



**From Brother LeRoi Jones Through The System of Dante's Hell To Imamu
Ameer Baraka**

Paulette Pennington-Jones

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**FROM BROTHER LeROI JONES
THROUGH
THE SYSTEM OF DANTE'S HELL
TO IMAMU AMEER BARAKA**

PAULETTE PENNINGTON-JONES

*Pittsburgh Board of Education
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

*To remind
Me
That the man who
Escapes/Prostitutes
His emotiveness
Is only a heretic
Condemned by LeRoi
To the coldest-white section*

**What is hell?
Where the inferno?
Why the system?**

To a Black man of the twentieth century disposed in the United States of America, the choices of definition appear to be limitless. Brother LeRoi Jones (1963: 153) in the early 1960s by writing and publishing *The System of Dante's Hell* defined and characterized the Black man's predicament as "Hell in the head."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *At the time this paper was written, the author was connected with the African-American Cultural Center and the Department of English of the University of Illinois.*

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The System of Dante's Hell, LeRoi Jones' first, and thus far only, extended work of fiction, deals with the mental plight of the Afro-American in general as this identical identity-dilemma overlaps and meshes with his misinterpreted personal dilemma. This psychological predicament is, of course, incited by the peculiar social situation-pit the Black man has been dumped and duped into—so that he may rot like the rest of the American peoples.

LeRoi (Jones, 1963) lucidly describes the situation-pit as being, "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."

Through *The System of Dante's Hell*, Leroi proves that a focus on Blackness is an acquired response in this world where all outer induced stimuli converge to force one to focus (even to attempt to merge into) upon unnatural, alien, white ways and methods of being. Only through conditioning oneself to focus, to see, can the Black man deal with this social dichotomy.

In "Philistinism and the Negro Writer," LeRoi (1966: 53) straightforwardly states his problem of focus.

When I went into the Army I saw how the oppressors suffered by virtue of their oppression—by having to oppress, by having to make believe that the weird, hopeless fantasy that they had about the world was actually true. They actually do believe that and this weight is something that deforms them and, finally makes them even more hopeless than lost Black men. It is because of this knowledge of the society around me that I have stated that "I write now full of trepidation, because I know the death that society intends for me."

The knowledge of this death is fully explored and dismissed in his catharsis work of fiction that has a moral purpose for the blind Black men he has left behind wallowing in the pit.

The System of Dante's Hell, as the title shouts, is based structurally upon the system of nine circles that Dante

Alighieri led his readers through in the third book of *The Divine Comedy* entitled *The Inferno*. The sinners in Hell are arranged according to three capital vices: incontinence, violence, and fraud. Each of the nine regions is designated for a particular sin, and the order of the sins is according to their wickedness, the lightest near the top of the pit and the most heinous at the bottom. LeRoi chose to base his novel about his/Blackmen's inferno upon Dante's structure for several reasons. First, he feels a direct identification with Dante, the man of the Middle Ages. In the novel, LeRoi (1963: 126) says directly, "For Dante, me, the young wild virgin of the universe to look." The innocence of both men is self-acknowledged—Dante in his journey through hell depicts pity, sympathy, and empathy for the lost souls, while LeRoi's innocence is not of action, but innocence/ignorance of the method of the system which has him engulfed. Although there is identification through innocence, it is innocence at variance. Both have concepts of hell which are similar, but the position, the placement of hell differs between the two. Dante's hell is the condition of the soul after death, brought to that point by the choices made during life. To LeRoi, hell has been internalized; hell is the condition within his soul.

Both interpretations of hell are based upon a religious or spiritual foundation:

Dante said plainly that the first meaning was the literal one. By this he meant that the cantos tell the story of the state of souls after death, according to the beliefs of medieval Christianity [Vergani, 1969: 25].

Man has inherited sin and death through Adam's fall, but also hope of Salvation through Christ's redemption. God in his love created humans with the power of perceiving good and evil and the opportunity of choosing. On the basis of their choice depended their eternal bliss of damnation. Those who set their will against the divine law were sentenced to inferno and everlasting torment [Vergani, 1969: 12].

