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Authenticity and Inauthenticity in Imamu Amiri Baraka's (LeRoi Jones') "The Alternative": An Interpretation in the Context of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*

Abstract

In Baraka's "The Alternative" the reader is confronted with the black student Ray and his fellows during one night in a dormitory of Howard University. The present essay's approach is to regard the experiences Ray makes in this night as the point of decision between an inauthentic existence, *i.e.* conformist to the Whites' cultural values, and an authentic existence, which maintains black cultural values against the pull of assimilationism in the dominant white society. Whereas previous studies have occasionally suggested such an interpretation without, however, founding their point on a 'theory of authenticity,' the present essay has its argumentation framed by Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which is *the* - or, at least, one of the most important and influential - philosophy of authentic resp. inauthentic existence. The methodological setting in a Heideggerian context gains in plausibility in view of the fact that Baraka has got into contact with the philosopher's ideas.

Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)¹ has considered himself influenced, among others, by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger.² It has been pointed out by John Wakefield the degree to which this influence - partly mediated via the American philosopher and poet Charles Olson, who was a friend of Baraka's - has affected Baraka's means of expression:

Undoubtedly, Baraka's early interest in the relationship of phenomenology to literature gave him unique insights into Olson. For example, the three key ideas on the writer's ability to *name* correctly, to *place* himself in the real world and to create a means of expression more authentic than that of *social reality* Olson derived

¹ In the following I will continue to use the name *Baraka*. Information about the author's change of names and its background can be gathered from any major work about Baraka, most of which listed in this essay's Works Cited. For details see especially Werner Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism"* (New York, 1978), p.263, n.2.

² "My influences have been Joyce, Dante, Burroughs, Ginsberg, Olson, Heidegger, Mao Tze-tung, and Negro music." *New American Story*, eds. Donald M. Allen and Robert Creeley (New York, 1965), p. 268.

ultimately from Heidegger and phenomenology. Baraka began his essays on expression with "How You Sound??" (1959), quoting both the "Heideggerian *Umwelt*," and Olson's "Projective Verse."³

Although Wakefield points to analogies between "The Alternative"⁴ and existentialism as regards contents,⁵ his main focus is on this story's mode of expression, which he considers to be of primary importance:

The idea of authentic identity does have relevance for black literature, but surely Baraka is more interested in the problems that looking your face [*sic*] in the eyes might pose for a black. Quite apart from the meaning of Camus' words, [the motto placed in front of "The Alternative"] how does a black look at his "fate," and more important, how would he choose to express it?⁶

Wakefield is certainly right in emphasizing the importance of modes and means of expression in "The Alternative." However, there is also a plot in the story, and there are motives and themes. I think we should not neglect the latter, and we are legitimated by Baraka himself not to neglect them if we consider his statement that "Form is simply *how* a thing exists" and "Content is why a thing exists."⁷ It is the aim of this study to show that the 'Whys' behind "The Alternative" can be accounted for by Heideggerian concepts laid down in the philosopher's main work *Being and Time*⁸ and that this perspective reveals insights into the story which are as interesting and meaningful as those gained by the focus on expression. If this aim can be reached, then, I think, this will confirm the evaluation of "The Alternative" as a 'good' story - at least for those readers who share Baraka's criteria of evaluation, which he has expressed with regard to music, but which can be

³ John Wakefield, "Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) *The Alternative* (1965)," *The Black American Short Story in the 20th Century: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Peter Bruck (Amsterdam, 1977), p.191.

⁴ In: LeRoi Jones, *Tales* (New York, 1967), 5-29. With quotations, "The Alternative" will below be abbreviated as TA.

⁵ "The familiar existential theme is there: a man must choose, and he must choose an authentic existence." (Wakefield, p.192.)

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Theodore Hudson, *From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka: The literary works* (Durham, NC, 1973), p.59.

⁸ Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford, 1973). With quotations, *Being and Time* will below be abbreviated as BT.

transferred to literature: "To my mind, technique is inseparable from what is finally played as content. A *bad* solo, no matter how 'well' it is played is *bad*."⁹

It is interesting to note that Wakefield and Sollors, both taking into account the existential background, come to opposing conclusions. The latter, emphasizing the nihilistic aspect of Camus' philosophy, writes: "Despite the title, there is no alternative envisioned by Baraka, and the Camus references underscore the wall-image of existentialist futility."¹⁰ Wakefield, on the other hand, who assumes a critical attitude on the part of Baraka towards Camus and who suggests an ironical understanding of the Camus references,¹¹ rather stresses the productive impact of existentialism, its potential to reveal to the human individual his freedom to choose, which in Baraka's case is the freedom to choose an authentic mode of expression: "It is my belief that 'The Alternative' as a whole explores an alternative way."¹² As an anticipatory remark I may say that the following study of "The Alternative" against the background of Heidegger's *Being and Time* will ultimately support Wakefield's point of view.

