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LITERARY HERESY

The Dantesque Metamorphosis of LeRoi Jones
into Amiri Baraka

Dennis Looney

During the Black Revolution, LeRoi Jones used a radical adaptation of Dante to express a new militant identity, turning himself into a new man with a new name, Amiri Baraka, whose experimental literary project culminated in *The System of Dante's Hell* in 1965.¹ Dante's poem (specifically, John Sinclair's translation) provides a grid for the narrative of Baraka's autobiographical novel; at the same time, the Italian poet's description of hell functions for Baraka as a gloss on many of his own experiences. Whereas for Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, Dante marks a way into the world of European culture, Baraka uses Dante first to measure the growing distance between himself and European literature and then, paradoxically, to separate himself totally from it. Baraka's response to the poet at once confirms and belies Edward Said's claim that Dante's *Divine Comedy* is essentially an imperial text that is foundational to the imperial discipline of comparative literature.² That Baraka can find his struggle against imperialist culture, as he sees it, on none other than this specific poem suggests the extent to which it is a richer and more complex text than even Said imagined. To see exactly how Baraka does this, I propose to read several extended passages from *The System of Dante's Hell* to take stock of its allusiveness to the Italian model. For all the critical attention to Baraka, surprisingly no one has undertaken the necessary work of sorting out his allusions to Dante in any systematic way.

Baraka first read Dante at Howard University in the early 1950s with Nathan Scott, a professor of English and religious studies, an experience which transformed him: 'Nathan Scott's preaching about Dante conveyed an *intellectual* love for literature that I hadn't seen. [...] And it was due directly to this that I later went back to Dante to read what I was able.'³ In an interview in 1981, Baraka explained that Scott's course was a year-long survey of Western literature: 'We got all the biggies, everybody we were supposed to get in that one-year survey course;

and when he came to Dante, he [Nathan Scott] was so in love with it. And now I understand why. Because he was religious. I didn't know that. He was a Reverend ... something like that. He was a Doctor of Divinity, as well as a PhD.⁴ Scott represents the rarefied world of Dante studies, rooted in the abolitionist and Protestant culture of the Bostonian gentry. The world figured in Dante's poem and the world of privilege that first fostered its study in the United States must have seemed equally strange to Baraka. The Ivory Tower, too, was an uncomfortable fit that came with its own set of limitations. Indeed, Baraka, as a sign of his rejection of that upward social mobility, would soon turn away from the world Scott represented by flunking out of Howard in 1954, only to return to Dante's poem several years later to read it on his own. He would use that rereading of Dante to position his critique of the social mobility of blacks in the United States. And he would also eventually develop a critical attitude toward the use of authors like Dante himself.

After his time at Howard (1952–54), Baraka joined the U.S. Air Force, serving until 1957, an experience to which he alludes in certain sections of *The System of Dante's Hell*. In 1991, William J. Harris divided Baraka's literary career into four basic periods, beginning with his dishonourable discharge from the service: the Beat period (1957–62); the transitional period (1963–65); the Black Nationalist period (1966–74); the Third World Marxist period (1974–91).⁵ Baraka wrote portions of *The System of Dante's Hell* in the first period as he came into his own among the Beat writers in New York and during the transitional years leading up to the book's publication in 1965. Although eclipsed by the fame of Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, and others whom he emulated, Baraka was associated closely enough with the group during his tumultuous years in Manhattan that he felt it necessary later to declare his independence from them. He struggled to find his identity as an ethnic outsider among white bohemians who saw themselves as social outsiders.⁶ It was a delicate balance to maintain, and the tension deriving from the ongoing social negotiations may account for the affected tone in *The System of Dante's Hell*. He did make a name for himself both as a poet and as a publisher working to establish alternative publishing venues for other poets. He co-edited the journal *Yugen* with his first wife, Hettie Cohen, and he set up the mimeographed semi-monthly newsletter of poetry and prose, *The Floating Bear*, co-edited with Diane di Prima, among other projects.

The System of Dante's Hell grew organically out of several experimental pieces published over the first decade of Baraka's writing career. The 1959 issue of *The Trembling Lamb*, a literary magazine printed by Harry Gantt and distributed by the Phoenix Book Shop in New York City, contained the first appearance in print of a portion, initially called *The System of Dante's Inferno*. The last word of the title was changed in the 1965 printing to *Hell*.⁷ It contains approximately the first third of the narrative as it eventually would be published; the text remains virtually unchanged in the subsequent versions. Two experimental short works, 'Hypocrites' and 'Thieves', which fit into the larger narrative where the piece in *The Trembling Lamb* leaves off, came out in an anthology Baraka edited in 1963, *The Moderns*.⁸ A third section, 'THE EIGHTH DITCH (IS DRAMA)', was first published in the ninth issue of *The Floating Bear* in 1961. The publication of this excerpt led to the arrest of Baraka and Diane di Prima on obscenity charges in October 1961. Baraka then republished three other sections that he incorporated into the final narrative, 'The Christians', 'The Rape', and 'The Heretics', in two collections that came out in 1963 and 1964, before he assembled all the pieces into the final version with an epilogue, 'Sound and Image', published by Grove Press in 1965.⁹ Only one short section, 'Personators (alchemists) Falsifiers', hadn't been published in some form earlier.