LeRoi's spiritualism nowhere reaches the formalism of the Medieval Catholic Church, but the commitment toward the religious foundation remains as steadfast. Critic Clarence Major (1965: 55), in speaking of LeRoi's earlier poetry, says, "Though he is not a Christian, he certainly seems to be spiritual." Addison Gayle, Jr. (1969) in his penetrating preface to *Black Expressions*, mentions the fact that literature to Black writers, in keeping with a tradition that stems from Medieval times, must above all else be moral. LeRoi himself has said,

Mysticism is, after all, the hard core of Negro culture . . . because the spirit was always vulnerable—more valuable than *things* for the Negro because he never had anything. . . . Trying to get at something which is finally spiritual and has to do with the transmitting of spirit . . . [is the Black writer's final goal] [Jones, 1966: 58].

Related to its literal and allegorical meaning is the stated moral purpose of the *Divine Comedy*: to point out to those yet living the error of their ways, and to turn them to the path of salvation. The moral purpose of *The System of Dante's Hell* is exactly the same: to vividly display the possible/probable errors of so-called life for the Blackman chained to America, to vividly display the terror/torment of such, thereby turning them back to their natural/righteous path which is their only salvation. To both moral men "Hell remains the kingdom of misery and ugliness, hate, torture, noise, and despair, without pause and without end" (Vergani, 1969: 21).

Whereas Dante finds himself astray in a dark wood, LeRoi is encased within his Black body.

Had Edward Margolies, white critic who authored *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth Century Negro American Authors*, taken these factors into account, he could not have trapped his critical abilities and displayed prejudiced inclinations by stating, "Despite Jones' attempt to structure

his hell . . . according to Dante's nine circles, the relationship is casual, and the novel is explosive and directionless as some of Jones's poems" (Margolies, 1968: 198). Also, he would recognize that some of the "self-hate and self-destruction" that he blindly accused LeRoi of is aimed not at the beautiful Black man and his being, but rather aimed at the whitened-Black man, the man who has ignored and therefore has no concept of Self. These are the mature and thoughtfully formulated steps of a man with direction for himself and his kind. LeRoi (Jones, 1966: 60) defends his direction through saying, "My own direction is always toward spirit, which is the only thing I admit as being real."

The Inferno opens at the midpoint of Dante's life, with Dante unable to recall how he got there, and knowing only that he has wandered from the path he should have been following. *The System of Dante's Hell* opens with LeRoi in his confused adolescence, not knowing exactly what is wrong, but recognizing that things are awry. The novel itself is the recalling/retelling of the ways and means which led him astray. Dante opens in ignorance; LeRoi opens in knowledge (albiet unspecific).

The first sentence of *The System of Dante's Hell* sets up the underlying, undeniable primary distinction between the white and Black world. LeRoi in his adolescence is not naive; he knows, "But Dante's hell is heaven" (Jones, 1963: 1).

This novel, which is an extension of an off-Broadway production entitled *Dante* that died after sixteen performances in 1961, opens with Neutrals, the uncommitted, who are located in the Vestibule (Costello, 1968: 436). LeRoi gives short descriptions of the people who inhabit Newark on West Market Street, haunt of his youth. These uncommitted are those, through the eyes of LeRoi, who neither totally submitted to the whitening, nor lived up to the commitment of their Black position. These are the men and women devoid of recognition of any social obligations or responsibilities. They did nothing to hurt Black people and, by the same token, did nothing to help Black people.

The neutrals run jewelry shops & shit in silence under magazines.
... They painted & led interminable lives... Stone on stone.
... All dead. All walking slowly towards their lives... stalking
their own winters [Jones, 1963: 9-12].

Although hell is reserved for those who deliberately, intellectually, and consciously chose an evil way of life, the negative vibrations of the vestibule are unmistakable. The refusal to choose, to commit oneself, is itself a choice, in an existential way of thinking. To LeRoi the obscurity of the noncommitment of the neutrals is blatantly repulsive in its blandness; its resplendent selfishness causes him to run and jump. To LeRoi, any action is better than no action: "and I slipped out through the window to the roof. Then shinnied down to the ground. I hid out all night with some italians" (Jones, 1963: 12).