Before turning to the analogies between *Being and Time* and "The Alternative" as regards the latter's contents, I want to make some remarks additional to those of Wakefield as regards form. Heidegger's methodological approach in *Being and Time* can be called onto-phenomenological. According to him, phenomenology means "to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself." (BT, p.58.) What does this signify for Baraka, who has felt "Secured to phenomenology and religion,"¹³ and with regard to "The Alternative"? This means that the author does not have his narrator pre-arrange the objects and events described according to a pre-structured scheme of logic, causality or finality. Such a pre-structuring - which human beings (or perhaps only humans

⁹ Hudson, p.59.

¹⁰ Sollors, *Amiri Baraka*, p.149.

¹¹ See Wakefield, p.194.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Allen/Creeley, p.267.

grown up under the influence of Western rationality) seem to apply automatically - may establish features of, or connections between the phenomena described which are not primarily inherent in them, or they may cover things up which cannot be adequately explained by this pre-structured scheme of rationality.

Hence, in "The Alternative," the description of persons, things and events is very little pre-arranged in terms of logic. The highly paratactical style, *i.e.* the almost complete lack of subordinating conjunctions, which 'normally' connect elements of speech logically, can thus be explained by Baraka's phenomenological perspective. The decisive criterion of order in the story is not narrative logic, but the associative flow of ideas ('stream of consciousness') on the one hand and a pointedly realistic and objective depiction of events, objects, persons, and dialogues on the other. Both modes of expression often follow each other abruptly,¹⁴ which is one of the characteristics that make the story difficult.¹⁵

Description is an essential of a phenomenological perspective.¹⁶ Taking this fact as an opportunity for a digression to the level of contents, I may add here that the phenomenological perspective is also represented by the leader: Ray's task is to watch¹⁷ (which is the precondition of describing), to describe¹⁸ and then to interpret what has been described (objects, persons, events) in its relevance for and its meaning in the greater context of its existence: "The lea-

¹⁴ *E.g.*: "The leader sits watching the window. The dried orange glass etched with the fading wind. (How many there then? 13 Rue Madeleine. The Boys Club. They give, what he has given them. Names." (TA, p.6.)

¹⁵ Another difficulty arises from those passages where the time of narration changes abruptly to another level. *E.g.*: "The line, for Jimmy's sad and useless horn. And they tell me (via phone, letter, accidental meetings in the Village. 'Oh he's in med school and married and lost to you, hombre.'" (TA, p. 8.)

¹⁶ Heidegger speaks of "'descriptive phenomenology', which is at bottom tautological" (BT, p.59).

¹⁷ "I have the abstract position of watching these halls." (TA, p.7.)

¹⁸ "And it's me making a potrait of them all. That was the leader's job." (TA, p.8.)

der's job ... to make attention for the place." (TA, p.7.)¹⁹ That this interpretation, addressed to his fellow students, is considered to be existentially important, becomes clear when the narrator refers to those of his peers on whom his endeavours have been lost:

Where are you now, hippy, under this abstract shit. Not even defense. That you remain forever in that world. No light. Under my fingers. That you exist alone, as I make you. Your sin, a final ugliness to you. For the leopards, all thumbs jerked towards the sand." (TA, p.9.)

According to the narrator (whose identification with the author is here suggested to the reader), the person addressed in this passage does only 'exist' as a figure of his prose fiction.

