness was decisive and clear-cut; it marked the inevitable point of no return for Baraka and he knew unequivocally that he had to "turn away" forever from his apolitical Beat coterie and redirect the goals of his art and his life to reflect this new radical consciousness.

But the "Betancourt" question did not represent the first nor the last time that Baraka would ponder over the nature of certain influences on his life and works: it has been a question which he has had to face all his life. His acute self-consciousness concerning the impact of certain artists on his literary career has resulted in an openness to acknowledge the existence of such influences throughout the entire body of his works, as is evident, for example, in one of his early poems, "The Liar":

Though I am a man
 who is loud
 on the birth
 of his ways. Publicly redefining
 each change in my soul, as if I had predicted
 them,
 and profited, biblically, even tho
 their chanting weight,
 erased familiarity
 from my face.
 A question I think,
 an answer; whatever sits
 counting the minutes
 till you die.¹

In light of Baraka's chameleonic career (reflected in his drastic--and now notorious--changes in ideology and poetics ranging from the expressive aesthetics of his apolitical Beat period, to the more pragmatic aesthetics of his Black Cultural Nationalist, and later, Marxist-Leninist phases); and in light of his life-long predilection to be revolutionary, the question of just how much, if any at all,

¹ LeRoi Jones, The Dead Lecturer (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 79.

his radical claims reflect the influence of others, is most crucial.

Against this background, it would be at once salutary and instructive to examine the repercussions of certain theatrical ideals that Baraka drew from another archetypal rebel in the theatre, Antonin Artaud. Though the Artaudian influences are manifest in Baraka's dramaturgy; and though Baraka readily acknowledges this influence, claiming, "Artaud has had a great influence on me--I can't deny that," he is also quick to clarify that this influence has been only partial.²

In the wake of the discussion of the dramatic theories of these two artists in Chapters 3 and 4, it is now possible to draw certain conclusions about the nature of Artaud's influence on Baraka, and the extent to which Baraka transformed these influences to create his own distinctive poetics. Further, through the historical perspective of this study, it is possible to locate the special characteristics of race, milieu, and circumstances that have worked together to create a genealogical nexus between Baraka and his dramatic predecessor, while, at the same time, ironically and irrevocably, alienating them.

As the final pages of the foregoing chapter have demonstrated, the dramaturgical consanguinity of Baraka and

² Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," August 27, 1987, MS., pp. 22-23.

Artaud is undeniable, and in fact, quite noteworthy. Both artists descend from the same revolutionary genealogy regarding the crucial matter of total theatre, with particular emphasis on the power of spectacle to transform the theatrical experience into a mind-changing event of mythic and ritual significance for the spectators. For both artists, this attention to spectacle--that is, all aspects of the mise en scène, especially its non-verbal aspects--is part of their attempt to restore theatre back to the fullness of its primordial energies. Both sought to create the kind of theatre that Robert Brustein has fittingly designated, "the theatre of communion."³ In his binary definition of modern theatre as the "theatre of revolt" or the "theatre of communion," Brustein explains that by the latter type of theatre he means: "the theatre of the past...where traditional myths were enacted before an audience of believers against the background of a shifting but still coherent universe."⁴

³ Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964), p. 4.

⁴ Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama, p. 4. Brustein, who identifies the dominant mode of modern theatrical expression as "the theatre of revolt," further amplifies his meaning by explaining: "By theatre of revolt, I mean the theatre of the great insurgent modern dramatist, where myths of rebellion are enacted before a dwindling number of spectators in a flux of vacancy, bafflement, and accident." (p. 4) In resorting to the elemental theatre of antiquity for their paradigms for their brand of the theatre of revolt, both Artaud and Baraka have effected a union between Brustein's two categories of

For Artaud and Baraka, a return to this type of theatre opened up infinite possibilities to exploit the theatrical experience for its emotional and expressive power to stir the collective consciousness of its audience. Artaud sought to "terrify and awaken" his audiences from cultural and spiritual apathy by subjecting them to cruel actions, which, like the plague, would be at once an instrument and a vindicator of the purified consciousness. On the other hand, Baraka sought to transform his audiences by first cleansing them of the ugliness and degradation that have been foisted upon them by the subtending culture, and then teaching them how to arrive at new and higher levels of black racial consciousness. Baraka's derèglement de sens in the theatre was aimed ultimately at achieving this goal. For pre-eminently above all other pursuits, he was driven by an intense desire to unite the disparate elements of the black diaspora and restore "[black] people to their traditional greatness."⁵

It is precisely in this intense and unmitigated resolve to utilize the theatre as a prime instrument of raising black racial consciousness, that Baraka diverges radically and

movements in modern theatre.

⁵ Amiri Baraka, Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965 (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 140. In another essay in this volume, "Nationalism Vs PimpArt," Baraka underscores the important restorative role of black art: "Black Art was first the restoration of LIFE and the restoration of HOPE, that all of the humans would survive the reign of the beasts." Raise, p. 126.

irreconcilably from his European dramatic progenitor. While Artaud was concerned about rescuing Western culture (and its image in the theatre) from the moral and spiritual turpitude into which it had fallen, and while he was, indeed, impelled to assault the consciousness of his audiences, he was not driven, as Baraka has been, by a fierce sense of racial pride and celebration--and yet, inevitably--, by an equally fierce mood of anger and outrage against the subtending culture for robbing his people of this pride in the past.

It is possible, of course, to locate the source of Baraka's extreme ethnocentrism in the ethos of revolution during the decades of the 1960's and 1970's. Had he been living and writing in the 1920's and 1930's as Artaud was, he would not have benefited from the unique surge of racial and social unrest that characterised that time in America, and served to fuel his revolutionary goals. Of course, it is now an accepted fact of history that Baraka himself was one of the prime instigators of this racial rebellion: he shaped the epoch, even as the epoch shaped him. Hence, the Eliot dictum that a writer changes his tradition even while his tradition changes and influences him,⁶ certainly holds true for Baraka--and in retrospect, for his dramatic progenitor as

⁶ See T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in Twentieth Century Criticism: The Major Statements, ed. William J. Handy and Max Westbrook (New York: The Free Press, 1974), pp. 28-34.

well, as both were revolutionaries who changed the tradition they inherited.

Since the study has so far established that these two revolutionaries are literary kin in their mutual espousal of the concept of total theatre, but that the quintessential raison d'être of their theatres is irreconcilably different, it is necessary at this point to examine the specifics of Baraka's divergence from Artaud. Perhaps the most critical consequence of Baraka's emphasis on black racial consciousness and the resultant theme of national and racial liberation, is that he has had to ascribe a pre-eminent political role to his theatre.⁷ As a result, an important part of the dialectic of Baraka's works centers around the problem of conjoining poetics and politics.

This emphasis on political utility in Baraka's dramatic cosmology is perhaps his most striking point of divergence from his European paradigm. For while Artaud did uphold the necessity for a utilitarian theatre, he openly repudiated any politicizing of the theatre, preferring that it serve a metaphysical function. Of course, it is not difficult at this point to remember that it was precisely because of this fundamental difference in ideology that the apolitical Artaud broke allegiance with the Surrealists after they declared

⁷ In my interview with Baraka, he repeatedly stressed that the role of the black artist is to "make cultural revolution" and produce "political revolution." Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," p. 7, p. 9.

their political stance in 1926.⁸ Had Baraka, the avowed ideologue and politician, been born during Artaud's time, and had he been a colleague of Artaud, no doubt, a similar ideological clash would have irrevocably separated them, even as it has done posthumously for Artaud. It is well to remember at this point also, that it was a similar politically motivated ethic that separated the emerging Black Nationalist, Baraka, from the Beat literati, and ultimately forced him to reject their solipsistic and introverted form of artistic rebellion.⁹

The reason for this separation and inevitable divergence is located in the phenomenon of Black Aesthetics, of which Baraka, the black separatist par excellence, has been the prime artificer and advocate. Because this aesthetics (which is a direct outcome of the revolutionary ethos of the sixties and seventies), has created an entire new generation of militant black artists; and because of its central role in shaping Baraka's revisionist approach to his dramatic

⁸ For Artaud's own painful account of the reasons for, and the outcome of, this break with the newly politicized Surrealists, see Antonin Artaud, "In Total Darkness, or The Surrealist Bluff," in Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), pp. 137-145.

⁹ This is the type of artistic engagement that Ron Milner, a prominent advocate of Black Aesthetics, described as incestuous: "I tell you that art for art's sake is: incest!...We, black people, desperately need a healthy natural art form: art coming from an intercourse with life! Our lives!" Ron Milner, "Black Theater--Go Home!", in The Black Aesthetic, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971), p. 293.

forefather, the rest of this section will be devoted to exploring some of its key tenets.

In the Barakan dictum, any artistic statement by a black man should be:

The embracing of a total Black Aesthetic, which has always, naturally, informed our lives in our freest consciousness, and the abandonment of the oppressive, unnatural European aesthetic. The reassertion of Black Tradition, which is the totality and total complementarity of all arts and the artists as fellow priest-physician craftsmen, together.¹⁰

The ambiguity inherent in this postulate is one that has dogged Baraka throughout his entire artistic career. For while he is vociferously denouncing his European and Euro-American literary antecedents (because, for all their avant-gardism, their brand of rebellion ultimately failed to serve his ethnic goals),¹¹ he has also had to work within the delimitations of the very tradition he attempts to subvert.

¹⁰ LeRoi Jones, "The 3rd Annual Black Power Conference: Creativity Workshop Report and Resolution," in Black Theatre, 2 (1969), 7.

¹¹ Alluding to Baraka's poetic predecessors, William J. Harris notes that "Baraka's fathers are rebels." William J. Harris, The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), p. 30. Naturally, this analogy can be extended to include Baraka's dramatic forefather(s), as is suggested in the subject of this study. Ultimately, as the study seeks to demonstrate, Baraka has had to disengage himself not only from his rebel antecedents, but also from his rebel contemporaries. His self-flagellation over his apolitical Bohemian period is evident in the essay "Cuba Libre," where he ruefully states: "The rebels among us have become merely people like myself who grow beards and will not participate in politics." LeRoi Jones, Home: Social Essays (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966), p. 61.

The Promethean challenge confronting Baraka has been how to juggle skillfully between the process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the Euro-American tradition, without capitulating to its domineering hold, and without prostituting his intention to recover the lost African tradition.

This fundamental ambivalence has given rise to the characteristic vigorous, and all together engaging, dialectic that pervades the entire Barakan canon. For Baraka, the dynamics of this dialectic revolves around the tension between socio-political utility and artistic integrity. For inherent in the issue of creative destruction are the literary, social, and political architectonics of reconstructing the desired new moral and social order. The artistic act of "razing" and "raising," or dissolution and restitution, offers Baraka a unique opportunity to create a new kind of literature which he hopes will transform his race. For unlike the French West Indian surrealist, Aimé Césaire, for whom the ultimate telos of the artistic activity is the "rearrangement of reality," Baraka advocates "the creation of a new reality after the destruction of the old."¹²

It is unequivocally clear, then, that Baraka's symbolic murdering of his literary fathers, or his "parricidal

¹² Amiri Baraka, Daggers and Javelins: Essays, 1974-1979 (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1984), p. 200.

impulse," as William J. Harris has termed it,¹³ has been motivated primarily by his desire to create a discrete art reflecting a new black Weltanschauung, and as a corollary, a new and ennobled black Geist. In his famous essay on the role of black literature, "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature,'" Baraka clarifies this mandate:

If there is ever a Negro literature, it must disengage itself from the weak, heinous elements of the culture that spawned it, and use its very existence as evidence of a more profound America.¹⁴

Further, in the essay, "Not Just Survival: Revolution (Some Historical Notes on Afro-American Drama)," Baraka ascribes even more significance to this proviso by amplifying his meaning:

We need a drama that directly describes the situation of [black] people and tells us how we change it, that shows us our lives and gives us the responsibility for mobilizing ourselves around life and revolution rather than drifting impotently in support of death and bourgeois rule.¹⁵

In light of this dictate then, it is manifestly apparent that Baraka's aim is not to be a mere scion or an epigone of the Artaudian brand of revolutionary dramaturgy, for that would only perpetuate the type of vapid, imitative black art that he repudiates throughout the volume, Home, especially in the essays, "Black Writing," "Expressive Language," "Hunting Is Not Those Heads on the Wall," and "Myth of a Negro

¹³ William J. Harris, The Jazz Aesthetic, p. 28.

¹⁴ LeRoi Jones, Home, p. 115.

¹⁵ Amiri Baraka, Daggers and Javelins, p. 51.

Literature."¹⁶ In this latter essay, he warns that "as long as the Negro writer contents himself with the imitation of the useless ugly inelegance of the stunted middle-class mind...he will be a failure, and what is worse, not even a significant failure. Just another dead American."¹⁷ Baraka's comrade rebel and fellow Black Aesthetician, Ed Bullins, echoes these strictures with lapidary clarity:

We don't want to have a higher form of white art in black-face. We are working towards something entirely different and new that encompasses the soul and spirit of Black people, and that represents the whole experience of our being here in this oppressive land....¹⁸

¹⁶ As a matter of fact, the entire Barakan canon is marked by a similar repudiation of any second-rate black artistry for whatever reason(s)--especially if the black artist capitulates to the negative images foisted on him by the dominant culture. Baraka is unrelenting in his own resolution to avoid the type of frustrated artistry represented by Willie Best. In the poem of that same name, Baraka describes the plight of Willie Best in verse that is at once trenchant and poignant:

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.

LeRoi Jones, "A Poem For Willie Best," in The Dead Lecturer (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 18.

¹⁷ LeRoi Jones, Home, p. 115.

¹⁸ Marvin X, "Interview with Ed Bullins," in New Plays from the Black Theatre, Bantam Books, Inc., 1969, p. xii. Cited by Margaret B. Wilkerson, "Critics, Standards and Black Theatre," in The Theater of Black Americans, ed., Errol Hill, II, p. 124.

The high seriousness and evangelical dedication which inform the works of these fellow rebels and priests of the new "black arts," should not be underestimated. Baraka, who, himself is the high priest of this movement, sets the tone for this seriousness of purpose in "STATE/MENT," the final essay in Home.¹⁹ Because this essay is a compendium of the goals of the black artist; and because it will serve to delimitate the referents behind the Artaudian metamorphosis, it will be quoted in its entirety:

The Black Artist's role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it. His role is to report and reflect so precisely the nature of the society, and of himself in that society, that other men will be moved by the exactness of his rendering and, if they are black men, grow strong through this moving, having seen their own strength, and weakness; and if they are white men, tremble, curse, and go mad, because they will be drenched with the filth of their evil.

The Black Artist must draw out of his soul the correct image of the world. He must use this image to band his brothers and sisters together in common understanding of the nature of the world (and the nature of America) and the nature of the human soul.

The black Artist must demonstrate sweet life, how it differs from the deathly grip of the White Eyes. The Black Artist must teach the White eyes their deaths, and teach the black man how to bring these deaths about.

We are unfair, and unfair.
We are black magician, black art
s we make in black labs of the heart.

¹⁹ In the title of this final essay of Home, Baraka consummately exploits the political implications of the pun, "STATE/MENT." The conciseness of the title, and of the essay itself, adds a masterful summary to the entire volume.

The fair are
fair, and death
ly white.

The day will not save them
and we own
the night.²⁰

Against the background of this clear road map outlining the central points of Black Aestheticism, we can now venture into the "black labs of the heart" for a critical observation of arch "black magician," Amiri Baraka, revelling in his hermetic art as he skillfully transforms inherited European paradigms into his own discrete black expression.