The System of Dante's Hell was published the same year Baraka divorced his white wife, Hettie Cohen, and left the beatnik scene of Greenwich Village, getting 'out of this downtown white hell'¹⁰ and moving to Harlem to run the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School. In-your-face political theatre became his medium of choice as he settled into Harlem. Baraka left after a brief sojourn in 1965 and returned to his home in Newark, New Jersey, which would soon be convulsed in the riots of 1967 and 1968. Shortly thereafter he became a proponent of Kawaida spirituality and assumed the name Imamu (or Spiritual Leader) Ameer Baraka. Kawaida spiritual practice, based on the 'moral discipline of orthodox Islam and African concepts' such as Umoja or unity, became a moral code governing the lives of Baraka and some of his fellow Black Nationalists.¹¹ At some point later he altered his name again, dropping 'Imamu' and changing the Islamic-sounding 'Ameer' to a more pan-African and secular 'Amiri'.

What did Baraka as a reader find in Dante that he could transform into something of his own? The title of his novel, *The System of Dante's*

Hell, suggests that what he took first from the Dantesque model was a *system* or a *structure* or a *form*. Baraka borrowed his title from the heading of a schematic table in John Sinclair's popular translation of the *Inferno*.¹² He reproduces the table with one significant alteration, moving the heretics from the sixth circle down to the bottom of his hell. He adds an explanatory note on where and why he repositions the heretics and he places the entire table prominently at the start of his own narrative in the 1965 edition.¹³ The narrative is made up of twenty episodes that focus on the main character's youth and young adulthood, with titles inspired by the *Inferno* such as 'Gluttony', 'Wrathful', 'Seducers', 'The Diviners', and 'Thieves'. The episodes follow more or less their order in hell according to the medieval tradition codified and restructured by Dante. There is no question that Baraka alludes to a systematic infernal topography with its moral overtones as the organizing principle for his novel. But why?

Baraka is writing about the hell of growing up black in the segregated America of the 1930s and 1940s and the frustrations of coping with that racist system in the 1950s and early 1960s. He focuses progressively on what it means to develop as a writer in that sort of world and he seems troubled especially by what he takes to be a paradoxical question: how one cultivates an authoritative voice as a black man if one's sources come predominately from white authors. Just before *System* is published but after most of the novel had already been written, Baraka writes an extensive review article, 'A Dark Bag,' on recent books by African and African American poets in the March 1964 issue of *Poetry*.¹⁴ The article is highly critical of the type of writing by Americans of colour that Baraka perceived to be in vogue at that time, including much of the material anthologized in *American Negro Poetry*, edited by Arna Bontemps. He is critical of many black African writers in English while he singles out several francophone authors for praise. He directs his complaints specifically against writers of colour who aspired to rise to the middle class and who 'thought of literature as a way of proving they were not *inferior*'.¹⁵ An example of the kind of writing to avoid is Ellison's: 'Ralph Ellison's extra-literary commercial is usually about European Literature, the fact that he has done some reading in it'.¹⁶ Ellison's advertised allegiance to Europe is precisely the problem. The reference to his work as a 'commercial', extraliterary no less, is a clever way of implying that he has sold out, but it may also be an envious commentary based on what Baraka assumed to be Ellison's financial

success.¹⁷ In contrast, the best writing by authors of colour should not imitate the literary models of white writers, regardless of the potential for profit. The black artist should consider his own race a legitimate and necessary subject and find appropriate sources accordingly. Baraka goes so far as to imply that the review in the establishment journal *Poetry* might be his last literary contribution as he shifts his energies to a more direct form of activism for his people.¹⁸ In a telling chronological detail, Baraka writes another piece, 'State/meant', one year after the 1965 publication of *System*, in which he goes much further in his demands of the artist whom he now refers to consistently as black: 'The Black Artist's role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it.'¹⁹ The latent militancy of 1964 has exploded by 1966: LeRoi Jones has become Amiri Baraka, the Negro bohemian has transmogrified into the black artist. We need to examine *The System of Dante's Hell* to see what brought about this radical transformation.

The following table [p. 310], which contrasts Sinclair's schematic table with the order of episodes in Baraka's narrative, shows that Baraka consistently uses Sinclair to map out the sections of his novel.