Coming back to our discussion of form in "The Alternative," what has yet to be done is to explain the stream-of-consciousness technique against the background of Heidegger's philosophy, which, indeed, strongly denies the relevance of consciousness and psychological subjectivity as such. We may tackle this problem by asking, what is the stream-of-consciousness technique if not the most adequate depiction of what is going on in the mind? (That something is going on in the mind cannot be denied.) And, I think it plausible to identify this 'what is going on in the mind' with what Heidegger means by 'state-of-mind' and 'understanding':

An understanding of Being belongs to Dasein's ontological structure. As something that is [Seiend], it is disclosed to itself in its Being. The kind of Being which belongs to this disclosedness is constituted by state-of-mind and understanding. (BT, p.226.)²⁰

¹⁹ Here, my understanding of 'interpretation' is based on Heidegger: "the meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in *interpretation*." (BT, p.61.) By interpreting, "all those basic structures of Being which Dasein itself possesses, are *made known* to Dasein's understanding of Being. The phenomenology of Dasein is a *hermeneutic* in the primordial signification of this word, where it designates this business of interpreting." (BT, p.62.)

²⁰ I add the last sentence of this quotation in the German original; it seems to me that its simpler phrasing is more suitable to support my steps of argumentation: "Befindlichkeit und Verstehen konstituieren die Seinsart dieser Erschlossenheit." (Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (16th edn., Tübingen, 1986), p.182.)

Hence we can say that the stream-of-consciousness technique as the rendering of state-of-mind and understanding is the most adequate means to express how the narrator discloses to himself his Being and that of the other phenomena in the world.

Leaving our reflections on Heideggerian phenomenology and their relationship with form in "The Alternative," we will now turn to our main item, the analogies between contents in the story and some of the concepts in *Being and Time*. In his main work, Heidegger has set out to restate the "question of Being," or, more exactly the "question of the meaning of Being." (BT, p.25.) The investigation of this question is carried out in the manner of a hermeneutic circle. It is characteristic of this process that one has a vague preconception of what is to be investigated and to let one's investigatory perspective and steps be directed by this preconception. In Heidegger's words:

Inquiry, as a kind of seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought. So the meaning of Being must already be available to us in some way. As we have intimated, we always conduct our activities in an understanding of Being. Out of this understanding arise both the explicit question of the meaning of Being and the tendency that leads us to its conception. We do not *know* what 'Being' means. But even if we ask, 'What is "Being"?' we keep within an understanding of the 'is', though we are unable to fix conceptionally what that 'is' signifies. (BT, p.35.)

At the beginning of "The Alternative," the hero-narrator ("the leader," Ray) is in a situation comparable to that of the phenomenological hermeneutic of Being. There is a yearning expressed in the story's first paragraph, a questioning, a searching - or rather its passive form, the wish to be searched for and found: "Old man, find me, who am your only blood." (TA, p.5.) The yearning seems to be directed towards something which is important for the narrator's cultural identity (his 'Being'). This is indicated by the generic implications of the terms 'old man' ('father') and 'blood' ('provenience'). And the term 'flesh' in the phrase "Who is our flesh" (*ibid.*) - which can be interpreted as a question as well as the relative antecedent of the following subject ('our lover') - may also point

to values²¹ which are important for a Black's cultural identity. The vagueness of the narrator's preconception of his identity is expressed by the conceited phrase of the "night," which, "tho innocent, blinds him." (*Ibid.*) This expression contains in a very condensed form the idea of the 'untouched,' unknowing, blank consciousness ('innocent night') which is illuminated by a 'flash of realization' ('blinding'), leaving behind a glimpse of knowing, the full meaning of which has then to be investigated. And, at the outset of this inquiry, there is 'remembering' - "Our lover, marched here from where we sit now sweating and remembering" (*ibid.*) - which reminds us of Heidegger's recapitulation of the question of Being.²²

The philosopher's inquiry into this question is based on the idea that Being must be regarded as 'Being-in-the-world.'²³ This means that one is always and primarily, *i.e.* in our everyday existence, involved in meaningful interrelations with objects and other people. And it is in these everyday experiences²⁴ where the investigation has to be rooted.

In "The Alternative" we are confronted with an extract of everyday life, namely that of black students in a dormitory of Howard University during one night in the 1950s.²⁵ There is nothing really extraordinary happening if we restrict our observations to the events; even the facts that the students offend against the regulations of dormitory life by drinking alcohol, smoking joints and frying pork chops within their room,

²¹ "intuitive urges, non-cerebral and transcendentalistic urges." (Hudson, p.72.) In his very instructive analysis of form, technique and style in Baraka's works, Hudson (ch.3) notices that these values are sometimes symbolized by 'meat' or 'flesh.' I think it is not erroneous to consider them here as positive values contrasted to those of white, Western, European culture, which is characterized, according to Baraka, by the dominance of thought over feeling, of the economic mind over imagination, of the past over the present, of the artifact over the artistic act. (See Hudson, pp.42-59.)

