Guided by Voices: Poetry, the Paranormal, and Mythmaking

by

L.J. Cooper

Department of English
Duke University

Date:_______________________
Approved:

___________________________
Priscilla Wald, Advisor

___________________________
Taylor Black

___________________________
Joseph Donahue

___________________________
Nathaniel Mackey

___________________________
Gerry Canavan

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2021
ABSTRACT

Guided by Voices: Poetry, the Paranormal, and Mythmaking

by

L.J. Cooper

Department of English
Duke University

Date:________________________________________

Approved:

___________________________

Priscilla Wald, Advisor

___________________________

Taylor Black

___________________________

Joseph Donahue

___________________________

Nathaniel Mackey

___________________________

Gerry Canavan

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2021
Abstract

This dissertation reconsiders the relationship between nineteenth and twentieth century artists and the paranormal. Historically, the term “paranormal” has denoted an array of otherworldly phenomena that has captivated artists and the public alike. Indeed, this period, host to William Blake’s spiritual visions and William Butler Yeats’s ghostly dictations, showcases the indelible influence the paranormal has had on art. Unsurprisingly, this influence has long attracted critical attention. The prevailing narrative of critics such as Leon Surette and Helen Sword argues that the period’s artists expressed their paranormal interests by aestheticizing the practices of spiritualist movements, which professed the existence of a “spirit world” that could be contacted by humans via séances or psychic mediums. But there has been little consideration of how artists identified these interests with the very mechanics of artistic creation, believing art could engage otherworldly phenomena in ways that spiritualist techniques could not.

In *Guided by Voices*, I argue that a diverse strand of nineteenth and twentieth century artists conceived of poetry as an access point to a transgressive, generative kind of paranormality. Some, for instance, understood the poetical text and its creator as haunted entities, while others believed their poetry-making could conjure spirits. Regardless, these poets all turned to the paranormal to achieve liberation. In their quest to expand the imaginative possibilities of their craft, they invoked the paranormal to revolutionize our perceptions of language, humanity, and politics. When read as such, their work comprises a distinct historical arc, a tradition of liberated poetics that unifies...
artists across disparate times and spaces. Hence, *Guided by Voices* not only reassess artistic engagements with the paranormal but also illuminates conceptual-historical links between artists that scholarship has not yet recognized.

Over three chapters and an epilogue, I demonstrate how *parapoiesis*, the unique enmeshment of poetry and the paranormal, enables a series of liberations: liberation from embodiment; liberation from poetic form; liberation from individuality; and liberation from sociohistorical reality. Close readings of primary sources direct my assertions, as do some wide-ranging theoretical reference points. I harness Jacques Derrida’s concept of hauntology to help articulate my definition of the paranormal, for example, and I incorporate Georges Bataille’s ideas about the mythic to flesh out my examination of poetical mythmaking. The project does, however, draw as much from a popular imaginary as it does academic discourses; folk spirituality’s characterizations of ghosts, magic, and the occult also help anchor my claims.

Ultimately, I argue that parapoiesis’ significance lies in its capacity to transform, often in a material sense, our world. Parapoiesis illustrates how and why poets perceive their works’ relationship with paranormality as intrinsic, procreative, and alchemical. I contend that these poets reveal a broader facet of nineteenth and twentieth century artistic production which maintains a contemporary resonance and usefulness: art’s paranormal entanglements deconstruct prevailing ideological narratives and histories, imagine alternative, liberatory ones, and, in doing so, alter the very material conditions within which culture itself germinates.
Dedication

In loving memory of Caroline Niechłanski
Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................iv

Dedication ......................................................................................................................................vi

List of Figures ................................................................................................................................viii

Acknowledgements .........................................................................................................................ix

Introduction: High Water Everywhere ..............................................................................................1

Chapter I: Parapoiesis ......................................................................................................................31

William Blake’s “Fibrous” Hauntology .........................................................................................31

“Myself - the Term between -”: Emily Dickinson’s Grammar of the Beyond .........................56

Chapter II: The Flowers of Herself .................................................................................................81

The Gift: H.D. Goes Beyond the Beyond ......................................................................................81

Post-Script: How Long Will the Wind Blow? .............................................................................119

Chapter III: The Magician Longs to Hear ....................................................................................128

Beware the Body, Beware the Soul: Surrealism, the Otherworldly, and Myth in the Caribbean ................................................................. 128

“Lessons of unlearning”: Pessoa and the Otherness of Otherworlds ..................................162

Epilogue: “The recreate, the recreation” ....................................................................................178

Strange Worlds in My Mind ........................................................................................................178

Where There Is No Vision, the People Persevere ....................................................................190

Works Cited and Consulted .........................................................................................................203

Biography .......................................................................................................................................222
List of Figures

Figure 1: Hector Hyppolite's The Congo Queen (1936, Museum of Modern Art) .......... 144

Figure 2: James Hampton's The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millenium General Assembly (1950-1964, Smithsonian American Art Museum).......................... 198

Figure 3: Detail of Hampton's throne (Smithsonian American Art Museum).............. 199

Figure 4: Detail of Hampton’s throne (Smithsonian American Art Museum).............. 200
Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to all the ghosts of my life:

My advisor and committee chair, Priscilla Wald, for her unflappable support, enthusiasm, and generosity.

My committee members—Taylor Black, Joe Donahue, Nate Mackey, and Gerry Canavan—for their encouragement and countless helpful insights.

Amelia Zurcher, Leah Flack, and Christine Krueger for igniting the Sacred Flame and all the invaluable guidance.

Stephen Beall and Patricia Marquardt for their guidance, quirky humor, and commitments to ἀρετή.

Matt Cekanor for his capacious mind and easygoing attitude about all things here, there, and beyond.

Caoimhe Harlock for her expansive kindness, curiosity, and humor that changed my life for the better.

Riley Ratcliff for their boundless spirit and warmth. Thanks for all the strange poems—and the even stranger dreams.

Maggie McDowell for her generosity, kindness, and wonderful cats.

Andrew Kim for all the gossiping and doomsaying sessions that, against all odds, affirm the triumphs of life.

Hannah Rogers for her inspiring pursuits of benevolence and justice, and for her unending compassion.
Kit Caravan for their steadfast weirdness and camaraderie.

Tom Ferraro for his wide-hearted, Whitmanian gusto, as well as for his COVID-era beneficence.

Charles Lee for the Pessoa recommendations and many facts about European shenanigans.

David Aers for the chats about communism and The Spirit over coffee at Southern Season.

Julia Zimmer for her exceptional intellect and companionship throughout the graduate school journey.

Konrad Schmitt for all the reminiscing over burgers and custard at Culver’s.

My parents and sister for all the love and laughs.
Introduction: High Water Everywhere

British filmmaker Adam Curtis begins his 2016 BBC documentary HyperNormalisation with a simple proclamation, one that, given the increasingly perplexing state of the world, seems like an intuitive, pervasive truth: “We live in strange times” (Curtis 0:28-31). As ominous Nine Inch Nail tracks play over scenes of urban decay, wartime atrocities, and political turmoil, Curtis highlights what he believes is the fundamental contradiction of modern life. Even though most people’s quality of life across the globe is deteriorating and, as such, inducing often-unbearable feelings of despair and aimlessness, no one in the ruling class appears to be doing anything about it. Instead, Curtis argues, human civilization itself has entered a state of nauseating paralysis wherein no one is willing or capable of articulating “any vision of a different or better kind of future” (0:50-53). This element of our contemporary moment is not, however, a simple, sui generis failure of the imagination, but is rather indicative of the ruling class’s deliberate attempt to maintain and expand their power. He continues, provocatively implicating all of us, even those with the best transgressive intentions, in the ruling class’s attempts to manufacture what essentially amounts to an artificial reality:

Over the past forty years, politicians, financiers, and technological utopians, rather than face up to the real complexities of the world, retreated. Instead, they constructed a simpler version of the world in order to hang on to power. And as this fake world grew, all of us went along with it because the simplicity was reassuring. Even those who thought they were attacking the system, the radicals, the artists, the musicians, and
our whole counterculture, actually became part of the trickery…their opposition has no effect, and nothing ever changes (1:03-53)

Curtis’s fake world is born of what he calls “hypernormalization,” a term coined by the Soviet-born academic Alexei Yurchak that refers to the process by which social and political elites attempt to add a veneer of normality to gradual systemic collapses by maintaining the status quo. For both Curtis and Yurchak, hypernormalization allows elites to insulate themselves from any legitimate challenges to their authority by gaslighting the general population into believing that social ills either do not exist at all or are being successfully managed and incrementally eradicated.¹ In this view, historical progress has effectively terminated and, with it, the possibility for any kind of change that would interrupt the purported stability of our lives; alternative economic arrangements that might redistribute financial assets, for instance, will flicker and die in a paradigm characterized by such a ubiquitous sense of its own finality.

As the above quotation suggests, Curtis identifies culture itself as one the primary culprits behind the ruling class’s ability to sustain its hypernormalizing agenda and activities. Arguing that hypernormalization’s cultural dimension germinated during the post-1968 years amid the bleak disenchantments with hippie sentiments and early crystallizations of the post-industrial FIRE economies² across the West, Curtis sets his sights on singer and poet Patti Smith. Smith’s 70s output, he claims, exemplifies the “rise

¹ For an in-depth discussion of Yurchak’s notion of hypernormalization, particularly of its linguistic and educational manifestations, see Yurchak pp. 50-92.

² That is, economies based largely on finance, insurance, and real estate.
of a new, powerful individualism that could not fit with the idea of collective political action” (8:01-06). Instead, Smith and her contemporaries became “new kind[s] of individual radical[s]” who beheld all that was crumbling around them, all the unprecedented corruption and consolidation of bourgeois power, “with a cool detachment,” not attempting to actually change these depraved material conditions, but rather simply “experience” them (8:15-24). As the twentieth century’s various ills continued to proliferate, this new generation of radicals “turned to art and music as means of expressing their criticism of society,” locating or articulating a kind of embryonic revolutionary vision without ever organizing on its behalf (9:06-12). Consider, for example, one of Smith’s seminal musical works, “People Have the Power” (1988). The piece is a triumphant, anthemic portrayal of “the people” rising up against “the fools” and asserting their rights to decency and autonomy, but the song notably opens with the line “I was dreaming” (Smith 0:19; 0:50-55). For Curtis, both the “I” and the “dream” are precisely the issue; artists with radical proclivities like Smith refuse to surrender their individuality to a collective totality, and, partially because of this, they are reluctant to engage with their tangible realities in a transformative way, preferring instead a mythical, dreamlike interiority. Ultimately, this perspective envisions much of twentieth century culture as a kind of quarantine zone, an epistemological space within which radical ideas can be advanced and explored but never permitted to leave and venture into the material world. As people encounter revolutionary beliefs through culture, they acknowledge the need for change without ever actually enacting said change, and it is this process of
cathartic recognition, Curtis argues, that occludes any efforts to combat hypernormalization. The world continues to devolve into chaos and impoverishment while we are all coerced into believing that it is being properly curated, since there is nothing we can do to alter its trajectory, anyway.

Curtis’s ideas, while presented in an engagingly distinct filmic style, are certainly not novel; many have been examined and supported by critical theorists for decades who, generally speaking, precede the temporal purview of Curtis’s project itself. Before we explore the lineage of Curtis’s analysis of culture, we must first acknowledge an important source of inspiration for hypernormalization, in addition to Yurchak, of course.

In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard famously contends that contemporary life has become a simulation populated by simulacra. The former refers to a kind of virtual reality created by capitalism’s “liquidation of all referentials,” its phenomenological elimination of all “real” signifiers, and the latter refers to that which has replaced these “referentials”: copies of copies of material objects that have displaced the original manifestations of these objects and have become their own “truth” (Baudrillard 2). In other words, objects that once had tangible origins and presences experience an “artificial resurrection in the systems of signs” in our simulated reality: “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double […] Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself” (2). We can already begin to see here the resonances
between Curtis and Baudrillard—both are concerned, fundamentally, with how prevailing ideologies carefully manage our perceptions of and engagements with reality, and both recognize our illusory detachments from the most essential features of our material conditions. If these parallels were not enough, Baudrillard calls our simulated world a “hyperreality,” or, the “generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (1). For Baudrillard, hyperreality is enduringly “real” insofar as it has become so untethered from material reality that we cannot even imagine or recall what is immediate and authentic anymore. We float above the “desert of the real,” resolutely enthralled by a system that “is no longer anything but…scaled-down refraction,” a system so immaterial that it has jettisoned the traditional basis of political economy: material production (1).

Hyperreality’s erasure of political economy, particularly as a Marxist hermeneutic, is, Baudrillard argues, a deliberate attempt by the bourgeoisie to cultivate atomization and stifle collective action, which is not dissimilar to Curtis’s definition of the concept; like Curtis, Baudrillard identifies the ways in which hyperreality fashions an insulated worldview that conceals or annihilates the avenues through which the oppressed might begin to formulate their own alternative realities.

Baudrillard’s hyperreality also has an unambiguously cultural component; he maintains that its configuration of culture (films, television, Disneyland, and so on) “bathes” the masses in a “media massage,” as Douglas Kellner puts it, assaulting them with fusillades of meaningless, simulated signs that, in amounting to pure, entrancing spectacle, cause social relations themselves to “implode” (Kellner 321-22). Without even
the most basic sense of community, of course, the possibility for revolutionary liberation 
ceases to exist. Baudrillard’s attention to cultural production, however, is one part of an 
extensive intellectual narrative within which Curtis positions himself, and, if we journey 
back far enough, we can develop a comprehensive account of culture’s relationship with 
sociopolitical power in the West. German philosopher Walter Benjamin, for instance, 
presents one of the earliest and most salient analyses of culture’s role in suppressing 
revolutionary energies and fortifying capitalistic supremacy. He writes, in “The Work of 
Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935), about how modern art’s 
(re)production through mediums such as photography or film sever it from its “parasitical 
dependence on ritual,” a framework that created “object[s] of veneration” which 
purportedly had singularly “magical” and “religious” functions (Benjamin 6). In 
Bejamin’s contemporary moment, art is instead “designed for reproducibility,” 
(photographic prints, as opposed to sacred idols) and, as such, it maintains a decidedly 
“political” ethos; art is no longer crafted as a representation of a mystical, transcendent 
beauty or power, which Benjamin calls an “aura,” but rather exemplifies the very social 
and material relations upon which societies function, lending those who encounter art the 
ability to critically, impartially examine the conditions that art reflects and, potentially, 
revolutionize them (4).

However, in the work’s final paragraph, Benjamin recognizes the dangers of 
aesthetic movements like *l’art pour l’art* (“art for art’s sake”), which displays vestiges of 
art’s ancient, cultic significance: the movement offers a “theology of art” that denies its
“social function” and prohibits its categorization by “subject matter,” all of which are essential to its revolutionary capabilities amid the ascension of mechanical reproduction (6). Benjamin argues that the “logical result of fascism” is the introduction of this kind of aesthetics “into political life,” since it allows fascism, an extreme iteration of capitalism, to stake the claim that imperial warfare and unobstructed bourgeois power are simply “beautiful” acts of expression—by emphasizing the importance of pure self-expression through art, fascism establishes the illusion that the state, ostensibly like its individual inhabitants, has the right to create the kind of “art” that best encompasses its identity, which allows fascistic elites’ power to reach such dizzying heights that, according to Benjamin, the “destruction” of human civilization itself becomes “an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (19).

Several years later, Benjamin’s contemporaries Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer would further explore the ways culture reaffirms capitalistic dominion—both critics acknowledge, like Benjamin, modern art’s entanglement with bourgeois power, but they strike a much more pessimistic tone, contending that the bourgeois pursuit of maximum profit has turned culture into a phenomenon with no politically subversive ethos, an instrument that forbids the emergence of any kind of class consciousness. Adorno and Horkheimer’s principal object of analysis is what they call the “culture industry,” a sector of capitalist society comprised of “films, radio and magazines” and other mass media “technologies” that forcefully integrates subjects into capitalism’s ideological order and inculcates a ubiquitous passivity (Adorno and Horkheimer 32). In
one sense, the culture industry produces a deliberate homogenization of all artistic objects under the guise of differentiation; its numerous forms of media may appear distinct, but Adorno and Horkheimer claim that the culture industry’s real differentiating efforts are found in its “classifying, organizing, and labelling consumers,” its ability to “cater” for the public a “hierarchical range of mass-produced products” that displaces the potential for class solidarity and organization with varying levels of revenue streams that all channel profits upward to the bourgeoisie (34). In another, related sense, the culture industry fashions and distributes art that is both devoid of imagination and capable of stultifying the imaginations of subjects living under capitalism, and it is here where Adorno and Horkheimer depart from Benjamin’s insistence that mechanically reproduced art can still possess a revolutionary value. The two critics discuss their insights through the lens of modern filmmaking:

Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies. The sound film, far surpassing the theatre of illusion, leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience, who is unable to respond within the structure of the film, yet deviate from its precise detail without losing the thread of the story; hence the film forces its victims to equate it directly with reality. The stunting of the mass-media consumer’s powers of imagination and spontaneity does not have to be traced back to any psychological mechanisms; he must ascribe the loss of those attributes to the objective nature of the products themselves, especially to the most characteristic of them, the sound film. They are so designed that quickness, powers of observation, and experience are undeniably needed to apprehend them at all; yet sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts. (35)

Since *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), the book in which Adorno and Horkheimer first articulate their ideas about the culture industry, was published well
before the hyperreal developments that Baudrillard and Curtis identify, it does not—and is not yet capable of—drawing distinctions between reality and simulated reality; the culture industry is hegemonic precisely because, in cloaking the world with itself, it asserts the indelible reality of the world as it is currently arranged, inundating cultural consumers with so many “facts” that they literally have no time to allow their imaginations to wander beyond the confines of capitalist ideology (35). This observation, however, is the basis of hyperreality: the culture industry has fashioned a worldview that has sterilized art’s (and people’s) capacity to devise and implement any competing perspectives, especially ones that might pose a challenge to the power structures embedded within the culture industry’s programming. Like Patti Smith, artists within Adorno and Horkheimer’s paradigm must ultimately propagate the culture industry’s bourgeois aims or be validated as aesthetically significant at all.

The culture industry as a concept has reverberated widely across humanistic disciplines, but its influence among contemporary critical theorists has been especially palpable. Two such theorists, Fredric Jameson and Mark Fisher, have taken up Adorno and Horkheimer’s mantle, examining how culture has continued to function at the behest of capital as a subordinating force, even as new cultural forms have emerged and old ones have mutated. For his part, Jameson harnesses Baudrillard’s insights to attend to postmodernism, a nebulous aesthetic movement endemic to the twentieth century’s second half that Jameson defines as “the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past”; postmodernism, chiefly through the form of the pastiche, amounts to a “blank
parody” of earlier aesthetic precepts, a “field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm” (Jameson 16, 18). The movement’s lack of a “norm,” its abandonment of a historicity within which art has traditionally germinated, coupled with its “hegemonic” ascension within society, has displaced reality with a simulacrum wherein “the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts” (17). That is, according to Jameson, postmodernism’s pastiche techniques which “subdue and incorporate” other cultural logics have been adopted by capitalism. As we inhabit this simulacrum devoid of any sense of history and its material conditions, we encounter one commodified postmodern art object after another, each of which leaves us with “little optimism about that potential control or mastery over processes, oneself, and nature and collective destiny, which nonalienated labor necessarily includes and projects” (147). Just as Adorno and Horkheimer insist that modern culture subjugates and atomizes individuals to stifle transformative collective action, so, too, does Jameson argue that postmodernism instantiates a “reflex” and “concomitant” of “yet another systemic modification of capitalism itself,” the demise of the historical immersion necessary to anatomize and thwart bourgeois exercises of power (xii).