Beyond this Dantesque grid, just how much does Dante's poem really influence the composition of Baraka's novel? Here's the beginning of the narrative:

But Dante's hell is heaven. Look at things in another light. Not always the smarting blue glare pressing through the glass. Another light, or darkness. Wherever we'd go to rest. By the simple rivers of our time. Dark cold water slapping long wooden logs jammed 10 yards down in the weird slime, 6 or 12 of them hold up a pier. Water, wherever we'd rest.²⁰

Baraka opens with an adversative conjunction, thus setting the tone for his version of Dante, which will be in contrast to the medieval model, played off against it, rather than a continuation of it. It may be that he was inspired to use this mode of opening by his reading of Ezra Pound. According to Diane di Prima, Baraka wanted to be known as the Black Pound.²¹ Pound similarly opens his epic *Cantos* with a conjunction: 'And then went down to the ship'. Perhaps Pound's initial 'and' alludes to the first word of Homer's *Odyssey* in the original Greek, 'man': 'Andra moi ennepe, Mousa' (About the man, Muse, sing into me).²² The suggestion in Pound's case (the same is true of Joyce's *Ulysses*) is that his work is meant to be read as a continuation of Homer's. Baraka, for his part, opens with a double sally against the Dantesque model and against

Sequence of episodes in Baraka's <i>The System of Dante's Hell</i>	Sequence in Sinclair's schematic map of the system of Dante's hell
Neutrals: The Vestibule	Neutrals
Heathen: No. 1	Circle 1. Virtuous Heathen
Heathen: No. 2	
The Incontinent: Lasciviousness	Circle 2. Lascivious
Gluttony	Circle 3. Gluttons
Incontinent: The Prodigal	Circle 4. Avaricious and Prodigal
Wrathful	Circle 5. Wrathful
	Circle 6. Heretics
Seven (The Destruction of America	Circle 7. Violent
Seducers	Circle 8. (1) Panders and Seducers
The Flatterers	(2) Flatterers
Simonists	(3) Simonists
The Diviners	(4) Diviners
Circle 8 (Ditch 5) Grafters (Barrators)	(5) Barrators
Hypocrite (s)	(6) Hypocrites
Thieves	(7) Thieves
The Eighth Ditch (Is Drama	(8) Fraudulent counsellors
The Ninth Ditch: Makers of Discord	(9) Makers of discord
Personators (alchemists) Falsifiers	(10) Falsifiers
Circle 9: Bolgia 1–Treachery To Kin-	Circle 9. Treachery (1) to kindred
dred	(2) to country and cause
	(3) to guests
	(4) to lords and benefactors
6. The Heretics	
Sound and Image	

an important American epic that was, for him, an intermediary. The gist of the opening line is that Baraka's story will be a tale far worse than the original, in comparison to which Dante's hell will seem like heaven: so much will he outdo his model.

The second line of Baraka's proemium enjoins the reader to be prepared for the unexpected, to see things differently, to see things in a new light. The narrator continues: 'Another light, or darkness.'²³ The challenge to the reader, then, is to see things in the dark and to see things that are dark, literally and figuratively, a challenge that eventually becomes one of the novel's themes. If Ellison's *Invisible Man* turns not being seen at all into a theme, *System* focuses on how to perceive things

in darkness – on how to perceive and appreciate even the darkness itself. Indeed, darkness and colour become apt metaphors in Baraka's writing for the social gradations of the classes on a scale that runs from white to black, with yellow, brown, and other shades in between. Rewriting Dante's *Inferno* is a process that enables Baraka to reflect on the social setting of his youth in Newark and his adulthood beyond that, seeing those various colours in a new light.

The first section of the novel, 'Neutrals: The Vestibule', emphasizes community, with the communal perspective encapsulated in the first person plural pronouns, 'we' and 'our', recalling the insistence on community at the beginning of Dante's poem: 'In the middle of *our* life's journey' (*Inf.* I, 1). The narrative begins with a reference to a river, Baraka's version of Acheron, where he would go as a boy and alongside which others presumably would gather, as the sinners do in Dante's *Inf.* III, before they are ferried over into hell proper. For Baraka, however, the river is a place of rest and refuge.

At *Inf.* II, Dante invokes the muses and, through them, his memory in order to recollect what he had experienced as pilgrim on his journey through hell. Baraka, too, calls his memory to action. First, he refers to the recollecting powers of his mind in the third person: 'The mind fastens past landscapes.'²⁴ Then he issues a command to his memory as it begins to produce a multitude of images from his past: 'Each face will come to me now',²⁵ and later 'I remember each face'.²⁶ Dante reassures the reader over and over that he is recreating the experience of the past exactly as it happened. The truthfulness of memory is not an issue for Baraka's narrator, who is more interested in presenting a poeticized view of the sites he remembers from his past, in phrases like 'Fire escapes of imagination'.²⁷ This sort of poetic image, in turn, can prompt a memory such as that of the night when the young Roi sneaked out his window to the rooftop: 'Then shinnied down to the ground. I hid out all night with some italians.'²⁸ On this transitional note, the first chapter of the novel ends as the protagonist moves surreptitiously out of his house and into the world of white culture, represented by the Italian-Americans of Newark. Dante clearly belongs to that Italian-American world – even more so, one might think, than he does to Baraka and the Negro world from which he and his protagonist emerge. When Baraka states 'Neutrals: The breakup of my sensibility',²⁹ he suggests that the application of this Dantesque category to his situation challenges his own understanding of himself and his surroundings. Moving out of his world and

into another by way of Dante and Italian culture paradoxically marks the beginning of the transition from LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka.