²² See BT, par. 1.

²³ See BT, pars. 12ff.

²⁴ The whole of BT, Division One (pars. 9-44) has been called "everyday analyses" ('Alltagsanalysen') by Thomas Rentsch (*Martin Heidegger - Das Sein und der Tod: Eine kritische Einführung* (München, 1989), p.119).

²⁵ The setting can be inferred from the references to Park Hall (TA, p.22) and to several popular figures at that time, such as Yma Sumac (TA, p.25).

and that the story ends in an outburst of violence against the homosexual Bobby Hutchens, his friend, and the leader himself, seem rather to belong to 'normal,' average campus life, probably not 'everyday' in the literal sense, but in no way exceptional. Hence, in order to reveal the significance of these everyday events we have to look for the conflicts that are behind them.

According to Heidegger, it is the "everyday Being-with" (BT, pars. 26ff.), i.e. the everyday interrelations of a person with other persons, which causes the "'levelling down' [*Einebnung*] of all possibilities of Being" (BT, p.165), i.e. the prevention of original, authentic modes of existence. The Being "stands in *subjection* [*Botmässigkeit*] to Others. It itself *is* not; its Being has been taken away by the Others." (BT, p.164.) These 'others', in Heidegger's terminology the indifferent neuter, "the 'they' [*das Man*]" (*ibid.*), are finally responsible for idle talk, curiosity, alienation, groundlessness, inauthenticity:²⁶ In a word, the 'they' is responsible for the "falling of *Dasein*" (BT, par.38). It has to be noted that 'officially' Heidegger does not want his idea of the falling of *Dasein* to be interpreted as a corrupt mode of existence. He says that "Falling reveals an *essential* ontological structure of *Dasein* itself." (BT, p.224.) However, as Winfried Franzen has pointed out, this officially neutral version of the analysis of 'everyday Being-one's-Self,' "is actually harsh criticism of the phenomena analyzed, a fact that cannot be doubted in view of the frequent use of pejorative terms."²⁷ We may add one quotation from Heidegger himself which indicates that he in fact considers the 'falling of the *Dasein*' to be a state that has to be overcome and that he favours - or even demands - the strive for authenticity:

The Self of everyday *Dasein* is the *they-self*, which we distinguish from the *authentic Self* - that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way [*eigens ergriffen*]. As *they-self*, the particu-

²⁶ See BT, par. 38.

²⁷ Winfried Franzen, *Martin Heidegger* (Stuttgart, 1976), p.45. (My translation.)

lar Dasein has been *dispersed* into the "they", and must first find itself. (BT, p.167.)

It is this conflict, the conflict that arises when one has to make the choice between letting oneself 'disperse' into the 'they' and searching for one's authentic self, which is the central theme of "The Alternative." This is the decision the leader is faced with.²⁸

The 'they' is formed by all those who evoke the association of 'death' in the narrator's mind, a motif which is persistent in the story and which causes the leader to lament: "But my country. My people. These dead souls, I call my people. Flesh of my flesh." (TA, p.22.) 'They' are the 'living deads', who suck individuality and authenticity out of the particular Being to make him one of their sorts, like vampires do: "And their voices, all these other selves screaming for blood. For blood, or whatever it is fills their noble lives." (TA, p.29.) And the leader fears the forces of the 'they,' their assimilationist power:²⁹ "Each thread a face, or smell, rubbed against himself with yellow glasses and fear at their exposure. Death. Death. They (the younger students) run by screaming. Tho impromptu. Tho dead, themselves." (TA, p.5.) And he is in danger of succumbing to their forces: "The leader, is sprawled, dying." (TA, p.6.)

The 'other selves' and their behaviour, as described by the narrator, show all the features which Heidegger has analyzed as essential constituents of the 'they' and the 'falling of *Dasein*.' It is in 'idle talk' in which they indulge most of the time, this "*gossiping and passing the word along*." (BT, p.212.) The leader is aware of this phenomenon³⁰ and he is capable of analyzing and unmasking the insubstantial and groundless character of 'idle talk': "'Will you look at that? I mean, really, now, fellows. Cats!' (Which was Smitty from the City's entree. And him the smoothest of you American types.

²⁸ See TA, p.9: "Tonight the leader is faced with decision."