Fisher both expands and crystallizes Jameson’s kaleidoscopic thinking in his presentation of “capitalist realism,” a term that refers to what Fisher claims is the defining cultural mode of the late-twentieth century onward. Fisher initially acknowledges that capitalist realism can easily be “subsumed under the rubric of
postmodernism as theorized by Jameson,” insofar as it views culture as a primarily bourgeoisie apparatus that solidifies and perpetuates the ubiquitous power of capitalism (Fisher 7). Fisher defines the concept as a representational strategy that is distinctly postmodern in its efforts to consume “all of previous history” and convert, once and for all, “practices and rituals into merely aesthetic objects,” unmooring us from the historical precedents and material realities that serve as the basis for revolutionary action. Capitalist realism recognizes capitalism’s “excesses” and regurgitates them, spewing them back at cultural consumers and encouraging them to make the same recognition without ever being able to attain the elevated consciousness necessary to begin to dismantle bourgeois power (4). This process, Fisher argues, results in two things: a collective inability to imagine any coherent alternative to capitalism, and, relatedly, a collective, almost unconscious belief that capitalism is the terminal apex of history. Capitalist realism’s degradation of the human imagination is not dissimilar to the way Adorno and Horkheimer discuss the culture industry’s interpolation of overwhelmingly banal media into people’s minds, but it also marks a significant, melancholic divergence from Jameson:

In the 1980s, when Jameson first advanced his thesis about postmodernism, there were still, in name at least, political alternatives to capitalism. What we are dealing with now, however, is a deeper, far more pervasive, sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility. In the 80s, “Really Existing Socialism” still persisted, albeit in its final phase of collapse. In Britain, the fault lines of class antagonism were fully exposed in an event like the Miners’ Strike of 1984-1985, and the defeat of the miners was an important moment in the development of capitalist realism, at least as significant in its symbolic dimension as in its practical effects […] The 80s were the period when capitalist realism was fought for and
established, when Margaret Thatcher's doctrine that “there is no alternative” - as succinct a slogan of capitalist realism as you could hope for - became a brutally self-fulfilling prophecy (7-8)

Of course, capitalist realism is not confined to Britain, and, to demonstrate this, Fisher explores how Western studio filmmaking synthesizes all the concept’s elements and adopts a global perspective to disseminate them as widely as possible. The most pertinent example he gives of this synthesis is Disney/Pixar’s Wall-E (2008), a film that envisions a world so “despoiled” by multinational corporations that it has become uninhabitable, until its titular robotic hero helps the “infantile and obese” humans living offworld realize that they can restore earth and live more meaningful lives if they reject entirely the scintillating allures of capitalism (11). For Fisher, the film “performs our anti-capitalism for us” and, indeed, transforms it into a mere “aesthetic object” that cannot take root in a material sense; if we believe that “capitalism is bad” in our hearts, we can continue to freely participate in the “capitalist exchange” and even “consume with impunity,” having proven to ourselves that we can maintain an ironic distance from the very system that depresses our political wills (16-17). Once again, the result of this particular kind of media encounter is an overarching paralysis. Radical, anti-capitalist change itself has become a kind of neutered, commodified, and ahistorical spectacle that we imbibe in rapid succession without ever enacting on a collective level. Our imaginations are ensnared within capitalist realism’s cultural matrix, and we can no longer even deploy them to conjure different modalities of capitalism, let alone an emancipatory alternative.
From Benjamin all the way through Curtis, we are given an increasingly dire portrait of modern existence: capitalist exploitation is driving the world toward unprecedented annihilation, but, thanks largely to the ideology’s colonization of cultural and aesthetic forms, we cannot devise a way to halt its inglorious stampede. In fact, we have become so fully engrossed by capitalism’s simulated, non-referential worldview, so detached from the material circumstances upon which collective action is built, that we cannot even *fathom* any redemptive alternative to capitalist oppression, let alone implement one. What, then, are we left with? Is there an exit strategy lurking within or beneath all this philosophical doomsaying, or are we destined for eternal stagnation and collapse? Working against the grain of Curtis and company, the French critic Jacques Derrida asserts that change does, in fact, remain possible: the most essential components of anticapitalist resistance that Karl Marx and Frederick Engels themselves first articulated persist because, even in capitalism’s moment of evangelical, orgiastic self-congratulation at the twentieth century’s denouement, these components “haunt” the West like a “specter” (Derrida 2). Despite the fact that, following the Soviet Union’s downfall, communism has been effectively slaughtered as a political project, and despite the fact that capitalism has engendered seemingly unyielding amounts of “violence, inequality, exclusion, famine” across the world, capitalism must always reckon with the threats of its ghostly adversary, must always define itself in opposition to an ideology it believes it has abolished and thus never truly escape it (106). To Derrida, the ghostliness of anticapitalist ideas is precisely what opens corridors of possibility. Marxism itself is
what he might call a “hauntological” entity, a term we will explore in-depth a bit later that entails a fruitful disjointedness, a capacity to be “absent-present,” atemporal, and non-contingent in such a way that anticipates through its spectral configurations a “democracy to come”: everything begins, Derrida says, in “the imminence of a re-apparition” (2).

Derrida’s paranormal vocabulary is a bit unusual for someone with his Marxist credentials, since it runs counter to the traditionally materialist frameworks of Marxist criticism.3 Derrida is not necessarily staging a clean break with Marxist thought here, since he thoroughly adopts the “spirit of the Marxist critique” and believes that this “spirit” must inevitably be adopted on a massive scale if any sociopolitical progress is to occur (85). But he nevertheless identifies and privileges the utility of Marxism’s spectral indeterminateness, advancing it almost as a sort of transgressive parallel to the capitalist simulacrum. Whereas capitalism maintains its domination through its ahistorical, consumer-driven illusionism, Derrida’s Marxism derives its modern potentiality through an indeterminateness that dwells beyond the simulacrum in the innermost elements of its managerial machinery, striking terror in the hearts of those who organize the ersatz orders. Indeed, it is Derrida’s penchant for otherworldliness—a term that, like hauntology, will reveal its myriad semantic registers across this project—which catalyzes my attempt to address the following question: can we rescue culture from the petrifying

3 Adorno, for example, who was equally—if not more so—enamored with Marxist thought, composed his scathing “Theses Against Occultism” in 1951, wherein he argued that the fascination with the occultic strands of paranormality across the twentieth century indicated a “retrogression of consciousness,” a loss of consciousness’ crucial power to “think the unconditional and to endure the conditional” (Adorno 233).
capitalist subjugation it experienced in the twentieth century and, in doing so, reveal or
reignite its status as a transformative phenomenon?

My principal claim will be that the historical and conceptual intersections
between art and the paranormal guide us toward a redemptive vision of culture, a vision
wherein culture rebukes Curtis’s resignations and helps initiate social change in a
material sense. However, before we arrive at that juncture, we must first consider how
paranormality first rose to prominence within the Western artistic tradition. The
nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw an explosion of interest in paranormal phenomena
across the United States and Europe. In the 1840s, Andrew Jackson Davis, a young
American who came to believe that he possessed clairvoyant powers and an ability to
converse with spirits, began to formulate ideas that would eventually blossom into the
spiritualist movement. Drawing from Emanuel Swedenborg’s mystical writings and
Franz Mesmer’s animal magnetism, Davis published The Principles of Nature, Her
Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind (1847), which outlines the methods by
which individuals might contact beings that lie beyond the plane of mortal existence.
Though it had numerous permutations and remained largely disorganized, spiritualism
seized the country’s imagination. Séances and traveling mediums like the infamous Fox
sisters abounded, especially as the Civil War engendered unprecedented death. It even
became associated with social progressivism. Figures like Paschal Beverly Randolph and
Aesha Sprauge extolled the capacity for spiritualist beliefs to help disseminate and
strengthen the causes of abolition and women’s suffragism, respectively. As the
movement spread across the world, it attracted the attention of Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, known later by his pen name of Allen Kardec. In the early 1850s, Kardec became increasingly fascinated with séances, spirits, and the same earlier thinkers that had captured the attention of Davis. His decision to extensively study spiritualist practices and practitioners resulted in *The Spirits’ Book* (1857), the foundational document for Spiritism, the European equivalent of spiritualism. In the work, Kardec, who serves as a vessel for a being that identifies itself as “The Spirit of Truth,” attempts to lend intellectual credibility to his analysis of the otherworldly, denouncing spiritualism’s religious overtones and proclaiming that Spiritism recognizes ethereal beings as components of nature that could be rationally explained with the proper scientific lexis (Kardec 60)

Both these movements slowly waned as the decades continued. However, near the dawn of the twentieth century, a paranormal renaissance began to occur, and those who sought to engage with paranormality began to fulfill Kardec’s aim of intellectually elevating the concept. Academic researchers closely scrutinized the precepts and practices of spiritualism and spiritism, which opened the door to examinations of a diverse array of paranormal activity that was referred to as “psychical” phenomena. In America, for example, William James co-founded the American Society for Psychical Research in 1884 with the hopes of exploring the scientific and psychological implications of telepathy and contact with spirits. With his *Phantasms of the Living* (1886), which James praised, Frederic W.H. Myers maintained a similar goal: to
exhaustively document the nature of apparitions and the means of encountering them, such as trance-inducing hypnosis, across England. Years later, in 1919, Carl Jung would present his “Psychological Foundations of Belief in Spirits” before the London Society for Psychical Research, a moment that speaks to what was then the expanding institutional legitimacy of all that the previous century’s movements inaugurated.

As the paranormal began to garner significant attention and respect within academic circles, it also began to infiltrate the Euro-American artistic consciousness. In 1875, Helena Blavatsky, inspired by the renewed interest in spiritualism, co-founded the Theosophical Society, which sought to advance her philosophical perspectives on everything from spirits to reincarnation and brought the likes of the painter Wassily Kandinsky and writer L. Frank Baum into its fold. Theosophy, along with other societies like The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and The Ghost Club, also attracted a young William Butler Yeats, whose late-career work, A Vision (1937), stands as something of a Blavatsky-esque apotheosis of his era’s paranormal preoccupations: an attempt to amalgamate all that he ascertained from participating in séances, mediumship, and dialogues with spirits into a singular collection of knowledge that could, he claimed, be traced back to ancient esoteric traditions. Indeed, scholarship that examines twentieth century literature’s relationship with the paranormal frequently identifies the sociological dimension of this relationship as the mechanism by which the ethos of spiritualism and spiritism transferred across history. Leon Surette, for instance, argues that Yeats and Ezra Pound’s complex integration of systems such as spiritualism, occultism, and theosophy
into their art emerged from their cooperative efforts to fashion a “single theory of visionary symbolism” (Surette 187). Timothy Materer follows a similar line of thinking, arguing that Pound’s interest in the alchemical legacy of the magician began to crystallize during a sojourned year with Yeats at Stone Cottage in 1913-14; even as he grew increasingly critical of Yeats’s obsession with spirits, Pound’s imagination was decidedly shaped by his proximity to Yeats’s fascination with hermetrical magic (Materer 51).

Virginia Woolf was similarly influenced by her relationship with Yeats and found new expressive opportunities in his highly systematized paranormal interests new: Gina Wisker maintains that, while Woolf remained skeptical of “the mechanisms of supernatural encounter” throughout most of her life, she “knows and writes of the importance of a ‘continuum’ of existence” that resonates with a paranormal beyond, the basis of which can be traced all the way back to her father’s membership in the London Society for Psychical Research (Wisker 8).

Critics whose work explores territory beyond the intimate relationships within the Yeats circle also emphasize the overlap between social spheres and literary manifestations of the otherworldly. Helen Sword, for instance, catalogues the rich array of artists—everyone from T.S. Eliot to Thomas Mann—whose experiences at séances and interactions with spiritualist-adjacent organizations and figures inevitably led to trajectorial shifts in their creative lives. In addition to the sociological impetuses of twentieth century literature’s paranormal affinities, Sword outlines an aesthetic principle she calls “ghostwriting,” the tendency of literary artists to adopt “mediumistic
appropriations of literary identities” through a multifaceted implementation of occultic and spiritualist practices (Sword 24). This tendency establishes, she argues, a uniquely paranormal sociology whereby literature itself instantiates a ghostly network of interpersonality. For certain authors, the paranormal conjured an impossibly intimate, almost shamanistic relationship between the living and the dead that shaped modernism’s inclination to disassemble and reassemble history, generic modes, language, and so forth. Sword’s historicist investigations are on a similar wavelength to Avery Gordon’s theoretical ones, as the latter contends in Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination (1997) that twentieth century literature repurposes the paranormal as the chief metaphor for its interests in representing social realities. At one point, she narrows her focus on Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987), which, she claims, depicts an entire “social memory” as a “haunting” (Gordon 164). For Morrison, social relations themselves “are prepared in advance and they linger well beyond our individual time, creating that shadowy basis for the production of material life” (Gordon 164). They are born, in other words, of what she calls “rememory,” the tendency for Morrison’s characters to become viscerally enchanted by that which “isn’t necessary visible to everyone else”; “rememory” indicates a collision with another consciousness and its impressions of a spatio-temporal locality no longer accessible to us (166). What both Sword and Gordon posit, then, is that the paranormal’s manifestations within and alongside literature descend from a fundamental interconnectedness, a vast nexus of social associations,
convergences, and overlaps that grants the paranormal an entryway into art and enables its capacity to metaphorize pre-existing phenomenological nuances.

This scholarship’s excavations of the paranormal’s sociological genealogy and resonances provides a useful framework for understanding how and why certain ideas reverberated across history and were often repurposed artistically: the interpersonal qualities endemic to spiritualism and spiritism, exemplified by communal activities like séances, make these movements particularly conducive to this kind of analysis. (We also cannot begin to consider how a paranormally-suffused culture might challenge authority and facilitate change without considering how its sociological elements, since these would presumably reside in the heart of any new society it helps fashion.) However, at the most basic level, it only traffics in literature’s representational power and does not address our previous, central question: can literature—a facet of culture—instigate social change through its integration with the paranormal? Can it not only reveal and present that which already resides in the world but harness the paranormal to conjure something new, reframing or reconstructing the world altogether and, indeed, establishing new social relations or communities in the process? One might turn to Devin Johnston’s illuminating study here, Precipitations: Contemporary American Poetry as Occult Practice (2000), which is one of the only recent projects that formulates a non-biographical, non-sociological presentation of literature and the paranormal. Johnston argues that poetry is “an embodiment of, rather than a reflection of, occult tenets,” which resonates with the kind of perspective on the literary arts I will attempt to cultivate.
throughout this project (Johnston 14). However, Johnston remains firmly situated in specific occultic traditions, does not recognize any paranormal qualities endemic to literary creation itself, and maintains that literature’s occultic qualities indicate a “negative sublime” which conditions its “recovery of Romantic values” (3, 58). These are certainly worthwhile insights, but they subsist on a limited and limiting understanding of paranormality, one that champions Romanticism as an aesthetic ideology in such a way that, say, art of the capitalist realist stripe strives to reinforce capitalist power structures above all else. While the literature I will examine is certainly influenced by things like occultism, my goal is to articulate how and why literature’s paranormality is intrinsic, procreative, and alchemical, which means that Johnston’s analyses of formal nuances once again leave us with more questions than answers: can literature’s paranormal entanglements deconstruct prevailing ideological narratives and histories, imagine alternative, liberatory ones, and, in doing so, alter the very material conditions within which literature is crafted?

In the following chapters, I will attempt to answer all the above questions affirmatively by, first and foremost, turning my attention to twentieth century poetry’s particular engagements with paranormal phenomena and contending that it is poetry that contains the path toward liberating culture from its debilitating appropriation by capitalist power. I am motivated to prioritize poetry for two reasons. First, as a matter of historical congruency with twentieth century aesthetics: as most of the aforementioned scholarship illustrates, poetry was the genre to which the literary artists with the most enduring
paranormal interests—Yeats, Pound, H.D., and so on—gravitated. This fact alone distinguishes it from, say, novels, which could certainly exhibit paranormal themes. However, confined more explicitly to the regulations and expectations of fictive narratives, novels do not maintain the same freedom to directly encounter the realities poetry sought to scrutinize and, in the case of my argument, transform. Second, in conjunction with Derrida, I take as my inspiration John Ashbery’s extraordinary assertion about poetry’s characteristic ability to grapple with impossibilities. In his 1957 review of Gertrude Stein’s posthumously-published *Stanzas in Meditation* (1956) for *Poetry* magazine, Ashbery writes that the volume is “no doubt the most successful of [Stein’s] attempts to do what can’t be done, to create a counterfeit of reality more real than reality” (Ashbery 254-55). As we will see, twentieth century poetry’s world-building is not a recapitulation of Baudrillard or Curtis’s hyperreality, nor is it entirely beholden to corporate interests and thus indicative of capitalist realism’s shadow play. Rather, I argue that it can be conceived as the nucleus of the genre’s paranormal dynamism which constitutes the genre’s transformative capacities. In the broadest sense, this project ruminates on how we might regain our ability to imagine and construct alternative paradigms, and Ashbery’s contention that poetry leaves us “with the conviction that” accomplishing the impossible “is the only thing worth trying to do” will propel and direct our ruminations (255).

My definition of paranormality throughout this project is received principally from spiritualist and occultic traditions, and it encompasses the more ethereal aspects of
the term (ghosts, mystical revelations, and so forth) as opposed to the strictly earthbound or conspiratorial ones (extraterrestrials, for instance). At the same time, I attempt to cast as wide a net as I can within this framework, borrowing from and attempting to constructively expand Jeffrey Kripal’s presentation of the paranormal encounter: the apprehension of a “palpable presence, energy, or power” through the use of a “super-imagination” that dispenses with the principles of both science and religion (Kripal 9). To avoid any confusion about Kripal’s use of the word and our colloquial understanding of it, I generally refer to paranormal phenomena as “otherworldly”—paranormality is, I claim, a hermeneutic construct that elucidates literary art’s enmeshments with otherworldliness. Indeed, I argue that poetic literature itself best encapsulates Kripal’s super-imagination, and, following this observation, I introduce my own term that will organize the project’s conceptual aims—\textit{parapoiesis}. The term accrues two meanings as the project develops. First, I affirm its status as a unification of the words “paranormal” and “poiesis,” the latter of which is, of course, the etymological origin of “poetry.” In doing so, I attempt to identify a distinctly literary heritage within which poetry is seen as an otherworldly medium and methodology, one that implies the potential for cultural reanimation even in the midst of domineering social powers. I diverge from scholarly trends, in other words, by arguing that certain strands of twentieth century poetry illustrate a preoccupation with otherworldliness that is not restricted to the sociological components of séances or occultic magic but is rather born of a poetical tradition that views the poet (and their creative processes) as a totemic, otherworldly agent.
Second, I break the word’s first half down even further, emphasizing its “para” (“alongside”) root and coupling it with the most elementary definition of “poiesis”: “to make.” In addition to revealing the indelible linkages between poetry and otherworldliness, I argue that parapoiesis captures poetry’s ability to, as Ashbery would have it, conjure different realities altogether. The idea here is that the otherworldly’s tendency to utterly rupture our sense of time, place, and identity, its radical disparateness with our quotidian reality and its lack of the perceptual immediacy and continuity intrinsic to this reality, is uniquely attuned to poetry. Thanks to its historical adoption of otherworldliness in both form and practice, poetry can deploy the otherworldly as a transfigurative force, which, in this regard, literalizes the term “otherworldly” so that it encompasses an actual, fully-formed otherworld. By discussing parapoiesis’ two interwoven rudiments, I seek to demonstrate that at least one twentieth century artform evaded a total subsumption within Curtis’s worldview and maintains the capacity to imagine, fashion, and even populate alternative, liberatory realities.

