Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note

by Amiri Baraka

(1961)

Dedicating the work to his Jewish wife and coeditor of the seminal journal Yugen, hettie jones, amiri baraka (LeRoi Jones) published his first poetry collection, Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note at Totem Press, the publishing house that he founded in 1958. Many of the poems—composed between roughly 1957, when Baraka returned from the air force, and 1960—had appeared in little magazines on the East and West Coasts prior to the release of the collection. Of these chronologically ordered poems, one is “in memory of radio,” perhaps his most notable poem.

Despite Baraka’s growing reputation as a distinctive voice in “new” poetry and his fixed place in the Greenwich Village bohemian scene, augmented by his work at Yugen and Totem Press, Preface received mixed reviews. Denise Levertov praised Preface for its use of jazz rhythms and the influence of earlier poets on Baraka. However, she warned that its political nature undercut some of its lyrical qualities. Baraka’s friend and literary associate Gilbert Sorrentino noted that the style was too full of “tricks.”

It is precisely this style that demonstrates Baraka’s literary legacy and “authentic voice.” Baraka credits Williams Carlos Williams with teaching him “how to write in my own language—how to write the way I speak rather than the way I think a poem should be written.” Preface as a whole demonstrates a Williamsque reliance on typographical manipulations and unconventional poetic syntax and punctuation. Showing the influence of Beat precursor charles olson and the Black Mountain School of poets, Baraka embraced free verse, with its irregular line length and absence of rhyme, in Preface. Though Baraka defended the Beat aesthetic in the Partisan Review as “less than a movement than a reaction against . . . fifteen years of sterile unreadable magazine poetry” and though he actively praised jack kerouac’s “Essay on Spontaneous Prose” in a 1959 letter to Evergreen Review, the works in Preface show more self-consciousness than the poetry that Kerouac envisioned. However, works such as “The Bridge” have a breathlike, jazz rhythm in the manner of what Kerouac called “blowing.”

Thematically, Preface illustrates the poet’s disaffection with American culture and his growing alienation from society. These are common currents in Beat literature, as William C. Fisher has pointed out. However, Preface is positioned uneasily within the Beat canon. The Beats as a group rejected the “organization man” conformist mentality of the Eisenhower–McCarthy establishment that invested truth in ideas such as the American Dream, traditional gender roles, and the conjuration of heroes from mass media. As the title of the collection suggests, the internalization of cultural myths have driven people to the brink; it is the poet’s burden to exorcise these cultural demons. Preface purports to shatter those cultural myths but, as Fisher writes, “To bring so much heavy apparatus to bear—prefaces and volumes—on a mere note is to mock the ostensible value of the poems themselves.” The duality of the poems contained in the work suggest that Baraka is not only disaffected and alienated from society as a whole but also as a lone black voice among a chorus of white Beats, he is a double outsider.

Foreshadowing his eventual break with the Beats to spearhead the black arts movement, when the title poem appeared in The Naked Ear, Baraka received a note from Langston Hughes that simply read, “Hail LeRoi from Harlem. I understand you’re colored.” The poem “Preface To A Twenty Volume Suicide Note” suggests an apocalyptic end for the poet, “the ground opens up and envelopes me,” but does so with an irony at his own expense. Because he has become accustomed to his fate, the poet stands apart from the chaos, a critical observer of the “broad edged silly music.” However, because he has not the faith of his daughter (to whom the poem is dedicated), he is rendered a tragic clown, alone and unable to assign meaning to his life or hope for something better. Pleadingly, he writes, “Nobody sings anymore.”

In the poem addressed “To a Publisher . . . cut out” Baraka begins by attacking publishers for their commercialism. He rails against their insistence on categorizing poetry and poets, but he then shifts to a critique of his own crowd of intelligentsia for their too-clever conversation, ending with a commentary on the possibly futile act of writing poetry. The poet in this world is both one of the “land creatures in a wet unfriendly world” who is victimized by the forces around him and a victim of his own mediocrity. He has but “talked a good match.” In “One Night Stand” which is addressed to allen ginsberg and in “Way Out West” which is addressed to gary snyder, the motif of artifice runs through the poems, distancing Baraka from the other poets’ respective projects. In “One Night Stand,” Baraka conjures the images of indigenous poverty in stark contrast to white, Beat effeminacy luxury. Baraka pits the “olives and the green buds” of the traveling poets against the “Twisted albion-horns” of the “black bond servants dazed and out of their wool heads.” Interestingly, to heal the schism of his own racial disconnection, the poet chooses to identify with his white friend but does so with a lack of sincerity: “We have come a long way, & are uncertain of which of the masks / is cool.” As Marlon B. Ross has written, Baraka “as a lower-class black man among upscale, slumming white beatniks” could only identify with Beats, though he expresses a tension that marks that identity as decadent and ineffectual. Images of white decadence subsumed in homoerotism lead to physical and spiritual decay in “Way Out West”: “No use for beauty / collapsed, with moldy breath / done in. Insidious weight / of cankered dreams. Tiresias’ / weathered cock.” The poet connects these images with his own mortality, juxtaposing the passing of the seasons with the passing of his youth.

Turning his critical gaze toward the black middle classes in “Hymn for Lanie Poo,” Baraka satirizes the black man who “apes” the white man by detailing the banality of his stifling, domesticated life. Unique for its distinctly racially conscious voice, “Hymn for Lanie Poo” sets up a tension between the poet and the white consciousness of American culture. In the space of this tension, the narrative takes the black bohemian as well as the black bourgeoisie to task.
Man lookathatblonde / whewell! / I think they are not treating us like / Mr. Lincon said they should / or Mr. Ghandi." In the final poem of the collection, "Notes For A Speech," the poet fully articulates his own estrangement from black culture, "African blues / does not know me." Returning to the unresolved tension of his position as a black poet in a white subculture in a white America, he sees himself as an "ugly man" to whom "Africa / is a foreign place." Unresolved, Baraka ends the poem on a note of generic angst: "You are / as any other sad man here / american."

**Bibliography**


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**Amiri Baraka** — Infobox Writer name = Amiri Baraka caption = Amiri Baraka addressing the Malcom X Festival in San Antonio Park, Oakland, California pseudonym = birthdate = Birth date and age|1934|10|7|mf=y birthplace = Newark, New Jersey (U.S.) flagicon|USA…

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Yet the poet finds something that changes his short suicide note into a twenty volume note that will never be completed: “Only she on her knees, peeling into / [stanza break] Her own clasped hands." But “she" is all the poet needs to hang on, to keep living despite the drudgery of other parts of his life. She is the one to whom he has responsibility, she is the one who loves him and whom he loves. "Preface" is an unusual lyric poem, since most lyric poems are on happier themes than contemplation of suicide. The contrast with the existentialists is an interesting one—the poet must admit that his behavior impacts others even if the poet no longer exists. The poet’s daughter, something outside himself and his selfish desire for suicide, keeps him alive. A Poem For Speculative Hipsters. Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note. Wise I. Ka’Ba. The Wise And Good by Ambrose Bierce. ‘O father, I saw at the church as I passed The populace gathered in numbers so vast That they couldn't get in; and their voices were low, And they looked as if suffering terrible woe.’ ‘Twas the funeral, child, of a gentleman dead For whom the great heart of humanity bled.’ Read complete poem.
Recently, I've become accustomed to the way the ground opens up and envelopes me. Each time I go out to walk the dog, or the broad, edged silly music the wind makes when I run for a bus, things have come to that. And now, each night I count the stars. And each night I get the same number.