The next circle, still following the elaborate plan set up by Dante, is inhabited by the heathens. Dante defines the heathens as the virtuous unbaptized, but a closer definition for LeRoi's heathen is the dictionary definition (Webster's *Seventh New Collegiate*), "an unconverted member of a people or nation that does not acknowledge the God." LeRoi's limbo is his relaxation in his own artistic-self-centeredness. He already has the inkling that man must go thru the self to reach the cosmic oneness—that he must journey through individuality assessed to community, but he wallows in his knowledge just as the uncommitted wallowed in their imposed ignorance.

I feel sick and lost and have nothing to place my hands on. A piano with two wrong notes. Broken chinese chimes. An unfaithful wife. . . . Everything I despise some harsh testimonial of my life. The Buddhism to affront me. Ugly Karma. . . . Nothing to interest me but myself. Disappeared, even the thin moan of ideas that once slipped through the pan of my head.

I am myself. Insert the word disgust. A verb. Get rid of the "am." Break out. Kill it. Rip the thing to shreds. This thing, if you read it, will jam your face in my shit. Now say something intelligent [Jones, 1963: 14-15].

Here LeRoi displays his disgust with his i-ness, but being unconverted to another philosophy belligerently taunts others who have or can come out of themselves toward him. His ability for direct address does donate some hope; if he can recognize the presence of others, he can recognize that he is not alone. The writer-isms of the paragraph demonstrate clearly that he is caught up in the “artist” trick of egocentric behavior and thought. But this he sees also: “The windows sit low above the river [Lethe] and anyone sitting at a table writing is visible even across to the other side. The shores are the same” (Jones, 1963: 17). And he moves positively to compare himself with Job, the hero of the Old Testament, who endures afflictions with fortitude and faith. “All I want is to move. To be able to flex flat muscles” (1963: 20).

Moving out of the first circle of heathens, LeRoi journeys to “Heathen: No. 2” where the emphasis is no longer upon single self-centeredness, but upon selfish dual liaisons. Here LeRoi introduces his adolescent desire-objects—Bernice (unmistakably similar in sound to Dante’s Beatrice, yet ironically impure in comparison), Sterile Diana, George, and Frank. His heterosexual and homosexual encounters are all unnatural to his consciousness, thus implying that nature, the natural is an approximate for God. The heathen is one who denies or defies the natural and is justly punished.

You’ve done everything you despised. Flowers fall off trees, wind under low branches shoves them into quick chill of the river, the high leaves disappear over stone fences.

My flesh is stone but I scream and he cringes with grunts.
 . . . Diane disintegrated into black notes beneath my inelegant hands. She died. She died. She died [Jones, 1963: 21].

Beyond the inelegant, unnatural acts, he attempts to stifle or murder his feeling, his emotion. “Or even I backing away from the zone. The area of feeling. Where anyone can enter” (1963). In his youth, when normally the spontaneous, the excitable runs rampant, he readies to kill, through retreat, the

natural, the God-like qualities of his manhood. And this is only limbo.

Through these opening three sections of *The System of Dante's Hell*, LeRoi introduces the reader to the obscure and fragmented language which dominates the majority of the sections of the novel. This form is used aesthetically to enhance the meaning of the content. The concealed language is used as another barrier to self. It is used as a protective shield which blocks and makes it easier to bear the personal revelations, while it succeeds in blocking or hindering the easy understanding of himself by/through others—thus, by self. Paradoxically, this implicit language has a favorable psychological effect upon the reader. It delivers the opportunity for the reader to become deeply involved through interpretation—the meaning, the content is a shared result of writer and reader. This being the ultimate aim of LeRoi's message—to merge the self with the outer selves, thereby forming the nation/self. LeRoi knows “Bpower = equals/but supercedes individualized control/concept of self” (Jones, 1968: 121), but that “It is easier to get people into a consciousness of black power, what it is, by emotional example than through dialectical lecture” (Jones, 1968: 125). Proceeding intelligently in his commitment, he circumvents “the arbitrary and imprecise nature of language” (Biggsby, 1967: 138) for the more solid emotional base which is naturally shared by Black people.