The narrative moves into a section that is an imitation of Dante's treatment of circles two through five, in which incontinent sins are punished: lust, gluttony, greed, and prodigality, anger and sullenness. In the passage treating the lascivious, Roi's uncontrolled exploration of his sexuality continues, with no mention of Francesca, Cleopatra, Achilles, or any others who might have caught Baraka's attention from even a perfunctory reading of *Inf.* V. We begin to realize that his rewriting is a very free imitation. And yet he makes an effort to keep the reader focused on possible Dantesque echoes, as when the narrator observes 'Passd the neutrals into the first circle' and 'But to the next level'.³⁰ Such asides are characteristic of Dante's original, enabling the reader to follow along as the pilgrim descends. For example, Canto V in Sinclair's translation opens: 'Thus I descended from the first circle down into the second' (*Inf.* V, 1–2). Another passage in this short section calls attention to itself by its allusion to Dante's text. The fear of out-of-control desire prompts this comment: 'Anger is nothing. To me fear is much more. As if trees bled.'³¹ Trees bleed dramatically in *Inf.* XIII, where Dante describes the punishment in the wood of the suicides. The allusion suggests that the fear of desire and its momentary satisfaction in homosexuality has caused the narrator to entertain thoughts of suicide.

We progress deeper into Baraka's hell, past the gluttonous and through the prodigal. He omits the avaricious, although he includes them in his version of Sinclair's map. The order of Dante's *Inferno* moves from circles two through five, various sins of incontinence, to circle six, the peculiar Christian sin of heresy, and on to circle seven of the violent. Baraka, however, moves from his section on wrathful sinners, the last sin of incontinence, to the circle of the violent, skipping the heretics. Baraka locates heresy at the end of his narrative, at the bottom of hell, aware that this contradicts Dante's order, in which it is placed in the sixth of nine circles. We will consider the modern author's reasons for rearranging Dante's structural design in more detail below when we come to the final section of his narrative, 'The Heretics'.

Baraka's rewriting of the entire seventh circle of the violent (*Inf.* XII–XVII) fills a mere page and a half. Entitled 'SEVEN (The Destruction of America)', the author's characteristic open parenthesis leads to a poetic meditation on the fate of native Americans at the hands of 'White man'. Without examining the theology or ethics informing Dante's sev-

enth circle, Baraka lifts from Sinclair's edition the following general description, which I reproduce, respecting Baraka's line-breaks and typographical arrangement:

Violence
 against others,
 against one's self,
 against
God, Nature and Art.³²

Baraka is not interested in matching moments from his experience with the precise sections in Dante's *Inferno* where the Italian poet deals with the given illicit activities.

In his version of the eighth circle, Baraka imitates Dante's structural design more fully. Baraka respects the original plan of an eighth circle made up of ten sections in a narrative sequence that constitutes over a third of the novel. Sinclair renders Dante's term for the subsections of the eighth circle, 'bolgia', as 'ditch' (a more accurate translation is 'pouch'), which Baraka borrows to describe the eighth and ninth sections of his sequence. Baraka reduces the four subsections of Dante's ninth circle to one, to which he appends his long story of the heretics in its iconoclastic reordered position. Finally, he adds a short epilogue to the entire work called 'Sound and Image'.

As we move deeper into Baraka's hell, his writing becomes more original. 'The Ninth Ditch: Makers of Discord', first published in an anthology *Soon, One Morning* (1963), is the most subtly constructed imitation of Dante's narrative in *The System of Dante's Hell*.³³ In this section, the author evokes the world of the Newark gangs of his youth in terms of *Inf.* XXVIII. First among Dante's makers of discord in the eighth circle, ninth bolgia, are the founders of Islam, portrayed as radical schismatics, Muhammad the prophet and his son-in-law, Ali. Dante accepted the medieval belief that Islam began when heretical wayward Christians created a schism within the Church. Their punishment in hell, consequently, is to be mangled and cloven into pieces by a devil, whose violent actions force them to embody the sort of suffering they brought about within the political entities of which they were a part. The schismatic's body is cloven in retribution for the way in which the schismatic clove the body politic. In Baraka's version of this section of hell, he continues to focus on his teenage years. He is about sixteen or seventeen, attending parties around Newark in a wintry landscape in the