²⁹ See Lacey, p.184: Ray "is torn between the desire for black identity and the pull of assimilationism."

³⁰ See TA, p.7: "Where their talk (these nouns) is bitter vegetable." And, p.11: "The rest there, floating empty nouns."

Said, 'Cats. Cats. What's goin' on?'" (TA, p.7.) Ray also criticizes his fellow students for their gossiping: "'Man, you cats don't know anything about Hutchens. I don't see why you talk about the cat and don't know the first thing about him.'" (TA, p.20.)

Lacey has made the following interesting observation:

Ironically enough, however, he [Ray] is accepted primarily because of his assimilationist tendencies. Ray's peers, all of whom are furiously bent on escaping their black roots, look upon Ray as a model. Because he reads constantly and speaks 'proper,' the other students, the embryonic black middle class, feel that Ray has found that vital key to the other world, the world of the dominant culture. Hence, he is the 'leader.'³¹

We may regard this observation as an example for Heidegger's idea that

The average understanding of the reader [it does not violate Heidegger's idea to understand 'hearer'] will *never be able* to decide what has been drawn from primordial sources with a struggle and how much is just gossip. The average understanding, moreover, will not want any such distinction, and does not need it, because, of course, it understands everything. (BT, p.212.)

In other words: Ray's peers absorb those pieces of his talk which are likely to advance their assimilation into the dominant white society without intending or wishing to understand the "primary relationship-of-Being towards the entity talked about" (*ibid.*). When they realize that Ray does not fulfill his function for them, he becomes an outcast: "'That cat's nuts. He was sittin' up in that room last night with dark glasses on ... with a yellow bulb ... pretendin' to read some abstract shit.' [...] 'Man, we do not need cats like that in the frat.'" (TA, p.9.)

³¹ Lacey, p.184. This observation is probably derived from the explanation in the story that Ray is the leader "because he said some words no one had heard of before" (TA, p.9) and the description of the rhetorically magnificent performance of Ray facing Mr. Bush (TA, pp.15-17), which results in admiration on the part of his fellows: "The talk is to that. That elegance of performance. The rite of lust, or self-extinction. Preservation." (TA, p.17.)

The narrator's frequent allusions to the social status of his fellow students in their later lives³² emphasizes Baraka's opinion of their alienation from their black cultural identity (and thus, ultimately, of their inauthentic existence) in view of Heidegger's observation that the 'downward plunge' "into the groundlessness and nullity of inauthentic everydayness [...] remains hidden from Dasein by the way things have been publicly interpreted, so much so, indeed, that it gets interpreted as a way of 'ascending' and 'living concretely'." (BT, p.223) To underscore the essential point in this: For those black students, climbing up the social ladder in the dominant white social system is identical with the downward plunge into inauthentic existence. Baraka contrasts this mode of existence, "for which everything is 'in the best order' and all doors are open," (BT, p.222)³³ and which is characterized by tranquility,³⁴ with that of his 'freaky' narrator: "The leader's job (he keeps it still, above the streets, summers of low smoke, early evening drunk and wobbling thru the world. He keeps it, baby. You dig?) was absolute." (TA, p.7.)

I want to refer to one other item of analogy between the contents of "The Alternative" and Heidegger's analysis of everydayness and the 'falling of *Dasein*': I consider the description of the students' urge to peep through the keyhole of Bobby Hutchens' door and to watch the homosexual affair that is going on in the room an adequate fictionalization of Heidegger's account of curiosity:

When curiosity has become free, however, it concerns itself with seeing, not in order to understand what is seen (that is, to come into a Being towards it) but *just* in order to see. [...] Consequently it does not seek the leisure of tarrying observantly, but rather seeks

³² *E.g.*: "Tom, the lawyer. Dan, the lawyer. Ted, the high-school teacher" (TA, p.17.); "And at the top of the stairs the leader stops, the whole hall full of citizens. Doctors, judges, first negro directors of welfare chain, morticians, chemists, ad men, fighters for civil rights, all admirable, useful men." (TA, pp.27-28.)

³³ This phrasing of Heidegger has an ironic relation to the story's end, since the breaking down of doors in a self-satisfied manner, showing no trace of sensitivity and respect for other people's deviation from averageness, finally leads to all doors being open.

³⁴ See BT, p.222.

restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters. In not tarrying, curiosity is concerned with the constant possibility of *distraction*." (BT, p.216.)