The first chapter presents the earlier, untimely poetry of William Blake and Emily Dickinson as the conceptual basis for parapoiesis. It begins, however, by establishing the theoretical boundaries of the project writ large. With the help of Mark Fisher’s analysis of Derridean aesthetics, the chapter contends that at the core of Blake and Dickinson’s interplay is a transformative enmeshment of Kripal’s definition of the paranormal and Jacques Derrida’s concept of hauntology. It maintains that the references to the poet and his craft in Blake’s Milton (1804) signal a creative method by which the poet becomes an
otherworldly “presence” (Kripal 9). At the same time, though, the poetry remains tethered to its author’s material embodiment, which reconfigures the ontological implications of hauntology and instantiates poetry’s power to alter sociopolitical landscapes vis-à-vis otherworldliness, a significant expansion of Johnston’s perspective on poetic form as occultic practice. From here, the chapter transitions to Dickinson, drawing from the work of critics like Paul Crumbley to outline her relationship with American spiritualism before it argues that Blake’s self-referential, paranormal methodology was the nucleus of her otherworldly concerns. It explores “This World is not Conclusion” and “Behind Me—dips Eternity—” to illustrate how she inherited and expanded what Blake established, contending that her ability to encounter the beyond relies on two things: an acousto-linguistic ontology which shares its characteristics with otherworldly entities, and an articulation of this (quasi-embodied) ontology through poetry, a medium that is uniquely equipped to render the otherworldly legible.

Ultimately, I contend that my juxtaposition of Blake and Dickinson both displays parapoiesis’ fundamental tenets and justifies its standing as a literary-artistic pedigree; the two poets reveal and detail the mechanics of poetry’s inherent otherworldliness, inaugurate their complicated trajectory, and begin to sketch the ways they can engender social change and articulate language and art’s transformational possibilities within corporeal reality.

The second chapter explores how parapoiesis was sustained and expanded by poets once of the twentieth century was in full swing. By way of an anecdote from
Yeats’s autobiographical writings about his lover, Maud Gonne, it contextualizes the modernist turn toward the otherworldly and details the scholarship of Surette, Materer, Sword, and Leigh Wilson to briefly present its affiliations with spiritualism and Spiritism. I then turn to the life and poetry of H.D., who, as Lara Vetter and Matte Robinson note, exemplifies the sheer vastness of modernism’s otherworldly proclivities. Rather than analyzing H.D.’s fascination with spiritualism and the occult as most scholarship does, however, I argue that her poetry’s otherworldly qualities descend from the parapoietical lineage Blake and Dickinson helped found. On the one hand, I claim that her poem “Hermes of the Ways” demonstrates a purposeful inheritance of the two poets’ iterations of parapoiesis—the piece conceives of embodiment and embeddedness in physical reality as the phenomena through which otherworldliness penetrates the artistic imagination and subsequently formulates the otherworldly’s entanglement with poetic expression.

On the other hand, since H.D.’s work must necessarily be contextualized by the unending distress and fragmentation instilled by global warfare, I maintain that it temporarily abandons parapoiesis’ claim to social upheaval in favor of a kind of salvatory impulse that is inflected by her peculiarly mystical interactions with Judeo-Christian precepts; in pieces such as “R.A.F.” and Trilogy (1945), she recognizes that materiality can no longer figure into parapoiesis amid World War II’s earthly annihilations, so she reconfigures the method as one that, through poetry, unchains otherworldly essences from embodiment and extracts them from material reality, elevating them into intangible, spiritual systems in an effort to preserve their transformational potential. This
development in the parapoietical tradition is the closest it comes to approaching the
cynicism of the critical theorists I analyzed earlier. Indeed, the chapter concludes with a
detour into Mina Loy’s poem “Letters of the Unliving,” which attempts to illustrate why
H.D.’s vision might not be possible in the first place. Nevertheless, I argue that H.D.
marks an important turning point in parapoiesis’ development that compels us to reckon
with its fundamental aim of reconstituting the world.

In the third chapter, I consider how parapoiesis’ initial promises of transfiguration
were restored and performed following H.D. and Loy’s acknowledgement of total
ruination and the discrepancies between poetry and otherworldliness that were instigated
by the world’s collapse. I begin with the framing narrative of André Breton’s ill-fated
journey to Haiti, where he encountered the visual artist Hector Hyppolite and came to
believe, then disbelieve, that Haitian art could effectively address the lapse into despair
that H.D.’s work exhibits. Drawing from an array of critics such as Terri Geis, Nadia
Choucha, and Georges Battaile, I argue that the eventual discrepancy between Breton and
Hyppolite emerged from their immensely different conceptions of mythmaking and the
role it plays in reintroducing the otherworldly into the world in a redemptive fashion.
Insofar as mythmaking, a term I define largely in accordance with Battaile and Aimé
Césaire, entails the generation of new social and material foundations amid earthly
fragmentation and chaos, Breton and Hyppolite diverged significantly; whereas Breton
consulted his occultic affinities in his insistence that our decrepit world needed to be re-
mythologized and reorganized accordingly before the otherworldly could be reintegrated
into it, Hyppolite’s art seems to advocate for the creation of a literal otherworld through an attunement to otherworldly phenomena. At this point, I claim, parapoiesis’ ability to engender change begins to reemerge, and this reemergence begins to illustrate how poetry can circumvent our inability to conjure alternative realities. In Curtis’s rendering of post-war life, we are plagued by imaginative anemia and paralysis under an unflappable capitalist regime, but, in parapoiesis’ post-war manifestation, transformation is an imminent, tangible possibility. To flesh this claim out, I further scrutinize Aimé Césaire’s poetry and involvement in the Négritude movement, arguing that their propagative deployment of mythmaking à la Hyppolite maintains a surprising resonance with Fernando Pessoa’s poetry. I examine how Pessoa’s heteronyms, his various authorial personae who instantiate his lifelong pursuits of otherworldly knowledge, fulfill Césaire’s dream of an otherworld engendered by subjects’ ontological enmeshments with otherworldliness itself. At this stage, parapoiesis makes something of a return to Blake, but Césaire and Pessoa are highlighted for their innovation within the tradition, as well as their willingness to reinvigorate its catalytic value by enlarging the very nature of otherworldliness and the responsibilities of poetry.

The project’s epilogue addresses how and why we can envision the development of particular sociologies within the novel otherworlds parapoiesis fashions; despite their ability to rescue poetry and its otherworldly heritage from the decimation that gave rise to sociopolitical stagnation, Césaire and Pessoa do not necessarily articulate the intricate details of what an otherworldly civilization might look like and how it might function on
an interpersonal level. Attempting to fill these gaps, I first turn my attention to Sun Ra’s understudied poetry. I explore how it reflects his formative otherworldly encounters while he was a college student and argue that it depicts otherworldly social relations through a ceaseless recreative process. Like Césaire and Pessoa, Ra believed that poetry conjures parapoietical otherworlds, but he also saw poetic language as that which conditions a sort of prismatic relationality on these otherworlds, a relationality that departs from the relative isolation of Pessoa’s vision and establishes a continuous, vitalizing exchange between otherworlds themselves. From here, I present a competing perspective that, once again, recalls Blake and Dickinson’s entrenchment in material reality and their urgency to reconfigure our perceptions of it. With the help of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s concepts of the undercommons and hapitcality, I analyze James Hampton’s wondrous artwork, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations’ Millennium General Assembly* (ca. 1950-64). The piece, I claim, indicates the possibility for parapoiesis’ return to the material world. Hampton’s use of garbage he found on his community’s streets to construct his throne, which stands as a representation of his elaborate, prophetic otherworldly beliefs, suggests that Hampton wanted his audience to drastically alter how they perceived, inhabited, and engaged with their world. Hampton’s work might not offer a pathway toward revolutionary emancipation from bourgeois power, but he does give us an opportunity to change how we respond to what we would normally see as useless or, at worst, a signifier of our asphyxiations under capitalist domination. If we can ecstatically reclaim as otherworldly the detritus around us, we can
forge new relational modalities and communities, and, from these things, perhaps, a new
world altogether.
Chapter I: Parapoiesis

William Blake’s “Fibrous” Hauntology

In a 1799 letter to Dr. Trusler, William Blake says of his creations: “And tho I call them Mine I know that they are not Mine being of the same opinion with Milton when he says That the Muse visits him in Slumbers...& being also in the predicament of that prophet who says I cannot go beyond the command of the Lord to speak good or bad.” (Blake 701) This proclamation gestures, of course, toward what might be the governing phenomenology of Blake’s life: his direct, invigorating encounters with spirits and other manifestations of the beyond. But Blake’s staging himself as a conduit for larger otherworldly powers here is not simply a quality of his visionary style; it is also a brief exploration of artistic reception. The comparisons to Milton and Balaam constitute, in their own right, Blake’s acknowledgement of his untimeliness as an artist, but what is equally crucial is his recognition that his works “are not Mine.” (701) The aesthetic sensibilities of the centuries within which the poet lived and worked were deeply inhospitable to him, and it was not until Alexander Gilchrist’s Life of William Blake (1863), published nearly forty years after Blake’s death, that he achieved any significant recognition. Things were much different at the dawn of the twentieth century, however, when, thanks to the early efforts of critical resuscitation from figures such as W.B. Yeats
and Northrop Frye, Blake’s declaration began to ring true. His works can be called his own insofar as he crafted them with a sensitivity to his contemporary moment, but, often, they exceeded the temporal and cultural spaces Blake himself navigated—they were ordained for a dispersal, to captivate and ignite the imaginations of a lineage of artists decades removed from him.

A comprehensive account, then, of the mechanics of Blake’s otherworldly preoccupations should consider his delayed acclaim, the notion that he foresaw, in a manner that is itself rather otherworldly, his work’s reverberations in times and places that did not yet exist in his sociocultural reality. This chapter proposes, however, that an immediate leap into the twentieth century, along with any proclamation that it was the “century of Blake,” are impulsive maneuvers that dilute the full extent of his work’s rich affiliations with the beyond and the breadth of their influence. Instead, our story begins by also bringing Emily Dickinson into the fold as one of the earliest artists whose life and work are replete with Blakean hallmarks, a reputation for eccentricity and a deferred critical appreciation chief among them. In this chapter, I will contend that Dickinson inherited from Blake, and eventually expanded, the creative method of parapoiesis, thereby comprising the other half of twentieth century art’s otherworldly roots. In the context of these two poets’ work, parapoiesis will refer throughout the following pages to the particular enmeshment of poetry and otherworldly phenomena that reveals how these poets conceived of their genre’s transformative relationships with various facets of their

---

1 See the former’s The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic and Critical (1893), with Edwin John Ellis, and the latter’s Fearful Symmetry (1947), both monumental reconsiderations of Blake’s work.
lives; in its current sense, the word is a portmanteau of “paranormal” and “poiesis” in order to capture Blake and Dickinson’s belief that their art possessed otherworldly attributions in and of itself. What is meant by “paranormal” here is aligned with Jeffrey Kripal’s definition, which, by way of Rudolf Otto, understands the paranormal as otherworldly occurrences or encounters that elude “both the faith of religion and the reason of science,” only capable, instead, of being understood through a “super-imagination” (Kripal 9). This “super-imagination,” in turn, indicates a “structure of human consciousness” that can engage with a “palpable presence, energy, or power encountered in the environment,” which is commonly identified by the world’s cultural lexicons as a “ghost,” among other things (9).

As we will see, however, Blake and Dickinson crucially reconfigure the contours of Kripal’s iteration of the paranormal. For the both of them, the “super-imagination” functions as a generative process—the poetic imagination crafting poetry—by which poets themselves experience an ontological transfiguration and become the “palpable presence,” at once witnessing the otherworldly and instantiating it (9). This simultaneity conditions the poets’ desires to alchemize and entwine concepts like embodiment, history, and language, and it grants us the ability to reconsider the paranormal’s enduring aesthetic significance: it is not simply a sociological preoccupation with spirits or magic that inflected certain occultic currents of artistic production, but rather a method by which poets explore the possibilities of their art. Consequently, what Blake and Dickinson’s attunement to the paranormal as a creative practice also signifies is a specific kind of kinship, one that illustrates the genealogies and continuities that parapoiesis has forged
independently of prevailing critical narratives about the historical dimensions of literary
cconsumption. Finally, for Blake and Dickinson, parapoiesis’ conveyance of
otherworldliness as a distinctly poetical concept invites us to ponder how the method can
catalyze change within our material realities and radically alter our perceptions of and
connections to them. Parapoiesis is not merely an enactment of “occult tenets” that
manifests in formal or authorial experimentation, as critics like Devin Johnston claim
(Johnston 14). Resisting a neat classification under “occultism,” parapoiesis is also
charged with a kind of subversive alternativity and the potential to liberate and reorganize
the world in accordance with its aesthetic functions.

Before I discuss the details of Blake’s inauguration of parapoiesis, I would like to
acknowledge the extensiveness of his encounters with otherworldly activity, as well as
how this activity has typically been interpreted by his contemporaries and modern
scholarship. Blake’s characteristic incorporation of deities, spirits, angels, and
mythological creatures into his work is perhaps not entirely surprising, given the
ideological climate within which Blake was situated. M.H. Abrams, writing from the
standpoint that the Romantic period’s ethos fervently opposed things like scientific
rationalism, urbanization, and industrialized labor, argues that the period’s most famous
artists’ chief accomplishment was to “secularize…inherited theological ideas and ways of
thinking” (Abrams 10). This turn to what he calls the “natural supernatural” resuscitated
the spiritual logics of pagan devotion and early Christian piety, laying the groundwork for
an “intellectually acceptable” and “emotionally pertinent” alternative to a “post-
Enlightenment” society: nature and spirituality were unified by a new kind of
“experiential paradigm” that challenged Enlightenment tenets by prioritizing the imagination’s renewed contact with various strands of religious thought and practice (66). William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) helped launch the Romantic zeitgeist, capture this most potently. Wordsworth muses lovingly in “Tintern Abbey” about a “motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things…And rolls through all things,” while Coleridge’s indulgences in abstruse German philosophy led him to declare that the human faculty of reason itself is “supernatural,” insofar as it is affiliated with a “primary imagination” that “differs only in degree and mode from divine creation” (Wordsworth ll. 102-03; Brisman 123). Otherworldliness was also prominent during this period beyond the confines of the strange theologies of its canonical poets. Emma Clery observes that the phenomena found in popular Gothic novels like *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794)—spirits, grotesque demons, dream visions, and so forth—are “emblematic of unregulated social and economic forces” that satiated a burgeoning consumer public’s appetite for the “spectacular,” and Frederick Burwick notes how both Romantic and Gothic permutations of the otherworldly even shaped scientific disciplines such as medicine: physicians who were studying mental illnesses consciously drew

“literary parallels” between their “patient’s delusions” and “supernaturalism” in order to imbue their writing with “their own sense of dramatic effect” (Clery 88; Burwick 73).³

Much of the period’s appetite for the “supernatural” or the grotesque resonates with Blake’s life and work, but it was almost always born of the desire to achieve certain literary affectations—to enhance theological, commercial, or scientific enterprises by appealing to a kind of mysterious and occasionally transgressive aesthetics. For Blake, the “supernatural” characteristics of Romanticism were not only a perpetual source of creative inspiration, but also an intimate part of his daily perceptual reality, a fact that was extraordinary and bewildering in a period that reveled in the uncanny. One of the poet’s most formative encounters with otherworldly forces came, his biographer Alexander Gilchrist writes, when he was “of eight or ten”: “Sauntering along” near his home by Peckham Rye, Blake witnessed what he believed was “a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars” (Gilchrist 7). Astonished, he returned home to relay the incident to his parents and “only through his mother’s intercession” avoided a “thrashing” from his father, who, reacting similarly to many people Blake will encounter throughout the remainder of his life⁴, deemed his experience

³ For a book-length study of the influence of Romantic “supernaturalism” on nineteenth century medicine and science, see Gavin Budge’s Romanticism, Medicine, and the Natural Supernatural (Palgrave 2013), especially the third chapter, “Indigestion and Coleridge’s Medical Imagination.”

⁴ The sole review of Blake’s 1809 exhibition of his illustrations of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales was penned by Robert Hunt for The Examiner, who decried Blake’s art as the demented productions of “an unfortunate lunatic” (Myron, Martin. Bodybuilding: Reforming Masculinities in British Art 1750-1810. New York: Yale UP, 2005, pg. 308). Even Wordsworth’s expressed admiration for Blake—“this poor man was mad”—comes at the rather comedic expense of other authors for which he had a distaste: “there is something in the madness of this man which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron and Walter Scott” (Robinson 281).
troubling, aberrant, and dishonest (7). Nevertheless, Blake continually insisted that his visions were legitimate from this point forward. In an 1800 letter to William Hayley, he offers his condolences by writing:

I know that our deceased friends are more really with us than when they were apparent to our mortal part. Thirteen years ago I lost a brother & with his spirit I converse daily & hourly in the Spirit & see him in my remembrance in the region of my imagination. I hear his advice & even now write from his Dictate (Blake 705).

Three years later, he corresponded with Thomas Butts and reveals something similar: “I…converse with my friends in Eternity, See Visions, Dream Dreams & prophecy & speak Parables unobserv’d & at liberty from the Doubts of other Mortals” (728). More important, though, is the influence Blake’s encounters had over his entire artistic trajectory. In the 1794 edition of *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, he recalls an oneiric revelation during which he, transformed into a “maiden Queen,” dallies with an “Angel,” and, near the end of his life in 1819, he described a “spiritual apparition” to John Varley during a séance that would culminate with his painting, *The Ghost of a Flea* (1820) (Blake 24; Bentley 377-78).