late 1940s or early 1950s. He takes buses across town to an unidentified house and then descends into the basement for intense dancing with people he doesn't know. Our hero is already showing his literary aspirations, alluding to conversations with a girl about Dylan Thomas and Baudelaire.³⁴ Roi recalls that members of his gang, the Cavaliers, were in a struggle with boys from another, tougher gang, the Dukes: 'They had taken up the practice of wearing berets. Along with the army jackets (& bellbottom pants which was natural for people in that strange twist of ourselves, that civil strife our bodies screamed for ... Now, too, you readers!)'.³⁵ In order to highlight the connection that he makes to his medieval source, Baraka commands the reader in a Dantesque manner to pay attention to the passage. Dante's makers of discord – Baraka borrows Sinclair's phrase to describe the sinners – are guilty of creating civil strife. The very names of the Newark gangs are medievalizing: Cavaliers and Dukes. Earlier in the passage, when the narrator first mentions them, he makes a passing reference to 'Mahomet',³⁶ in Sinclair's spelling. It may be that the rival gang, the Dukes, plays the part of 'Mahomet' in a local Jersey version of a religious dispute. But like many other details in Baraka's narrative, it is difficult to identify the exact purpose of the allusion.

Baraka has his text of Sinclair's translation of Dante open to *Inf.* XXVIII. The final example of a schismatic in the canto is the troubadour poet, Bertran de Born, who succeeded in dividing Henry II from his son in the complicated political landscape of twelfth-century France. Bertran memorably appears at the end of Dante's canto with his detached head in his hand like a man holding a lantern, articulating the principle of the punishment's fitting the crime: 'Thus is observed in me the retribution' (*Inf.* XXVIII, 142). Bertran sheds light on how the two Newark gangs act when they come together in the crowded basement at the house party: 'Tonight someone said something about the records. Whose property or the music wasn't right or some idea came up to spread themselves. Like Jefferson wanting Louisiana, or Bertran deBorn given dignity in Hell. There was a scuffle & the Dukes won.'³⁷ The Dukes are territorial, as gangs are – and as Jefferson was when he negotiated the Louisiana Purchase with the French and as Bertran de Born was when he tried to rally one faction of the French nobility against another. Baraka focuses on Bertran in preference to several other sinners in Dante's canto, probably partly because he was a poet. The striking observation that Bertran (whose last name Baraka misspells) is

'given dignity in Hell' is taken straight from Sinclair's notes, in which the scholar writes: 'The quality of the sinners seems to rise from figure to figure, from the brutal squalor of Mahomet to the strange dignity of Bertran.'³⁸ Bertran does have an unexpected dignity in Dante's hell, which Baraka appreciated. It is possible, though, that he simply lifted the insight along with the phrase from Sinclair's commentary. Roi, for his part, is trying to lie low, hiding behind his persona as a poet in love: 'I sat down talking to a girl I knew was too ugly to attract attention.'³⁹

The references to Dante's text in this passage culminate when an angry member of the Dukes leaves the party only to return armed and ready for a fight: 'He came back with six guys and a meat cleaver. Rushed down the stairs and made the whole place no man's land. [...] "Where's that muthafucka." Lovely Dante at night under his flame taking heaven. A place, a system, where all is dealt with ... as is proper. "I'm gonna kill that muthafucka." Waived the cleaver and I crept backwards while his mob shuffled faces. "I'm gonna kill *somebody*."⁴⁰ The narrator describes the chaos that ensued, including how his own face was grazed by the cleaver, now an 'axe,' until,

they finally disappeared up the stairs, all the fighters.

When we came out
& went slow upstairs the fat guy was spread out in the snow & Nicks was slapping him in his face with the side of the cleaver. He bled under the light on the grey snow & his men had left him there to die.⁴¹

The Duke with the cleaver has become Dante's devil dispensing punishment to the gang members. But the devil gets his due, for it is the Duke gang member who has been cut up and left to bleed to death out on the sidewalk. This suggests, moreover, that the earlier reference to 'Mahomet' may be an attempt to link the Dukes to the role of Muhammad in *Inf.* XXVIII. Roi himself has metamorphosed into a new person; from talking of Dylan Thomas and Baudelaire to cultivating literary interests that the others envied to hiding strategically behind a conversation with an unattractive girl, he has turned into none other than the poet: 'Lovely Dante at night under his flame taking heaven.'⁴² This is a Dante who has emerged from hell to see the stars of heaven once again, a sentimental poet whom the others don't understand, not even his friends. This is a utopian Dante who will dream up 'a place, a system where all is dealt with as is proper', an adolescent in Newark who survives to become our poet in New York.

The book's final episode, 'The Heretics', stands out as the longest single piece in the narrative. As I noted above, Baraka locates the heretics at the end of the novel, at the very bottom of his reconstruction of hell, aware that this contradicts Dante's order, which places them, instead, in the sixth of nine circles. He explains the move in a note appended to the entry for the heretics on the schematic map at the beginning of the novel:

I put The Heretics in the deepest part of hell, though Dante had them spared on higher ground.