II

We are attempting to take all the things that are positive in us, our music, our very strong religious expression, our own life style, and incorporate them into our art on a collective basis. Our aim is not only to become better artists, individually and collectively, but to create a uniform positive art.

Ed Bullins, in "Interview with Marvin X"

The Black artists must create new forms and new values, sing new songs (or purify old ones); and along with other Black authorities, he must create a new history, new symbols, myths and legends (and purify old ones by fire).

Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement"

²⁰ LeRoi Jones, Home, pp. 251-252.

We want a black poem. And a
 Black World.
 Let the world be a Black Poem
 And Let All black People Speak this Poem
 Silently

or LOUD

LeRoi Jones, "Black Art"

The hermetic art through which the Afro-American artist creates "new forms" and "sings new songs" is forged in the vast crucible of a rich African past, a past which is sanctified by its antiquity, but tainted by its more recent history of the black man being brought to the West in chains. For the black man, then, the West has always represented a tradition that is antipodal to his African past, and he has always been faced with the challenge of how to recover and retain significant elements of that past. Remarking on the unique historical crisis of the black man in the West, and the resultant ontological dilemma of his Western existence, Baraka protests that:

... to be brought to a country, a culture, a society, that was, and is, in terms of purely philosophical correlatives, the complete antithesis of one's own version of man's life on earth--that is the cruelest aspect of this particular enslavement.²¹

The crisis of the black artist in the West is a direct outgrowth of this painful fact of his bifurcated history. For

²¹ LeRoi Jones, "The Negro as Non-American: Some Backgrounds," in Blues People: Negro Music in White America (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1963), p. 1.

while the West is now his home,²² it also represents traditions that are antithetical to what makes him distinctively black. Having mastered the "[Western] semantic rituals of power"²³ --as the Rutgers and Howard Universities educated Baraka has so thoroughly done--, the black artist must use that mastery of Western literary forms and tradition to his advantage.

For radicals like Baraka, such an "advantage" means an appropriation of those very forms and traditions in order to deconstruct them and replace them with elements reflecting the élan vital of black culture rooted in the mosaic antiquity of a glorious African past. To accomplish this, a necessary first step for the black artist would be to dethrone the gods who reign in the "grey hideous space" of the West,²⁴ and resurrect and reinstate the lost gods of Africa, like the "lost god damballah" mentioned in "Black

²² In order to stress this fact, Baraka declared in one of his early poems, "Notes for a Speech":

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

LeRoi Jones, Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note (New York: Totem Press, 1961), p. 47. Of course, in his later works, Baraka radically moves away from this ambiguous attitude to Africa. The main point here is his emphasis on his national identity.

²³ LeRoi Jones, Home, p. 169.

²⁴ LeRoi Jones, "Black Dada Nihilismus," in The Dead Lecturer, p. 62.

Dada Nihilismus."²⁵ For Baraka, such a restitution is a vitally important part of recreating black history and culture. His acute historical sense of his race, and as a corollary, his creation of a literature in terms of that historicity, is a reflection of the neo-Hegelian concept of history as process, and is a concept which is crucial to the understanding of his aesthetics.

It is against this background that any consideration of Baraka's transformation of Artaudian dramatic theories can assume its full significance. For while Artaud's pioneering efforts at theatre reform offered Baraka "a kind of liberating mechanism out of Western theatre forms,"²⁶ it was inherently, and therefore, inevitably, limited because it did not, and--because of different nationalities, cultures, race, and milieu--could not encompass the unique experience of the black diaspora, so crucial to the artistic expression of the black man.

The Baraka-Artaud aesthetic conflict is nowhere more tense than on the crucial matter of the function of the mise en scène, which, ironically, is the very issue on which they do agree--to a point, that is, as has been demonstrated at the end of chapter four. For while they both utilize elements

²⁵ In the final Crow Jane poem, Baraka refers to the god, Damballah, as a "kind father." His emerging rejection of his European "fathers" is implicit in this poem. LeRoi Jones, The Dead Lecturer (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 53.

²⁶ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," MS., p. 22.

of spectacle to appeal to the consciousness of their audiences, the fact that Artaud's target is a general collective consciousness, while Baraka's appeal is specifically to a black collective consciousness, has resulted in a very engaging dialectic.

At the heart of this dialectic is the fact that Artaud's paradigm (the Balinese Theatre) does not provide his audience with the same immediate shared sense of racial identity and communality provided by Baraka's African heritage. Nor is Artaud's special stage language comprehensible to his audience in the same manner as Baraka's special stage language is comprehensible to his knowing and participating audience. And whereas throughout The Theater and its Double, Artaud repeats such general terms as "concrete language," "concrete physical language," "pure theatrical language," "language of gesture," "development in space," "language of space," "poetry of space," Baraka modifies and particularizes the meaning of such vague phrases to include specific elements of black language and culture, especially black music.

His revisionist approach to Artaud's "pure theatrical language" has its aetiology in his need to incorporate elements of African iconography, symbology, and mythology in his art in order to appeal to the collective consciousness of his audience. But because Baraka's aim is also to use the theatre as an instrument of pedagogy, he draws from certain

elements of popular culture that he thinks might appeal to his audience; however, this is only a secondary source for him.

Through the crucial process of artistic metamorphosis, Baraka substitutes Artaud's vague "language of the stage" with specific "extra-literary" elements, most of which are Africanesque in origin. Among these elements of transformation are: black music (ranging from jazz to Negro spirituals); black language (including slang, the dozens and signifying, as well as other elements of hipsterism or street language); folk tale and other elements of oral history; elements of Africanesque communal antiphony (including chants, revivalism, shamanism, "call-and-response," the "shout" and "field holler"); the talking drums; pageantry, rituals, and ceremonies; and dance (reflecting the rhythm and pulse of black people in celebration and defiance). Since black music and language are the principal informing agents of this new iconography and symbology, the discussion will now focus on their key role in the Barakan aesthetics.

Perhaps the most crucial element of transformation for Baraka is the all-important, all-embracing black American music, which is inseparably rooted in African music. Whereas Artaud summarily discusses music in less than one page of The Theatre and its Double, Baraka has written three books²⁷ and

²⁷ Blues People: Negro Music in White America (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1963); Black Music (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1967; and, with Amini Baraka, The Music:

numerous articles on the subject, thereby equipping himself subconsciously to use it as a tool to deconstruct his dramatic forefather. Further, whereas for Artaud, music is significant on the stage (as part of the mise en scène), but does not have any socio-political referents in or outside the theatre, for Baraka, music is an integral part of the entire black nation.

Baraka's music-based black aesthetics can be traced back to his historical perspective of the black man in America: the evolution of the Afro-American has a conjunctive development in the evolution of black music in America. According to Baraka, in "The Myth of a Negro Literature," "it [black music] is, indeed, a chronicler of the Negro's movement, from African slave to American slave, from Freedman to Citizen."²⁸ Further, in his monumental study of black music, Blues People,²⁹ Baraka alludes to the inseparability of the black American from his African roots, for it was "[t]he African cultures, the retention of some parts of these

Reflections on Jazz and Blues (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1987).

²⁸ LeRoi Jones, Home, p. 107.

²⁹ This work has won general high acclaim and has been regarded by some critics as the best on the subject of jazz. See, for example, Theodore R. Hudson, From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka: The Literary Works (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1973), p. 92.

cultures in America, and the weight of the stepculture [that] produced the American Negro. A new race."³⁰

As a result of this parallel historicity, Baraka regards black music as the entelechy of black life, and, not surprisingly, he establishes it as the ultimate paradigm for black art:

I want to use music as my persistent reference just because the development and transmutation of African music to American Negro music (a new music) represents to me this whole process in microcosm.³¹

As the quintessential expression of black life, black music represents the struggles, despair, and grief of a race pitted against the most inhuman circumstances conceivable; and yet, it is also the triumphant celebration of a defiant and indomitable spirit, made even stronger through peril and adversity. In Baraka's estimation, it was "Negro music alone...[that could draw the] strength and beauties out of the depth of the black man's soul."³² It was only this music--black soul--that could encompass the entire diapason of black existence, and represent "the emotional anthem of our lives."³³

³⁰ LeRoi Jones, Blues People: Negro Music in White America, p. 7.

³¹ LeRoi Jones, Blues People, pp. 7-8.

³² LeRoi Jones, Home, p. 106.

³³ Amiri Baraka, The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka (New York: Freundlich Books, 1984), p. 53.

Baraka attributes the inherent strength of black music to the fact that it is both spiritual and secular, expressive and functional. Whereas the tendency in Western culture has been to appreciate a work of art for its non-functionality, that is, primarily for its aesthetic appeal, in African culture, the aesthetics of a work of art is inseparable from its functionality. For the African and the Afro-American, an artifact is a dead work if it does not function as part of the life-blood of the culture. Baraka observes that, whereas:

One would not think of any particular use for Haydn's symphonies, except perhaps the "cultivation of the soul"... it was, and is, inconceivable in the African culture to make a separation between music, dancing, song, the artifact, and a man's life or his worship of his gods. Expression issued from life, and was beauty.³⁴

In functioning on both the spiritual and the secular levels, music has offered the African a vehicle of expression for his religious worship, and for the promulgation and celebration of certain values, customs, and rites. The talking drums, for example, are potent instruments of communication, as are the field hollers and yells. The expressive and spiritual content of such communication is linked to the fact that in the African ethos, the lines of distinction between spiritual and secular music are very thinly veiled. Baraka points out that this is linked to the concept of "Soul," the spirit or the life inherent in all

³⁴ LeRoi Jones, Blues People, p. 29.

things.³⁵ For the African, both types of music--the religious and the secular--are capable of expressing this "soul." Baraka amplifies his meaning:

The religious music might yearn for a crossing into a new life, a raising of this life onto "higher ground," an ultimate salvation of the person and their soul and freedom from this wearying slavery world.

The secular too would speak of a time when "the sun's gonna shine in my back door someday" or shout that things won't always be like this, meaning that there will be a time of more money, more love, more self-fulfillment--that such a time will surely come.³⁶

Using W. E. B. DuBois' tripartite characterization of the religion of the slave as his model (the preacher, the music, and the frenzy),³⁷ Baraka explains the spirituality and expressiveness of such distinct black modes of communication as the "call-and-response":

In the black musician, even of a secular bent, all three of these aspects of the black church are combined! The form of much black music is even in the Call and Response structure of Preacher and Congregation, plus the response of the audience in nightclub or concert hall is much like that of the fervent congregation. There are "Yes, sirs!" and "Yeh's" and even some "Amen's" shouted back at the musician, not just the silent murmurs of the Western concertgoer.

The black religious form expands past religion and historically permeates the entire culture,

³⁵ See Baraka's essay, "The Phenomenon of Soul in African-American Music," in Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka, The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1987), pp. 268-269.

³⁶ Amiri Baraka, "The Phenomenon of Soul in African-American Music," in The Music, p. 269.

³⁷ Amiri Baraka, "The Phenomenon of Soul in African-American Music," in The Music, p. 270.

whether manifested through the African-American nation's poets or its football running backs, who after scoring a touchdown, might do a Holy Roller wiggle and leap in the end zone to express their joy!³⁸

It is against the background of the religious significance of black music that we can best understand its powerful functioning in the secular life of the culture. Two distinct, though not mutually exclusive, religion-based elements of black music are worth mentioning at this point: communal antiphony and improvisation. Whereas Artaud's highly stylized Balinese-modelled presentations do not allow for any type of improvisations,³⁹ in the Barakan theatre, spontaneous expressiveness is part of its very life-blood. In my interview with Baraka, he alludes to the power of such spontaneous expressiveness in the theatre:

When we did Slave Ship, for instance, Archie Shepp's music sort of took the play out into the audience, with all the actors going around, shaking hands with the audience and singing, "When we gonna rise, when we gonna rise." That was very poignant the times that I saw it....You could see black people, and even white folks, moved, weeping,

³⁸ Amiri Baraka, "The Phenomenon of Soul in African-American Music," in The Music, p. 270.

³⁹ In the essay, "On the Balinese Theater," Artaud underscores this point: "These actors with their geometric robes seem to be animated hieroglyphs....One of the reasons for our delight in this faultless performance lies precisely in the use these actors make of an exact quantity of specific gestures, of well-trying mime at a given point....These mechanically rolling eyes, pouting lips, and muscular spasms, all producing methodically calculated effects which forbid any recourse to spontaneous improvisations.... [My underline]. Antonin Artaud, The Theatre and its Double (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958), pp. 54-55.

feeling vindicated spiritually. And that's what [black] drama can do.⁴⁰

This urge to participate in communal antiphony and spontaneous expressiveness has its origin in the African concept of the creative act. In the African ethos, the artifact is not as important as the act of creating it; for it is only during the process of creating that the vital spirit of the people can have its fullest expression. Baraka develops this important concept in his thought-provoking essay, "Hunting Is Not Those Heads on the Wall." Drawing a clear distinction between the reified art object and the process he calls "art-ing,"⁴¹ Baraka stresses the importance of the flow of kinetic energy in, and through, the artist, out to a receptive audience. For Baraka, this is vital because he feels that:

Even the artist is more valuable than his artifact, because the art process goes on in his mind. But the process itself is the most important quality because it can transform and create, and its only form is possibility.⁴²

For the black artist, then, fixity is replaced by fluidity, stasis by dynamic movement, as he tries to tap the creative energy of the artistic process. Hence, Artaud's exaltation of the "faultless performance" of his "animated manikins" (the Balinese dancers), falls outside all referents for the

⁴⁰ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," MS., p. 15.

⁴¹ LeRoi Jones, Home, p. 175.

⁴² LeRoi Jones, Home, p. 174.

Barakan process-oriented aesthetics. In his insightful commentary on "Hunting Is Not Those Heads on the Wall," William C. Fischer alludes to this aspect of the Barakan aesthetics by underscoring the view of

...the black tradition as one of Art-ing, an immersion in the process of creating, as reflected for instance by the continuous cycle of instantaneous creation-disappearance-re-creation that is implicit in the improvisational forms of music and speech at the heart of black expressive modes.⁴³

The essay, "Hunting Is Not Those Heads on the Wall," is of seminal importance in the Barakan canon as it contains the basic idea developed in several other works, especially Blues People. In one of the most important essays of this work, "Swing-From Verb to Noun," Baraka notes that the Euro-American culture tends to give precedence to the "noun" (that is, to the art object) over the "verb" (meaning, the artistic process). He cites this as the reason for the diminished improvisational impulse in the works of some of the 1930's white jazz practitioners, especially Benny Goodman. "Swing" or the verb force, lost its impact in the works of these artists. Baraka amplifies his meaning, thus:

Swing, the verb, meant a simple reaction to the music (and as it developed in verb usage, a way of reacting to anything in life). As it was formalized, and the term and the music taken further out of context, swing became a noun that

⁴³ William C. Fischer, "The Pre-Revolutionary Writings of Imamu Amiri Baraka," in The Massachusetts Review 14, no. 2 (1973): 293.

meant a commercial popular music in cheap imitation of a kind of Afro-American music.⁴⁴

However, Baraka's admiration of the works of Archie Shepp, Sonny Rollins, Don Cherry, and John Coltrane is linked to the expression of "swing" in their music.