Generally speaking, scholarly evaluations of Blake’s entwinement with the otherworldly tend to fall into two hermeneutical camps, both of which are relatively detached from the nuances of the deeply symbiotic—sometimes even parallel—relationship between his personal experiences and his art. First is the insistence that the more overtly “supernatural” strands of Blake’s art constitute a kind of aesthetic
recapitulation of the Western esoteric tradition. The mysticism of Boehme and Swedenborg loom large here; the former inspired Blake’s multivocal Christianity along with the spatial geometry of his poetry and art, whereas the latter’s intricate organizational schemas informed Blake’s spiritual world-building, from its depictions of gender to its moral codes. The second, related group is the one that positions Blake’s otherworldly affinities within a larger “visionary” project, his lifelong effort to emancipate the imagination in order to fashion a new kind of self-enclosed mythology. Indeed, this standpoint is so committed to deciphering Blake’s system that, as is the case with Nelson Hilton’s claims, the literary implications and heritage of Blake’s actual visions of the beyond are supplanted by investigations of philological minutiae: the “visionary” character of Blake’s work resides within his lexicon, which means that Blake’s “visions” indicate a concern with what ultimately lives and dies on his own

5 The definitive compendium for Blake’s “esoteric” sources remains Kathleen Raine’s Blake and Tradition (Princeton UP 1968), which develops readings of Blake’s most famous works through the lenses of numerous esoterica—alchemy, numerology, the Hermetica, and so forth.

6 A thorough treatment of Boehme’s spiritual influences, as well as the myriad critical appraisals of it, can be found in Bryan Aubrey’s Watchmen of Eternity: Blake’s Debt to Jacob Boehme (1986). See also Marsha Newman’s “‘Milton’s Track’ Revisited: Visual Analogues to Blake's Vortex in the ‘Law Edition’ of Boehme” in Interdisciplinary Literary Studies vol. 5, no. 2 (Spring 2004), pp. 73-93 offers an astute discussion of Blake’s indebtedness to Boehme’s “linguistic and visual constructs” (76).

7 The historical archeology of Blake’s relationship with Swedenborg is conducted by Morton D. Paley in “A New Heaven Is Begun”: William Blake and Swedenborgianism, Blake Quarterly, vol. 13, no. 2 (Fall 1979), which discusses everything from Blake’s marginalia in his copy of Heaven and Hell (1758) to his attendance at a Swedenborg conference. Also of note is Peter Otto’s “Organizing the Passions: Minds, Bodies, Machines, and the Sexes in Blake and Swedenborg” in European Romantic Review, vol. 26, no. 3 (2015), which explores the symmetry between the two figures by way of their refurbishing various elements of the human subject.
Even Andrew Cooper, who maintains that Blake’s art creates an extra-temporal concept-space “of indefinite signification” that unites him with later strains of thought, is primarily interested in Blake’s mythological system as an intellectual construct: Blake’s investment in eighteenth century theories of sense and vision produces a system governed by a radical phenomenology of time (Cooper 100).

The idea that Blake’s work challenges linear time and reverberates omnidirectionally is, in a basic sense, aligned with the temperament of this chapter’s discussions of the poet’s relationship with otherworldliness. But there are several points of departure from the aforementioned critical trends that I would like to outline. Attempts to rigorously historicize Blake’s ideas, for all their merit, do not need to grapple with the fact that Blake belonged to, and was resurrected for, the twentieth century, a period during which his art achieved its deepest aesthetic, social, and philosophical pertinence. As such, it is reasonable to explore how Blake’s parapoiesis responds to or even emerges out of twentieth century thought, especially if we are to take inspiration from Cooper’s insights. The Blake mythographers, however, do not provide a sufficient conceptual framework with which to accomplish this. Even if Blake’s “system” developed a novel phenomenology that engendered its own temporal paradigm, a consideration of Blake’s encounters with the beyond, on their own terms, reveals another dimension of his work, one that situates him within a larger story that exceeds any single artistic corpus. The act of artistic creation, as Blake himself explains in his correspondences, was an

---

otherworldly experience that not only relied on his affiliation with philosophical traditions and his own imagination, but also on an ontological transformation: Blake’s becoming a vessel through which spirits dictate their thoughts. It is not particularly useful to conceive of his “system,” then, solely as a metaphorical representation of his interventions in natural philosophy, nor as a prophetic totality from which every subsequent idea descends. Rather, what is crucial here is his poetry’s self-referential enactment of poesis as an otherworldly metamorphosis of being. In the context of Kripal, a poem like *Milton* (1804), of instance, invokes a poetical “super-imagination” to reconceptualize the material body as a paranormal “presence,” an entity at the nucleus of the work’s transfiguration of history (Kripal 9). What *Milton*’s articulation of paranormality also signifies, of course, is an iteration of the ur-rhythms that govern Dickinson’s work. Blake’s influence is vast, but the otherworldly impulses that *Milton* portrays, as we will see, belong to a creative methodology that persists and adapts, recognizable as a Blakean trademark but not beholden to any Romantically “supernatural” line of inheritance.

A dissection of how *Milton* encompasses Blake’s parapoiesis should, however, begin with a theoretical underpinning that elucidates how and why Blake deploys the otherworldly, particularly since this act eludes much of what established scholarship offers us. (This is not only said with respect to Blakean criticism, but also to Kripal’s work, the modification of which consists of several details that are best illuminated by lines of thinking that lie beyond his predominantly theological scope.) It is here that I would like to turn to Jacques Derrida’s notoriously oblique but immediately useful
concept of hauntology, for a couple reasons. First, hauntology emerges from Derrida’s broader analysis of the twentieth century’s ideological landscapes and, as such, has as much of a filial bond with that century as Blake does. This is not simply to say that Blake “anticipated” Derrida’s ideas, but rather that both figures occupied a common milieu and actively converse with each other. Second, one of hauntology’s primary functions is to use an ontological vocabulary in order to decipher the mechanisms of historical time, which is the precise avenue through which Blake’s poetry conjures paranormality. That is, phenomenology or the “visionary” are not as essential as being and the presence(s) thereof here, which, once again, allows us to orient ourselves toward the aesthetic ramifications of Blake’s personal experiences with the otherworldly. If we consider how Blake’s work confronts and responds to hauntology, then, we will see with greater clarity why his parapoiesis roots itself in ontology, as well as the ways in which this interplay contributes to a broader adoption of paranormality that offers an alternative to one of the most prominent philosophical evaluations of the twentieth century.

Derrida’s Specters of Marx (1993) takes for its backdrop a twentieth century fraught with (ostensibly) abortive attempts to sustain Marxist political movements across the world, a “malaise” that emerged at “the beginning of the 50s” and crystallized with the then-recent collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Derrida 15). The book notes how this decline has been interpreted by figures with “conservative or reactionary motivations” as the final, triumphant ascension of liberalism, and it takes umbrage with Francis Fukuyama’s assertion that this trajectory indicates the end of history and ideology altogether (15). Writing within what he deems a century of “traumatic events”
perpetrated by authoritarian regimes, Fukuyama maintains that economic and political “liberalization” has prevailed amid all the strife: “liberal democracy” has developed into “an ideology of...universal validity,” and, because of this, we can began to consider how “History itself might be at an end”: the historical experiments at the “far” ends of the ideological spectrum have, at the end of the millennium, succumbed to a teleological movement toward liberalism (Fukuyama 42). Derrida rebukes Fukuyama’s perspective in several ways, but one of his chief strategies is to argue that Marxism persists because of its ability to “haunt” Western thought after its collapse on the global stage, to undermine the assumed directionality of history by encapsulating a distinct relationship between ontology and temporality (Derrida 2). He defines this phenomenon as hauntology, the notion that existence or “Being” is fundamentally rooted in a paradoxical presence-by-absence. (The pun of the original French formulation of the word signifies the paradox as well—the “h” is silent, presenting a near-homophone of “ontology.”) To further develop this concept, Derrida turns to Hamlet (1601) to declare that, as is true for all ghosts, Marxism’s “spectral” ontology offers a portrait of time that is “out of joint”: if we are to understand Marxism as hauntological—as an ideology whose existence is predicated on it being functionally deceased—then the influence it continues to hold because of its current state demands that we interrogate the “reassuring order” of the present itself, along with “everything that can be opposed to it,” including the past and the future (Derrida 48). As Mark Fisher notes, hauntology is aligned with Derrida’s earlier work insofar as it fashions Derrida’s “specter” as “that which acts without (physically) existing” (Fisher 20). But it diverges from its Derridean kin in the sense that its foremost
characteristic is that it “cannot be fully present” because it can only stand in relation to a “broken time”; in Martin Hägglund’s words, “[the specter] has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is no longer or not yet” (Fisher 19; Hägglund 82). This “broken time,” as well as the Derridean call to scrutinize the ways in which time is ordered to serve the ideological ends of Fukuyama and his ilk, are paramount to Fisher’s discussions of hauntology’s aesthetic implications (Fisher 19). To Fisher, hauntology is a kind of speculative technique that allows artists to consider what a “world radically different from the one in which we currently live” would look like (Fisher 16.) The decomposition of any alternative to “liberal democracy,” in other words, engendered a nostalgia not for the past, but for “lost futures” that “haunt” our social imaginations (Fisher 16). And it is precisely these futures’ spectrality, their presence-by-absence, that can motivate artists to create works that reflect some their qualities, the isolated sights or sounds of a time and place that will never totally manifest.

Despite the generally incendiary, progressive nature of Blake’s politics, the explicitly Marxist dimensions of hauntology will not serve as our entry point into *Milton.* Fisher’s hauntological triad of ontology, history, and art will catalyze our analysis instead, and Blake’s poem’s response to this Derridean tradition will also reveal how it is interwoven with his reconfiguration of Kripal’s paranormality. In fact, we can begin to parse through the details of this dynamic through a careful examination of the poem’s very first lines. A poetic voice calls upon the “Daughters of Beulah” in a recognizably Homeric (and Miltonic) invocation, but these “muses who inspire the Poet’s song” have a much more peculiar relationship with their beseecher:
Come into my hand
By your mild power; descending down the Nerves of my right arm
From out the Portals of my Brain, where by your ministry
The Eternal Great Humanity Divine planted his Paradise,
And in it caus’d the Spectres of the Dead to take sweet form
In likeness of himself. (Blake 96; ll. 5-10)

It continues, intimating that it will present an “unexampled deed” of the English poet
John Milton, who dwells within “Eternity” prior to the commencement of the narrative,
before it transitions to a “Bards prophetic song” that propels Milton’s visitation to
Blake’s corporeal present in Lambeth and toward redemptive action (96; ll. 21-22). I will
note, first and foremost, that this sequence’s attention to the body’s components and their
functions is not atypical for Blake and might, as Tristanne Connolly convincingly argues,
be what motivates the designs of his illuminated books writ large.9 It is at the granular
level of the poetry itself, though, where we find the most salient manifestations of this
leitmotif. In The Book of Urizen (1794), Blake describes the titular figure, a kind of
demonically Newtonian overlord, by emphasizing his “bones of solidness” that stultify
his “nerves of joy” (75; ll. 40-41). During a much less gruesome scene in Jerusalem
(1804-1820), he depicts an encounter between Enitharmon and Los, Blake’s complex,
mythical analogues of Adam and Eve, during which the former makes “milky Love” flow
into the “aching fibres of Los” (247; ll. 28-29). The beginning of Milton deploys similar
language, but, unlike many other texts across Blake’s oeuvre, it is adamantly self-

9 See Connolly, Tristanne J., William Blake and the Body (Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York:
Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), especially the first two chapters, “Textual Bodies” and “Graphic Bodies.”;
Blake’s control over “what kind of audience he will have, and how they will be affected” by his work lies
in the very form of his illuminated books, which “dramatizes the instability of bodily border”—word and
image combine and disintegrate just as his mythological characters’ bodies do (Connolly 2).
referential in that it takes for its subject a poet’s nerves and their role in poesis, not those of a fabled character who inhabits the larger Blakean cosmology. Of course, it is not abundantly clear who is delivering this invocation. Since the section’s climactic lines mention a “Bard [breaking] forth” to contextualize the events and figures who will shape the poem’s narrative, one can plausibly argue that the voice summoning the “Daughters of Beulah” belongs to the “Bard” and, as such, is not entirely synonymous with Blake and his poesis here (96; ln. 24). Despite this, the bodily imagery offers some compelling evidence for a different assertion. The “Daughters” seemingly “descend” into the poet’s nerves from the “portals” of his “brain,” which suggests yet another meta-poetical gesture (96; ll. 2-3). In some sense, the “Daughters” are inexorably tethered to the universe fabricated by Blake’s imagination (“Beulah” is a paradisiacal region devised by Blake which he refers to as a “Soft Moony Universe”¹⁰), so their emergence from the poet’s “brain,” the seat of the imagination, as Blake would have understood it, signifies that we are witnessing the gestational process of Blake’s own creativity (96; ll. 5-10).

It is important to recall, however, that Blake’s ability to conjure fantastical territories and populate them is only a part of his artistic ethos, and that his life was permeated by visceral encounters with the otherworldly that profoundly stimulated his imagination. In this regard, Milton’s references to imaginative generation via the body are not strictly metaphorical tools useful for identifying the poet as Blake at the work’s outset. They also help establish the poem’s broader parapoietical method, its principal

¹⁰ See Blake, The Four Zoas, “Night the First,” ln. 30
aesthetic substructure that resonates with Blake’s contact with the beyond, and, in doing so, lends his poetry a power beyond its cryptic mythos. As the invocation progresses, we are told that its representation of Blake’s poesis is linked not only to his brain, but to a mechanism, as it were, inside of it: a “Paradise” instilled by the “Eternal Great Humanity Divine” (96; ll. 6-8). It is perhaps impossible, as is the case with many other things wrought in the Blakean tongue, to provide a single definition of what this latter entity is. In an immediate sense, it evokes the “human divinity” endemic to the incarnation, and is even referred to by male pronouns, which could imply a parallel with Jesus (96; ln. 8). Given “his” position within Blake’s lexicon and ultimate function, however, he cannot necessarily be reduced to individual segments of the Christian tradition. For one, he appears to correspond syntactically to Blake’s “human form divine,” a concept found in early poems like “The Divine Image” (1789) that encompasses what scholars perceive as Blake’s rather nebulous artistic relationship with the human body: Anne Mellor contends that the “human form divine” exemplifies Blake’s paradoxical belief that the human body “impose[s] upon man’s potential divinity” but also serves as the chief “stylistic principle” of his visual art’s “linearism,” while Matthew Green unites the term’s proximity to the “lines” and “outlines” of the body with Blake’s attitudes, equally “redemptive” and hostile, toward the “Lockean self,” George Cumberland’s theories about outlining as a graphic technique, and so forth (Mellor xv; Green 179). The “Eternal Great Humanity Divine” is indeed connected to the body—the “human form”—insofar as he possesses “humanity” and has “planted” something directly inside of Blake’s brain. However, perhaps in keeping with Blakean paradoxicality, he is also responsible for causing
“Spectres of the Dead to take sweet form,” a process originating with incorporeality\textsuperscript{11} that seems to have been administered by the “Daughters,” the very figures who enliven Blake’s corporealized imagination (96; ln. 9). What are we left with, then, is a portrait of Blake exercising his imagination to create poetry that has several interlacing components. The “Daughters” manifest within Blake’s brain, the space in which they, along with the “Eternal Great Humanity Divine,” endowed Blake’s ability to witness the “forms” of the “Spectres of the Dead,” and they “descend” into his hand’s “nerves” to inspire and direct his aesthetic representation of this ability, the ability that initiates his eventual experience of Milton’s reanimation and rectification (96; ll. 5-10).

Whereas Mellor and Green suggest that Blake’s synthesis of the embodied self—the concept he frequently castigates before and after Milton—with the otherworldly and the disembodied is a problematic tension, an evaluation of Blake within our theoretical framework indicates that this synthesis is rather a nascent indication of an enthusiastic coherency that many do not detect in Blake’s late-period works.\textsuperscript{12} This evaluation will be most effectively articulated if we reorient ourselves toward paraopoiesis and think about each element of this sequence as if they were pieces of a larger conceptual mosaic. First, what is most significant about the Eternal Great Humanity Divine is not precisely who he

\textsuperscript{11} Incorporeality refers here to two things: the reinstatement of the “dead’s” “form,” the transition back into some kind of materiality after death, as well as the nature of the “Spectre.” In Jerusalem, Blake calls the Spectre the “Reasoning Power in Man,” and, as S. Foster Damon notes, it has an extensive affiliation, particularly in Milton, with selfhood, or, the “false body” (229; ln. 10). I understand the Spectre, then, as an intangible essence that helps shape one’s individuality but remains distinct from the physical “human form divine.”

\textsuperscript{12} Some critics, like Robert Gleckner and Northrop Frye, see a general consistency across Blake’s entire career, but the scholarly tradition which perceives a kind of collapse into pessimism and incoherency—generated by the likes of David Erdman, Morton Paley, and E.D. Hirsch—persists.
is, but the way his ontological status manifests through his agency. He is simultaneously affiliated with an embodied humanity and the immaterial otherworldly (the “Spectres of the Dead”), both of which are reflected in the Paradise he helps cultivate in Blake’s brain, the instrument that he activates in order to enable the poet’s encounters with the “sweet form[s]” of the deceased (96; ln. 10). Because of the Eternal Great Humanity Divine’s liminality, and because the otherworldly is conjoined with Blake’s neural activity, the Paradise bears a striking resemblance to the language Kripal uses to describe the super-imagination. That is, the Paradise can be understood as a “structure” of Blake’s consciousness that grants access to the otherworldly without any subservience to one prevailing systematization of meaning and experience (Kripal 9). The systematizations here do not necessarily refer to religion or science, even though these are assuredly in play for Blake, but rather the body and the beyond, which the Eternal Great Humanity Divine fuses together as an entity in his own right and as an operative within Blake’s mind.

Second, however, it is no accident that this appearance of a Kripalean super-imagina­tion is formulated during Blake’s self-reflexive portrayal of creative production. The invocation, that is, enmeshes the super-imagination, Blake’s otherworldly consciousness, with his artistic imagination in such a way that reorders Kripal’s notion of the paranormal as an aesthetic method, not just a kind of phenomenological matrix. The poem Blake forges germinates within the organ that houses both his creativity and the apparatus that grants Spectres of the Dead a form, and, since the work hinges on conjuring Milton out of Eternity and rendering him into a “palpable presence,” its very
existence illuminates the otherworldly’s role in engendering, organizing, and transforming art (Kripal 9). Without a thorough representation of how Blake achieves direct access to the otherworldly, the poem would be relegated to inert speculation, a philosophical exploration of a dead poet and his writings devoid of its vital intimacy. Indeed, its intimacy, its configuration of the otherworldly within its creator’s physicality and sensorial faculties, signals a harmonious convergence of life and art that, in turn, speaks to its reverberations outside of its poetical confines. Blake, who claimed, for example, to “see” and “speak” with his deceased brother “daily & hourly in the Spirit,” is replicating or attesting to this capability in Milton’s invocation, which begins to suggest that the poem’s reconstituting the forms of the dead has consequences in the material, phenomenal world (Blake 705).