It is heresy, against one's own sources, running in terror, from one's deepest responses and insights ... the denial of feeling ... that I see as basest evil.⁴³

Baraka's rearrangement reflects tensions in Dante's original narrative regarding the structural design of the whole and the position of the heretics in relation to it. In a curious (and most likely unintended) way, Baraka's reclassification of the heretics reflects Dante's own reconsideration of this specific category within the classical ethical scheme underlying the Christian plan. Marc Cogan clarifies that for Dante heresy, like violence, is a sin tied to the irascible appetite; it is not a sin of maliciousness like the sins deeper down in the eighth and ninth circles of Dante's hell.⁴⁴ Baraka's decision to shift heresy further down in his narrative depends on his own redefined literary understanding of the sin. This, then, is a moment of auto-criticism, for Baraka saw himself as a cultural and literary heretic with respect to his attempt to blend in with white culture early in his life, especially during his time in Greenwich Village leading up to the novel's publication in 1965. In the story, Roi describes himself as an imitation white boy whose 'quick new jersey speech, full of italian idiom, and the invention of the jews'⁴⁵ perplexes and charms the rural southern blacks he meets near the Air Force base where he is stationed in Louisiana. These encounters force Roi to confront directly the social dichotomy of being split down the centre, of having a double consciousness, half-black, half-white. The heresy, therefore, is that of a black man who tries to act white and, worse, refuses to learn from the rude and uneducated (but untainted) blacks of the South. By extension, it is heretical for the black writer to ignore his race and write as though he were white. For Baraka, this heresy comes down to an appeal to the wrong sources – middle-class over lower-class, as he often puts it, and European over African.

Baraka's precise title for the chapter is '6. The Heretics', the number recalling the circle of the heretics in Dante's order. For Baraka, however, we are in the pit of hell; we should therefore expect to see Satan, as we do at the end of Dante's narrative. The chapter opens with an epigraph, in italics and quotation marks, taken from Sinclair's notes to *Inf.* IX, found on page 128 in that edition:

'The whole of lower Hell is surrounded by a great wall, which is defended by rebel angels and immediately within which are punished the arch-heretics and their followers.'

And then, the city of Dis, 'the stronghold of Satan, named after him, ... the deeper Hell of willful sin'.⁴⁶

Baraka draws from Sinclair's note a correct generalization: once inside the gates of lower hell, once past the point of *Inf.* IX in the original narrative, we are within Satan's domain proper. Given this calculation, Baraka's repositioning of the episode of the heretics is not quite as unorthodox or heretical as it may seem. The action of the story reaches its climax in a neighbourhood on the other side of the tracks in Shreveport, Louisiana, called 'the Bottom', where servicemen would often go for a night out. The neighbourhood's name (not uncommon in towns across the South) is one way to emphasize that we are in deepest hell. The Dantesque landscape furthers the impression. The setting is full of 'Damned and burning souls',⁴⁷ a bar 'filled with shades. Ghosts'.⁴⁸ At another moment, perhaps in a flashback, the narrator reflects 'All frauds, the cold mosques glitter winters' and 'Infidels fat niggers at the gates',⁴⁹ recalling the mosques of *Inf.* VIII, 70–73 and the drama at the gates in *Inf.* IX. Finally, throughout 'The Heretics', the author alludes to the cruel and savage forest in which his character wanders – the Dantesque image par excellence. 'The old wood. Eyes of the damned uncomprehending'⁵⁰ becomes an image for nothing less than white Western civilization, especially its literary culture, which entraps Roi and by extension Baraka.⁵¹

Roi meets a whore with a heart of gold named Peaches, who will provide him with the opportunity to learn how to be black. While the narrative design would lead the reader to expect some version of Satan, instead Roi quite unexpectedly meets his saving grace. Throughout the novel, he has not had a guide – no Virgil or Beatrice – during his journey. When Roi first lays eyes on his would-be lady, he is compared to Dante: 'He pointed like Odysseus wd. Like Virgil, the weary shade,

at some circle. For Dante, me, the yng wild virgin of the universe to look.⁵² There is nothing sexually virginal about Roi, but it remains for him to be initiated into the mysteries of the culture of his birthright, black culture. Later, as Roi and Peaches dance, he recognizes that ‘my history ... ended, here, the light white talking jig, died in the arms of some sentry of Africa. ... No one the white world wanted or would look at’.⁵³ Roi says to himself as Peaches undresses him: ‘Please, you don’t know me. Not what’s in my head. I’m beautiful. Stephen Dedalus. ... My soul is white, pure white, soars’.⁵⁴ His unvoiced plea is that she respect him for his apprenticeship in Western culture, for his similarity to Joyce’s protagonist in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. At the very opening of the story he declares his allegiance to ‘Thomas, Joyce, Eliot, Pound’,⁵⁵ but, by suggesting that these authors are part of his heretical education, he indicates that he is prepared to leave them behind as soon as he finds a new guide for the future. After succumbing to Peaches, he performs and leaves, only to return to accept her invitation to move in for a while. He thinks to himself, as she serves him watermelon in bed the next day: ‘And I felt myself smiling and it seemed that things had come to an order.’⁵⁶ A good system, in other words, to counter all the bad in the narrator’s life. He continues: ‘And felt the world grow together as I hadn’t known it. All lies before, I thought. All fraud and sickness. This was the world. ... A real world. of flesh, of smells, of soft black harmonies and color.’⁵⁷