Ronald Milner (1967: 11) understands and expresses this valid concept in “Black Magic: Black Art” by saying:

Affirmations and inspiration, that is what the Black artist must mean to the Black man. Speaking of the qualities of himself and his living place as truthfully and artistically as he can with no one's standards or acceptance in mind but his own, the artist strikes empathy and identification; there is the reaffirmation of acknowledgement, then the assertion of what has been acknowledged, and the changing the toppling—the first inner, with the body personal, then outward through the bodies social, political, etc.—is on its way.

LeRoi reiterates the thought in emotional expressionism: "When I die, the consciousness I carry I will to Black people. May they pick me apart and take the useful parts, the sweetmeat of my feelings. And leave the bitter, bullshit rotten white parts alone" (Schneck, 1968: 16).

Continuing his journey downward/inward LeRoi reaches the circles of incontinence: the sins of the appetite, the sins of self-indulgence, the sins of passion are displayed. Incontinence also contains displayed weakness of will and irresolute action in the fact of temptation.

The first circle of the incontinent is entitled "Lasciviousness." The setting is a downtown (midtown Manhattan) party scene where LeRoi is knowingly participating in the cannibalistic ritual where he is the meal. "Lascivious is to meat. They take it into their mouths. Meat. Blood on the paper. . . . Anger is nothing. To me fear is much more. . . . And the lust in the world fashioned into snow" (Jones, 1963: 24-25). The meat/meal that LeRoi speaks of the they—whites—devouring should be interpreted both ways. Literally, these intemperate people are not pure eaters, are not vegetarians, but indulge in the killing and consuming of their own animal kind. On the second level, those physically misdirected are dealing in fellatio. The oxymoronic closing quote sentence (fiery lust is to frozen snow) metaphorically foreshadows the philosophical center of hell, which is the frozen ice block that negates all human warmth, emotion, sharing, and communalism. As they are lewd in their self-satisfying desire, he is equally wanton in his cooperation.

Although the next circle is called "Gluttony," LeRoi deals with the intimate urban area as glutton, because he had thoroughly revealed the gluttony of the nonpeople and the possible real-people who castigate themselves by playing cohort. New York City is succinctly shown as one who has great capacity for absorbing and wasting those caught within its jaws. LeRoi simply says, "City is gluttony" (Jones, 1963: 27).

The prodigal LeRoi in the successive circle is recklessly extravagant and lavish only in his hope for immediate salvation. He recognizes that his gain will be escape from his sip of hell, and he is greedy for this gain. In thinking "Each excess past" (1963: 30), he deals in retrospect with the beautiful sensualism he has known, intelligently deducing that sensualism is a probable positive trait for Black people. But his truth remains:

The prodigal lives in darkness. I have lost those clear days. . . . An impossible distance of shadows. Wool cloak of years. Not time, not ever time. Not to myself, a young fat-lipped corpse. Tell your lies some other time. "Your parents still visit the child" [1963: 31-32].

By this circle he is already too far gone—he is caught; the only way up is down, the only way out is through.

With the subject of wrath, LeRoi too briefly deals with respect to others displayed for his verbal ire, and his enjoyment of this display. His cryptic approach to this circle may be due to dissipation as a result of his over-lucid (for ego to bear) delivery in the first circle of the incontinent. Or his personal experiences never lean in an overtly wrathful direction. Whatever the reason, he shortchanges his lesson on the wrathful.

Within the section of the incontinent, there are several disparities between Dante and LeRoi. In Dante's system, the city of Dis is reached only after passing through the circle of the wrathful. In LeRoi, the city—New York City, the prototype of all American cities—is alone used to depict gluttony. In Dante's philosophical pattern, the sins of incontinence are sins done in isolation, excepting the sins of the wrathful which by their exposed hatred can possibly bring harm to someone (Vergani, 1969: 49). LeRoi recognizes no isolation—all sins are committed in collaboration (although not necessarily with mutual gain). For LeRoi, there is a philosophical inacceptance of isolation.