Because jazz and its cognates and derivatives, blues and bebop, represent the developed perfection of the process of "art-ing," Baraka devotes considerable attention to these distinctly Afro-American phenomena throughout his writings. In his autobiography, for example, Baraka reflects on the integral role that these music forms traditionally have played in black life:

Blues is our poem of new world consciousness, jazz our articulation that we is [sic] familiar with all the shims and shams of the machine....Blues is our father and our mother our grandparents our history, plus our daily black soulful lives as brothers and sisters against and within the reality and the idea of this place. Blues is the basic pulse and song, the fundamental description and reaction...the music of a people, a whole nation, expressing that nation's psyche, its "common psychological development." And jazz, as Langston says, is the child, the blue/black prodigy of the earth mother/father, that wants to take its inherited sensitivity...and presume to claim (to know and understand) all that exists in America black brown red yellow or white.⁴⁵

Music, then, for Baraka represents the past, present and future of black life; and because of its strong improvisational impulses, it has the power to collapse the

⁴⁴ LeRoi Jones, Blues People, pp. 212-213.

⁴⁵ Amiri Baraka, Autobiography, p. 55.

distinctions in time, and render black life as one continuous flow of kinetic energy and "soul."

It should be noted at this point, however, that Baraka is by no means the first black writer to underscore the importance of music as a double for black life and black art. As Baraka himself observes in the quote above, Langston Hughes was very sensitive to the various nuances of musical expression in black art. Several other prominent black writers, for example, Ralph Ellison (especially in Invisible Man), and James Baldwin (especially in Blues for Mister Charlie) also explore the potential of black music to express black life. In exploring the vast potential of black music as a double for black life and art, Baraka excels in an area of artistic expression in which his dramatic progenitor, Artaud (despite all his artistic innovations), was severely limited because he did not have any parallel paradigm(s). The rest of this chapter will examine some of the specific music-related iconography and symbology that Baraka uses to transform his European dramatic antecedent.

III

To begin at the beginning, the frenetic religiosity of Afro-American slave music was clearly an attempt at establishing a vocabulary of release by a people whose languages were conscientiously taken from them by slave owners, who even went so far as to destroy their drums, a major means of communication. It is from this perspective that the development of Afro-American music must be viewed: as the progressive refinement of a sublimated vocabulary, wherein that which is most heartfelt is stated loudly and clearly but never directly, never in so many dangerous words.

A. B. Spellman, "Not Just Whistling Dixie"

The influence of music on Afro-American culture is perhaps no where more strongly felt than on its language. Black language is unique in that it reflects the polyphonic rhythms and tonal variations of black music. This symbiotic relationship between black music and black language has its prime referent in the African talking drums, in which the music and the language are one and the same artistic expression. Black language, then, like the music, is an affirmation and celebration of the life of black people.

It is against this background of the inherent power of black language, that Baraka employs it freely throughout his works--both to affirm his culture and to deconstruct the alien European culture. Like black music, black language is a form of rebellion, and its very use constitutes a very real act of rebellion and defiance. In a recent interview, Baraka

protested against any interference from the status quo regarding his use of black language:

The problem was that when you actually printed real [black] people's speech, that was shocking, because most of the formalistic Western theatre didn't deal with people's speech at all....They didn't deal with it in terms of its rhythms and syntax either. I try to deal with living speech and I try to deal with the way that people really talk, what they really say. I try to deal with how they actually sound....I have no choice--not until people change the way they speak.⁴⁶

The manifestation of "real people's speech" in Baraka's works takes many forms. It is evident in aspects of black vernacular styles such as the dozens, sounding, and signification;⁴⁷ scatting and songification; chanting and shamanism; as well as the scream and the shout. In all of these, music is the constant referent, always informing the content as well as the form, both of which imitate the repetition and inversion process of jazz.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," MS., pp. 18-19.

⁴⁷ The terms "dozens," "sounding," and "signifying" are part of the highly complex ritual of verbal expression among black American males in the street culture. Thomas Kochman defines "signifying" as "insults which are hurled directly at the person." He refers to the "dozens" as insults hurled "at your opponent's family, especially the mother." 'Sounding' is another term for playing the dozens." See Thomas Kochman, "Toward an Ethnography of Black American Speech Behavior," in A Pluralistic Nation: The Language Issue in The United States, eds. Margaret A. Lourie and Nancy Faïres Conklin (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, 1978), pp. 94-116.

⁴⁸ This is a process that William J. Harris describes as "jazzification" or the "jazz aesthetic." Harris uses the jazz aesthetic to explore Baraka's transformation of his poetic antecedents. See William J. Harris, The Poetry and Poetics of

As William J. Harris has noted, jazz is the ideal paradigm for deconstructing the dominant tradition, because it is a "signifying" tradition.⁴⁹ It rearranges reality and brings it into alignment with a world view more consonant with the black Weltanschauung. In order to incorporate all various complexes of that reality, the black artist needed a form that would give him flexibility while allowing for a sensitive representation. Baraka found jazz (and its expression in the black vernacular referred to above) to be the perfect vehicle for such an expression. As Harris has also observed, the creative destruction of Baraka's jazz aesthetic takes many forms, namely, "rejection, extremism/completion, violence, dismemberment, creative anger, and revolution."⁵⁰

In the act of debunking the dominant culture through these various forms, the black artist is in effect creating a discrete black art, reflective of the black ethos. The affirmation of black music and language is as crucial as the survival of the race. What seems like improper or incomprehensible language to the subtending culture is perhaps a sine qua non of black existence. Baraka underscores the importance of this point in his essay, "Expressive Language":

Amiri Baraka (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985).

⁴⁹ William J. Harris, The Jazz Aesthetic, p. 19.

⁵⁰ William J. Harris, The Jazz Aesthetic, p. 18.

Being told to "speak proper," meaning that you become fluent with the jargon of power, is also a part of not "speaking proper." That is, the culture which desperately understands that it does not "speak proper," or is not fluent with the terms of social strength, also understands somewhere that its desire to gain such fluency is done at a terrifying risk. The bourgeois Negro accepts such risk as profit. But does close-ter (in the context of "jes a close-ter, walk with thee") mean the same thing as closer? Close-ter, in the term of its user is, believe me, exact. It means a quality of existence, of actual physical disposition perhaps...in its manifestation as a tone and rhythm by which people live, most often in response to common modes of thought best enforced by some factor of environmental emotion that is exact and specific.⁵¹

The impulse behind Baraka's artistic expression (and his necessary transformation of his European antecedents) is to be found in this need to present an "exact and specific" rendering of black life. His deliberate incorporation of black music and black vernacular elements in his writing is perhaps his quintessential act of artistic rebellion. For even when he uses European methods such as expressionism or even dadaism (as will be discussed in the following chapter), he automatically transforms them in content and form to reflect his black racial consciousness.

As Baraka indicated to me when I interviewed him, Artaud, finally, could only "suggest a liberating mechanism out of Western theatre form." But the incipient ideas of theatre reform served Baraka well. For it showed him the way to return to his own roots and draw from its rich resources

⁵¹ LeRoi Jones, Home, pp. 171-172.

grounded in African antiquity. The result has been the development of a distinctly black poetics initiated and promulgated by Amiri Baraka. The full significance of these transformation can only be evaluated in the context of their application in Baraka's work. Towards this end, Larry Neal's concluding remarks in Black Fire prepares us to view Baraka's performance in his plays, in chapter six, following.

What this has all been leading us to say is that the poet must become a performer, the way James Brown is a performer--loud, gaudy and racy. He must take his work where his people are: Harlem, Watts, Philadelphia, Chicago and the rural South. He must learn to embellish the context in which the work is executed; and, where possible, link the work to all usable aspects of the music. For the context of the work is as important as the work itself. Poets must learn to sing, dance and chant their works, tearing into the substance of their individual and collective experiences. We must make literature move people to a deeper understanding of what this thing is all about, be a kind of priest, a black magician, working juju with the word on the world.⁵²

As we will see in the following chapter, Baraka the performer par excellence converts the stage into a veritable living entity reflecting the tortured consciousness of his black heroes.

⁵² Larry Neal, "An Afterword," in Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing, ed. LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1968), p. 655.

CHAPTER 6

THE COMPLETE CONSORT DANCING TOGETHER:

THEORIES WEDDED TO PRACTICE

What we demand is the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form, the unity of revolutionary political content and the highest possible perfection of artistic form.

Mao Tse-tung, Selected Readings

Form and content are both mutually expressive of the whole. And they are both equally expressive...each have [sic] an identifying motif and function [....] We want different contents and different forms because we have different feelings. We are different peoples.

LeRoi Jones, Black Music

Let the combination of morality
and inhumanity
begin.

LeRoi Jones, "Short Speech to My Friends"

I

Amiri Baraka's symbolic call for action in the poem, "Short Speech to My Friends,"¹ was only one of the numerous instances in his early writings when he expressed the ultimate telos towards which all his artistic impulses moved: the marriage of the act and the word in his drama. For Baraka, the pragmatist par excellence, the mere concept of

¹ See LeRoi Jones, The Dead Lecturer (New York: Grove Press, 1964), pp. 29-30.

total theatre promulgated by Antonin Artaud in his theoretical writings ultimately could not suffice. Baraka's need to mobilize black people into new areas of consciousness, socially, and politically, necessitated dramatic action which could be translated into real-life action.

But the first act that Baraka needed to perform was to disengage himself from his dramatic forefather, either by way of modifying, or totally rejecting, aspects of his theories. In fact, the development of Baraka's drama can be seen as a movement away from all his European (and American) dramatic antecedents towards the creation of a "post-American form"² --that is, Black Aesthetic forms that can accomodate a union of political utility and artistic integrity. His plays are an attempt to negotiate that peaceful and mutually beneficial co-existence of ethics and aesthetics that he alluded to in his dramatic manifesto, "The Revolutionary Theatre."³

However, as has been pointed out in previous chapters of this study, Baraka's major problem has been just how to create a "post-American form" within the delimitations of both the European and the African-American ethos. The search for such a form has resulted in a continuous process of experimentations in which dominant elements of the African

² Amiri Baraka, Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965 (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 34.

³ LeRoi Jones, Home: Social Essays (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966), p. 212.

tradition are incorporated into Euro-American formal modes. At times, Baraka completely subverts these formal modes to create new forms that can accommodate black ethnic consciousness in crisis.

Accordingly, in Baraka's dramatic cosmology, formal modes such as the morality play, the minstrel show, and allegory are given new meanings to reflect his racial themes. In addition, Baraka employs surrealist and expressionistic techniques only to the degree that they promote black racial consciousness. Always, the informing elements of change are rooted in black music, black language, black mythology, and black history.

Throughout most of the plays, Baraka attempts to achieve a unified historical and racial consciousness by couching his message within a ritualistic framework. This unified black consciousness is achieved because of:

the strong presence of symbols, characterizations, themes, and language styles which are frequently repeated from play to play and over a period of time, with the result that easily recognized patterns are established which have the function of reaffirming the values and particular commitment of the audience for whom the plays are written.⁴

As one of the chief elements of effecting a communal art in which the values of black life are reaffirmed, ritual therefore assumes a pre-eminent role in Barakan drama and at the same time distinguishes him from his European prototype.

⁴ Shelby Steele, "'White Port and Lemon Juice,'": Notes on Ritual in the New Black Theater," Black World (June 1973), p. 4.

For, whereas Artaud admired the ritual activities of the Balinese dancers because they demonstrated "a certain number of perfectly learned and above all masterfully applied conventions";⁵ and whereas Artaud was primarily interested in the "spiritual tone" of these rituals,⁶ Baraka was pre-eminently concerned with more secular rituals rooted in black culture and history, as well as in the social and political issues affecting the lives of blacks. Initiated by Baraka, all the dramatists of the Black Arts Theatre sought to exploit ritual as a means of affirming shared values with their audiences. In identifying the distinction between this type of ritual and conventional (religious) ritual, Shelby Steele notes that:

Ritual in the New Black Theater is achieved through the repetition of patterns, symbols and values from drama to drama rather than the traditional religious method of repeating a single ceremony until it becomes ritual.⁷

In order to maintain the element of drama and suspense within these repeated patterns, the black artist varies his themes "so that the message is the same but the form through which it is communicated varies from play to play."⁸ However,

⁵ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 55.

⁶ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, p. 55.

⁷ Shelby Steele, "'White Port and Lemon Juice': Notes on Ritual in the New Black Theater," p. 7.

⁸ Shelby Steele, "'White Port and Lemon Juice': Notes on Ritual in the New Black Theater," p. 7.

because on the surface these ever-changing forms and treatments would tend to create the impression of artistic unevenness, this chapter will attempt to establish thematic as well as technical links between the plays.

The discussion will center around four major works representing Baraka's early drama--Dutchman, The Slave, The Baptism, and The Toilet--all written in 1964; and three major works representing his later nationalist and socialist periods--Experimental Death Unit #1 and A Black Mass (1965), and Slave Ship (1969). The choice of plays for discussion is intended to represent the entire diapason of Baraka's experimentation with different forms, modes, and thematic treatments.

However, two categories of plays have been omitted from this discussion. First, the very minor short pieces such as Black Power Chant, Home on the Range, and Police have been omitted because they represent only a rudimentary treatment of the Black Cultural Nationalist themes which Baraka explores more fully in his major plays of that period. Secondly, some later plays have been omitted because Baraka himself was not very clear about their scope and design. Among these plays are A Recent Killing, The Sidney Poet Heroical, and Junkies Are Full of Shhh. Baraka himself omitted these plays from the collection, The Motion of History and Other Plays, citing as his main reason the fact

that he was "searching and confused,"⁹ and that the plays were "flawed ideologically."¹⁰ Further, Baraka justified his omission of these plays from the volume The Motion of History by stating that he wanted to "go on to other things, through work and study, to gain more clarity and a deeper analysis."¹¹ Baraka's statement regarding these omissions from The Motion of History is equally applicable to this dissertation: "The gaps in this book are gaps only because of the absence of the works mentioned."¹²

There are certain identifiable patterns of development in Baraka's experimentation with different forms and modes. For example, there is a general movement away from the dominant naturalistic mode of the earlier plays toward more expressionistic elements in the later plays. It should be pointed out, however, that Baraka's approach is essentially exploratory, and as a result, it is not uncommon to find a mixture of naturalistic and expressionist elements in some plays, for example Dutchman and The Slave. And though The Toilet is predominantly naturalistic in form and language, a

⁹ Amiri Baraka, Introd., The Motion of History and Other Plays (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1978), p. 12.

¹⁰ Amiri Baraka, Introd., The Motion of History and Other Plays, p. 13.

¹¹ Amiri Baraka, The Motion of History and Other Plays, p. 12-13.

¹² Amiri Baraka, The Motion of History and Other Plays, p. 16.

contemporaneously written play, The Baptism, has a combination of naturalistic and surrealistic elements.

This variation in techniques within the earlier plays foreshadows some of the sharp differences in technique between these plays and the later drama. For example, the sparse and austere setting of The Toilet contrasts sharply with the ornate setting and great spectacle of A Black Mass and the elaborate pageantry of Slave Ship. In addition, the language varies from the strictly naturalistic expression of The Toilet to the "meta-language"¹³ of The Slave, and the more overtly propagandistic political rhetoric of some of the later plays.

In addition to demonstrating the range of Baraka's experimentations with forms and techniques, the choice of plays for discussion is also intended to reflect certain developmental patterns in his treatment of theme. For example, whereas Dutchman and the earlier plays concentrate more on assimilationist themes and the resultant weakened black identity, the later plays, especially Slave Ship, focus on the assertion and celebration of positive black identity and values. In addition, the more introspective treatment of

¹³ Baraka uses this word in The Slave: "we need, ahem, a meta-language. We need some thing not included here." Dutchman and The Slave (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1964), p. 45. As the Slave introduces the dream sequence at the beginning of the play, he realises that regular discursive language could not suffice and that a "meta-language" is required to portray the surrealistic sequence of events.

theme and character in the earlier plays give way in the later plays to more overtly political and propagandistic messages meant to promote positive black identity.