But the bottom of hell isn’t the place for a kind spirit like Peaches, whether or not she is meant to recall Beatrice, nor can the narrative end on such a blissful note if it is to remain true to its primary model. Roi, assuming the role of husband, jokes about going out to shop for his new bride and buys her, among other things, some peaches. On his way back to her house, he has a change of heart about being with her, glossed by a citation of the opening line from *Inf.* IX: ‘That color which cowardice brought out in me’.⁵⁸ Dante uses the line to depict the pilgrim’s face when he turns pale upon realizing that his fearless guide Virgil is suddenly afraid. Virgil has realized that he is no longer in control of the situation and that the pilgrim’s life is at risk, for he is in danger of being turned into stone at the walls of the City of Dis. The colour of cowardice is white. To turn from Peaches and what she represents for Roi is to turn back toward whiteness and the fear that accompanies it. It is to risk a kind of petrification. Moreover, it is to turn toward a form of heresy, as Baraka’s subsequent allusion makes clear. Here is the quoted

verse in its narrative context in *System*: 'It was a cloud I think came up. Something touched me. "That color which cowardice brought out in me." Fire burns around the tombs. Closed from the earth. A despair came down. Alien grace.'⁵⁹ In Dante's *Inferno*, God punishes the heretics by causing them to be buried in open tombs. This is what Roi now risks as he leaves Peaches behind in the hopes that he might 'find sweet grace alone'.⁶⁰ In an earlier lyric piece, 'A Poem for Neutrals', Baraka alludes to this same passage in *Inf.* IX, just before Dante encounters the heretics beyond the gates of the City of Dis. There, however, his journey is interrupted:

It is not Dante,
nor Yeats. But the loud and drunken
pilgrim, I knew so well
in my youth. And grew to stone
waiting for the change.⁶¹

Baraka identifies with the pilgrim (though he is not 'loud and drunken' in Dante's original), distinguishing him from Dante the poet. In this lyric version of the descent into hell, Baraka's pilgrim is petrified before he can make it out and grow into the poet. The epic version of the descent in *System* offers different possibilities.

As Roi walks away from the house of Peaches, a rain begins to fall. Its timing suggests a rite of purification: 'And a light rain came down. I walked away from the house. Up the road, to go out of Bottom.'⁶² This could be – it should be – the moment when the pilgrim exits hell and sees the stars once again. Instead, three 'tall strong black boys' beat him nearly to death for being a 'Mr. Half-white muthafucka'.⁶³ As the novel ends the protagonist does indeed see stars, but not the salvific kind offered by the Dantesque model: 'Crazy out of my head. Stars were out.'⁶⁴ He is picked up by the authorities and taken away to an institution. In the last line of the story, Roi is revived in a different kind of infernal setting: 'I woke up 2 days later, with white men, screaming for God to help me.'⁶⁵ But it is a form of hell no less.

In an epilogue to the novel, 'Sound and Image,' the narrative voice forcefully describes a vision of hell on earth:

Hell in the head.
The torture of being the unseen object, and, the constantly observed subject.

The flame of social dichotomy. Split open down the center, which is the early legacy of the black man unfocused on blackness.⁶⁶

Baraka's definition of hell ultimately does not derive from anything specific in Dante's text. Rather, hell is the state of mind of the black man who must cope with the effects of being invisible in the white world. The 'unseen object' of this social critique is Ralph Ellison's invisible man. Baraka's reference to 'the flame of social dichotomy' and to being 'split open down the center' describes the impact of being, paradoxically, an invisible man under constant observation, an exile lost in one's own country. The divisive tension between being entirely ignored by one's society and being hounded to death leads the author's autobiographical self to do things that bring about his eventual ruin. This tension leads him to a white institutional hell, perhaps the psychiatric ward of a hospital, which also stands for the sanitized danger of the canonical hell represented by Western literary models such as Joyce, Eliot, Pound, and of course Dante. Roi, the narrator, standing for the author LeRoi Jones, needs to break away from these models – as, indeed, Amiri Baraka would work hard to do in his subsequent writing.