The next circle in Dante's progression is reserved for the heretics. Leaving the circles of the will-less sins, the reader enters the realm of malice which encompasses the sins of the will. "According to Dante's definition, a heretic was one who chose his own opinion rather than following the judgment of the Church" (Vergani, 1969: 56). Under LeRoi's system, the heretics are not assigned to the bottom of the sixth circle—they are the lowest of the low. LeRoi (1963: ii) explains,

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.

We are not talking merely about beliefs, which are later, after the fact of feeling. A flower, turning from moisture and sun would turn evil colors and die.

To be righteous, LeRoi calls for commitment on the Black man's part—commitment to feeling, the ultimate resource of man. Extending this theory, the Black man who happens to be a writer must deal in a literature of commitment also. "A writer must have a point of view, or he cannot be a good writer: He must be standing somewhere in the world, or else he is not one of us, and his commentary is of little value," amplifies this theory of commitment as propounded by Bigsley (1967: 5). LeRoi says this bond, this declaration, this warranty between the Black man/artist and his brother should lead us in our natural righteous direction. The Black artist's path is clear, if he is not to be a betrayer/heretic. "What's needed now, for 'the arts' is to get them away from white people, as example of their 'culture' (of their life, finally, and all its uses, e.g. art) and back where such strivings belong, as strong thrusts of a healthy people" (Jones, 1967a: 5). LeRoi continues,

High art, first of all, must reflect the experiences of the human being, the emotional predicament of the man, as he exists, in the defined world of his being. It must be produced from the legitimate emotional resources of the soul in the world. It can never be produced by evading these resources or pretending that they do not exist. It can never be produced by appropriating the withered emotional responses of some strictly social idea of humanity. High art, and by this I mean any art that would attempt to describe or characterize some portion of the profound meaningfulness of human life with any finality or truth, cannot be based on the superficialities of human existence. It must issue from real categories of human activity, truthful accounts of human life [Jones, 1967b: 193].

For LeRoi's acceptance and guidance in this betrothal, he is accorded the position of cultural hero to the Black community. The crime of heresy is the major inner enemy of the Black nation.

With circle seven, where the violent are incarcerated, LeRoi lumps the violent against others and the violent against self under the chapter entitled "The Destruction of America." This chapter is a prose poem with a desert setting that depicts Black trapped with whites dying on a high, cold mountain. Still, in this circle, under the violent against God, nature, and art are the panderers and seducers, the flatterers, the simonists, the diviners.

The seduction of LeRoi is through an act of fantasy which he has created of his past, his old love (which is now dead), his home. The self-seduction creates an approach/avoidance response which is similar to the relationship of the pander and the seducer. "Go away & try to come back. Try to return here. Or wherever is softest, most beautiful. Go away, panderer. Liar. But come back, to it" (Jones, 1963: 37).

The circle of flattery finds LeRoi enjoying the differentiation, the distinction that attending college and obtaining a formal education bestows upon the Black youth in his original ghetto home. LeRoi looks back upon childhood games and teenage loves and sees that he is already separated

from his people, and to him, in his condition, this is good. The discrimination imposed upon him by white value/standards is flattering at this point in hell.

The definition which Webster gives the noun "simonist" is one who buys and/or sells a church office, but LeRoi translates this to the personal, individual definition of one who through the buying and selling of the body (his church office) commercializes sacred jurisdiction. To demonstrate this, he opaquely describes the partial act of intercourse which turns out to be an unnatural dual-debaser.

The diviners of both Dante and LeRoi find their "heads twisted backwards" (Jones, 1963: 49) for attempting to foretell the future. LeRoi implies that the prejudgment made upon his comrades by each other, and those predictions upon others made by himself, whom he considers having lived heretofore in a closet, are base, baseless, and unjust.