To reflect Baraka's ideological changes, and the resultant shift in thematic emphasis and treatment, the plays will be discussed in a roughly chronological order. Since the historical and theoretical framework of the previous chapters have really been a prelude to the actual elucidation of Baraka's drama, the present discussion will place great emphasis on the aesthetic principles governing each play. Hence, in addition to the examination of Baraka's rigorous modification of forms, attention will focus on other elements of transformation, such as Baraka's infinite linguistic experimentations.

The one constant amidst the flux of manifold forms and modes has been Baraka's unswerving resolve to create an art form that will ultimately reflect the raised consciousness of black people and commit them to the struggle for political liberation. Baraka realised that this could only be done by presenting his audience with positive role models. The discussion of the plays will therefore chronicle Baraka's movement away from the assimilationist themes and concerns of the earlier plays, towards a more positive assertion of absolute negritude¹⁴ in the later plays. For, whereas the

¹⁴ The term was coined by Léopold Sédar Senghor and made popular by Aimé Césaire. Both artists were leading proponents of the 1930's Negritude Movement. Baraka's goal in his later

earlier plays portray "black men in transition,"¹⁵ the later plays replace the portrait of the "weak Hamlets"¹⁶ with stronger heroes who demonstrate "[h]ow we triumphed."¹⁷

Throughout this process, Baraka's acute sense of history is ever present. His recreation of the black hero is really a reflection of his re-interpretation of history through rituals and myths, especially in the later plays. He recreates these myths and ritual in a deliberate attempt to make them more meaningful for blacks. As he tells us in Raise, the search for a "post-American form" is fueled by this very desire to produce "[p]lays where history is absolutely meaningful and contemporary."¹⁸ It is ultimately through this redefinition of history--and concomitantly, the redefinition of the role of the black artist and the identity of the black man--in terms of the African ethos that Baraka is able to go beyond Artaud's theorizations and create plays that reflect the goals of the Black Aesthetician.

drama is to show how absolute negritude can be expressed in life and in art.

¹⁵ A term first used by Larry Neal in "The Black Arts Movement." In The Black American Writer, ed. C. W. E. Bigsby (Deland, Florida: Everett/Edwards, 1969), II, p. 194.

¹⁶ LeRoi Jones, Home, p. 214.

¹⁷ Amiri Baraka, Raise Race Rays Raze, p. 33.

¹⁸ Amiri Baraka, Raise Race Rays Raze, p. 34.

II

Plays of specific finding. Plays of human occasion. That is, where is the confrontation (between life and "death"), the wrench of soul and white shit, ugliest. Bring in the image of man, and evolution triumphant again.

Amiri Baraka, "What the Arts Need Now"

One of the recurring thematic concerns of Baraka's early plays is the confrontation between a sensitive protagonist and a hostile environment. Invariably, the sensitive protagonist falls prey to the overpowering juggernaut forces without him. In Baraka's Obie award-winning Dutchman (1964),¹⁹ Clay, the sensitive "would-be poet"²⁰ and black protagonist, becomes the victim of the white bitch-goddess, Lula (America), when he goes too far with his assimilation into white culture. Because Dutchman--in both its title and content--is so rich with mythic significance, it is not surprising that the confrontation between its two protagonists has attracted a welter of diverse critical responses. However, in light of the present focus on Baraka's experimentation with form and content, the discussion will

¹⁹ It was mainly as a result of the phenomenal success of Dutchman in the early sixties that Baraka became nationally and internationally known. This play has received more critical attention than any other of Baraka's works.

²⁰ LeRoi Jones, Dutchman and The Slave (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1964), p. 35. All subsequent references to these plays will be from this text.

focus on the major mythic symbols and the major theme: the search for black identity and positive values.

On the literal level, the play's outline is quite simple. It involves the encounter between two people, Clay, a "twenty-year-old Negro," and Lula, a "thirty-year-old white woman," both riding on the subway "[i]n the flying underbelly of the city" of New York (p. 3). After many suspicious glances at each other, the two strike up a conversation (initiated by Lula, the aggressor), and soon they plan to go to a party together and then spend the night at Lula's apartment (again, all initiated by Lula). The conversation between the two soon turns into bantering during which Lula taunts Clay about his aspirations to be part of middle class white America:

Lula.[mock smile]....What've you got that jacket and tie on in all this heat for? And why're you wearing a jacket and tie like that? Did your people ever burn witches or start revolutions over the price of tea? Boy, those narrow-shoulder clothes come from a tradition you ought to feel oppressed by. A three-button suit and striped tie? Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go to Harvard.

Clay.My grandfather was a night watchman.

Lula.And you went to a colored college where everybody thought they were Averell Harriman.

Clay.All except me.

Lula.And who did you think you were? Who do you think you are now? (pp. 18-19)

Throughout their tense repartee, Lula constantly raises the question of Clay's identity, until finally, her jabbing remarks force him to take a definite stand about who he really is. Shocked by his violent non-apologetic assertions,

Lula stabs him to death, solicits the aid of on-lookers to throw his body off the train, and then straightens up herself while preparing for her next victim--another young black intellectual who enters the train at the next stop. As the short two-scene play ends, the reader is left with the distinct impression that this vicious murderous cycle will be repeated.

The issue of black identity--its expression or repression--and the survival of black racial pride, seem to be Baraka's main concern in this play. As his spokesman, Clay expresses the agony of the soul-struggle the black man experiences as he attempts to break out of the old Uncle Tom stereotype and reveal the "renegade/behind the mask."²¹ In the essay, "LeRoi Jones Talking," Baraka explains that "Clay is a young boy trying desperately to become a man. Dutchman is about the difficulty of becoming a man in America."²² In exploring that difficulty through the dynamics of an inter-racial relationship in racist white America, Baraka exploits the confrontation between Lula and Clay on the personal as well as the social level. As he states in one of his essays, "[t]he play is about one white girl and one Negro boy...in

²¹ LeRoi Jones, "A Poem For Willie Best," in The Dead Lecturer (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 26.

²² LeRoi Jones, Home, p. 188.

what I hope was a revelation of private and shared anguish...."²³

However, the play gains its strength, not so much from its overtly racial theme, but from the consummate artistic build up of the context of this "private and shared anguish." The first scene represents an accretion of images centering around black middle-class assimilationist attitudes and white mockery of those attitudes. Insisting that she knows Clay like "the palm of [her] hand" (p. 17), Lula leads up to the point where she tells him to pretend that he is not black:

So we'll pretend the air is light and full of perfume.... And we'll pretend the people cannot see you. That is, the citizens. And that you are free of your own history. And I am free of my history. We'll pretend that we are both anonymous beauties smashing along through the city's entrails. (p. 21)

White America (represented by Lula) lures the would-be black Baudelaire to suppress his racial pride and capitulate to its dictates (p. 19). The tension is made even more acute because Lula functions as a goad to uncover these attitudes. But while she attacks Clay for his middle-class mask, she baits him as a possible sexual victim:

Lula. [becoming annoyed that he will not dance, and becoming more animated as if to embarrass him still further]
Come on, Clay...let's do the thing. Uhh! Uhh! Clay! Clay! Clay! You middle-class black bastard. Forget your social-working mother for a few seconds and let's knock stomachs. Clay, you liver-lipped white man. You would-be Christian. You ain't no nigger, you're just a

²³ LeRoi Jones, "LeRoi Jones Talking," in Home, p. 187.

dirty white man. Get up, Clay. dance with me,
 Clay.
 Clay. Lula! Sit down, now. Be cool.
 Lula. [mocking him, in a wild dance]
 Be cool. Be cool. That's all you
 know...shaking that wildroot cream-oil on your
 knotty head, jackets buttoning up to your
 chin, so full of white man's words. Christ.
 God. Get up and scream at these people. Like
 scream meaningless shit in these hopeless
 faces.
 [She screams at people in train, still
 dancing]
 Red trains cough Jewish underwear for
 keeps!...Clay. Clay, you got to break out.
 Don't sit there dying the way they want you to
 die. Get up. (p. 31)

By the end of the first scene Lula's verbal flagellation reaches a high point as she accuses Clay of being a murderer --that is, annihilating his true identity as a black man. At this point, it becomes apparent that her repeated expression of concern about his manhood is motivated, not so much by any desire to promote it, but rather to complete the process of eviration she initiated at the beginning of the play. As Jerome Klinkowitz has observed, at this point, "the transposition is complete. Lula has shifted a flirtatious come-on to a cultural indictment."²⁴ Commenting on this transposition, Werner Sollors notes that "the protagonists change their functions to themselves, to each other, to the other train riders, and as artistic self-projections."²⁵

²⁴ Jerome Klinkowitz, "LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka): Dutchman as Drama," Negro American Literature Forum, 7-9 (1973-1975), 124.

²⁵ Werner Sollors, Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism" (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 125.

In a three-page verbal retaliation, Clay gives unbridled expression to his long-repressed anger and aggression. He repudiates all that Lula stands for, and in particular, he rejects the denigrating images of black man she has attempted to foist upon him throughout the action of the play. In a "[s]udden scream frightening the whole coach," Clay lashes out:

Don't you tell me anything! If I'm a middle-class fake white man...let me be. And let me be in the way I want....And I'm the great would-be poet. Yes. That's right! Poet. Some kind of bastard literature...all it needs is a simple knife thrust. Just let me bleed you, you loud whore, and one poem vanished. A whole people of neurotics, struggling to keep from being sane. And the only thing that would cure the neurosis would be your murder. Simple as that. I mean if I murdered you, then other white people would begin to understand me....If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn't have needed that music. She could have talked very straight and plain about the world. No metaphors. No grunts....When all it needs is that simple act. Murder. Just murder! Would make us all sane. (pp. 34-35)

In this volatile outburst, Clay is both triumphant and defeated. For while he vigorously asserts his identity, his rebellion is, alas, only one of words:

....I'd rather be a fool. Insane. Safe with my words, and no deaths, and clean, hard thoughts, urging me to new conquests. (p. 35)

In choosing to remain safe with his own words, Clay chooses the path of least resistance and pays the tragic consequences. According to Larry Neal, "[w]hen Clay finally

digs himself it is too late."²⁶ His tragic flaw is that he only makes verbal gestures towards the type of revolution needed to exorcise white America of the neurosis of racial hatred. Baraka's implicit thematic statement in this is that the artist must function beyond his words--he must conjoin art and politics so that he can have an effective tool to bring about national liberation for blacks. This is in keeping with Baraka's concept of history and the rise of the black man as a revolutionary process. Clay tragically dissociates himself from this process when he declares:

My people's madness. Hah! That's a laugh. My people. They don't need me to claim them. They got legs and arms of their own. Personal insanities. (pp.35-36)

For Baraka, the emerging Black Nationalist, expression of the authentic black self must be accompanied by revolutionary words and deeds. In other words, the black man must be truly revolutionary if he is to survive in America.

In choosing to couch this message within a multiple mythic framework, Baraka expands the personal, social, and political implications of the play. His serious intent to exploit the mythic possibilities of his theme is announced in the very first stage direction. We are told explicitly that the play's setting is: "In the flying underbelly of the city. Steaming hot, and summer on top, outside, Underground. the subway heaped in modern myth" (p. 4).

²⁶ Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," The Black American Writer, II, 195.

While the action of the play is firmly grounded in the realism of the New York subway in the turbulent decade of the 1960's, Baraka also places it within the vast continuum of world history from the creation of the first man. Hence, Clay can be seen as a twentieth century Adam who is tempted by a modern Eve--Lula, who symbolically boards the subway with a bag full of apples. After she goads Clay to accept the first apple, calculatingly, she informs him that "eating apples together is always the first step" (p. 11). In accepting the apple, Clay symbolically accepts the tragic consequences of his later attempt to partake of the forbidden sexual fruit of white America represented by Lula. His fall is metaphorically foreshadowed in the apple-eating scene.

In addition to his use of the creation myth, Baraka also draws from the legend of the Flying Dutchman. According to John V. Hagopian, Baraka most likely came across this legend in his study of German while in college. Translating Elisabeth Frenzel's German version, Hagopian explains the legend:

The Flying Dutchman is condemned to roam the seas to the end of time, unless he is redeemed by the faithful love of a woman.²⁷

Hagopian contends that the subway is a modern version of the Flying Dutchman, and that the passengers who passively watch

²⁷ John V. Hagopian, "Another Ride on Jones's Subway," College Language Association Journal, 21 (1977-1978), 271.

Lula's murderous deed are the counterparts of the ghostly crew of the condemned legendary ship.

Reflecting a more historical reading, Lloyd Brown links the mythic theme of Dutchman with the Dutch slave traders, who reportedly brought the first slaves to the New World.²⁸ According to Brown, Clay's temptation and fall are also linked to the cursed legacy slavery left America. For "slavery insured the loss of American innocence quite early in American history."²⁹ Against the background of these myths, the inevitable failure in the relationship between Lula and Clay assumes more significance. Clay's tragedy resides in his capitulation to this accursed aspect of his history. As his name suggests, he becomes a malleable victim to the forces of history. When he eventually attempts rebel, it is too late.

Baraka's use of myth in Dutchman forshadows its role in all his other plays. Whereas Artaud assigns a metaphysical and spiritual role to myth, Baraka uses myth in his works only when it informs a greater understanding of socio-political-cultural issues related to the lives of blacks. Hence, in Dutchman, the creation myth is invoked, not for any spiritual import, but to show the inevitable fall of the black race when it capitulates to the dictates of an

²⁸ Lloyd Brown, Amiri Baraka (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), p. 144.

²⁹ Lloyd Brown, Amiri Baraka, p. 144.

oppressor race. Further, in using myth in this play to explore the ontological dilemma of a black male searching for meaningful definition of his identity, Baraka exploits the power of the theatre to deal with psychological conflicts--a function which Artaud repudiated. For Artaud, "drama does not develop as a conflict of feelings but as a conflict of spiritual states."³⁰

Baraka treatment of the theme of the divided black consciousness takes a different turn in his next play, The Slave.³¹ Whereas Dutchman deals with a protagonist who fails to act, its companion piece portrays a protagonist, Walker Vessels, who does act, but who in effect remains paralysed because of his self-hate and his nihilistic tendencies. Like Clay, Walker is a soi-disant intellectual whose major conflict arises from his ambiguous attitude to white culture. And like Clay, he is a "black man in transition," trying to deal with the passage from a "slave" to an intellectual who has assimilated elements of white culture. But unlike Clay,

³⁰ Antonin Artaud, The Theater and its Double, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 53.

³¹ The Slave was written in 1964 in the wake of the resoundingly successful reception of Dutchman. The plays were published together and are often read as companion pieces. See, for example, John Lindberg, "'Dutchman' and 'The Slave': Companions in Rebellion," Black Academy Review, 2 (Spring 1971), Nos. 1-2, 101-107. However, The Slave remains a secondary work in terms of critical acclaim. According to Werner Sollors, The Slave is a "'Son-of-Dutchman' kind of work." Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest For a "Populist Modernism," p. 134.

Walker from the outset refuses to respond passively to this culture.