And again the leader is not willing to follow his peers in their 'downward plunge':

"Hey, Smitty! We going upstairs to peep that ol' sissy Hutchens. He's got some big time D.C. faggot in there with him. You know, we figured it'd be better than 3-D."

"Yeh? That's pretty hip. You not coming, Ray?"

"No, man...I'm sure you cats can peep in a keyhole without me." (TA, p.22.)

The leader has up to now been characterized as opposed to the forces of assimilation, averageness, falling etc. However, his attitude can be explained more adequately - at least up to where he opposes his fellow students physically - by a state of isolation in the midst of the others and *in the world*: "And its me making a portrait of them all. That was the leader's job. Alone with them." (TA, p.8.) This state of isolation is the result of 'anxiety' in Heidegger's interpretation of the term: "*Being-in-the-world itself is that in the face of which anxiety is anxious.*" (BT, p.232.) And: "Anxiety individualizes Dasein and thus discloses it as '*solus ipse*'." (BT, p.233.) It is not any entity, a something or someone, the leader is anxious about; this is not meant by Heidegger. Anxiety is rather expressed by a feeling of uneasiness, uncanniness, of 'being-not-at-home.'³⁵ Of course, it is difficult to fix particular details from the story to prove this feeling of the narrator; that this is so results from the character of 'anxiety.' However, this uneasiness has also been acknowledged by Wakefield: "we see the leader unhappy and isolated, facing the prospect of a palace revolt."³⁶ And, we may prove from the fact that the leader feels himself as "the sole martyr of this cause" (TA, p.7) that he is somehow suffering; and we may prove his feeling of *Unheimlichkeit* (comprising both 'feeling not at home' and 'uncanniness') by his statement: "An unhealthy atmosphere, this America." (TA, p.15.)

³⁵ See BT, p.233.

³⁶ Wakefield, p.192.

The leader's anxiety reveals to him the possibility to make a decision for an authentic existence, just as Heidegger has described the function of 'anxiety':

Anxiety makes manifest in Dasein its *Being towards its ownmost potentiality-for-Being* - that is, its *Being-free for* the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself. Anxiety brings Dasein face to face with its *Being-free for* [...] the authenticity of its Being, and for this authenticity as a possibility which it always is. (BT, p.232.)

The moment of decision is marked by the leader's raising to action,³⁷ which consists in opposing his fellow students physically in their attempt to violate the privacy of Bobby Hutchens and his lover:

"Oh, shit, fuck it. Fuck it." He slams the book against the wall, and empties Hambrick's bottle. "I mean, why?" Empties bottle. "Shiiit." When he swings the door open the hall above is screams. Screams. All their voices, even now right here. The yellow glasses falling on the stairs, and broken. In his bare feet. "Shiit. Dumb ass cats!" (TA, p.26.)

The interpretation of this passage as the point of decision, which has consequences for Ray's stance towards the world is confirmed by Hudson's note that "Hallways [*cf.* 'hall' in the above quotation from "The Alternative"] are passageways from phase to phase in life."³⁸ That the leader has decided for an authentic existence which is contrasted to that of averageness and nullity - "More prints in the sand, away, or towards some name" (TA, p.29) - becomes clear in the story's last passage: "I am a poet. I am a rich famous butcher. I am the man who paints the gold balls on the tops of flagpoles. I am, no

³⁷ Heidegger's philosophy in *Being and Time* does not contain a call for action, nor does it contain a refusal of action or activism. In his account of 'conscience as a call' (BT, pars. 56ff.) he writes: "We miss a 'positive' content in that which is called, *because we expect to be told something currently useful about assured possibilities of 'taking action' which are available and calculable.* [...] The call of conscience fails to give any such 'practical' injunctions, *solely because it summons Dasein to existence, to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self.* With the maxims which one might be led to expect - maxims which could be reckoned up unequivocally - the conscience would deny to existence nothing less than the very *possibilities of taking action.*" (BT, p.340.)

³⁸ Hudson, p.71.

matter, more beautiful than anyone else. And I have come a long way to say this." (*Ibid.*)

At this point of our discussion we may go back to the interpretive disagreement between Wakefield and Sollors referred to on page 3 of this study. We are now in a position to deny Sollor's opinion that "there is no alternative envisioned by Baraka" and that "The Alternative" emphasizes the existentialist aspect of futility. The alternative to assimilation into the white social system, to becoming a neutralised, inauthentic part of the 'they,' is the striving for a self-conscious and authentic self, a striving, which is, indeed, accompanied by anguish because one has to resist the integrationist pull of the 'they,' a resistance which may entail punishment, mentally or physically.