Finally, and on this note, it is one thing that the poem’s prioritization of Blake’s body reveals an (autobiographical) interplay between the imagination and paranormality, but the work also decisively orients itself toward the physical aspects of his body—his poetry’s dependence on his “brain,” “nerves,” and “hand,” implies a methodologically significant ontology that complicates what a “palpable presence” signifies in the context of Kripal’s paranormal (Blake 96; ll. 4-7; Kripal 9). Blake’s parapoiesis is instigated by the Eternal Great Humanity Divine’s status as an entity who concurrently typifies embodiment and the otherworldly, an unbounded, protean being who cannot be relegated to either category at any given time. But Blake, even though he is granted the ability to interact with the beyond, remains uniformly defined by his materiality: there is no explicit mention of a wholly ineffable otherworldliness, nor of the imagination, nor of
anything that might be described as basically intangible that originates with Blake. In fact, what Blake’s portrayal of himself is most saliently aligned with is the ability bestowed upon him to endow the dead with a sensible form. His self-stylization here signals not that he is recalling himself from Eternity à la Milton, but rather that the basis of his parapoietical method is his own kind of eminent “palpability”: his poetical encounters with the beyond are ineluctably contingent on the processes of his body, the site that serves as a physical representation of the otherworldly becoming legible (Kripal 9). If what the poem is beginning to express here is a parapoiesis that is ingrained within and among the facets of “real life,” then this self-referential physicality makes sense. However, when we contemplate how this imagery compares to the ontological implications of hauntology, we can reveal glimpses of another dimension to Blake’s materiality. What the invocation establishes is not a hauntological presence-by-absence, since nothing is lost or ultimately imperceptible. Instead, Blake’s parapoiesis indicates an amplified presence, a materialist ontology that fashions the otherworldly and the poetry that manifests it as intrinsic to the human body. What this introduction to Blake’s ontology compels us to do, then, is to consider how his poetry modifies both paranormality and the means by which the beyond can be discerned. We are not strictly dealing with a Kripalean paranormal consciousness here, nor with the spectrality represented by hauntology, but rather a creative process that believes in its power to actualize the otherworldly and implant our physical realities with all that usually surpasses them.
When the dust of the invocation settles, we can begin to sketch a cohesive picture of what Blake’s parapoiesis entails: it suggests a triangulation of materiality, poetry, and the otherworldly, and it conceives of the poet as the entity within which this triangulation occurs; the poet’s existence renders the otherworldly imminent and concrete, which means that their poetic creations might necessitate the further development of otherworldly energies within material reality. Indeed, as the poem that the invocational Blake seeks to devise actually begins, the stirrings of all that we have examined so far crystallize, and the relationship between hauntology, the paranormal, and art that Blake reimagines becomes increasingly apparent. The “Bards song” discusses the primary antagonist of the work: Satan, a Miltonic figure who, transposed into Blake’s cosmology, manipulates the Adamic prophet-creator Los into giving him the “station” of Palamabron, the representation of pity (96; ll. 22, 9). Satan’s affected “mildness” and “blandishments” that he strengthens following this usurpation belie his tyrannical impulses that prompt one transgression after another until he can exercise unregulated power over the Blakean pantheon (98-99; ll. 36-37). He declares that he is “God alone” and begins to impose stringent “Moral laws and cruel punishments,” polluting the “Divine Vision” with an “extreme…darkness” (103; ll. 22, 25, 31). The song concludes, and Milton’s spirit, having heard it, avows to go to “Eternal Death” to thwart Satan’s dominion, as “I in my Selfhood am that Satan. I am that Evil One!” (108; ll. 30-31). Prior to this confrontation, however, Milton commences a lengthy journey through Blake’s various realms within Eternity and descends “thund’ring into the Sea of Time & Space,” just as Blake reappears and details how he witnessed this entity from beyond enter his “left foot” and “pass”
through his other “members” (110; ln. 46; 115; ll. 12-14). Subsequently, Blake is capable of inhabiting the perspective of Milton’s “Spectrous body” and experience all that Milton represents—the singular imaginativeness that crafted Satan, an earthly past that has given way to a celestial otherworldliness, and the trajectory of his journey through Eternity—as if it were his own: “But Milton entering my Foot, I saw in the nether / Regions of the Imagination; also all men on Earth / And all in Heaven, saw…In Ulro beneath Beulah, the vast breach of Milton's descent” (115; ll. 3-6). Afterwards, all the “earthly things” of the “Vegetable World” appear on Blake’s foot as a “bright sandal,” and he takes his first steps into “Eternity,” where most of the poem’s action takes place (115; ll. 12-15).

Once again, Blake’s material body, and all of material nature itself, is depicted as the vehicle through which the poem’s narrative action unfurls, as if Milton’s vanquishing Satan in Eternity can only occur once the former occupies an embodied vessel and brings physical reality into the proceedings. What is most crucial here, though, is how this sequence offers an alternative to Fisher’s evaluations of hauntology. Since the otherworldly (the insensible, “absent” phenomena) is, in Milton’s case, deliberately pursuing materiality, the poem’s emphasis of sheer presence is reaffirmed, but it is the representation of Blake’s ontological position that is especially pertinent. I will first note, because Blake’s relevance to hauntology is connected to his restructuring of paranormality, that Milton’s “Spectrous body” entering into Blake’s foot is the clearest reconfiguration of the Kripalean paranormal we have received so far (114; ln. 20). Milton’s spirit is not simply a “palpable” essence that Blake perceives with a certain paranormal consciousness; he is an ethereal being who anchors himself within Blake’s
body, a being whose qualities and perceptions Blake himself comes to signify (Kripal 9). Blake and Milton’s melding, however, does not necessarily mean that the scene is melding the material and the otherworldly into an ontological liminality like the one that the Eternal Great Humanity Divine possesses. Blake’s physicality and his donning of the “Vegetable World’s” sandal, rather, suggest that he is wholly distinct from the otherworldly as it is represented by the figures in his pantheon, and that he is still capable of perceiving it as it exists externally to him (115; ln. 12). What Milton’s spirit’s entrance into Blake does illustrate, though, is that Blake’s body and all its members are charged with Milton’s otherworldly essence, and, as such, Blake the embodied subject transfigures into Kripal’s “palpable presence,” a kind of physical, discernible manifestation of the beyond (Kripal 9). In this regard, Blake’s parapoiesis is certainly duplicating his professed ability to engage with spirits by reviving Milton as a “sweet form,” but it is also rendering Blake’s own “form” as a materialization of the otherworldly. (Blake 96; ln. 9) Parapoiesis for Blake is not merely realized as a witnessing and a conjuring, but as a becoming, and it is through poetic conjuration specifically, the process of writing into existence materialized otherworldliness, that this becoming takes place.

Blake’s status as a paranormal “presence” in the poem is also another vector in its response to hauntology, namely because of the role Blake-as-“presence” plays in the work’s formulation of art’s relationship with history (Kripal 9). Blake’s famous proclamation that Milton was “of the Devil’s party without knowing it” looms large in Milton’s response to the “Bards song” and helps elucidate why Milton pines for “Eternal
Death” in the first place (Kripal 9; Blake 35). To Blake, Milton’s chief error was to ultimately disavow Satan’s emancipation from God’s highly systematized republicanism, which Blake deemed a façade that stifled liberty and concealed an authentic tyranny. Hence, Milton’s atonement in the Blakean universe involves both a destruction of his “Selfhood,” an aggregation of his desires to codify rationality and parliamentary politics, and, by extension, the annihilation of his particularly influential representation of Satan, a figure that Milton, according to Blake, was compelled to perceive as restrictive, irrational, and authoritarian (Blake 108; ln. 30). What the poem is staging here, in a broader sense, is virtually antithetical to the way Fisher discusses the aesthetic implications of hauntology. Blake’s parapoietical method that places his physical body at the center of its generative capability, a body whose poetic creations are possible because the otherworldly is inscribed onto and infused within it, also demonstrates that this same nexus can weave alternative histories that alter the trajectory of the present. The poem is not offering speculative morsels of an irretrievably lost future that is conditioned by a broken time, but is instead reimagining literature’s history and power, crafting a new kind of temporality and material reality that bear the mark of Milton’s unequivocal adoption of Satanic liberation.

This reimagining is thoroughly evinced by the end of the poem, and it is here where we see the transfigurative fruits of Blake’s parapoietical labor. Milton, after condemning Satan, proclaims that his “Self-annihilation” will initiate an unprecedented era: the institutionalized “Rational Demonstration[s]” of “Bacon, Locke & Newton” will be jettisoned while every place from Felpham to Lambeth will be “cloth[ed] with
Imagination,” a development that will give rise to “Poetry” that will no longer “imitate” nature, but shape it according to an ineffable “grandeur” and “inspiration” (142; ll. 1-11). He then fuses with Ololon, his feminine parallel who ventures “into [his] depths,” and departs from Blake, vacating his “Vegetable Body” but leaving behind a transformed reality that stands prepared to fulfill his vision:

Wine-presses & Barns stand open: the Ovens are prepar'd:
The Waggons ready: terrific Lions & Tygers sport & play:
All Animals upon the Earth are prepar'd in all their strength
To go forth to the Great Harvest & Vintage of the Nations.
(143-44; In.5; ll. 36-39)

Since Milton’s spirit’s occupation of Blake’s body lends Blake direct access to Milton’s perceptions and identity and propels the poem toward this sequence in the first place, Blake’s body, its position as a material emblem of otherworldliness, is, once more, a major catalyst within the work, this time as the space within which Milton’s alteration of material history itself is articulated and perceived. That is, even if Milton abandons Blake’s body or acts independently from his containment within it, its paranormal ontology nevertheless ensures that it will bear the mark of Milton’s sacrifice; Milton’s rehabilitation of his historical legacy that transforms the present and institutes an emancipated, cohesive, and imaginatively revitalized future. Indeed, it is fitting that the work concludes just as it began, with a reference to poetry, the empowerment of which will figure centrally in Milton’s reformulated reality. Blake’s creative method portrayed at the outset links both poetry and paranormality to his daily, embodied existence and experiences, and what we encounter here is the culmination of this linkage. Blake has forged a poem not only with his “brain” and “nerves,” but with his paranormalized body,
an entity that captures how his imaginative endeavors and non-artistic life are indistinguishable (96; ll. 6-7). Even as Blake is left alone with his “Vegetable Body,” the transformed reality that the poem has crafted and the future it has sown remain intact, a testament to his belief that, because it is already an integral facet of the corporeal world, parapoiesis maintains the ability to effect tangible, historical change and sculpt reality in its image (143; ln. 27).

“*Myself - the Term between -*”: Emily Dickinson’s *Grammar of the Beyond*

In his 1892 *Atlantic Monthly* review of the unassumingly-titled *Poems* (1890), the first published collection of Emily Dickinson’s poetry that helped inaugurate widespread approbation for her artistry, Thomas Aldrich remarks that the poet’s “extremely unconventional and grotesque fancy” was “deeply tinged by the mysticism of Blake” (Aldrich, quoted in [Ceasar] Blake 55). This insight perhaps takes its cue from the book’s preface, wherein Thomas Higginson writes: “It is believed that the thoughtful reader will find in these pages a quality more suggestive of the poetry of William Blake than of anything to be elsewhere found” (Higginson v). Her longtime correspondent, friend, and literary “Preceptor,”13 Higginson not only observed a symmetry between the two poets’ “imaginative power,” but also likely intuited that their writerly careers were following

---

13 In a letter to Higginson dated June 7th, 1862, Dickinson concludes with a typically abstruse question: “But, will you be my Preceptor, Mr Higginson?”
similar paths (Dickinson “7 June 1862”; Higginson v). As is the case with Blake, Dickinson’s work remained largely disregarded throughout her life. Only a handful of her poems appeared in print, most notably in Samuel Bowels’ *Springfield Republican* newspaper, whose editors cultivated relationships with the Dickinson family that, as Judith Scholes contends, proved aesthetically significant for Emily but initiated the notorious sanitization of her unorthodox compositional style.\(^\text{14}\) Moreover, the extent of Dickinson’s ambitions to publicly disseminate her work remains difficult to sketch and was influenced by several mitigating factors that Alfred Habegger summarizes in his study of her life: remnants of an upper-class logic that favored the circulation of manuscripts between private social circles, her family’s “uneasiness” about her proclivities and her resultant “shrinking from the public gaze,” and the fact that “clearly, someone other than” Dickinson had submitted her poem “Nobody knows this little rose” for publication to the *Republican* in 1858 (Habegger Chapter 16).\(^\text{15}\) Nevertheless, Dickinson was assured of her untimely powers—her “Difference – made me bold –,” she proclaims in one poem—and, by the 1930s, around the same time Blake’s work was garnering broad attention and commendation, she was being heralded as a thoroughly

\(^{14}\) See Scholes’ piece, “Emily Dickinson and Fidelia Hayward Cooke's Springfield Republican,” in *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2014): pp. 1-31. Scholes discusses how the epistolary friendships Dickinson forged with the publication’s main proprietors, Bowels, Josiah Gilbert Holland, and his wife Elizabeth “became…integrated into the rhetoric of women's original poetry in the paper”: Dickinson’s correspondences included poems tailored to the newspaper’s content, which, in turn, were reworked by “editorial hands” to shape the outlets literary-journalistic vision (Scholes 3).

modern poet who was attuned to the artistic and critical inclinations of a period that arrived decades after her death. Figures such as R.P. Blackmur and Thomas Johnson, who went so far as to claim that Dickinson “did not live in history and held no view of it,” believed that her poetry functioned as something of a template for their New Critical analytic, and, thanks to the later groundswell of feminist criticism by the likes of Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Adrienne Rich, Dickinson emerged as a veritable titan of twentieth century culture (Johnson xx).16

Blake and Dickinson’s cohabitation of the twentieth century’s poetic milieu is, of course, sufficient justification for a dialogic exploration of their work, along with a consideration of how their poetry’s interplay guided certain contingents of the century’s artists. Since I am attempting to reveal and analyze a parapoietical genealogy, however, I will also note that both poets’ writings incubated within historical-conceptual frameworks of the otherworldly—whereas Blake’s work was inflected by a refurbished spiritual imaginary and public appetite for the uncanny, Dickinson’s was partially molded by spiritualism, a mid-nineteenth century religious movement that was organized around personal contact with spirits. One of its foundational texts, Andrew Jackson Davis’ *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind* (1847), comes as

close as any document does to cohesively portraying its ethos. Davis lambasts the
“physical sciences,” arguing that they seek to codify “the anatomical, physiological, and
phrenological constitution of man” as stable and decipherable, when, in truth, humanity is
in a state of “steady flux,” just like everything else in nature (Davis 23). Once we
recognize the mutability of “forms and appearances,” we can liberate the mind from
corporeal “organization” and “pass into a sphere of new existence,” which is precisely
what he professes to do (40). He draws from the “chemical processes” of Mesmeric
clairvoyant practices and Swedenborgian epiphany (a Blakean motif, as we discussed
earlier) to “shift” to a strictly “mental organization” and enter a spiritual, “invisible”
plane wherein he can witness otherworldly life, both extraterrestrial and ethereal (179;
270). He describes anthropomorphic beings with “telescopic mind[s]” and “elongated
heads” living on Saturn, and he pays a visit to the “spiritual inhabitants” of Jupiter who,
long-deceased, demonstrate a kind of superhuman moral refinement (182). Davis’s
invocation of science, the body, consciousness, and the literal otherworldly eventually
systematized into what Robert Cox calls “an elaborate social physiology,” with renowned
media like the Fox sisters and spiritualist congregations appearing across America to
advance an engagement with the beyond as a restorative, reformative enterprise (Cox 3).
As Ann Braude notes, spiritualism appealed to the “wavering” faith of those
“disillusioned by Darwinism, biblical criticism, and the rise of science,” and, because the
ability to communicate with spirits ostensibly disclosed moral paradigms supported by
the celestial, the movement was able to develop in close proximity to the broad political concerns of abolitionism and women’s rights advocates (Braude 4).17

Dickinson’s relationship with institutionalized religion and spirituality was, like Blake’s, extraordinarily complex, a topic she would often discuss through a combination of caustic wit and subdued admiration. She says of her family in an 1862 letter to Higginson, for instance, that “They are religious—except me—and address an Eclipse, every morning—whom they call their ‘Father,’” the central, lunar image of which, as Linda Freedman notes, evokes ridicule, reverence, fear, and wonder, all at once (Dickinson “15 April 1862”).18 Critics like Freedman and James McIntosh generally tend to maintain that the aspects of Dickinson’s work that might be deemed “spiritual” in spite of her peculiar agnosticism are contiguous with what McIntosh identifies as a “post-Calvinist,” Emersonian philosophy, a formulation of the divine that is imbued with the “evanescent unknown” (McIntosh 16; 150). That is, Dickinson’s lifelong fascination with the ineffable and the mysterious suggests a “nimble believing,” a spiritual heritage that accommodates, if obliquely, certain permutations of religious concepts or experiences

17 The fifth chapter, “‘The Body and Soul Destroying Marriage Institution,’” of Braude’s *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) is particularly insightful regarding spiritualism’s affiliation with women’s suffrage. For more on spiritualism’s influence on radical feminist politics and, subsequently, U.S. obscenity law, see the third chapter of Molly McGarry’s book, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2008). Not to be discounted here is Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825-1875), a mixed-race spiritualist whose *Dealings with the Dead* (1861) and abolitionist ties represent a major unification of spiritualism, race, and Civil War era politics.

18 Freedman’s *Emily Dickinson and the Religious Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011) offers a reevaluation of Dickinson’s spirituality along Christological lines, arguing that her poetry can be assembled as a recapitulation of the Gospel narratives. See especially the first chapter, “A Word Made Flesh,” for her analysis of how Dickinson’s quasi-scientific turn toward materialism and embodiment are organized around an incarnational aesthetic.
and, most importantly, a kind of conviction akin to faith (8). There are, however, moments scattered across her oeuvre that appear to concretely resemble some of the most prominent qualities of spiritualism, a pattern that suggests a surprisingly unambiguous embrace of the otherworldly as sustenance for the imagination. She emulates the interdisciplinary language of Davis when she writes that “This World is not Conclusion. / A Species stands beyond –,” and she associates her poetic expressions with how a spiritualist medium might declare their capacity and authority to relay the activity of the beyond:

The Only News I know
Is Bulletins all Day
From Immortality.
[...]
If other news there be,
Or admiraabler show –
I’ll tell it you. (Dickinson 405; ll. 1-3; 10-12)

Indeed, Paul Crumbley has even linked Dickinson’s use of spiritualist terminology and tropes with the movement’s political dimensions, arguing that she located in its “democratic principles” a vehicle through which her poetry could interrogate “conventional definitions of nature” and present a kind of emancipated, transformational political subjectivity (Crumbley 107). In essence, the traditional elements of spiritual meaning that are elided or, at best, muddled by Dickinson’s skepticism are recuperated imaginatively, a process that foregoes investments in Judeo-Christian precepts and cultivates a kind of spirituality tailored explicitly to her poetry’s

19 See especially the fourth chapter, “The Unknown as Needed and Dreadful,” in McIntosh’s Nimble Believing (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 2000) for a deeper exploration of Dickinson’s epiphanic acceptance of her “vocation as a poet…whose special province is the unknown” (124).
conceptual deliverance. The otherworldly, regardless of Dickinson’s religious attitudes or experiences, is an engine of her creativity that animates her work’s tireless curiosity and expeditions into ethereal territories.