The action of the play revolves around Walker's confrontation with his former wife, Grace Easley (a white woman) and her present husband, Bradford (also white). Walker, who is the commander of a revolution taking place in the city, abandons the action to visit the Easleys' home, supposedly to see his children by his former marriage to Grace. Pitted against all the visible signs and characters of his life before the revolution, Walker unleashes all his pent up racial anger and hatred. The confrontation ends in the utter destruction of all evidences of his pre-revolutionary life. In the wake of Walker's violent murder of Easley, everything crumbles before his eyes: the house collapses under shell fire, and Grace and the children die from the impact of multiple explosions.

On a literal level, The Slave could easily be dismissed as a mere revenge and hate-ridden drama. However, on closer examination, Baraka's intricate design becomes more apparent. The play is really a complex examination of Walker's tortured psyche and his desperate attempt to deal with the factors which led to his failure both as an intellectual and as a revolutionary. The center of Walker's conflict is his ambiguous relationship to his past and his present. His psychic agony is prefigured by the doublespeak of the old field slave in the prologue:

Whatever the core of our lives. Whatever the deceit. We live where we are, and seek nothing but ourselves. We are liars, and we are murderers. We invent death for others. Stop their pulses publicly. Stone possible lovers with heavy worlds we think are ideas...and we know, even before these shapes are realized, that these worlds, these depths or heights we fly to smoothly, as in a dream...will ring in our ears and shatter that piece of our eyes that is never closed.... (p. 43)

The slave is uncertain about the very "core" of his existence. His solipsistic view of life has perverted his concept of reality. Thus, the distinction between truth and "deceit" is blurred "as in a dream." And when he does confront reality, it is with a myopic vision, with only "that piece of [his] eyes that is never closed."

Further, the slave's ambiguous identity foreshadows Walker's internal conflict regarding his own identity. His image in the world and his image of himself have no bearing on each other. His uncertain age only serves to underscore this ambivalence:

I am much older than I look...or maybe much younger. Whatever I am or seem...[Significant pause] to you, then let that rest. But figure, still, that you might not be right. Figure, still, that you might be lying...to save yourself. Or myself's image, which might set you crawling like a thirsty dog, for the meanest of drying streams. The meanest of ideas. (p. 44)

Commenting on the ambiguous role of the field slave, Lloyd Brown notes that he is "both older and younger than he looks because he incorporates the past and the present."³² Brown concludes that the old field slave is really "an archetype of

³² Lloyd Brown, Amiri Baraka, p. 149.

the black experience," and that this should caution the reader against any literal interpretation of the play.³³

The image of the split personality is nowhere more sharply delineated than in the final lines of the prologue where the stage directions inform us that "he [the slave] enters the set proper and assumes the position he will have when the play starts...still moaning..." (p. 45). When the old field slave emerges as the forty year-old Walker at the beginning of the play, the reader becomes aware that the action of the play will be a dream-sequence to the dream already started in the Prologue.

It is within this context of the dream-sequence that Walker's visions of revolution and his failed aspirations to be a poet can best be read. For all his bold talk about revolution throughout the play, Walker has never articulated a specific plan for accomplishing his goals. It is therefore not surprising that in the midst of the revolutionary attack on the city, he abdicates his post of commander of the troops, simply because he wants to make one last revenge-motivated visit to the Easleys. However, the encounter with the Easleys only serve to highlight the fact that Walker is simply a frustrated idealist, as the following exchange with reveals:

Grace. There are so many bulbs and screams shooting off inside you, Walker. So many lies you have to pump full of yourself. You're split so many

³³ Lloyd Brown, Amiri Baraka, p. 149.

ways...your feelings are cut up into skinny horrible strips [...] I don't even think you know who you are any more. No, I don't think you ever knew.

Walker. I know what I can use.

Grace. No, you never even found out who you were until you sold the last of your loves and emotions down the river...until you killed your last old friend...and found out what you were. My God, it must be hard being you, Walker Vessels. It must be a sick task keeping so many lying separate uglinesses together...and pretending they're something you've made and understand.

Walker. What I can use, madam...what I can use. I move now trying to be certain of that.

Easley. You're talking strangely. What is this, the pragmatics of war? What are you saying...use? I thought you meant yourself to be a fantastic idealist? All those speeches [...] impressive characteristic of his culture...the idealism of rational liberalism [...]

Walker. Yeah, yeah. Now you can call me the hypocritical idealist nigger murderer. You see, what I want is more titles. (pp. 61-62)

Walker's acute split consciousness has rendered him incapable of genuine revolutionary action. He becomes a helpless victim³⁴ of his own idealism, a "weak Hamlet" who talks more than he acts.

If the action of the play seems real--and not the dream-sequence that it is--it is because Baraka has successfully transposed realistic elements (for example, realistic jargon of warfare and the actual sounds of the explosions from the war raging outside the Easleys' home), into his "fable in a

³⁴ In his essay, "The Revolutionary Theatre," Baraka classifies Clay, Walker, and Ray (in The Toilet), as "victims." Home, p. 211. However, in that same essay, he predicts a time when the Revolutionary Theatre will be people, not with these "victims," but "with new kinds of heroes." Home, p. 214.

Prologue and Two Acts." Walker's thirst for violence and revenge is shocking and disturbing precisely because of this verisimilitude.

At the end of the play, all the external signs of utter destruction (the collapsing house and the dead occupants) are mere mirror images of the psychic turmoil caused by the internecine war raging within Walker. Baraka's incorporation of realistic details in his fable has brought a painful "slice of life" into the theatre and rendered his message even more poignant. Walker's inability to reconcile his role as slave and rebel, poet and revolutionary commander is the inevitable outcome of his inability to face the circumstances of his history.

At this point in the development of his drama, Baraka's emphasis is still on verbal exploration of psychological conflicts rather than the resolution of conflicts through dramatic action. As a "Fable,"³⁵ or "little talk" The Slave is full of brilliant dialogue, and the characters are ever aware that they are involved in a drama of words. According to Grace, they are all participating in a "ritual-drama [of] metaphors" (p. 70); and Easley refers to it as "[t]he poetry of ritual drama"--to which Walker concurs, "Ritual drama..." (p. 57).

Baraka's experimentations with form and content take a different turn in The Baptism, a play also written in 1964.

³⁵ From Latin "fabula" meaning narration, account or story.

As the title implies, the play deals with a baptism--normally a rite of initiation into an elect (Christian) community. However, Baraka's anti-traditionalist method subverts this religious rite in order to expose the sham and hypocrisy of some practitioners of the Christian faith. Through the process of ironic inversion, Baraka pits the virtues of a sensitive homosexual against the insensitivity of a hypocritical minister and his sexually perverted congregation.

The setting for the play is "an almost well-to-do arrogant Protestant church, obviously Baptist."³⁶ In an Artaudian-like manner, Baraka exploits the gaudy and ostentatious setting of the church for its vast potential for spectacle. It is not without design that he focuses most of the action "on the altar." To complete the spectacle meant to highlight the excesses of this "arrogant Protestant church," Baraka meticulously describes the stage properties:

A huge white cross of glass is dangled from the ceiling at the rear of the altar with the inscription "IHS" written on the crossbar. The decor is mostly red velvet and gold. A speaker's stand is at the front of the dais, and 2 microphones stand in front of it. The inscription "IHS" is written on the speaker stand as well. Under this inscription a plaque that says "WHBI RADIO." (p. 11)

³⁶ LeRoi Jones, The Baptism and The Toilet (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 11. All subsequent references to these plays will be taken from this text. It should be noted that even though the references are not explicit, the church described is a black church, and the characters are black.

With equal care, Baraka prescribes the exact tones and gestures that should accompany each character's participation in the baptismal rites. Thus, as the Minister intones, "Break the chain of ignorance. Lord, in his high place...", he "moves to center of the stage bowing, with folded hands at his chin" (p. 11). Then, "rising, doing slow dance step with leg raised," he chants, "Precious. Precious" (p. 11). In the meanwhile, the Homosexual "moans" as he repeats, "Not love. Not love" (p. 11). As each character moves towards the altar, the Boy enters "in a black robe, with a bag on his back" (p. 12). Ready to perform his ritual, he kneels quickly, sobbing, "father, pray for me" (p. 12). In all of this spectacle, the emphasis is on the inversion of a rite that is usually sacred.

The key to the inversion is Baraka's careful characterization. None of the characters have names: they are merely stereotypical representations of types. These include a Boy, a Minister, Women, an Old Woman, a Homosexual, and a Messenger. The action revolves around a contest for the Boy's soul and body. The Boy, who has sinned by masturbating while pretending to pray, comes to the Minister to be absolved of his transgressions and then baptized. But the sanctimonious women of the church (who all take the credit for revealing the Boy's sin to the Minister), insist that he be punished instead of be forgiven. With mock-holy indignation and

feigned religious ecstasy, the women condemn the Boy's action, while exalting their own repressed sexuality:

He is the Son of Man. The big stroker of the universe. It was he who popped us. (They all moan ecstatically, sinking to their knees, praying.) God bless mommy and daddy, and Rochester, and Uncle Don. And please God bring me a new baby sister....And bring me a new doll, and a monopoly set, and an FM radio and a picture of Monk... (p. 24)

When the Boy reveals that he is not "the Son of Man," the Women demand his castration and death: "Blasphemer. You spilled your seed in prayer. You sacrificed these blessed vestals to your lust. You should die! Die!" (p. 26) The Minister wholeheartedly agrees with all the women that the Boy should die. Ironically, it is only the Homosexual--the avowed pervert and outcast of society--who pleads for mercy and compassion on behalf of the Boy. In a macabre ritual, the Minister and the entire congregation prepare to kill the Boy without granting him forgiveness.

But the Boy decides to fight back: he pulls out a "long silver sword" and with menacing seriousness, shouts, "You have no charity! No humanity. No love. No sense of your selves" (pp. 28-29). As he strikes each of them dead, he proclaims, "it is not right that youth should die to cleanse your stinking hearts! I am the Son of God. The Christ" (p. 29).

In subverting the tradition of the morality play Baraka achieves some consummate artistic effects. On the anagogical level, he debunks the traditional concept of Christian love,

mercy, and forgiveness by reversing the traditional roles usually ascribed to characters such as the Minister, the Boy, and the Homosexual. Rather than portraying charity and forgiveness, the Minister and his congregation become the embodiment and vile expression of evil. Their despicable and uncharitable behaviour is an ironic foil for the compassion and mercy expressed by the Homosexual. By his method of inversion, Baraka exposes the failure of the Christian ethic to function beneficently in the lives of its proponents. According to Lloyd Brown:

The most crucial outcome of the play's moral conflict is the degree to which Christianity emerges as an inherently corrupting tradition which makes it impossible for the individual to experience love and sexuality to the fullest, except on nonconformist or rebellious terms.³⁷

As will be demonstrated in some of the later plays, Baraka's development as a dramatist is marked by his ever increasing predilection to subvert traditional forms as a means of rejecting Western culture, while promoting politicized ethnic themes.

Though The Toilet (1963)³⁸ was written three years before The Baptism, it is contemporaneous with that play in its exploitation and inversion of rituals. Set in an actual toilet, the play centers on a gang of adolescents--nine

³⁷ Lloyd Brown, Amiri Baraka, p. 139.

³⁸ According to the Grove Press edition, which is being used in this discussion, the play was first presented on December 16, 1964, at St. Mark's Playhouse, New York.

blacks and two whites--who act out their sexual conflicts through violent words and action. According to Paul Witherington, the violence expressed by the boys is actually "the acting out of a ritual" during which they pass from adolescence to manhood.³⁹ Reflecting a parallel view, Robert Tener contends that the tough language and rough physical contact are similar to "that expressed in the training of some warrior or athlete...[in] a male world activated by the image of man as a fighter-hero."⁴⁰

The plot of the play is simple. A white boy, Karolis, sends a homosexual love letter to a black boy named Ray (otherwise known as Foots), in which he tells him that he is beautiful. On learning of this perverse expression of love, the other gang members are outraged, and decide to drag the recalcitrant Karolis to the toilet so that Foots can fight him and maintain his honor as gang leader. Foots is tardy in arriving on the battle scene, but when he eventually comes, he is reluctant to fight the already battered and unconscious Karolis. Surprisingly, it is Karolis who drags himself from the floor and declares that he wants to fight Ray. During the fight, the other members of the gang pounce upon Karolis, beating him brutally. They all leave him lying lifeless on

³⁹ Paul Witherington, "Exorcism and Baptism in LeRoi Jones's The Toilet," Modern Drama 15 (September 1972), 159.

⁴⁰ Robert L. Tener, "The Corrupted Warrior Heroes: Amiri Baraka's The Toilet," Modern Drama, 17 (June 1974), 207-215.

the floor of the toilet, but Foots soon returns to the scene, embraces Karolis and weeps over his body.

This brutal action takes place within a setting that is itself brutally realistic. The actuality of the situation is underscored by the concreteness of the setting:

The scene is a large bare toilet built of gray rough cement. There are urinals along one wall and a partition separating them from the commodes which are along the same wall. The toilet must resemble the impersonal ugliness of a school toilet or a latrine of some institution. A few rolls of toilet paper are spread out on the floor, wet through. The actors should give the impression frequently that the place smells. (p. 37)

In detailing these naturalistic aspects of the scene, Baraka establishes the extreme environmental hostility that the boys struggle to overcome. Repeatedly throughout his works, he comments on the difficulty, especially for the black male, of becoming a man in America. In The Toilet, the adolescent gang, with all its violence, rebelliousness and confusion, is really acting out the division and pain within its collective consciousness. In their own way, all the boys feel the pressure to participate in the show-down in the toilet, for through the confrontation, they are forced to face some of the vital issues of growing up. The boys, then, are all searching for total self expression--for expression of their maleness, of their blackness, and of their essential identity and humanity. In The Toilet as in The Baptism this expression is ironically manifested through homosexual love. In both plays, Baraka seems to be intimating that, despite

the social, religious, and racial taboos, this gesture towards love at least represents some type of genuine emotions.

As a drama of extreme realism, The Toilet renders a faithful representation of the gang's usual mode of verbal expression. For these boys, the tough language of the "dozens," "sounding," and "signifying" is a natural part of the rites of passage from adolescence to manhood. Since mastery of this language is in part mastery of the environment, the boys strive to outdo each other in their verbal warfare. For example, they constantly refer to each other's mother disparagingly, indicating their need to rid themselves of the mamma's-little-boy's image, and assert their own manhood. The following exchange between Love, Ora, and Hines is a typical example of "playing the dozens" and "signifying" between the boys:

Love. Hey, Big Shot, what happened to your shirt?

Ora. (Putting his hands down and handling the torn part of his shirt). That muthafuckin' Karolis ripped it.

(The other three yowl. Hines pushes his fingers to the hole as if to tear it again). Get outta here you black ass bastid. (He squares off at Hines, then pushes him away). That paddy bastid! I had the cocksucker around the waist, and then he rips my shirt and scratches me. (He holds up his wounded hand).

Hines. You let him get away?

Ora. No, hell. I punched the bastid right in his lip. But he was making so much noise we thought somebody'd come out and see us so Knowles and Skippy took him in the broom closet and I cut down the stairs. The stupid bastid was screaming and biting right outside of ol'lady Powell's room. (p. 41)

In The Toilet, more than in any of his other early plays, Baraka faithfully incorporated black street language into the ritual action. In commenting on the language of this play in a recent interview, Baraka defended even the obscenities and scatology, claiming, "that's the way they sound. Now if you want me to edit that for the sake of...what? I wasn't ready to do that--I still am not ready to do that."⁴¹ Hence, the "ripping," "scratching," "wounding," "screaming," and cussing in the above exchange can be seen as part of the painful adolescent process of escaping the old self and forging a new identity. This is a process that is especially difficult for the black males portrayed in this play. For while they reject the old stereotypes, they still do not have clear, positive identity models to follow. This is a short-coming that the emerging Black Nationalist Baraka attempts to redress in some of his later plays.