Although the focus in this story is on the attitude of the black students towards the white establishment, it also becomes clear from some passages that Baraka considers the white, Western or European based culture as such as corrupt or, in Heidegger's terms, 'falling.' Thus, the narrator quotes from Robert Herrick ("To Electra"), Richard Lovelace ("To Lucasta - Going to the Warres") and W.B. Yeats ("The Second Coming") and then disparages their lyrics as "Primers for dogs who are learning to read. Tinkle of European teacups." (TA, p.18.) I think it adequate to interpret these lines as an example for the literary parricide of which William J. Harris³⁹ speaks in his most interesting study of Baraka's works, a study in terms of the philosophy of jazz, which is based on aesthetic transformation, and which strongly resembles the post-modernist concept of deconstruction. If we consider the fact that "The Alternative" was first published in 1965,⁴⁰ and that the first half of the 1960s mark the period of Baraka's alienation from the philosophy of the Beat movement and the transition towards

³⁹ *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic*, (Columbia, 1985). As to Baraka's "battle with his literary predecessors - not just with the immediate ones but with the whole tradition of white European and American literature" see *ibid.* pp.26ff.

⁴⁰ See Carol Fairbanks and Eugene A. Engeldinger, *Black American Fiction: A Bibliography*. (Metuchen, N.J., 1978), p.21.

the nationalistic black cultural stance,⁴¹ we are also supported by text external indications to assume a de(con)structive 'drive' behind "The Alternative." I find it interesting to note that a de(con)structive concept lies also at the basis of *Being and Time*, where it refers to the history of ontology and where it programmatically aims at arriving "at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being." (BT, p.44.)

Ironically, the ancient ideals of white culture, which represented white authenticity (and are opposed to those of black culture), have lost their meaning: "The 3rd floor of Park Hall, and old 19th-century philanthropy, gone to seed. The missionaries' words dead & hung useless in the air. 'Be clean, thrifty, and responsible. Show the anti-Christ you're ready for freedom and God's true word.'" (TA, p.22.) And, ironically as well, it is Professor 'angry-at-jazz' Gorsun, a fervent activist in favour of assimilationism,⁴² who expresses the domination of averageness in the white culture explicitly: "We are white and featureless under this roof." (TA, p.23.) Last but not least, it is the lover of Bobby Hutchens, the homosexual Lyle, depicted as an effeminate and cowardly⁴³ figure, who seems to be most advanced in assimilation. He says: "Oh Bobby, you ought to stop being so conscious of being coloured. It really is not fashionable." (TA, p.24.) Correspondingly, he, the postal worker, has "one of those goood jobs [...] U.S. guvment." (*Ibid.*)

⁴¹ Cf. Werner Sollors, "LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka)," *Amerikanische Literatur der Gegenwart*, ed. Martin Christadler (Stuttgart, 1973), 506-522.

⁴² "'Goddamnit, none of that nigger music in my new building. Culture. Goddamnit, ladies and gentlemen, line up and be baptized. This pose will take the hurt away." (TA, p.23.) That assimilationism 'takes the hurt away' corresponds to Heidegger's observation that the dispersion into the 'they' leads to tranquility. (See BT, p.223.)

⁴³ When the students have broken down the door of Bobby Hutchens' room, "Bald Lyle is in the closet." (TA, p.29.)

Appendix

To my knowledge it has not yet been noted that there is an error in the dialogue between Bobby Hutchens and Lyle (TA, p.25), an error which leads to confusion of the speakers. It can easily be traced back that it is Lyle, who says: "[...] Say, why don't we shut off that light," which is followed by a change of speakers (to Bobby), indicated by punctuation and line indentation: "Umm. Let me do it. There... ." The following ("You know I loved you in Jimmy's play [...] How old are you, Bobby?") is spoken by Lyle. However, there is no change of speakers indicated by closing and opening quotation marks and there is no line indentation. This error can probably be accounted for by Baraka's technique of writing fast, doing "practically no rewriting and polishing, preferring to work out the mechanics of a piece of literature as he is in the process of writing it. Once he has committed words to paper, for him the artistic process has been completed."⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ Hudson, p.38.

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