Moving into circle eight, we begin to deal with the sinners categorized as simply fraudulent. Here grouped, each according to his own kind, we find the grafters or barrators, the hypocrites, the thieves, the fraudulent counsellors, the makers of discord, and the personators (alchemists) or falsifiers.

The grafters are standardly defined as those who profit from their position in public office. Here the musician stage of LeRoi's life is equated with public office. His gigs put him in the public eye, making him desirable to those pitiful ones who respected and learned for a part of his ego-heightened fame and notoriety. In this selection, there is a fusion of the art/intellectual scene with the homosexual scene, and LeRoi reaps dual dubious profits. Yet it is in this section that he has come to grips with, acknowledges his emotions enough for him to honestly face himself in direct accusation. "YOU LOVE THESE DEMONS AND WILL NOT LEAVE THEM. I am myself after all. The dead are what move me. The various dead" (1963: 59).

The opening scene on the hypocrites depicts a church

scene—not the usual Black Baptist emotion-releasing meeting, but a middle-class respectable worship of faking Methodists. This is the perfect showcase to expose categorically those who affect virtues and qualities they do not possess. LeRoi plurally personalizes it this way, “We did a lot of things, those years. Now, we do a lot of things. We drink water from streams. We walk down hoping to fuck Mulattos when they bathe. We tell lies to keep from getting belted, and watch a faggot taking a beating in the snow from our lie. Our fear” (1963: 65). The chapter closes with a playlet—the members of LeRoi’s old gang come together giving speeches of their past exploits and present theories—bragging dissemblers in chorus. Their group effort is abbreviatedly signed, “Yrs t., Caiaphas.” No more apt person could LeRoi have extracted from the Bible, via Dante, than the high priest who told the Council that it was better for Jesus to die than for the whole nation to perish. Both LeRoi and Dante deal with the hypocrites roughly because few sins can equal the deliberate cloaking of one’s true character and feelings in a false aspect of piety, tolerance, and honesty. This sin is closely akin to LeRoi’s deep-placed heretics, because with Blacks displaying both traits or tones, their nation can never become.

The chapter entitled “Thieves” opens with quote from Gauguin in *Noa Noa*. “Was I to have made this far journey, only to find the very thing which I had fled?” LeRoi the thief recognizes that he has stolen from himself; thieves steal in. His violence toward self has been a drying process, and his inner space has become cement where it was once fertile Black soil. LeRoi recognizes that he has declared war upon himself and won, just as he and his fighting youth gangs committed war thievery upon their neighborhood. And with this thievery, this drying, creeps nonunderstanding of self by self and thus by other/selves. “My symbols hung unblinked at. The surface appreciated, and I, sometimes, frustrated because the whole idea didn’t get in . . . only the profanity” (1963: 78).

Chapter/circle eight, the home of the fraudulent or evil counsellors, is one of the more intricate and interesting dramatic ditches. This section appears to be directly on the off-Broadway play of LeRoi's entitled *Dante*. The Narrator sets the scene for inner conflict by locating the reader within the inner tent. The first half of the schizoid personality is 46, reveals himself to be the young, idealistic, intellectual, physically acquiescent type. He has thoroughly internalized sick-white artistic values. This character's symbol/stance is lying on his stomach reading. The second character, the anti-self who openly calls himself the foil, announces that he should be called Herman, but he is slickly and symbolically called 64. 46 does not recognize his counter-self, but is fascinated by him and on the literal level engages in what appears to be a homosexual initiation. Knowledgeable 64 who claims to have been through it all, dangles this knowledge and information before 46 as bait—46 snaps. Says 64, "I have, at least, all the black arts. The smell of deepest loneliness. I know things that will split your face & send you wild-eyed to your own meek thoughts! . . . I'm a bellyrub man! But that's my circle, now! I am static & reflect it meaningfully. But you, my man, are still in a wilderness. Ignorant & weak. You can be taken" (1963: 83-84). And because 64 asserts this position as mentor, then fails to counsel/convince 46 that his middle-class hang-up/values are worthless; but falsely leads 46 in his thoughts of aspiration along the bleached-mind way, 64 is ultimately a fraud. 64 has been there and deliberately denies his role as teacher. His beautiful Black musical riffin',