⁴¹ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: Interview with Amiri Baraka," August 27, 1987, MS p. 19.

III

We are beautiful people
 with african [sic] imaginations
 full of masks and dances and swelling chants
 with african [sic] eyes, and noses, and arms,
 though we sprawl in grey chains in a place
 full of winters, when what we want is sun.

LeRoi Jones, "Ka 'Ba"

The whole race connected in its darkness, in its
 sweetness. We must study each other. And for the
 aliens we say I aint studying you.

LeRoi Jones, Preface to Black Magic Poetry

Whereas Baraka's earlier plays were generally directed at white audiences, the plays written during his Black Nationalist and Socialist periods were written primarily for black audiences.⁴² There was also a noticeable shift in subject matter and treatment. Whereas the focus of the earlier plays was on semi-tragic heroes, in the later plays we witness the emergence of a new kind of hero. In these later plays also, Baraka replaces the earlier analysis of personal conflicts with open political advocacy. Several of these later plays are little more than short agit-prop pieces, but they do reveal Baraka continuing his experimentations with form and content, especially ritual--

⁴² In a recent interview, however, Baraka claimed that he was writing for "ninety per cent of the world." He elaborated, "I am trying to write for most people. My writing is aimed at (I hope) their needs--the needs of the ninety per cent." Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," MS., p. 17.

the ritual of black theatre. Expanding on the meaning of this theatre, Ron Milner explains:

I mean the ritualized reflection and projection of a unique and particular way of being, born of the unique and particular conditioning of black people....⁴³

Of all the short agit-prop pieces, Experimental Death Unit #1 (1965)⁴⁴ is perhaps the best transition play from Baraka's earlier to his later works. Whereas the earlier plays had a central, semi-tragic hero, this play does not. It involves three main characters (Duff, Loco, and the Woman), through whom Baraka projects his views of American decadence and his repudiation of blacks who participate in it.

The broad outline of the play is simple: During an apparent black revolt, some black soldiers on patrol come across a black prostitute and her two derelict white customers, Duff and Loco, who are fighting each other to see who can get the "good booty" first (p. 13). The black group (the experimental death unit) interrupts the melee and sexual sporting and orders immediate death for Duff, Loco, and the Woman. The bodies are then pushed into a heap, and the death

⁴³ Ron Milner, "Black Theater--Go Home!" in Addison Gayle Jr., The Black Aesthetic (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971), p. 288. For a more detailed account of ritual in the Black Arts Theatre, see Shelby Steele, "'White Port and Lemon Juice': Notes on the New Black Theater," Black World (June 1973), pp. 4-13, 78-83.

⁴⁴ The text to be discussed is taken from LeRoi Jones, Four Black Revolutionary Plays (Indianapolis & New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969). The other plays in this volume are: A Black Mass, Great Goodness of Life, and Madheart. All references to these plays will be from this text.

unit regroups and marches off with two of the soldiers hurling "dozens" at each other:

First Soldier:

Hey man, that bitch look just like your mother!

Second Soldier:

Man, I'll cut your joint off if you start that stuff. I don't play them kinda games.

First Soldier:

Yeh, but you'll pat your foot! (p. 15)

The moral of the play is clear: blacks who prostitute themselves (literally or symbolically) to white decadence deserve summary execution. Such deaths should be seen as a type of purification, an exorcism of any evil influences that would contaminate the race and keep it in bondage to white culture. The symbolic gesture should lead to a new moral and social order based on black rule. Stressing a different aspect of this exorcism, however, Werner Sollors feels that it is linked to Baraka's desire to replace literary rebellion with actual revolution:

"Death Unit" seems more concerned with exorcising Baraka's old Bohemian idols than with presenting a "populist" Black nationalist cause; and in this play, the Black military avant-garde kills off what used to be the literary avant-garde. Baraka was apparently moving toward a new definition of avant-gardism.⁴⁵

The play, which is a parody of Beckett's Waiting for Godot, is sprinkled with Beckettian dialogue. But whereas Beckett's language deals with "nothingness," Baraka concretizes and makes the language "hip" by employing street

⁴⁵ Werner Sollors, Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism," p. 207.

idiom, including slang and obscenities. The vulgarity and filth in the language thus function as a metaphorical representation of the decadence of Western society, and is implicitly a criticism of Beckett's "nothingness." In this play, as in The Toilet, Baraka uses black street language to subvert conventional forms and communicate to his intended audience in a language it understands.

In A Black Mass (1965), Baraka moves closer to realizing some of the goals that he prescribes for the Black Arts Theatre. The play is a black ritual which re-defines the black experience and promotes black culture. According to William C. Fischer, "the play is no mere inversion of Western legendry. It is a full-blown contemporary black demonology born out of a separatist morality."⁴⁶ As the first Barakan play to utilize a completely Afro-American mythic framework, the play sets an important precedent for the Black Arts Movement.

Based on the Jacoub myth of the Nation of Islam (formerly known as the Black Muslims), the play investigates the function of art and the creative process. In an interview with Marvin X and Faruk, Baraka explains the reason for his choice of this myth:

...I wrote the play, Black Mass, based on the Nation of Islam's telling of the story of Yacub. The Nation of Islam's theology seemed to me to be a

⁴⁶ William C. Fischer, "The Pre-Revolutionary Writings of Imamu Amiri Baraka," Massachusetts Review 14 (Spring 1973), p. 297.

vehicle for the expression of truth on many levels about man, Black man, spiritual man's subjugation by anti-spiritual forces. That seemed to me to be the key to the Yacub story, so that's the way I tried to use it in Black Mass.⁴⁷

According to this myth, a black scientist, Jacoub,⁴⁸ works black magic (in a positive sense) and creates the first white being, who immediately turns out to be a monster. Jacoub's fellow scientists reprimand him for creating "a soulless beast...a mirror of twisted evil. The blind reflection of humanity" (p. 31). But Jacoub's philosophical and aesthetic problem is that he espouses "art for art's sake."

Baraka's implicit criticism is that the black man cannot afford to create art that does not function in his best interest. In fact, such a creation is bound to destroy the creator. As Nasafi, another black magician, warns Jacoub, "this thing will kill...will take human life...because it has no regard for human life!" (p. 31). As a black "overreacher" who craves knowledge for knowledge's sake, Jacoub has failed to follow the imperatives of the Black Aesthetician.

Baraka exploits the ritual of play for its theatrical effectiveness. The spectacle of the opening scene conveys a

⁴⁷ Marvin X and Faruk, "Islam and Black Art: An Interview with Ameer Baraka (LeRoi Jones)," in Black Arts: An Anthology of Black Creations, eds. Ahmed Alhamisi and Harun Kofi Wangara (Detroit: Black Arts Publication, 1969), pp. 144-145.

⁴⁸ In A Black Mass, Baraka uses the spelling "Jacoub." The present discussion will use this spelling.

mystical aura, and the music by Sun-Ra helps to conjure up a magical atmosphere. The scene is described as:

Jet blackness, with maybe a blue or red-violet glow. Soft peaceful music....Music of eternal concentration and wisdom. Some lights come up, outline the three magicians. Three Black Magicians. They are dressed in long exquisite robes, one with skullcap, one with fez, one with African hat (fila). The outline of some fantastic chemical laboratory is seen, with weird mixtures bubbling, colored solutions (or solutions that glow in the dark. (p. 21)

The majestic robes of the black magicians and the near-religious atmosphere of the setting evokes images of a rich black ancestry which contrasts sharply with the defiled image of the black creator in the play.

But Baraka is not only concerned with the visual effects of the spectacle; he exploits the full potential of the aural effects also. Sun-Ra's background music adds to the drama the dynamic rhythms and expressiveness of the Afro-American musical heritage. In fact, so dynamic is the music that it actually assumes the role of a character. In the initial stage directions, for example, we are told that "music can fill the entire room, swelling, making sudden downward swoops, screeching" (p. 22). This music envelops the entire action of the play, achieving its most intense pitch and resonance at the moment of Jacoub's creation. At this point, the music achieves a "shattering dimension" (p. 30).

Because Baraka integrates the music as a part of the ritual framework of the play, there is a fluidity in the flow of the music and the dialogue--a sort of musical call-and-

response effect. The music in A Black Mass is an expression of the "art-ing" process that Baraka alludes to in Home. Music-cum-dialogue in performance--and not the written text--seems to be the impetus behind Baraka's elaborate and meticulous stage directions throughout this play. At the close of the play, when Baraka combines music, spectacle, gestures, screams and spontaneous audience involvement, he not only gives concrete dramatization to Artaud's concept of total theatre, but he also far transcends it.

However, in Slave Ship (1969)⁴⁹ Baraka far surpasses all his previous efforts at total theatre. Not only does he capitalize on the powerful theatrical effects of music within the ritual framework, but he also exploits all aspects of the mise en scène to consummate artistic ends. Further, in Slave Ship, Baraka most closely approximates Artaud's anti-text concept for the theatre. The play has very little dialogue (less than forty per cent of the text) and depends upon extra-textual elements for its effectiveness. According to William C. Fischer, Baraka succeeds so well in creating spectacle in this play that "the conventional function of the playwright is now transformed into something nearer that of a priestly director of ceremonies."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ All reference to the play will be from the following text: LeRoi Jones, Slave Ship (Newark, N. J.: Jihad Productions, 1969).

⁵⁰ William C. Fischer, "The Pre-Revolutionary Writings of Imamu Amiri Baraka," p. 299.

Described by Baraka as "A Historical Pageant," the play is a dynamic interpretation of history in which the playwright attempts to raise the racial consciousness of blacks, first by exposing them to the chief instruments of their oppression, then urging them to destroy those images, and finally, inviting them to join in the concluding triumphant celebration. Because of the structure of the action of this play, its audiences are not meant to be mere viewers but actual participants.

The action of the play comprises a series of expressionistic scenes or tableaux. In the first tableau, a religious rite is interrupted by some slave traders who capture the Africans and put them in chains. The images evoke the passion and agony of the victims:

African Drums like the worship of some Orisha. Obatala. Mbwan-rattles of the priests. BamBamBamBamBoom BoomBoom BamBam....Chains, the lash, and people moaning. Listen to the sounds come up out of the actors. Sounds thrown down into the hold. AAAAIIII-EEEEEEEEEE. Of people, dropped down in the darkness, frightened, angry, mashed together in common terror. The bells of the ship. White Men's voices, on top.... (p. 1-2)

In the second image, the slaves are herded on to the slave ship, while the next "scene" reveals their agony as they are brought on to American soil. The next tableau reveals the African trying to survive in America. The triumph of the African-American is that he has survived every effort to break his will and destroy his racial pride. This is the reason for the celebration at the end of the play, where

everybody sings, "Rise, Rise, Rise/Cut these ties, Black Man Rise/We gon' be the thing we are..." (p. 13).

Slave Ship is complex fusion of various sounds (for example, drums, cries, screams, drums, humming, moaning, singing, chants, incantations). It is also filled with African and Afro-American expressions. For example, Man 2 curses and pleads to his own god:

Fukwididila! Fukwididila! Fukwididila! Screw you, Orisha! God! Where you be? Where you now, Black God? Help me. I be a strong warrior, and no woman. And I strain against these chains! But you must help me, Orisha. Obatala!⁵¹

Baraka's experiment with lighting is also very effective. Throughout the play, the intermittent blinking lights and the general semi-darkness meld to create a surrealistic atmosphere. In one section of the play, the flashing light is particularly effective as it helps the spectator to create visual images of his own. Near the end of the play, for example, Baraka gives the following stage directions:

Lights on suddenly, show a shuffling "Negro." Lights off...drums of ancient African warriors come up...hero-warriors. Light blink back on, show shuffling black man, hat in his hand, scratching his head. Lights off. Drums again. Black dancing in the dark....Lights flash on briefly, spot on, off the dance.... (p. 7)

The "historical pageant" of the Slave Ship gains intensity from the continuous screams and cries throughout the play. Because the action takes place mainly in the dark,

⁵¹ LeRoi Jones, Slave Ship (New York: Jihad Production, 1969), p. 3.

the screams are particularly poignant, at times even frightening, as in the following example:

Rocking of the slave ship, in darkness, without sound. But smells. Then sound. Now slowly, out of blackness with smells and drums staccato, the hideous screams. All the women together, scream. AAAAAAIIIIIIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE. (p. 2)

In an aural culture like the black culture, such expressive sounds provide a means of catharsis for the audience. And because of the symbiotic relationship between the audience and the players, it is very natural for the spectators themselves to participate in such expression. Of all his plays, Baraka's Slave Ship represents the ultimate telos of total audience participation in the action. In fact, the spectators themselves become actors in the drama of their own history and their own lives. This marriage of content, form and expression is what Baraka aspired to in all his drama.

Though Slave Ship represents the one play in which Baraka most faithfully accomplishes the main goals of the Revolutionary Theatre, all his other plays can be seen as gestures towards this end. Because of the exploratory nature of Baraka's efforts in the dramatic arts, each play has to be appreciated as an artistic entity of its own. It is within this dual context that each play discussed in this chapter can be seen as a movement away from Euro-American forms towards a more distinct Black Aesthetics.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

THE FINAL CURTAIN: AN EVALUATION OF BARAKA'S
REVOLUTIONARY THEATRE

The Lord has saved me
to do this. The Lord
has made me strong.
I am as I must have
myself. Against all
thought, all music,
all my soft loves.

LeRoi Jones, "I Substitute for the Dead
Lecturer"

Is the Act as Legitimate as the Word? (A question
that could only be asked in a bourgeois society, it
is so absurd.) Now we know the act is more
legitimate, it is principal!

Amiri Baraka, Introduction to The Motion of History
and Other Plays

Amiri Baraka's sense of mission for a reformed theatre is perhaps the one general impulse that links him most closely to Antonin Artaud; for Artaud was fired by a similar sense of commitment to create a new theatre. But whereas Artaud was primarily a visionary and a theorist, Baraka has established his art in a rigid utilitarian ethic, insisting that it serve a political role. For him, the "act is more legitimate" than the word,¹ for ultimately, the desired national liberation of

¹ Amiri Baraka, Introduction to The Motion of History and Other Plays (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1978), p. 12.

blacks can only be achieved through political revolution. His political activism, then, has impinged greatly upon his art. In fact, in the Barakan dictum ethics cannot be separated from aesthetics.

This politicized poetics is at once the strength and the weakness of Baraka's art. On the one hand, it has served the vital role of revolutionizing black art and its function in the community. As a result of this, many community arts theatres (following Baraka's own Harlem-based Black Arts Theatre) were established in major cities throughout the United States during the sixties and seventies. Despite financial problems and ideology-based internal dissension, the Black Arts Theatre proved to be a watershed event in American theatre. In addition, an entire generation of black artists has turned to the Barakan aesthetics for paradigms for their works. It was, for example, only after the publication of Baraka's blueprint for the revolutionary theatre that several other black artists followed his lead and issued similar manifestoes. Artists as diverse as Don Lee, Sonia Sanchez, Askia Muhammad Toure, Larry Neal, Ben Caldwell, Ed Bullins, and Ron Milner have been greatly influenced by Baraka's radical view of art.