Despite all of these obvious parallels with Blake, and despite her acquaintances, publishers, and early reviewers candidly noting them, only a handful of critics have drawn comparisons between the two, let alone develop of a sustained investigation of the ways in which their works respond to each other. As Freedman notes, this critical reluctance is primarily due to the lack of direct evidence that Dickinson ever encountered Blake’s work, even though it is possible that Higginson introduced Blake to Dickinson at some point, since he “had certainly read Blake” by the time the two met (Freedman 38). Moreover, Dickinson herself was relatively consistent when discussing her formative artistic influences—the Brownings, Keats, Ruskin, and Shakespeare are among the usual suspects. If our aim, however, is to consider Dickinson’s position within a larger paranormal matrix, a literary pedigree whose members acknowledge and institute paranormality as a creative method, then these historical barriers do not occlude our path. The paranormal as self-expression, in other words, compels us to reconceptualize the

---

20 Alan Blackstock’s “Dickinson, Blake, and the Hymnbooks of Hell” (The Emily Dickinson Journal, vol. 20 no. 2, 2011, p. 33-56) provides perhaps the most thorough analysis of the two poets’ relationship by claiming that they “challenge the theological, educational, and stylistic hegemonies the hymn tradition deliberately advanced” (33). Other critics that read Blake and Dickinson alongside each other include: Sharon Cameron’s Lyric Time (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979), which argues that Blake is a “true Dickinsonian progenitor” because of his synthesis of time and identity (213); Karl Keller’s The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), which contends that Dickinson, like Blake, perceived the imagination as the only faculty that could “bring heaven and earth together” (131); and Richard Brantley’s Emily Dickinson’s Rich Conversation (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), which maintains that Dickinson’s interest in “refreshing the senses” and “the ideal and otherworldly” suggest Blakean tendencies (10, 104).
logics of history itself, as Blake demonstrates in *Milton*. But, with respect to this project, I am also examining two poets who helped infuse the twentieth century’s artistic climates with paranormality, whose otherworldly predispositions were claimed as the twentieth century’s own and who were thus, in a sense, composing their work in greater proximity to each other than is typically recognized. Any discussion, then, of Blake and Dickinson’s later influence on parapoiesis must begin with an understanding of how their responsiveness to each other’s ideas governed their particular contributions to this phenomenon. It is from here that I will begin to diverge from the scholarly discourse about Dickinson’s relationship with the otherworldly. What several of her poems illustrate, I claim, is not merely an allusiveness to a quasi-Emersonian spirituality, nor an integration of spiritualist imagery and techniques, but also an implementation of otherworldliness and parapoiesis that both reflects and expands Blake’s rendering of the concepts. In her dealings with the beyond, Dickinson preserves the ontological transfigurations, self-reflexivity, and counter-hauntological immanence at the core of Blake’s parapoiesis, though she develops a kind of new experiential locus through which these things are articulated. That is, otherworldly phenomena are encountered in Dickinson’s works not through an aestheticization of an otherworldly body, but through persistent references to the elemental characteristics of poetry and the process of poetic creation, especially units of sound and language. The otherworldly is intimately woven into her syntactical ecosystem, and, in turn, Blake’s narrative movement toward the redemptive transformation of the world is displaced by the poetic form as a manner of being that conjures and reveals what lies beyond distinguishable reality.
I will begin this discussion, of course, with an assessment of the basic connections Dickinson forges between poetry and otherworldliness, locating in her works a depiction of the beyond that resonates with all that we have established about the otherworldly so far. An appropriate entryway into Dickinson’s parapoiesis is “A word made Flesh is seldom,” since it is arguably her most conspicuous poetical meditation on language’s relationship with otherworldly phenomena. Dickinson commences the piece by invoking the biblical premise of “A word made Flesh is seldom” and suggests an innate sympathy between her mode of expression and a divine process:

A word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die
Cohesive as the Spirit
It may expire if He —

“Made Flesh and dwelt among us”
Could condescension be
Like this consent of Language
This loved Philology (Dickinson 671; ll.9-16)

To offer a brief translation: a “word,” so long as it is “distinct”—made splendidous in an artistic context, perhaps—evades death altogether, proving just as enduringly “Cohesive as the Spirit” unless “He” who was “Made Flesh and dwelt among us” becomes “condescension” (abandons His heavenly station) in imitation of “Language” and “This loved Philology”; put another way, this particular “Word” will abide until, at the very least, the Second Coming (ll. 9-16). Unsurprisingly, critics generally assert that these lines amount to Dickinson correlating her poetry, her arrangement and manipulation of the “word,” to the incarnation, the monumental act of God’s grace that, through Jesus, united the human and the divine. Steven Monte, for
instance, argues that she “seems mostly concerned with accruing power to herself” here: “if He can be made flesh, I can write poetry” (Monte 17). Likewise, Shira Wolosky reads the “loved Philology” as a “moving tribute” to Dickinson’s own idiosyncratic beliefs about the “functions of language,” a moment during which she conflates the singular, celestial agency required for the incarnation with her *sui generis* stylizations of the written word (Wolosky 35). Indeed, Dickinson’s insistence that her “word” is everlasting and as “Cohesive as the Spirit” is an audacious proclamation of her creative ability and not dissimilar to Blake’s belief that poetry, once enmeshed with a certain configuration of the ethereal, maintains the capacity to adjust the courses of culture, history, and so forth (Dickinson 671; ll. 9, 11). What Dickinson implies here is a kind of dispersal or even displacement of a central Christian principle. Her poetry recapitulates the incarnation by giving novel linguistic forms to imaginative thought, thereby demonstrating that its miraculous, paradigm-altering qualities can be reignited in a secular, aesthetic setting.

Related to this secularity, however, is another one of the poem’s perhaps less obvious and more nuanced admissions: the poem’s definition of language reveals that Dickinson is more concerned with a transgressive appropriation of Christian tradition than with a linguistically-driven exploration of the beyond in its most ineffable sense. The notion that her work could ever “expire” depends on a “condescension,” a transmission of the holy “word” into mortal flesh, so that divinity (presumably once more, following the life and death of Jesus) becomes “Like” Dickinson’s authoritative “Language” and beloved “Philology” (671; ll. 9-16). Even though she professes that her creative transmutations of language are comparable to the significance of the incarnation,
language itself, and, more importantly, the poetic “Philology” that she has constructed out of it, are expressly linked with the “condescended” (671; ll. 14, 16). There is no clear indication that they have heavenly origins, nor do they appear to stimulate a refined understanding of or intimate contact with, say, God. Rather, Dickinson’s language is the mechanism by which she repossesses the otherworldly, insofar as it encompasses a facet of a dominant religious ideology. In a poem concerned with anticipating and affirming her longevity through an intervention in a spiritual tradition, she is careful to sustain her artistic independence: her “Philology” must remain “condescended”—characteristically human and thus distinct from the kind of celestial otherworldliness that facilitates the incarnation—lest her poetry be absorbed into the very tradition that she is attempting to reorient (671; ll. 14, 16).

While certain aspects of this poem will be useful for elucidating the broader parapoietical implications of Dickinson’s work, namely its claim that her poetry is ineluctably tethered to a fallen, human plane, it illustrates the analytical limitations we confront when we attempt to reassemble her understanding of the beyond from the historical vantage point of any sort of preestablished religious system. We may yield insights into her convictions about her talent and her poetry’s capacity to decentralize normative permutations of spirituality, but we are afforded little information about whether she believed that her art could instantiate a less categorizable otherworldliness. What ought to follow is not a consideration of whether she employed an “otherworldly imagination,” a frustratingly nebulous phrase critics gravitate toward when they seek to explicate her fascination with the unknown, for example. If I am to illustrate how and
why her integration of the otherworldly into her work signals an engagement with a Blakean paraipoiesis and, as such, an affiliation with a literary—not religious—pedigree, our path forward might best be framed by the following question: does Dickinson portray any specific rudiments of poetry, linguistic and otherwise, as access points to the beyond? If a poem’s individual qualities are indicative of otherworldly phenomena, then, leaving aside the imagination that fashioned it, how are we to evaluate the poem as a whole? Can it be understood as a paranormal entity in a similar way that Blake’s body was, or is it a kind of expressive outlet and container for its more significant otherworldly components?

To begin to explore the answers to these questions, a closer examination of “This World is not Conclusion” is warranted, since the poem begins to articulate a Dickinsonian paranormality that is sensitive to much of what lies at the core of Milton. As I alluded to earlier, the poem opens with a proclamation that seems like it could have been lifted from the pages of Andrew Jackson Davis’s spiritualist writings: “This World is not Conclusion. / A Species stands beyond —” (198; ll. 1-2). Though the intermingling of scientific and otherworldly vocabularies here exemplifies spiritualism’s role as a cross-pollinator of myriad arenas of knowledge, the poem’s objective is not necessarily to respond to spiritualism’s stature as an influential religious movement or ideology, as was the case with “A word made Flesh is seldom”. The most salient way to illustrate what lies at its core is to work our way through the poem backwards, since, following its opening two lines, it details the ways in which the “Species” continuously fails to be grasped or systematized by any discipline that ventures to do so (198; ln. 2). In the work’s last two lines, Dickinson metaphorizes humanity’s desire to ascertain the “beyond” and its
“Species” as an insatiable hunger, a “Tooth” that even “Narcotics” cannot prevent from “nibbl[ing] at the soul” (198; ll. 2, 19-20). The suggestion here is that what we might colloquially refer to as the “soul” is a representative component of the inhabitants of the beyond and something that all human beings ostensibly possess. If we take this suggestion as true, in other words, an understanding of the without should intuitively develop from an examination of what resides within us. However, Dickinson sees noumenal interiority as nothing short of madness if we consider the preceding contentions about the subject matter, and, following this logic, we are led to believe that the “soul” is more closely associated with a series of misguided, ineffectual investigations performed by those who do not adequately meet the epistemological demands of the “beyond” (198; ll. 2, 20). Those who rely on “Faith” to comprehend the “Species,” for example, futilely rely on “twig[s] of Evidence” and the wisdom of “Vane[s]” and compensate for their dearth of knowledge with “Strong Hallelujahs” and “Gestures” at the “Pulpit” (198; ll. 13-16). She continues, writing that to “gain it, Men have borne / Contempt of Generations / And Crucifixion,” and that, for the “scholars” and people who practice “Philosophy” who are not as zealous, it unfailingly “puzzles” and “baffles,” resulting in an exasperated, diminishing “Sagacity” (198; ll. 8-12). Despite all this perplexity, we have climbed up to the summit of the poem, as it were, to find Dickinson’s incongruously confident, finalizing intonation that “This World is not Conclusion. / A Species stands beyond —” (198; ll. 1-2).

The poem’s litany of stymied disciplinary approaches to the “Species” of the “beyond” is, first and foremost, perhaps more overtly aligned with the Kripalean
paranormal than what Blake offers in his depiction of the Eternal Great Humanity Divine (Dickinson 198; ln. 2). We are quite literally witnessing a kind of an otherworldly “presence” thwart the epistemological tools of “both the faith of religion and the reason of science”: the faithful scour for mere “twigs,” and the “scholars” are “baffle[d]” until their wisdom is compromised (Kripal 9; Dickinson 198; ll. 4, 9, 15). This passage, if we follow Kripal’s logic, suggests that a super-imagination is necessary to decipher what others have repeatedly failed to. Blake concretely portrays the super-imagination, we will recall, as a structural element of his imaginative consciousness. Located in his brain, it is a “Paradise” granted to him by the “Eternal Great Humanity Divine,” a being who comprises both the material and the beyond, that helps enable his poetry’s capacity to aesthetically represent his visceral encounters with otherworldly entities (Blake 96; ll. 6-8). The Eternal Great Humanity Divine plays an important role in Dickinson’s formulation of paranormality and the super-imagination, but, before we arrive there, we must acknowledge that her point of reference is not her physical body nor its experiences. She writes frequently about her embodiment, especially the operations of her brain and eyes\(^2\), but here, when explicitly discussing the beyond, she emphasizes the qualities of poetry, an indication that she is imbibing Blakean paradigms just as much as she is deliberately departing from them. Her poetical orientation is further evinced and

---

\(^2\) See the fourth chapter of Karen Sánchez-Eppler’s *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (U of California Press, 1993) for the political and gendered implications of this, as well as Martin Wand and Richard B. Sewall’s “A New Perspective on Emily Dickinson’s Eye Problem” (*The New England Quarterly* 52.3, 1979, pp. 400-406), which marks an early foray into the critical fascination with Dickinson’s attention to optics.
illuminated by the glimpses we are afforded into what the “Species” might be or represent (Blake 96; In. 6; Kripal 9; Dickinson 198; In. 2). It is important to initially note that the poem’s ending leads us to believe that the “Species” refers to the “soul” or that the “soul” is a microcosmic instantiation of what lies “beyond”—an individual member of an otherworldly “Species,” that is (Dickinson 198; In. 2). However, given how ineffectual and erroneous the “Philosoph[ers]” and figures at the “Pulpit” who dominate the work are, and given that the object of their voracious inquiries is the “soul,” we can adopt a healthy skepticism toward such an interpretation (198; ll. 6, 17, 20). “Soul” might very well be an inadequate signifier, a word that misrepresents the “Species” because it was plucked from the vocabulary of these “scholars” who have yet to provide any meaningful edification about the “beyond” (198; ll. 2, 20).

Indeed, the multidimensionality of the term “Species” lends some credence to this claim (198; In. 2). In addition to connoting Darwinian science or Davisonian spiritualism, “Species” has an extensive association with writing, especially within eighteenth and nineteenth century English literary culture (198; In. 2). The foundational rhetorician Hugh Blair, for example, refers numerous times to different “species of versification” and “species of writing” in his Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1783), employing the appellation for everything from Egyptian hieroglyphics to Elizabethan odes (Blair 68).22 If we assume that Dickinson’s “Species” of the “beyond” bears a semantic relationship to

22 More examples include a work by the didact John Carey called Practical English prosody and versification; or, Descriptions of the different species of English verse (1816), as well as one that has garnered some attention among critics and historians of the novel, An essay on the new species of writing founded by Mr. Fielding (1751).
writing, we must additionally consider the only insights we receive into its nature: she states that it is “Invisible, as Music – / But positive, as Sound –” (Dickinson 198; ll. 2-4). Sure enough, Dickinson supplies characteristics that, in a certain sense, also belong to poetry: as a genre that emerged from rhapsodic, lyrical traditions, poetry is intrinsically “musical” and conditioned by “sound” in a manner that prose is not, and, depending on whether poetry is being performed or read as a static occupant of a page, it can be both “Invisible” and “positive” (197; ll. 3-4). The latter word’s juxtaposition with “Invisible” implies that it evokes something that is not merely experienced by the senses, but that which the senses grant a kind of persistently verifiable tangibility, the kind, say, a poem as a printed object might possess. The fact that the “Species” exemplifies these two traits simultaneously is also illustrated by their status as adjectives in the poem and, thus, the nouns to which they are conjoined (198; ln. 2). “Music” is “Invisible” in that it is evanescent and designed for aural consumption, but it also relies upon a sophisticated notational language that is often expressed visually through transcription; “sound” is “positive” insofar as it could be produced by physical entities or measured by our sensory faculties, but it does not possess any obvious, stable palpability in and of itself (198; ll. 3-4). These subtle discrepancies suggest a deeper sympathy between the “Invisible” and the “positive,” a coherency that is incomprehensible to conventional modes of inquiry or expression but perfectly feasible as an ontological component of the “Species” that “stands beyond” (198; ll. 2-4).

Respecting the poem’s wariness toward attempts to definitively categorize the “Species,” we ought to be careful not to claim that the “Species” is poetry itself (198; In.
The paradox of the work is that Dickinson is so declarative about something that swiftly dispenses with those who yearn to declare it, but the “Species” is also situated beyond “This World,” which, if we are to take any lesson from “The word made Flesh is seldom,” means that it also exceeds poetry (198; ll. 1-2). We can begin to achieve clarification, however, by analyzing the “Species” as one part of Dickinson’s paranormality, her assimilation and modification of the chief characteristics and purposes of Blake’s Eternal Great Humanity Divine (Dickinson 198; ln. 2). It is true that the “Species” similarly encapsulates both the immediately discernible and the ethereal, a liminality that, in a Blakean context, represents the poet’s perceptual reality (198; ln. 2). The Eternal Great Humanity Divine’s ontological position is precisely what allows Him to endow Blake’s ability to witness the otherworldly within a corporeal plane, an act that occurs within the same physical organ that houses Blake’s poetic imagination (Dickinson 198; ln. 2). Dickinson’s “Species” is also self-reflexive in that it bears a resemblance to her preferred aesthetic form, but this self-reflexivity also indicates that the “Species” is even less distinct from poetry than Blake’s figure is and, therefore, not a perfect correlative (Dickinson 198; ln. 2). That is, because the “Species’’ symmetry with the Eternal Great Humanity Divine is conveyed through a terminology that denotes the integral features of poetry, the “Species” itself does not maintain the same agency that the Blakean construct does, and its kinship with poetry compels us to reconsider the mechanics of the genre as a parapoietical method (Dickinson 198; ln. 2). The poem’s syntactical maneuvers insinuate that poetry’s qualities function as intermediaries between human activity and an otherwise inscrutable beyond that the “Species” represents (198;
ln. 2). Any interaction with or manipulation of these qualities would not only enable self-expression, but also entail a capacity to access the very same substances, as it were, that constitute otherworldly entities. In this regard, Dickinson contends that poetry’s components, while not necessarily otherworldly in and of themselves, accomplish what the Eternal Great Humanity Divine does from a different vantage point. By displacing the Paradisical structure of Blake’s consciousness with an acousto-linguistic phenomenology, Dickinson reorients the basis of Blake’s parapoiesis away from interiority and toward the aesthetic experience, implying that the poetical manifestations of the “Species” traits are the vehicles through which we can surmise, replicate, and, by proxy, encounter the beyond (Dickinson 198; ln. 2). To return to Kripal, these avenues of contact with the beyond also seem to suggest a multi-faceted super-imagination, the nucleus around which Dickinson’s reconfiguration of Blake and the paranormality of her creative method revolve. Since all of the “Species”’ otherworldly characteristics uniquely coalesce in poetry, an engagement with a poem would ostensibly exercise, even latently, the super-imagination as an experiential faculty; we cannot hasten to claim that a poem stands as a paranormal “presence” in Kripaean terms, but its formal proximity to the beyond can surely activate the “super-imagination,” insofar as this proximity allows our poetical encounters to catalyze an ability to fathom the beyond (Dickinson 198; ln. 2; Kripal 9). Hence, Dickinson’s creative method is also suffused with a certain otherworldliness, and, in devising her own iteration of parapoiesis, she reworks Kripal and engages with Blake’s ideas at once. The organization and animation of poetry’s structural elements, rudiments of expression that are adjacent to the ethereal “Species,” is
an imaginative process whose basic materials possess a conceptual heritage with the
otherworldly (Dickinson 198; ln. 2). Here, Dickinson’s super-imagination, the capacity to
detect semblances of the beyond in sound, musicality, and (written) language, is entwined
with the artistically generative and is not merely indicative of a particular
phenomenological framework.