NOTES

- 1 LeRoi Jones, *The System of Dante's Hell* (New York: Grove Press, 1965). This essay is an abbreviated and slightly rewritten version of a section from my book, *Freedom Readers: The African American Reception of Dante Alighieri and the 'Divine Comedy'* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, forthcoming).
- 2 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), pp. 43–48.
- 3 Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (New York: Freundlich Books, 1984), p. 75.
- 4 Interview with D. H. Melman in *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, ed. by Charlie Reilly (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), pp. 214–15.
- 5 For an account of these periods, dates, and titles, and some reflections on the limitations of such chronological categories, see the 'Editor's Note' in *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. by William J. Harris (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), pp. xv–xvi. Baraka's Marxist fourth period continued unabated into the new millennium.
- 6 Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), pp. 87–88.
- 7 *The Trembling Lamb*, ed. by John Fles (New York: Harry Gantt for the Phoenix Book Shop, 1959), pp. 29–48. Gantt's operation was located at 360 Cabrini Boulevard, New York.

- 8 *The Moderns: An Anthology of New Writing in America*, ed. by LeRoi Jones (New York: Corinth Books, 1963).
- 9 For a facsimile of the first edition's frontispiece, see the website of the main library at the University of Virginia, <http://www2.lib.virginia.edu/exhibits/rec_acq/lit/baraka.html> [accessed 21 November 2009].
- 10 *Autobiography*, p. 198.
- 11 Theodore R. Hudson, *From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka: The Literary Works* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1973), p. 35, quoting Baraka. For a fuller picture of Kawaida, see Baraka's description: '7 Principles of US: Maulana Karenga & The Need for a Black Value System', in his *Kawaida Studies: The New Nationalism* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972), pp. 9–22.
- 12 *Inferno*, trans. by John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 19.
- 13 *Hell*, pp. 6–7. Various printings treat Baraka's note on heretics differently. The reprint in the Library of Black America relegates the note to the bottom of the same page rather than highlighting it by positioning it at the top of the following page, as is the case in the first edition: see *The Fiction of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2000), p. 17. In *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, William J. Harris paraphrases the note in his excerpt from 'The Heretics' (p. 100).
- 14 LeRoi Jones, 'A Dark Bag', *Poetry*, 103.6 (March 1964), pp. 394–401.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 395. The italics are Baraka's.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 In Baraka's *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow, 1966), p. 162, he comments: 'A book – no matter what you have to say in it – is just a commercial object and Negro Material is not the commercial object that gets the best sales. But even so, there are always exceptions. Baldwin books sell. Ellison, and some others.'
- 18 'A Dark Bag', p. 394.
- 19 *Home*, p. 251.
- 20 *Hell*, p. 9.
- 21 In *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years* (New York: Viking, 2001), di Prima attributes this claim to A. B. Spellman: 'It was in one of these sessions that A. B. made the remark that "Roi wanted to be the Black Ezra Pound"' (p. 240).
- 22 Guy Davenport is reported to have made this observation in conversation. For Pound's text, see Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1972). p. 3.
- 23 *Hell*, p. 9.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

- 32 Ibid., p. 36.
- 33 *Soon One Morning: New Writing by American Negroes, 1940–1962*, ed. by Herbert Hill (New York: Knopf, 1963).
- 34 *Hell*, p. 94.
- 35 Ibid., p. 98.
- 36 Ibid., p. 97.
- 37 Ibid., p. 98.
- 38 Sinclair, trans., *Inferno*, p. 357.
- 39 *Hell*, p. 99.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid., p. 100.
- 42 Ibid., p. 97.
- 43 Ibid., p. 7.
- 44 Marc Cogan, *The Design in the Wax: The Structure of the 'Divine Comedy' and Its Meaning* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), pp. 60–68.
- 45 *Hell*, p. 128.
- 46 Ibid., p. 119.
- 47 Ibid., p. 126.
- 48 Ibid., p. 128.
- 49 Ibid., p. 136.
- 50 Ibid., p. 134.
- 51 Some other allusions to the Dantesque forest: 'The day . . . where had it gone? It had moved away as we wound down into the mass of trees and broken lives' (ibid., p. 122); 'Once past you knew that your life had ended. That roads took up the other side, and wound into thicker dust. Darker, more insane, nights' (p. 126); 'The old wood' (p. 134).
- 52 Ibid., p. 126.
- 53 Ibid., pp. 129–30.
- 54 Ibid., p. 140.
- 55 Ibid., p. 119.
- 56 Ibid., p. 147.
- 57 Ibid., p. 148.
- 58 Ibid., p. 149.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Ibid., p. 150.
- 61 Amiri Baraka, *The Dead Lecturer*, in *Three Books by Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)* (New York: Grove Press, 1975), pp. 7–79 (p. 13).
- 62 *Hell*, p. 150.
- 63 Ibid., p. 151.
- 64 Ibid., p. 152.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 Ibid., p. 153.

Dennis Looney, 'Literary Heresy: The Dantesque Metamorphosis of LeRoi Jones into Amiri Baraka', in *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gragnotati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart, *Cultural Inquiry*, 2 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2010), pp. 305–22 <https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-02_18>

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