On the other hand, Baraka's dogmatic ideological stance and his extreme ethnocentrism have often alienated him, not only from literary critics, but also from some of the very people he writes for. The result has been that Baraka is

still not as widely read as he should be. Generally speaking, critics still tend to dismiss his works as being too ethnocentric. But Baraka himself is very quick to dismiss "white people [who] think that black artists have not achieved anything of any real note."² However, he is not unaware of the pitfalls of his extreme dogmatism, and he seeks to redress it in some of his later plays. In admitting to this shortcoming, he writes: "These plays, from Slave Ship to The Motion of History, show a leap...from partial truth to a more wholesided reality."³

The general slowness--and even reluctance--on the part of some critics to acknowledge Baraka's literary achievements has been matched by a similar hesitancy on the part of some publishers to accept his works. Remarking on this thorn in the flesh, Baraka writes in the introduction to one of his works: "There has been a constant and consistent movement, hidden to some extent by the fact that it is much harder for me now, for example, to get works published by the big publishers."⁴ And in a recent interview, he complains bitterly about the difficulties he has been encountering in getting some of his works produced:

² Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," MS., p. 20.

³ Amiri Baraka, Introduction to The Motion of History and Other Plays, p. 15.

⁴ Amiri Baraka, Introduction to The Motion of History and Other Plays, p. 16.

I've got a bunch of plays, but it is very hard to get plays produced, particularly when they do not like your nationality or your opinions...I publish plays when I can, when I find an avenue...a magazine or somebody who wants it. And again, the production is very difficult. Nobody has produced a play of mine in New York for years and years--except a Woody King and some other kind of off beat kind of poeple....But in terms of mainstream--they do nothing about it.⁵

The unfortunate reality is that, though Baraka's contribution to the development of Afro-American drama is outstanding, he is still not recognized by a significant portion of mainstream America, including critics, publishers, producers and even readers. And even within black literary circles, he has not gained the level of recognition that is commensurate with his accomplishments. The self-conscious Baraka is acutely aware of these glaring discrepancies, noting that:

[I]t is interesting that I have never had a play done on Broadway. Yet obviously in terms of my own reputation as a black artist in the theatre, that has to be a glaring kind of accusation of the great white West....The Negro Ensemble which is the negro arm of Broadway...as far as I am concerned--they have never done a play of mine. The AUDELCO Awards, which is supposed to make awards to blacks in the theatre...they have never really honored me in anyway. Yet if you talk to people around the world about black theatre, they will mention my name. So that's the kind of dichotomy that you have to face.⁶

⁵ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," MS., 17.

⁶ Elaine Duval, "Reasserting and Raising Our History: An Interview with Amiri Baraka," MS., p. 18.

Notwithstanding the difficulties that Baraka has encountered; and despite some of his ideological shortsightedness, he has remained indefatigable in his commitment to create and propagate art that will serve the needs of black people. His desire to revise and modify Euro-American art forms is born, not out of a desire to produce a higher form of white art, but rather to produce politically liberating art for black people. His acute sensitivity to black history and culture, especially its language and music, has made him ideally suited to create paradigms for the new black theatre. Hence, when Baraka borrows some of the Artaudian concepts of total theatre, especially ritualized spectacle, he does so only to "decolonize" them and endow them with black ethnicity and political consciousness.

In the final analysis, while Artaud's metaphysical revolt in the theatre has not met all Baraka's needs, it has proven to be useful in that, implicitly, it has pointed to the need for the Black Aesthetician to add the socio-political dimensions. Ultimately, though, both artists are concerned about using the theatre to bring about a radical transformation of man's total being, so even though their methods and their thematic concerns are different, they are both literary kin in the modern romantic theatre of revolt initiated by Nietzsche.

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APPENDIX

REASSERTING AND RAISING OUR HISTORY:

AN INTERVIEW WITH AMIRI BARAKA

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(The interview will first be published in the Spring/Summer 1988 issue of Obsidian II).

I interviewed Amiri Baraka at his Newark, New Jersey, home on August 27, 1987. The interview, which was taped in Baraka's study, was conducted amidst a flurry of activities--some related to the busy preparations for the following night's performance of Kimako's Blues People (the performing arts center located in the basement of Baraka's home); some related to Baraka's phone ringing off the hook (he finally took the phone off the hook!); and some related to Baraka's busy mind thinking of a hundred different things at the same time. Yet, amazingly, Baraka was intensely focussed during the interview, expressing his passionate convictions with trenchant clarity and with a thundering forcefulness that belied his quiet bearing. In a study, such as this one, which deals with the works of a living author--and especially one as vocal as Baraka--it is only fitting that he has the final word.

Q. Your life and works have been characterized by constant changes. Where are you now in terms of your political and aesthetic commitments?

A. Well, you know, I am fundamentally a Marxist now. I think that it's strange that an individual can go through life and not have any changes at all. Those people who are criticizing me for changing so much--I wonder how they are able not to make any changes at all. I am essentially a Marxist now.

Q. What is the consistency in your thought? Do you see it as being progressive or cyclical? Is it possible, for instance, to say that you have come full circle?

A. There is no such thing as that, really. I mean, thought, like life, is developmental. It moves from one point to another point, even though it might seem like it is staying at the same point. Essentially it is characterized by dialectical motion, finally and hopefully moving upward and onward, just like human beings seeking socialism, whether they know it or not. Well, the ancient human beings practiced what you could call primitive communalism, but if you are not aware of the fact that there is a distinct relationship between primitive communalism and say, communism, you might think that they are the same thing. But

they are not the same thing. One is on a higher more developed level, the product of an industrialized society; and one is a function of primitive society. My own thinking hopefully, has been characterized by being able to receive more information, to accrete more information, assimilate more information, and to develop higher and higher along more developed lines of upward thinking.

Q. Would you say though, that your thought is more cyclical than progressive?

A. No, no--the cyclical thing is really more an illusion. I mean that, even though it seems cyclical, it is essentially not, since it is always moving to a higher level of refinement--even if that means that it is going out of existence.

Q. In your commitment to creating art that will serve the needs of the community, you founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in Harlem and the multi-functional Spirit House in Newark. Are you involved in any similar community arts projects now?

A. Yes. Just a few weeks ago, on August 7, we opened Kimako's Blues People. It is going to be a performance-based community arts group, featuring music, culture, drama,

dance. We are really just getting started. It will be in line with the other projects, similar to Spirit House, but hopefully on a higher level.

Q. By higher level, what do you mean?

A. Well, essentially, we will be more conscious of what we are doing, and therefore, hopefully will be more able to achieve the specific goals that we outline. In the past, sometimes we have tended rather to have a kind of scatter-shot effect when we only had a general, and not a specific idea of what it was we wanted to do. Now we have a much more specific idea of what we want to achieve, so hopefully we can achieve that.

Q. In one of your essays written in 1964 ("LeRoi Jones Talking"), you expressed great concern and "trepidation" about great black writers like Baldwin, Dubois, Wright and Chester Himes--all of whom you thought were "driven away." You expressed the fear that this might happen to you. Now, over twenty years later, do you see yourself--like you saw Ellison--"fidgeting in some college"?

A. Well, I am definitely fidgeting in some college--you can believe that. But I think the main difference is that I remain an activist, to the extent that I am still fighting

for issues out there. Ellison has never been an activist and that's been his real problem. And I think it is the activism or the attention to real life that keeps one rooted in the real, rather than say, the imagined or the abstract.

Q. Given the fact that many of the sixties' artists are now "silent" or "reformed", is there a left conservative agenda now in existence? If so, who is in the vanguard of this movement?

A. First of all, you have to understand that after every upsurge in the black movement there is a reactionary thrust from the oppressors. And after every social upsurge, or during any period of social upsurge in the movement, there is a corresponding upsurge artistically and culturally. During the 19th century period of the anti-slavery movement, a host of slave narratives were being written...the kind of pre-civil war revolutionaries in the free north. They created a literature...you know--sort of like Frederick Douglass and people like David Walker. In the early 20th century, with Garvey and DuBois leading the movement, you have the Harlem Renaissance. In the sixties, you have Malcolm X and Martin Luther King...the Panthers...you have the Black Arts Movement. You see, you always have a corresponding kind of artistic and social upsurge. So the reactionary thrust surfaces--what Langston Hughes called the

"white backlash." It is this "white backlash" that puts the cap on, and silences and essentially attacks the movement. Once you raise your struggle to a certain level, then this reactionary force tries to push it back down. And it is pushed back down, but never to the same low level that it was before; it's pushed down. Obviously between the sixties and now, we have reached a high plateau, but what the Reagan regime is trying to do is to eliminate all the gains we made in the sixties. And they do this through violence and political repression. The same is the situation in the West Indies and Africa. Wherever there is a black movement, it consolidates and then it develops and rises for a period; and then it meets sharp and fierce resistance.

Q. Can you identify any parallels between the conditions of the peoples of the Third World and the plight of Black Americans in their struggle for self-determination?

A. It is essentially the same struggle. It changes in form, but the essence is the same. I say it changes in form, because in some places the struggle is against colonialism, and in some places the struggle is against neo-colonialism, like in Jamaica. To me, the struggle against Seaga (or "Blindaga," as the students call him) is essentially the struggle against neo-colonialism. You know, Third World people are ruling in behalf of imperialism. When you are

talking about the literature, you have attack on the writers just like you have attack on the activists. For example, you have these corporate butchers who refuse to publish the works. My publisher...the publisher that I have been using--William Morrow, has been bought by Randolph Hurst 111, who is a staunch reactionary. His first communication to me when he bought William Morrow was to say that I owed him \$2300.00 in author's alteration. As it turned out, I did not, because the stuff was not even written in my handwriting. But he has no intention of publishing my work or doing anything for me.

Q. If the role of the artist is historically determined, what would you say was the role of the artist back in the sixties and seventies? What is it now in the eighties, and what do you envisage it to be in the nineties?

A. It is essentially the same role--that is, to raise the level of human consciousness, to make human beings self-conscious, to make them aware of the real nature of our lives, and real obstructions to our development. If we look at the struggle of the artist in say, the 19th century anti-slavery struggle or the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Arts sixties, we realise that those are very revolutionary periods. So the artists' role is very clear and cut out for them--very well defined in any such ethos of

revolution. And they could take their lead from the leading figures in the movement. Imperialism declined--the period of backwardness that hopefully we are trying to come out of, but which we obviously are still in. The role [of the artist] always is to make cultural revolution, and that's the role that we have now, right now, in the eighties. The role is to make cultural revolution--that is, to oppose the kind of imperialist, racist culture of, you know...Rambos...the kind of spineless reactionary theatre that you find on Broadway...the kind of nonsensical pro-imperialist writings that are published by the major publishers. What the artist has to do is to call for cultural revolution, to call for and to participate in and to help make cultural revolution--that is, raising a revolutionary culture or opposing the kind of backwardness that the rulers force on us to maintain the status quo. I mean, television, radio, films, book publishing--they are all wastelands, garbage cans, in the main. There are still good things published, though. For example, I just got a book in the mail from Toni Morrison, who is one of my favorite writers, and so that's why I was smiling...I know it will be a great experience reading that book. But in the main, what is published is like garbage. What's published is pornography, no matter what they call it. Obscenity. Dumb lies. Things that are produced on Broadway and films are garbage. 99% of it is garbage--things that don't even need to be created. They

spend millions and millions of dollars on something that does not even need to see the light of day, much less to be judged whether it is a good or bad movie. It has no reference to reality, except some monster making money. It has no validity.

Q. You have always maintained that we need to create black art that "actually talks" to the needs of the community. Do you think that black theatre is succeeding in meeting these needs and raising the level of consciousness of black people?

A. Sure. It always does. Black art--art created by African-American people--always raises the level of consciousness, always. Always--that is its function, that is what it does. If you trace the mainstream history of African-American art, you will see that it is always committed and involved at the top of, at the head of the movement to free black people. Always. Whether it is in Africa, the West Indies, the United States. For instance, let's talk about the West Indies, since you are from Jamaica. We could ask, for example, what is the function of Bob Marley's art? Or what is the function of Mickey Smith's poetry? (Both of these artists are dead--ominously so). Liberation--liberation is the motivating force behind their art. Or we could ask, what is the purpose of Walter Rodney's historical investigation? These are the

people whose names we remember. We will not remember the various little traitors of imperialism. We will remember the Douglasses, we will remember the Bob Marleys, we will remember the Walter Rodneys--absolutely.

Q. Would you say then that the primary role of the artist is political liberation?

A. Yes. You see, political liberation is part of the whole question of attaining and raising humanity. You know, in my view, these people are presumptuous to talk about humanity; this is not human society that we are in....

Q. If you had to define your artistic peers now, who would they be? And where would you place yourself in relation to them?

A. As far as I am concerned, I would regard people like Toni Morrison and Jimmy Baldwin as my artistic peers...you know, these are some of the people I feel related to in some kind of way--in terms of peers having been out there for a while and becoming visible in service of black art. These are the people that I would identify with readily. And there are older people who certainly I have to give respect due to their age and accomplishments--people like Margaret Walker, for instance. I have to give deference to her certainly, and

to all the people who are the grand masters and mistresses of our ever evolving artistic history. I feel that these people certainly have a lot to teach me. I feel that people like Toni and Jimmy are certainly my peers and at the same time, people that I look to learn from--which I think is always a good definition of people belonging to the same artistic milieu.

Q. Can you comment on the present aesthetic scene in America?

A. Well, as I said, I think that this is a period of transition, as such. After the revolutionary period of the sixties and early seventies, we are now plunged into backwardness, headed up by Ronald Reagan--the world leader of animalism and reaction and backwardness. But I think I at least see signs of a turn around now. Look at the struggle in South Africa, for instance. The struggle is intensifying, and that gives a good indication that things are turning around. I think you have to see the African-American struggle and the South African struggle and the struggle of people in the West Indies as real barometers of world struggles, because black people are on the bottom. We have been and still are the slaves. We have been the slaves in relation to every body else. We still are discriminated against for racial reasons. You may have a lot of money in your pocket

but you do not get a chance to be a part of "the classes"--you know, in terms of the class struggle. And that's the only thing that mitigates the class struggle. The fact is that racism--national oppression, racial slavery--is a class question, because it reduces a nation of people to a lower class. But still, it obscures class struggle in the sense that you could be a black bourgeoisie and if you don't have a sign on your lapel that says "I am a black bourgeoisie, I've got enough money in my pocket, don't bother me," somebody might come up to you and call you "nigger", or they might not let you ride in a cab. Even though you might have a million dollars in your slide, you still might not get the cab. But that's the racial aspect of it. Still it is class in essence, in the sense that what the racial designation is used for is to isolate black people as an international oppressed class who can be super-exploited anywhere, based on color. Anywhere--whether you come from an independent African nation or independent West Indian nation or whether you are a member of the oppressed Afro-American nation, there is that international white supremacy that is the basic social organization for imperialism.

Q. Should the artistic strategy be now less nationalistic and more integrationist?

A. Well, you see, I don't think that either one of those is what we seek. We seek democracy and self-determination. Whether you are talking about separation or integration, those terms are not relevant to us in any real sense, because people with democracy and self-determination do what they want to do. If you want to be separated, you should be free to be separated, and if you want to be integrated, you should be free to be integrated. The point we are making is that you should have the power to determine what you will do with your life--that's self-determination in democracy. That's all we want. It's not a question of being with white people, or running away from white people. It's being a self-determining people with all the democratic rights that anybody else has, that's all. Just equality. That's all we're talking about. We are not talking about wanting to go away from people, or wanting to be with people. We are talking about being equals with anybody. That's all we're talking about. Equality.