I'm pure impression. Yeh. Got poetry blues all thru my shoes. I got. Yeah, the po-E-try blues. And then there's little things like 'The modern Jazz Blues.' Bigot Blues. Yourself, my man. . . your stone self. Talkin bout blues. White buck blues (short short blues, go thru me like wind, I mean, pure wind). I'm pure expression White friend blues. Adultery blues (comeon like you some dumb turkey, cool as you comeon to us, like a stone turkey they had you in the new world). Got what? Yeh, like love, baby, like love.

I had the Kafka blues . . . and give it up. So much I give up.
Chicago, Shreveport, puerto rico, lower east side, comeon like
new days. Sun everywhere in your eyes. Blues, comeon, like yr
beautiful self.

This does not and can never deny his malicious killing, through lack of nonevil counsel, of his other/self.

LeRoi, like Dante, deals with symbolic numerology, especially in the above section. The most prominent symbol is the multiple of ten, one hundred, which is the sum of the schizophrenic parts, standing for perfection. 46's yearning for merger with 64 positively reflects his conscious understanding of the need for unity between the white-imposed false distinctions of the "middle-class negro" and "underprivileged negro." Their liaison also positively reflects his unconscious understanding that total unity of all Black peoples is perfection.

The successive chapter dealing with the makers of discord, the sowers of scandal is headed "The Christians." LeRoi continues with the theme of the split between the college youth and his ghetto friendships past. He speaks of breaking off from the body, the masses of Black people. "I knew I'd gotten out. Left all that. The Physical World" (1963: 94). There is the flavor of enjoyment of masochistic suffering and the pleasure of being singled out as special for nonphysical, nonearthy, but intellectual reasons. This circle is the formal end of even tenuous ties between himself and his brothers. The comparison may be made between the original Christians and the educated-intellectuals who separate themselves from the majority to worship in clique. In the confrontation between these factions, the gang-men, the Dukes, win the battle because the college-gentlemen true to form avoid the fray. "The new learning had come in" (1963: 99).

The rotten piousness of the personators, the falisfiers pervades the next circle. LeRoi, the leading faker alchemist claims to be a God-fearing/good/god-man in this God-fearing land. He claims that anarchy, unnatural disorder, the killer of

God simply overtook him, “walked into us like morning” (1963: 119), but the impersonation is too heavy, too natural for the nonnatural liar to bear. By the closing lines of the chapter he denounces/reveals himself, and his cohorts as a “lousy vaudenville group.”

Nearing the bottom of the pit exposes the sins of treachery. Although Dante deals with the traitors to kindred, to country, to guests, and to masters, LeRoi chooses to deal only with the worst: treachery to kindred. LeRoi entitles this short-story-like chapter “The Rape.” Having completely made the move into the white-emerged middle-class of his dreams, he thoroughly fills the no-valued role. Other acceptance has not closed his eyes to his position of misfit, but it has closed and blocked his empathy actions toward other misfits. A group of teen Brooks-brothers seeing a drunken sister lost in their ritzy conclave, trick her with kindness saying they will drive her to her lost destination. She accepts and the journey of the aborted rape begins. The group, instigated and led on by LeRoi, the king-zero-no-higher violator of allegiance and faith to kind, attempts physical violation until she convinces them that her sickness, lower-class sores, is contagious. She givingly teaches them that life can take you down and LeRoi hears. She translates the fact to him that the damned soul is the prisoner of this world. When the group moves to kick the “bitch” from the moving vehicle, LeRoi acts on his allegiance—too late. Unfortunately, he is saved from his would-be purifying act through allegiance to him by a group in which he remains a misfit. The despoiling is reversed; the rape is of LeRoi.

The center of Dante’s pit is reserved for the arch-traitor Satan. The center of LeRoi’s pit remains for the arch-self-traitor, the heretic. LeRoi knows now that in the “blonde summer in our south . . . life was already over.”