The intermediacy that “This World is not Conclusion” outlines in the abstract is
explored more concretely in “Behind Me—dips Eternity,” a poem that displays
Dickinson’s parapoiesis in action and addresses some of the friction between the works
we have examined so far: how and why, for example, a poem can remain inextricably
human, as Dickinson insists in “A Word made Flesh is seldom,” if its constituents are
reminiscent of the beyond. The poem begins:

    Behind Me—dips Eternity—
    Before Me—Immortality—
    Myself—the Term between—
    Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,
    Dissolving into Dawn away,
    Before the West begin— (Dickinson 373; ll. 1-6)

Situated firmly between “Eternity” and “Immortality,” words charged with an
otherworldly meaning, is Dickinson the subject, a self-styled “Term” who is seemingly
capable of apprehending and articulating what lies beyond as if it were readily sensible:
the “dipping” of “Eternity,” followed by the metaphorical imagery of the “Eastern Gray”
and “Dawn” that captures the attainment of “Immortality” in the subsequent lines,
renders the beyond just as self-evident and legible as astronomical phenomena like the
sun spanning the horizon (373; ll. 1-6). As with her previous poem, what the work
presents so far signals some important reverberations with *Milton*. For one, the perceptual immediacy of the beyond is entwined with Dickinson’s particular ontological state, which recalls the implications of Blake’s body’s transfiguration into a paranormal entity. The entrance of Milton’s “Spectrous body” into Blake’s foot not only establishes an otherworldly ontology that facilitates Blake’s passage into “Eternity,” but also serves as the foundation of his interrogation of hauntology’s presumptions (Blake 115; ll. 3-6). As both a “palpable presence” and the site of his creative imagination, Blake’s embodied materiality forges an alternative relationship between temporality and the paranormal, one that, through poetry, alters the corporeal present and broader historical trajectories (Kripal 9). Dickinson’s “Term” is a similar depiction of ontology as a predicate for an aesthetic representation of otherworldliness, and the word itself invokes a finite period of time, which, in turn, signifies a Blakean connection between the otherworldly and the worldly, mortal present, even if historical redemption is not the work’s foremost concern as it was for Blake’s Milton (Dickinson 373; ln. 3).

What is notably absent here, of course, is a clear indication that the beyond is actually enmeshed with material reality or the body, let alone the mechanics or transformational capacities of such a synthesis; “Eternity” and “Immortality’s” immanence, along Dickinson’s cognizance of them, is ultimately realized metaphorically, and the intermediate position of the “Term” suggests that both otherworldly concepts remain external to the poet (373; ll. 1-3). The poem’s other two stanzas express and develop this sentiment further. Dickinson first portrays the “Kingdoms—afterward” and the “Dateless Dynasty” of the divine “Prince” as things that “they say” exist, which
harkens back to her confrontation with Christian tradition in “A word made Flesh is seldom” (373; ll. 7-12). The phrase “they say” is the most crucial here, especially because it follows the first stanza’s rather unambiguous declarations: after Dickinson witnesses otherworldly phenomena at the outset of the piece, the second stanza reads as an attempt to translate her experience through an authoritative religious epistemology, which “they,” not Dickinson, presumably fashioned and promulgate (373; ln. 7). This moment sustains the separation between the poet and the beyond, but the spiritual framework’s detachment from her articulation of her perceptions also implies that “Eternity” and “Immortality” are not concepts that can be integrated into Christian thought; “their” utterances are merely echoes of speculation compared to the opening’s imagery (373; ll. 1-2, 7). Indeed, following this assertion, Dickinson recapitulates her earlier perceptual convictions while, at the same time, providing a vision of the present that is not really governed by sweeping, liberating alterations of reality as it is at the end of Milton: she once again affirms that there is a “Miracle before Me” and “Miracle behind,” but, in addition to the “Term,” a “Crescent in the Sea” lies “between,” engulfed by “Midnight” and a “Maelstrom—in the Sky” (373; ll. 13-18).

At first glance, the poem offers something of a peculiar discrepancy. The beyond is as immanent and discernible as the light of “Dawn,” but the position from which it can be observed is pervasively dark and turbulent (373; ln. 5). One can argue that the tension here indicates a basic antagonism toward the ethereal, that Dickinson participates in a kind of theodical exercise which critically explores the usefulness or attainability of “Eternity” and “Immortality”: Dickinson’s representation of herself is not only immersed
in the “Maelstrom” at “Midnight,” but this representation, along with the poem itself, expires just as the “Maelstrom” appears, a cessation that does not intimate a hospitableness to, say, an afterlife (373; ll. 1-2, 19-20). However, if we think about the work as an extension and enactment of “This World is not Conclusion’s” ideas, its disparate images congeal, and it further clarifies the parapoietical dimensions of the poet’s artistry. The best starting point for this analysis is Dickinson as the “Term between” (373; ln. 3). The “Term’s” signification of a mortal present, its detachment from the otherworldly that the “Maelstrom” demonstrates, is inflected by the fact that one of its other valences is linguistic, insofar as “Term” can also, of course, denote “word” (373; ln. 3). This simultaneity recalls Dickinson’s discussions of poetry’s structural affinities with the “Species,” and it signals that the work emphasizes an acousto-linguistic character through which her beliefs about poetry crystallize and her expressions of paranormality run. To the extent that she instantiates one of poetry’s endemic components (language, in this case), Dickinson is “condescended,” but she nevertheless serves as an intermediary between the mortal plane and the beyond, facilitating and articulating a phenomenal encounter with “Eternity” and “Immortality” thanks to her ontological kinship with those concepts, if we assume that their features are contiguous with the similarly ethereal “Species” (198; ll. 1-2; 373; ll. 1-2). It is no coincidence, then, that Dickinson the “Term” is expressly depicted as an entity “between,” but what is also significant here is the continued reconfiguration of Blakean thought (373; ln. 3). Blake’s otherworldly materialist ontology gives way to one that is organized around a quality.
shared by poetry and the “Species,” an intermediary status that permits experiences of a beyond that never permeates the body nor the imaginative consciousness (198; In. 2).

We are left, however, with an obvious question: where does poetry as a form of expression stand? If we follow the logic in the first two works we examined, we can conclude that Dickinson’s construction of a poem, her arrangement of the acousto-linguistic elements that are aligned with the beyond, is the methodological foundation of her permutation of parapoiesis. To experience a poem, in other words, is to experience the coalescence and interplay of all that allows us to fathom the otherworldly. In “Behind Me—dips Eternity,” she expands her purview through her identity as the “Term” (373; ln. 3). Her perceptions of “Eternity” and “Immortality” are not predicated on an encounter with poetry, but rather an inhabitation of one of its chief characteristics, her status as an acousto-linguistic being who possesses the rudiments of poetic expression (373; ll. 1-2). This signifies that the qualities of the “Species” are associated with both poetry and a human subjectivity that is formulated through language, writing, sound, and music—our encapsulation of these features is, independent of poetry, an avenue through which we can begin to access the beyond (198; In. 2). Moreover, if the basis of this contact is the acousto-linguistic self, then poetry, in addition to stimulating the super-imagination, also operates as a vessel that makes legible and transmissible our insights about the otherworldly. The otherworldly is cognizable, that is, because it spans the spectrum of our acousto-linguistic qualities, which means that the articulation of our engagements with it requires a synchronistic modality that is designed to harness the entirety of this spectrum. (According to Dickinson’s parapoietical schema, prose, for
example, is representationally insufficient, since it is unable to account for the musicality of the “Species” in the way that poetry is.) (198; ln. 2)

What we arrive at, then, is a parapoiesis wherein the breadth of poetry’s anatomical congruency with the beyond establishes a poem as an epistemological unit. Experiential knowledge of the beyond can accrue through our awareness and exploration of our acousto-linguistic faculties’ lineage, and, where philosophy, religion, and science fail, poetry triumphs. Its formal characteristics are themselves linked with the beyond and the human capacities that facilitate our otherworldly encounters, and these degrees of resonances make it uniquely equipped to serve as the medium within which our encounters are given definition and meaning; if our acousto-linguistic selves and our discernments of the beyond that they engender are the painter and the paint respectively, poetry is the canvas. Has Dickinson, by centering her parapoiesis on these selves, entirely abandoned Blake’s investments in embodiment and transformative restructurings of material reality? One way we can answer this question is “not entirely.” Insofar as our acousto-linguistic capacities naturally rely on embodiment to varying extents (vocalizing speech, composing written poetry, and so forth), we can assume that Dickinson’s persistent fascination with embodiment is, at the very least, a subliminal factor of her parapoiesis; and we can also conceive of prioritization of poetry’s elemental components as a sort of transformation in and of itself, since, perhaps even more so than Blake, her rendering of poetry unleashes and conveys the genre’s possibilities that might have otherwise gone unrecognized. Nevertheless, Dickinson both inherits and, crucially, develops Blake’s parapoiesis, and the result of this development, her unique position
within parapoiesis as a nascent literary tradition, is worthy of critical attention in its own right.
Chapter II: The Flowers of Herself

The Gift: H.D. Goes Beyond the Beyond

W.B. Yeats’s *Autobiographies* (1938) presents the poet’s creative and political vision in such a way that evokes some of the basic elements of artistic modernism writ large: the search for imaginative liberation amid utter social and psychic desolation, the interrogation of time, space, and perception through myriad forms of experimentation, and so forth. What is arguably the most important component of the poet’s memoirs, however, is their representation of his famous otherworldly preoccupations, his dedication to which resulted in his systematized meditation on humanity’s relationship with the beyond, *A Vision* (1937). Of course, to say that Yeats’s depiction of himself is what instantiates all of this alone is to overlook perhaps the seminal figure in his life and work—Maud Gonne. At one point, Yeats recalls Gonne telling him that, sometime shortly before 1890, she had adopted a child while in France (she later reveals that the child was biologically her own) who had recently died. Gonne was, according to Yeats, almost irreparably distraught, and he remarks that “for the first days of her grief [she] lost the power of speaking French, which she knew almost as well as English, and she had acquired the habit of taking chloroform in order to sleep” (Yeats 48). Sometime later, Yeats and Gonne were conversing with their mutual friend, George William Russell, a
mystical polymath who “had seen many visions,” about various theosophical matters when the topic of reincarnation piqued Gonne’s interest (48). Despite Yeats’s concern that Gonne’s interest evinced a possession by an “evil spirit” that was “creating a desire for power and excitement,” she inquired “how soon a child was reborn” via metempsychosis, and “if reborn, where?” (48). Russell’s response that “it may be reborn in the same family” made a deep impression on Gonne, who, sometime later, told Yeats that she had reunited with the deceased child’s father, Lucien Millevoye, at the memorial chapel she constructed for it in France in order to revive its soul—by performing a magical sex ritual over the child’s coffin and the corpse therein, Gonne had hoped to produce a new child whose arrival might encompass the spiritual rebirth, as it were, of her departed child (48). Gonne herself was reticent when it came to whether she believed her new child, who was two years old at the time she confessed her behavior to Yeats, contained the soul of her previous child, and the peculiar sequence ends with Gonne solemnly claiming that she and Millevoye “lived apart” (133).

This manner of thinking was not particular to Yeats and Gonne. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the same point at which Blake and Dickinson’s poetry was undergoing significant critical reappraisals, an interest in the otherworldly began to surge through the avant-garde circles of the Euro-American intelligentsia. Ezra Pound, Mina Loy, and T.S. Eliot all attended séances during or just after the First World War, and several of the period’s philosophical luminaries established important connections with organizations that facilitated inquiries into the beyond: Carl Jung, for example, presented his “Psychological Foundations of Belief in Spirits” to the London Society for Psychical
Research in 1919.\(^1\) Yeats’s anecdote is, however, perhaps singularly useful in that it exemplifies the defining mechanisms by which his and Gonne’s acquaintances’ otherworldly preoccupations altered the course of modernist art. First, the encounter between Gonne and Russell that provides the former with a requisite understanding of incarnation captures the predominantly sociological nature of these preoccupations, the transmission of otherworldly knowledge within and on account of communal spaces and a constellation of interpersonal associations. As Helen Sword notes, even the period’s most ardent skeptics, that is, the ones who often decried the inclinations of the Yeatsian ilk, signaled a curiosity about the ethereal that made its way osmotically into their creative work. Thomas Mann, who professed to “abhor morasses of the spirit,” attended séances at the home of the distinguished psychical researcher Dr. Albert Freiherr von Schrenck-Notzing for a year prior to the publication of *Magic Mountain* (1924), which concludes with a meeting between protagonist Hans Castorp and the ghost of his dead cousin (Sword 76). Virginia Woolf was similarly critical of beliefs and activities that revolved around the spirit world. She preferred to account for ghosts as “internal psychological entities so long as she did not have to acknowledge them as real,” and, though she maintained a congenial relationship with Yeats, she once confessed that the intensity of his enthrallment with the beyond and his investigations thereof made her “gasp…like a dying alligator” (82). Nevertheless, Nicholas Royle and George M.

---

Johnson argue that, in works like *Night and Day* (1919), “Kew Gardens” (1919), and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Woolf establishes a “supernatural aura” that implements the vocabulary of psychical research, which Yeats was well-versed in, in order to instill a narrative coherency into a fragmentary, distorted textual landscape (Johnson 20).² Gertrude Stein, who, as Stephanie L. Hawkins notes, thoroughly documented her “rejection” of the beyond in her most autobiographical works, frequently “extolled the virtues of the mystical paintings of Juan Gris,” maintained that, from an anthropological perspective, it is only “natural to believe in superstitions and hand-reading,” and, along with Upton Sinclair, attended lectures by the self-proclaimed mystic and spiritual teacher George Gurdjieff while in Paris (Hawkins 59).³ This apparent receptiveness to the otherworldly, according to Hawkins, resonates with Stein’s “idiosyncratic” theories of narration and identity, which borrow the “sign-systems” prevalent among the same “superstitions and occult pseudoscience” that she dismissed (60). Taken collectively, these examples illustrate a scholarly consensus about the way otherworldly sentiments infiltrated the literature in our purview. Even amid modernism’s characteristic (and anxiety-inducing) sensitivity to textual heredities and dialectics, its fascination with, as

---

² Royle, in *Telepathy and Literature: Essays on the Reading Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), maintains that “Kew Gardens” functions unambiguously as a “ghost story” (119), and Johnson, in “A Haunted House: Ghostly Presences in Woolf’s Essays and Early Fiction” (in *Virginia Wolf and the Essay*, ed. Beth Rosenbergh and Jeane Dubino, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), develops the claim that one of Woolf’s chief aims is to turn to the otherworldly to undermine “the materialism of the classical novel”— *Mrs. Dalloway’s* Clarissa, for instance, bears a “striking affinity” with contemporary spiritualists and psychical researchers, insofar as she is phenomenologically bound to the “unseen” and the “apparitional” elements of humanity (247-49).

³ See pg. 243 of Peter Washington’s *Madam Blavatsky’s Baboon* (New York: Shocken Books, 1993) for more on Stein and Sinclair’s connection to Gurdjieff.
Eliot spells out in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), the poet’s obligation to conceptualize the literary text as the interface between the past and the present, the movement’s penchant for the beyond is not entirely coeval with textuality in this sense. Instead, modernist works largely imbibe their otherworldly qualities from their creators’ nexuses of social experiences; psychical organizations, informal salons, and individual friendships all constituted the substructure of this dimension of the period’s creative production.

Another insight we can develop with the help of Yeats’s account of Gonne pertains to the nature of Gonne’s attempted resurrection itself, which encompasses the two epistemological and methodological strands that governed and were conjoined through modernism’s otherworldly affinities. On the one hand, her desire to engage as directly as possible with the spirit of her deceased child speaks to the early-twentieth century resurgence in spiritualism, a permutation of the mid-nineteenth century American movement which we briefly explored during our discussions of Dickinson. As Pamela Thurschwell documents, this period’s spiritualism became so ubiquitous and, in part, respectable across various intellectual disciplines that it “tended towards” a peculiar “combination of religious hopefulness and materialist skepticism,” as figures like Frederic W.H. Myers spearheaded what they believed to be scientifically rigorous endeavors to demonstrate the persistence of the soul after death (Thurschwell 15). Despite spiritualism’s expanding influence within educational institutions, its association with the diffuse practices and people of “low-culture” endured. Traveling mediums and séances abounded, both of which promised communion with the likes of dead relatives or
celebrities, and the interpretive possibilities of spiritualist doctrine remained accessibly
diverse in the face of attempts to systemize it within aristocratic institutions.

Spiritualism’s multiplicity and customizability would help explain Gonne’s capacity to
remain ambiguous to Yeats, as well as the poet’s belief that she had been possessed by a
nefarious entity: both, in the context modernist spiritualism, could have been operating in
accordance with two competing definitions of spirits. But these qualities also had
ramifications for its influence on the period’s literature. Sword contends that
spiritualism’s principal impact is exhibited by what she calls “metaphorical
mediumship,” modernist authors’ methodological strategy of drawing at will from the
tropes of mediumship to conjure, as it were, their art (Sword 76). She cites Eliot’s *The
Waste Land* (1922) as an example of this technique. Eliot’s perspective on mediums
revolves primarily around his interest in their contradictions and his own “contradictory
desire” to become one through the poem—as they contact and accept into their bodies the
spirits of the beyond, they are at once “authoritative and absent, embodied and
transcendent, ironic and invisible, speaking with the ‘different voices’ of both men and
women” (Sword 97). What undergirds the poem, then, is Eliot’s aesthetic reenactment of
mediumship, born of his particularly vexed understanding and integration of the concept
that, Sword maintains, manifests in the poem’s innovative “straining against the limits of
the traditional lyric” (98). While spiritualism was perhaps even less cohesive than it was
during Dickinson’s time, its democratic ethos persisted in a conceptual register, and
several of its most central tenets helped craft some of literary modernism’s most
significant works.
On the other hand, Gonne’s surreptitiousness about the ritualistic aspect of her interest in reincarnation captures the explicitly occultic element of modernism’s otherworldly fascinations. That is, the transmission of Russel’s knowledge of reincarnation to Gonne and her putting it to the test quietly and beyond Yeats’s gaze is not dissimilar to how this era’s artists sought to concretize new kinds of ontologies and temporalities that drew from a rigorously schematized lexis of occultic knowledge. Leon Surette notes that modernist literature is inflected by a tradition of “occult scholarship” that figures like Yeats, Pound, and Eliot participated in and advocated on behalf of to their artistic compatriots (Surette 38). This “scholarship” was a kind of archeological process by which authors excavated and subsequently incorporated into their work a vast, ancient heritage which included things like Hellenistic fertility cults, mystical symbology, Hermetic and Gnostic texts, and even contemporary systems such as Madame Blavatsky’s Theosophy (Surette 38). The “occult” was, in this sense, not as nebulous as modernist spiritualism and was conceived as a coherent, systematized body of “secret knowledge” that was accessible through an ostensibly universal vocabulary (38). For instance, Pound, as Timothy Materer illustrates, was “intensely interested in the conception of the poet as a magician” and for a period styled himself as a “magus” who used his early poetry to stage the “visionary experiences” of this character, so to speak, whose genesis was found in the occult tradition that Pound was immersed in (Materer 50). Indeed, “tradition” is an essential term here, one that speaks to a distinctly occultic understanding of history that was guiding Pound’s magical poesis. According to Surette, any artistic rendering of occultic phenomena in the early twentieth century was
understood to be the product of a kind of noumenal, “underground elite” that was
manifesting itself (Surette 39). The revelation of this “elite,” which occurs cyclically
under “favorable historical conditions,” granted individuals who had studied it the ability
to siphon its secret power and, through their individual agency, alter the social and
cultural contours of civilizations and strengthen the bonds of humanity (Surette 39). To
be an occultic artist, then, was to recognize the tradition of this manifestation, its
historical catalysts and qualities that, when harnessed by a knowledgeable subject, could
alter the course of history itself.