Q. Some people have argued that Black nationalism was demeaning in the role that it imposed upon women. Would you comment on this indictment?

A. Well, I think that nationalism, because it is a bourgeois ideology has essentially a bourgeois approach to the women question--that's true. I know that certainly during

our cultural nationalist days, we were great male chauvinists. And sure, a lot of that still remains--uneliminated, if you will. But you see, people have to understand that even though nationalism is a bourgeois ideology, when it is espoused by oppressed folks, it is also a sign of a kind of resistance to imperialism. In other words, you have to make a distinction between national consciousness and nationalism. What nationalism finally does is to try to subjugate any other people to the nation, suggesting that "we are better than anybody else." What national consciousness does is to identify ourselves as an entity, with the right to sovereignty and self-determination, and with our own history. That's the distinction that sometimes is obscured. If people begin with the national consciousness, they can slide into nationalism, or if they begin with nationalism, they can develop into the national consciousness and then the kind of internationalism that ultimately is what people want. And that is nothing fundamentally different from what most people want--that is, the right to live their lives unencumbered by oppression and artificial repression.

Q. In your poem, "I Substitute for the Dead Lecturer," you intimated what you perceived to be your own prophetic mission. Now over twenty years later, how do you perceive yourself fulfilling this role?

A. Well, I like to think that I have at the same time tried to fulfil what that poem says in essence, despite various failures and evasions and weaknesses. Hopefully, in essence, I still address myself to the overall concept there. And I think what I was trying to say there is that the dead lecture suggests abstraction, suggests a non-activist relationship to things. But I wanted to go beyond that and actually substitute for it. Instead of the dead lecturer, here I am, and I am going to try to do something vital to deal with life and live in the real world. That is essentially what I wanted to do.

Q. In searching for a literary medium that most aptly portrays the identity of black people, you settled for the dramatic mode. Can you elaborate on why you think this genre is particularly well-suited for this purpose?

A. Well, there is a book, Marxism and Poetry--a particularly interesting book--by a man whose name I think is George Thompson (I think he is an English man). In this book, he says that you can see that in times of social transformation, drama usually is the leading art form. The reason for that is because it is the most ambitious, in the sense that it purports to actually recreate life with people--not with words, not with flat energies, but with

real people going through those motions. As such, there is a great agitational quality to it, since there are real people who can make a direct and conscious communication with the audience, a coming together with the audience. When we did Slave Ship, for instance, Archie Shepp's music sort of took the play out into the audience, with all the actors going around, shaking hands with the audience and singing, "When we gonna rise, when we gonna rise." That was very poignant the times that I saw it. To experience the kind of turbulence and tribulation of the slave ship, with a lot of people in the dark; to actually have the slave ship being shown, with slave rebellions and black people...that was quite poignant. I mean, to actually have that kind of passion simulated in drama, is quite powerful. To have even that rise of passions and then finally the kind of resolution in some kind of way of these passions...that yes, we had overcome the struggle after all, this historical kind of tragedy--to have all this simulated in drama, is powerful. You could see black people, and even white folks, moved, weeping, feeling vindicated spiritually. And that's what drama can do. Drama can come out of the separated frame as art and actually touch the audience in a real and literal way, and raise the level of consciousness of that audience. And that's what Thompson said. He pointed that out--that Shakespeare, for instance, was the revolutionary poet of the emergence of capitalism and the bourgeois class. That was why they

venerated him so much, even though they did not want to hear what he had to say...because he showed the destruction of the feudal class--the kings...you know.... You've got the mad Macbeths, the Richard III's, butchers and mad men and perverts.... You've got the real rise of the merchant class and bourgeois politics.... You see in Shakespeare, for instance, some of the major question in the capitalist theory taking off then. He dealt with racism in Othello, he tried to deal with anti-semitism in the The Merchant of Venice, he tried to deal with feminism in The Taming of the Shrew, and he dealt with the question of democracy in Julius Ceasar. All that was done through drama, and all that captured the imagination of that era and summed up, and characterised that era, and indeed any capitalist era, generally. That's why now, more voices are called for to speak for the oppressed class, the great masses of working people and the oppressed nationalities who now want to come into their own.

Q. Do you think that these "voices" will be most effective through the dramatic mode?

A. Well, I tend to believe what Thompson says--that is, that as we get more and more into a revolutionary period, drama will assert itself again. Back in the sixties, that gave rise to the whole Black Arts Movement. The two leading

forms of the Black Arts Movement were poetry and drama. Black theatre was very, very important. And Black poetry also. Music, of course, is always fundamental to all of it, because poetry is the sound of music, and drama has to have music in it just to be theatre.

Q. Are you in the process of writing or publishing any plays now?

A. Well, I have plays. I've got a bunch of plays, but it is very hard to get plays produced, particularly when they do not like your nationality or your opinions. I hope we can do plays downstairs at our performance-based Kimako's Blues People [the newly formed community arts center located in the basement of Baraka's home]. I just published a play in this book called The Music, that my wife and I did. It is a play about the primitive world that we did in 1984-85 in New York. I publish plays when I can, when I find an avenue--you know, a magazine or somebody who wants it. And again, the production is very difficult. Nobody has produced a play of mine in New York for years and years--except a Woody King and some other kind of off beat kind of people, I guess you could say. Anyway, I used them to do a play of mine called Bumpy, with music by Max Roach, in February. But in terms of the mainstream--they do nothing about it. But I think it is interesting that I have never had a play done on

Broadway. Yet obviously in terms of my own reputation as a black artist in the theatre, that has to be a glaring kind of accusation of the great white West--you know what I mean. The Negro Ensemble which is the negro arm of Broadway...as far as I am concerned--they have never done a play of mine. The AUDELCO Awards (The Audience Development Committee), which is supposed to make awards to blacks in the theatre...they have never really honored me in anyway. Yet if you talk to people around the world about Black theatre, they will mention my name. So that's the kind of dichotomy that you have to face.

Q. Who is your primary audience now?

A. As far as my intentions go, I would like to think 90% of the world. I am trying to write for most people. My writing is aimed at (I hope) their needs--the needs of 90%. The other 10%, I think, won't appreciate it. They definitely won't appreciate it. It's just that that 10% have so much power and control over the other 90%, that they can determine what they see and hear.

Q. What about the pervasive obscene language in your works? Why have you found it necessary to use it?

A. You see, the problem was that when you actually printed real people's speech, some people found that shocking. That's because most of the formalistic Western theatre didn't deal with people's speech at all. I am not talking about just the scatology or obscenities in it. They didn't deal with it in terms of its rhythms and syntax either. I try to deal with living speech and I try to deal with the way that people really talk, what they really say. I try to deal with how they actually sound. I wrote a play called The Toilet about young teenagers hanging out in the men's room in the high school. That's the way they sound. Now if you want me to edit that for the sake of... what? I wasn't ready to do that--I still am not ready to do that. But now you can hear that language on television and in the movies. So what we were actually doing then--that is, letting people talk the way they actually talk--was nothing more than pointing the way to utilization of real speech. And they are doing it now. They are obviously exploiting it and just using it to titillate the youth. As a matter of fact, that's all they do. But I think it has at least allowed a literature to utilize real speech. I personally have no choice but to continue using such language...not until people change the way they speak.

Q. C.W.E. Bigsby once said that "in terms of literary achievement, as opposed to political utility, the

revolutionary black theatre has as yet offered very little of real note." What is your response to this comment?

A. Well, he hasn't said anything new. I think that white people think that black artists have not achieved anything of any real note. If you ask somebody else they will tell you that black football players are not high achievers. It just depends on what white person you ask...you know, what races you ask. Certainly we do not depend on Bigsby to make comments on black art.

Q. Your concentration on ethnic themes and your insistence on ethnocentric criteria for judging such works have often been decried by some blacks and some whites as being too narrow in focus, as lacking the necessary universality for it to be enduring art. How do you respond to this criticism?

A. No, that's not true. What we have always talked about is democracy--the fact that our lives have to be in tune with the world, that's all. And that we as a people have an aesthetics based on our experience, and no one should try to define or limit our aesthetics based on what they consider, given their views on the matter. And they are always trying to turn that around to say that I am trying to limit it. No, I am saying, they are the ones trying to limit our

experience and our art, because they are not in tune with us.

Q. From the pervasive religious imagery in your works, one gets the impression that you have more than a passing acquaintance with Christian beliefs. Where do you place God in the scheme of things?

A. Well, I am not a religious person actually. My feelings about divinity and spirituality were always conceived as having to do with feelings and clarification of feelings--trying to understand what it is that I felt. I certainly have at one point flirted with Islam. Obviously I came out of a middle-class Baptist church background, so I have had religious training. But I think that what Marxism has done is to more or less confirm a view that I had previously, that I was never involved in formal religious beliefs.

Q. What about the Kawaïda faith--what role did it play?

A. We always saw that as a cultural doctrine. We saw that as having aspects of religion to it, but never in terms of a personal God or a formal church--rather as confirming the spiritual under-pinnings of African beliefs about life and the after-life. You know...that there is a spiritual aspect

to life. And I do still believe that there is a spiritual aspect to life. I just believe that the spiritual exists as a result of the material, not the other way around. The metaphysicians believe that the material exists as a result of the spiritual. I believe the other way around--that the spiritual exists as a result of the material...that what you mean by spirit is what is the essence of a thing, what it gives off. What kind of psychical information, if you will, does it give off. That's what that has to do....And in order for anything to give off anything, it has "to be." If it doesn't "be," then it can't "be." You see what I mean?

Q. In acknowledging the literary predecessors who have had some influence on your works, you seem to concentrate mainly on those whose poetic practice and theories have influenced your own. What about your dramatic heritage? What about the influence of Antonin Artaud, for example?

A. Well, Artaud was a great influence on me--I can't deny that. I mean, when I came upon the Theatre of Cruelty, the very idea of the kind of denunciation of bourgeois life, which is essentially what that was, the denunciation of Western racism, the denunciation of the Western colonial mentality--that appealed to me for obvious reasons. You know, the whole question of spectacle, powerful kinds of imagery being generated by that kind of theatre, appealed to

me and still appeals to me. I certainly do not uphold everything that Artaud represents, but I think in terms of trying to find a kind of liberating mechanism out of Western theatre forms--that was positive as far as I have been concerned.

Q. Would you say then, that all this has had a distinct influence on your dramatic works?

A. Sure, at the time it definitely did, it definitely did. I think that at the time I wrote the "Revolutionary Theatre", for instance, I had read Artaud's The Theatre And Its Double and "The Man Suicided by Society." I had read some of Artaud, and it certainly impressed me.

Q. In your essay "The Revolutionary Theatre," you drew a parallel between Artaud's and your own design for an Anti-Western theatre. Could you elaborate on the kinds of parallels you envisaged between Artaud's and your own design for the theatre?

A. Well, Artaud saw...say, the "Destruction of Mexico" as spectacle, a great tragic spectacle, a great empire being destroyed by the rise of Western colonialism. I saw the specifics as different, but what I thought we shared in common was the desire to have spectacle as part of the

theatre again, to have the theatre being able to capture great events--broad, earth-shaking, historical events, not just little cocktail party chatter, not just drawing room comedy, or comedies of manners or the well-made play--but to write a play that could actually be called "The Destruction of Mexico." I mean, something that great. So that is what I began to conceive. I thought...well, yes, I will write a play with that kind of fantastic dramatic scope, only about things that I am interested in, which in essence is the destruction of Western imperialism.

Q. Would you say then, that what you drew from Artaud was mainly method?

A. Yes. Form, I guess--you know, seeing some ideas on alienation from traditional Western theatre.

Q. In A Black Mass and Slave Ship, for example, the ritual, the music, the scream, and the general spectacle reflect Artaud's concept of total theatre. Were you conscious of any specific Artaudian influences in the writing of these particular plays?

A. Yes. I think that what that was leading me back to was the traditional theatre...because, you know, even to get back to the traditional--the non-western theatre, the

African theatre--is to get back to the theatre of the total use of the senses. And I think that that is what Western theatre was lacking, and that's what I think has been bad about it. It has gotten away from the total theatre. To me, theatre as proposed by its most ancient form (which of course, was African--not Western), has to do with the use of all the arts at the same time. That's why it is theatre. All the arts should be expressed in the theatre. You are talking about a total emotional involvement. So you are talking about music, dance, poetry, mime--all of those things together is what makes it theatre. That is what Artaud advocated, and I think that is what I was getting back to.

Q. Susan Sontag described the impact of Artaud as "so profound that the course of all recent serious theatre in Western Europe and the Americas can be said to divide into two periods--before Artaud and after Artaud." What influence would you say Artaud has had on the theatre in America in general?

A. Well, I couldn't say. I know that Artaud has had some influence on people like say, the living theatre...obviously also on some of the people who were also sensitive to say, the stuff that Beckett and Ionesco were doing in the theatre of the absurd...various people of the Beat

generation, people with interest in surrealist literature. I think that impact was obviously there. And for me, Artaud was the transitional method back to understanding the kinds of possibilities of theatre of the whole consciousness by utilizing all the arts, by exploring the full dimensions of total theatre.

Q. Is there a Black American literary tradition? If so, where do you place yourself in this continuum?

A. Yes, there is a Black American literary tradition. I guess I place myself as part of that generation that has reached its fifties by 1987...you know--certainly not the last wave, because obviously there's a couple of generations now out there, younger than I am...obviously some writers who are in their thirties and some in their twenties. At least, let's say that there is another generation that's out there now. But I see myself, certainly as part of that tradition, and I think that the problem is that that tradition is always obscured by white supremacy. But if you check out the leading writers in our tradition, you see that they have been very consistent--very consistent aesthetically, in terms of their intentions and in terms of their various use of forms. Yes, there is an African-American tradition, just like there is an African-American aesthetic, just like there is

African-American history. Some people think that we have no history because they choose to distort the facts. You know, it's like the Lone Ranger and Tonto; Tonto only exists as part of the Lone Ranger's history, and that's not true. We have our own history. It is part of the total history of human beings. But the problem is that we have been excluded from history--hence our determination to reassert it, to raise it.

VITA

Elaine Isolyn Duval was born in Kingston, Jamaica, on September 9, 1949, daughter of Olivia and Donald Duval. She attended St. Hugh's High School in Kingston, and upon graduating in 1969, she received the school's award for the best student in English. She subsequently entered the University of the West Indies (U.W.I.), Mona, Kingston, on a Jamaica government scholarship to pursue a special honors degree in English. After graduating in 1972 from the University of the West Indies with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English, she taught English for one year at the College of Arts Science and Technology, Kingston. She re-entered the University of the West Indies in September 1973 to pursue a Diploma in Education, specializing in the teaching of English.

On graduating from U.W.I. in 1974, Elaine spent the next six years teaching, working in public relations, and working as an editor. She taught English at Mico Teachers College in Kingston during fall 1974, and again from 1977-1979. In the interim (1974-1977), Elaine worked as a public relations officer for the National Savings Committee, Kingston, and as an editor of that organization's quarterly magazine.

In September 1979, Elaine left Jamaica to come to the United States of America to pursue further graduate studies. She received a Master of Arts degree in English from Ohio

University, Athens, Ohio, in June 1981, and she subsequently taught English at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, for one semester. In January 1982, Elaine enrolled in the doctoral program in English at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She graduated with a Ph.D. in English in August 1988.