

## William J. Harris: On "In the Tradition"

In 1980 Baraka's long poem "In the Tradition" was published in *The Greenfield Review*. This poem, dedicated to contemporary alto saxophonist Arthur Blythe, is Baraka's most fully realized and completed "epic" poem?epic in the Poundian sense that it concerns historical events. Baraka describes it as "a long poem, a poem about African-American history," and in it, he most successfully brings together his white and his black avant-garde traditions. While the thematic concerns here are black, they are expressed through an art form that derives not only from black music but also from both white and black avant-garde technique and theory. Like jazz, this form is uniquely New World, growing out of two distinct cultures and becoming something new.

The black tradition Baraka affirms in this poem is more complex than any conception of black culture he had expressed in the past. It is a tradition of heroes . . . . And it is a tradition of villains . . . . But while the poem is nationalist, affirming black people, it is revolutionary nationalist rather than culturalist. In his Marxist stage, Baraka has seen cultural nationalism as static, clinging to a feudal and romantic past, and he has seen revolutionary nationalism as committed to a struggle for a free and socialist future. According to Baraka, the revolutionary nationalist, like the cultural nationalist, believes like Marx "It is not enough to understand the world; we must change it," but unlike the nationalist the revolutionary knows the world can be changed only by organized revolution, not spontaneous revolt.

From *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic*. Copyright 1985 © the University of Missouri Press.

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Amiri Baraka [2]

### **Author:**

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