The most explicit prose of this section reveals most clearly the most heinous sin. Using heavy environmental imagery, LeRoi reiterates his separation. When asked by an alien is he

his brother's keeper, he replies, "'Nigguhs is Nigguhs. . . . No,' I said, 'No. Fuck, man, I hate coons'" (1963: 123). Yet in this small southern Black-bottom, LeRoi encounters the natural prostitute Peaches who expects the natural of him and offers her natural in return. His inability to comply (caused by his perverted actions heretofore), to erect himself in manhood, discloses, uncovers him. With the strength of right, she forces him, and although he physically responds, he is intellectually unready/able to accept his natural role. Dishonestly agreeing the play the husband/wife game, he runs away from his fruit. Because of Original Good, he is beaten by his blind-to-his eyes kind brothers, who only partially denounce this lowest slime as "Mr. Half-white muthafucka" (1963: 151). And LeRoi ascends through his descent. Through beaten eyes, he sees the repugnance, the murder in denial of self, other/selves, nation/self, emotion, and feeling and falls to his knees begging an all-merciful God for mercy.

Brother LeRoi Jones, the struggling, whitened negro writer has completed his transformation into the spiritual, knowledgable Black writer/artist now named Imamu Ameer Baraka. He now knows, and most importantly has revealed through his descent into *The System of Dante's Hell*, that

to be an American one must be a murder. A white murderer of colored people. . . . The colored people, negroes, who *are* americans, and there are plenty, are only colored on their skin. They are white murders of colored people. Themselves were the first to be murdered by them; in order to qualify [Jones, 1968: 119].

The heretics plainly wear the mark of the seer/priest Imamu Ameer Baraka.

He showed/shows us through example:

Jones, on the very brink of the American dream of fame and fortune, withdrew from the magic circle and went uptown. (All the way uptown—to Harlem—leaving the high art scene to his white colleagues. . . . Not only did he withdraw his person, but he

took his art along with him. He withdrew *Black Magic*, a complete collection of his poetry, from Grove Press. A three-act four hour play optioned for Broadway was not produced [Schneck, 1968: 14].

His progression led him from whiteness into for/real Blackness.

Blacks have recognized and praised his "progression away from the word-center world to a world of intense emotion and violent action" (Resnik, 1967: 29).

Imamu Ameer Baraka has taken himself through absolute honesty, absolute revelation, absolute pain for his people. He did this to discover him/perverted/self, to obliterate him self and to merge with his selves. The ultimate pure Black act.

He has enacted the regenerative qualities of the moral writer. He spirits.

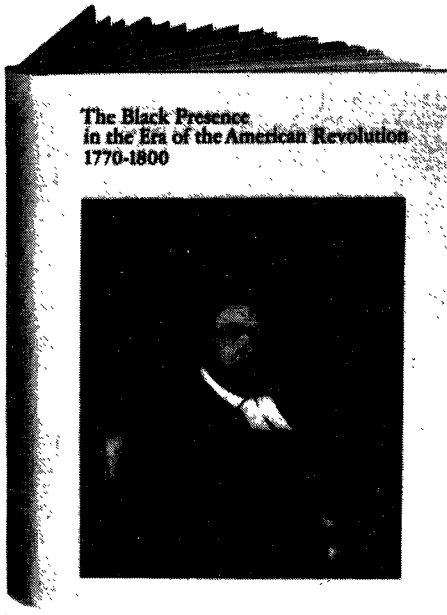
The poet, on this view, is the reciter of the ritual which keeps the world in being; but because the ritual these days has either fallen in disuse or is used for limited purposes religion ironically, having become a limited purpose, the poet must also be a rediscoverer, re-edifier who causes the purified and idealized history recited in the ritual to be freshly seen as penetrating and modifying our secular or supposed secular concerns, which is after all, exactly what was proposed and achieved by Dante [Howard, 1965: 403].

Imamu Ameer Baraka supersedes this tradition of Dante.

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