

M. L. Rosenthal: On "Black Dada Nihilismus"

Indeed, American sensibility has in the past decade suffered a renewed exposure to violence in ways we did not expect and hardly yet realize. One poetic result is a morbid, sickened assimilation of the shock into the language of feeling generally. . . . An instance of what I am talking about in contemporary America is Baraka's poem "BLACK DADA NILISMUS." Here the poet contrives a rhetoric of rage that acts out the role assigned the black man by his most paranoid oppressor. It is important to note, as with Hughes, that the violent, simple affect exists in a sophisticated intellectual context. The very title of the poem shows a deliberate marshaling of motifs from literary and political revolutionary tradition and from black magic. Jones assimilates the syntax, the cultural tokens, and the vocabulary of uneducated blacks to his highly literate context of reference.

[. . .]

The author of these lines has something of a political base in one of our great, crisis-ridden American cities: Newark, New Jersey. His poems and plays have explored the subjective effects of the dominant whites' violation of black mentality, and at the same time has acted out psychologically and in fantasy the politics of intransigent confrontation. No American poet since Pound has come closer to making poetry and politics reciprocal forms of action. That is not necessarily a good thing. When the reciprocity comes out of the very nature of the language and feeling that engage the poet, when it amounts to a discovery as of the awakening of the senses, then we have to do with an accomplishment whose moral and aesthetic character are inseparable values: as in *Hamlet* or *Coriolanus* or, less grandly, in Shelley's glorious chorus in *Hellas*: "The world's great age begins anew." In such work the quality of the poet's engagement with truth makes him incapable of using language dishonestly. Bu in part of "BLACK DADA NIHLISMUS" Baraka's political rhetoric cheapens his poem and dilutes its intended but merely contrived barbaric ferocity. His category of names, for example, places Lumumba in the same category of race victims as characters in American comic strips and radio serials, nightclub performers and prizefighter, so that he weakens and at last loses the poem's original incantatory force.

Even in this poem, however . . . Baraka has not betrayed himself entirely through an oversimplified rhetoric. He is the victim of his own best human qualities, a man who refuses to let himself slide out from under the burdens of less privileged black Americans. . . . Many of his poems are the deliberate invention of an intellectual poet setting out to internalize the violence of the poor blacks' experience and convert it into an equal and opposite reaction, and one just about as acceptable as a promise of national enlightenment.

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