We might now pose, then, the following question: why was Yeats convinced that
Gonne was possessed by an “evil spirit” if she appeared to be an ideal occultic agent of
history (Yeats 48)? After all, she had received and internalized occultic knowledge and
had subsequently attempted to reconfigure an historical event. The answer in part, of
course, likely has to do with Yeats’s masculinist anxieties about a woman’s eagerness to
dictate her own reproductive life. But it also speaks to a kind of paralyzing atomization, a
collapse of the belief that an engagement with the otherworldly could facilitate human
connection and social change. In this regard, Gonne’s obsession with altering her
personal history that appears to fail instantiates a rupture with occultic historiography
that, to someone like Yeats, foreshadowed the dissolution of triumphant historical
progress altogether; revelation of the otherworldly has given way to a solipsistic
instrumentalization of it, which engenders a world wherein “the falcon cannot hear the
falconer” (Yeats ln. 2). One might be tempted here to argue that Gonne’s episode
captures the broader social and psychic crises that so prominently characterize modernist
art, but this, I will argue, is not the whole story. Yeats’s evaluation of Gonne also speaks
to what was then a burgeoning discrepancy between artists and the otherworldly, which is
linked with the parapoietical tradition that Blake and Dickinson helped establish.
Whereas Blake and Dickinson saw the interplay between poetry and the otherworldly as
the engine of reformation and unification in an embodied reality, modernist poets saw an
important fracture. Owing to the intellectual and aesthetic resurrection of things like
spiritualism and the occultic tradition, the otherworldly was as much of a
phenomenological certainty as ever, but its emergence as such conditioned a
reconceptualization of poetry’s possibilities and limitations. The poetic imagination was
no longer affiliated with embodied subjects whose art shaped a tangible, paranormalized
reality, but rather with subjects who, reacting to both an ever-expanding otherworldliness
and wartime decimation, retreated into a solipsistic realm of abstraction. This turn stifled
the genre’s transformative power that Blake identified in its capacity to represent the
otherworldly, and, indeed, indicates a larger representational crisis. Although the human
mind could match the breadth of otherworldly phenomena whose ubiquity and
accessibility were guiding artistic pursuits, poetry’s ability to productively capture these
phenomena was eroding in a century beginning to face unprecedented fragmentation and
disruption. Through an analysis of H.D.’s implementation of otherworldliness amid this
erosion, which will culminate in a dialectical comparison of her work and Mina Loy’s, I
will consider what use, if any, parapoiesis maintained as the twentieth century unfolded,
as well as how its transformational agency was preserved or reckoned with in the
evacuation of any coherency in material reality.
The poet whose work perhaps most evocatively captures the twentieth century’s emergent crises is Hilda Doolittle, more commonly known by her pen name H.D. Like many of her artistic contemporaries, H.D. drew frequently and broadly from sources—textual or otherwise—that documented otherworldly phenomena. Early in her career, however, she was most closely associated with Imagism, a literary-artistic movement spearheaded by Ezra Pound that, broadly speaking, championed direct expression, economy of language, and a departure from the poetic conventions of the Victorian era in favor of a renewed interest in Classicism. In 1913, Pound composed an essay for Poetry called “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” in which he outlines the poet and critic F.S. Flint’s principal aims of the movement:

Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something. Don’t use such an expression as ‘dim lands of peace.’ It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer’s not realizing that the natural object is always the adequate symbol. Go in fear of abstractions. Don’t retell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose. Don’t think any intelligent person is going to be deceived when you try to shirk all the difficulties of the unspeakably difficult art of good prose by chopping your composition into line lengths (Pound par. 7-9).

As H.D. notes in her “memoir” of Pound, End to Torment (1958), Pound was so impressed by her poem “Hermes of the Ways” that, during a 1912 meeting in a tearoom at the British Museum, he scrawled “H.D. Imagiste” at the bottom of the manuscript.4

4 H.D. recalls the moment in a characteristically impressionistic and elliptical way: “Meeting with him alone or with others at the Museum tearoom. We all read in the British Museum reading room. Dark walls and statues that looked dingy. Frances had gone home. I could wait till my parents came. My father, at 70, had retired from the University. My mother wrote, ‘We could meet in Genoa.’ I had my own allowance now. Drifting? ‘But Dryad,’ (in the Museum tea room), ‘this is poetry.’ He slashed with a pencil. ‘Cut this out, shorten this line. ‘Hermes of the Ways’ is a good title. I’ll send this to Harriet Monroe of Poetry. Have
Even a cursory evaluation of “Hermes of the Ways” elucidates why Pound was so enthusiastic about H.D.’s potential as a distinctly Imagistic writer:

The hard sand breaks,
and the grains of it
are clear as wine.

Far off over the leagues of it,
the wind,
playing on the wide shore,
piles little ridges,
and the great waves
break over it. (H.D. 37; ll. 1-9)

These opening lines immediately and succinctly capture the Imagist movement’s ethos that Pound discusses in his Poetry essay: their language is direct and precise, free of abstraction, and utterly faithful to the concrete details of nature’s activity. Most important, however, is how the poem, both explicitly and implicitly, depicts the dynamics between subject and the world within which they are situated. What enables the subject’s observations of nature here is not simply their capacity to use their sensory faculties. In one sense, the poem’s imagery is generated from an enmeshment between the subject and nature; eventually, the wind “whips around” the subject’s ankles and they taste the “sweet” water that offers itself to them (37; ll. 29, 34). These phrases signal that the subject’s embodiment maintains a kind of prelapsarian communion with nature, an integration that conceives of a human’s embodied presence as both “natural” and a vessel

you a copy? Yes? Then we can send this, or I’ll type it when I get back. Will this do?” And he scrawled ‘H.D. Imagiste’ at the bottom of the page” (H.D. 18).
through which natural forces reveal their characteristics. In another, related sense, the seamless way the poem depicts this dynamic suggests that poetic expression is naturally suited, as it were, to convey it. The subject’s observations and interactions in the poem do not obviously appear to emerge from any sophisticated or byzantine aesthetic strategy that is imposed onto nature, but they instead arise spontaneously and accessibly, as if poetic creation is coeval with the embodied subject’s convergences with nature. Nothing in the piece’s language, imagery, and style establishes any friction or distance between subject and nature, and these formal qualities, simply because of how unobtrusive and reflective of the subject-as-nature they are, serve only to affirm the central conceptual relationship that H.D. articulates. The essence of what the poem conjures through its degrees of associations, then, is a certain poetically-oriented ontology: as the product of an embodied subject who is ineluctably entwined with nature, poetry is able to fully represent this relationship as it manifests in a particular moment in time and is, by extension, part of a larger naturalistic totality.\(^5\)

There is another element of “Hermes of the Ways,” however, that is quite distinct from its conventionally empirical presentation of nature, one that speaks to H.D.’s

\(^5\) I use the word “totality” here deliberately, both to honor the influence of Lukács’ treatment of literary production in “Realism in the Balance” (1938) and to depart from it. On the one hand, Lukács’ claim that authors who emphasize “whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface” do little to reveal the social relations of capital to the unorganized working class and thus begin to stimulate revolutionary sentiment is not entirely incorrect—as I will show later, the modernist poetic consciousness’ regression into abstraction and solipsism renders the optimism of Blake and Dickinson inert (Lukács 33). On the other hand, Lukács, chiefly because he is so concerned with the novel form, fails to recognize what modernist poets did: that the “objective totality” itself was cohabitated by social relations and the otherworldly, so much so that the two forces actively shaped each other. Indeed, this otherworldliness’s resonance with the human imagination—its status as fuel for the work of “realist” luminaries like Thomas Mann—suggests that it helps guide the imagination toward liberation, toward a fuller expression of a totality that contains within itself an otherworldly possibility to reconceptualize time, history, art, and society.
burgeoning interest in the otherworldly that would come to define the rest of her literary output. Following the two opening stanzas cited above, the poem’s speaker remarks:

But more than the many-foamed ways
of the sea,
I know him
of the triple path-ways,
Hermes,
who awaits. (37; ll. 10-15)

The “triple path-ways” that characterize Hermes not only evoke the Hellenistic messenger God but also his later manifestation of Hermes Trismegistus, a fusion of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian deity Toth, as well as the purported author of the Hermetica, an ancient collection of occultic texts that comprise the foundation of the religious-philosophical movement called Hermeticism (37; ln. 13). At the poem’s conclusion, Hermes is evoked once again, this time as a seemingly integral part of the natural world that the piece’s speaker intimately engages with throughout: “Hermes, Hermes…you have waited, / where sea-grass tangles with / shore-grass” (37; ll. 49, 51-54). What this poem, written in 1913, signifies is what critics have written about extensively: H.D.’s eagerness to engage with and systematize the otherworldly energies she found herself surrounded by, not just those that constituted the early-twentieth century’s artistic atmosphere but also those that constituted her perceptual reality. The most memorable encounters with the latter came in 1920 during her travels to Greece with her longtime companion, Bryher. At one point, she was standing aboard a ship alongside a man she called Peter Van Eck and noticed several dolphins and an island come into view, only to realize later that all these things had disappeared as apparitions
would. In another incident, H.D. and Bryher simultaneously witnessed a series of images “write themselves” on the wall of their room in a hotel just outside of the location of the Delphic oracle, an experience that, she claimed, demonstrated her natural connection with “the high regions of mystery and magic…of hidden, secret storehouses of revelation and inspiration” (Sword 122). Sword notes that H.D.’s otherworldly interests began to reach their zenith around the beginning of the 1930s, during which time the poet “joined the Society for Psychical Research, attended lectures on spiritualism, and took part in weekly group seances” to better understand and harness the mystical power of her visions a decade earlier (Sword 123).

True to the early-twentieth century’s dual iterations of the otherworldly, H.D.’s interest in the occultic tradition also blossomed around this time. Her spiritualist yearnings to communicate with the dead who lingered within the corporeal plane were eventually dwarfed by her impulse to seek—or even craft for herself—a coherent, otherworldly vocabulary that gave her visions as much historical and creative meaning as possible. To accomplish this, she turned to several standard occultic lineages—Hermeticism, Kabbalism, and Rosicrucianism—all of which she alchemized into a singular articulation of her encounters with the otherworldly. As Matte Robinson argues, H.D. in one sense retained the narrative of inheritance that is typical of most occultic traditions and practices: she ties her sensitivity to the otherworldly, her “Gift,” as she calls it, to a “syncretist meeting of European and North American initiates” of the “Invisible Church,” to “the Knights Templar,” and even to “Ancient Greece and…the mythical Atlantean civilization” (Robinson 18). However, she also maintained that her
“Gift” was the product of “direct experience,” or, to put it another way, the natural world proclaiming its fundamental otherworldliness to her in such a way that it could subsequently be transmitted through and made sensible by her linguistic enterprises (18).

Indeed, if we return to “Hermes of the Ways,” we can glimpse the genesis of this logic. The poem’s final lines—“Hermes, Hermes…you have waited, / where sea-grass tangles with / shore-grass”—conceive of Hermes, himself a kind of metaphorical instantiation of one of the most essential occultic strands of knowledge, as a component of nature, a figure who the subject “knows” because his presence is located within a sensible, natural world (H.D. 37; ll. 49, 51-4). Hermes does not descend from a celestial location, nor is he summoned by a séance or other occultic technique that the subject has imbibed from a source external to their immediate experiences of their surroundings. Instead, he commingles with the very same natural world that the subject is enmeshed with. According to this thinking, then, the otherworldliness that Hermes exemplifies helps comprise a kind of conceptual scaffolding within the naturalistic totality I identified earlier. The subject’s embodiment provides to them an ontological kinship with nature, which is itself endowed with otherworldly essences, and this, in turn, implies that the subject’s ability to witness these essences is, insofar as anything that is natural can be called otherworldly, born of their own essential otherworldliness; the fact of the subject’s embodiment alone is, in H.D.’s framework here, a sufficient indication of parapoiesis’ triangular unity between nature, the human, and the otherworldly. H.D.’s capacity to represent these mechanics in poetic form, of course, returns us to our earlier observation, that poetry is one of this totality’s operative factors and can thus be said to possess an
otherworldly quality in its own right. Since poetry, in other words, necessarily originates with an embodied subject and is capable of attesting to the naturalistic experiences of said subject, both of which signify an overarching otherworldliness, it is itself a kind of emanation of the otherworldly, a genre that maintains discernible genealogical echoes of the beyond. As we forge ahead, H.D.’s engagement with the beyond will become increasingly reliant on elusive “experiences” that alters her efforts to catalogue and understand them, but “Hermes of the Ways” stands as an important entryway into the otherworldly elements of her creative life. The piece offers, if subtly and indirectly, a rather coherent depiction of how she conceived of poetry’s expressive possibilities amid a world charged with otherworldliness.

As with Blake and Dickinson, H.D.’s poetry was not merely informed by the currents of her milieu that had otherworldly preoccupations (spiritualism and occultism in her case), nor was it isolated to her poetical renderings of Imagism that accounted for, say, her visionary encounters with the beyond. (A poetically-oriented ontology that traffics in the otherworldly is, after all, very reminiscent of Blake and Dickinson’s creative strategies we discussed in the previous chapter.) Rather, to fully comprehend why and how H.D. arrived at her naturalistic portrayal of the otherworldly, we must once again abandon the scholarly preoccupation with its sociological dimensions and firmly situate her work within the tradition of parapoiesis that Blake and Dickinson also belong to. Broadly speaking, there has been little consideration of how and why these two poets might have influenced H.D., or whether she had even read and integrated their work to begin with. Marsha Schuchard, in one of the few Blakean accounts of H.D.’s “prophetic”
writing, argues that it was Pound who had introduced Blake to her in the early parts of their relationship, and that this introduction likely reinvigorated certain parts of H.D.’s imagination: since Blake and H.D. both had connections with the Moravian Church, Schuchard postulates that H.D. found in their shared heritage a mutual interest in the visionary properties of sexual liberty that proved both philosophically and creatively inspiring (Schuchard 212-14). Others, such as Tony Trigilio, argue that H.D. inherited from Blake the desire to create a “heterodox tradition of prophetic language,” which most evidently manifests as her Blakean staging of apocalyptic landscapes in her wartime works like Trilogy (1944-46) (Trigilio 1). Critics have paid just as little attention to Dickinson’s presence in H.D.’s life. One of the notable exceptions to this lack is Martha Nell Smith’s essay, “Not Each in Isolation,” which briefly traces some of the historical-conceptual overlaps between the two poets. Smith makes special note of H.D.’s evaluation of Dickinson’s work as “really very nice crystalline stuff” in a 1924 letter to Bryher, contending that H.D. recognized Dickinson as a significant progenitor of Imagism’s investment in poetic clarity and precision (Smith 48). Indeed, H.D. owned a copy of Dickinson’s The Complete Poems (1924) that she heavily annotated, which Smith cites as material evidence for H.D.’s deliberate invocation of Dickinson’s unorthodox poetic style across her career. These more focused efforts to historicize the reverberations between H.D. and Blake or Dickinson rightfully insist that efforts to anatomize H.D.’s artistic heritage dilute the complexities of her vision, but they nevertheless compel us to identify her stature within poetic traditions that might not yet have been fully explored.
In fact, H.D. and Blake’s parallel interests in sexual radicalism, as well as the stylistic symmetries between H.D. and Dickinson, do not illuminate the full extent to which H.D.’s work speaks to the two poets’ otherworldly predilections. When we consider the resonances between H.D.’s work and parapoiesis as we have hitherto explored it, we can obtain a clearer picture not only of H.D.’s prevailing aesthetic agenda but of her perspective on poetry’s capacities and longevity as an artform. After all, H.D.’s copy of Dickinson’s collected poetry itself urges us to move in this direction. On the back cover of the book, she listed a handful of poems she appears to have admired. Among them are “She died at play” and “The Bible is an antique Volume,” two poems that bear some clear resemblances to “Hermes of the Ways”: the former envisions a “ghost” whose countenance recalls a “spray” from the sea, and the latter disparages the “faded men” who champion the literary qualities of the Bible over “Orpheus’ Sermon,” all of which resonates deeply with H.D.’s project to fuse the otherworldly’s various lineages with poetic creation (Dickinson “She” 80; ll. 6, 9; “Bible” 636; ln. 16). The poem that most successfully captures H.D.’s inheritance of both Blake and Dickinson’s particular renderings of paranormal poesis, however, is “R.A.F.” (1941). H.D.’s relationship with the Royal Air Force during World War II constitutes perhaps one of her most sustained, fruitful engagements with otherworldly forces. As Barbara Guest notes, H.D. began to seriously integrate R.A.F. pilots into her otherworldly schema when she met Hugh Dowding, a scientist whose son was a fighter pilot who had been killed during combat. By the time Dowding’s book, Many Mansions (1943), was published, he believed that R.A.F. pilots who had perished could be contacted “through mediums” and that they
inhabited a “middle ground between earth and astral space,” helping “their comrades to their astral haven” as they, too, were killed (Guest 261). H.D. frequented Dowding’s lectures and, in conjunction with her participation in seances led by Arthur Bhaduri, became convinced that she was able to communicate with deceased airmen: they appeared before her, she heard their voices, and they related to her prophetic declarations about atomic warfare. Writing in *H.D. by Delia Aton* (1949), the poet would later claim that the content of “R.A.F.” was based on an actual experience with a slain pilot’s ghost that propelled her deeper into her otherworldly fixations, and, in *Majic Ring* (1944), which contains transcribed letters she composed to Dowding, the associations she perceives between the pilots and strands of occultic history are made clear: “I have thought of the RAF circle and crown with wings as a sort of sun-symbol…the RA has its significance as the name of RA, the Egyptian ‘creator of gods, men, and the world’…Also, he is ‘usually depicted as hawk-headed.’ Well, this is by way of association and brought in here because the Viking ship has your wings, but IN the sun…There we had the sacred barks, ‘the heavens being conceived of as an ocean’” (H.D. “Delia” 190; “Ring” 15-16).

H.D.’s willingness to affiliate otherworldly concepts such as the divine with nature, as she does in “Hermes of the Ways,” distinguishes her from Dowding’s multi-planar framework, and is, indeed, something that characterizes the entirety of “R.A.F.” and its interplay with Blake and Dickinson’s work. The opening lines are revelatory in this regard:

He said, I’m just out of hospital,
but I’m still flying.
I answered, of course,
angry, prescient, knowing
what fire lay behind his wide stare (485; ll. 1-5)

What is crucial about this sequence, which presumably introduces us to an
encounter between the poem’s speaker and the spirit of an R.A.F. airman, is what it is
missing from it. We should first recall how Blake and Dickinson present their interactions
with the beyond in Milton and “This World is not Conclusion”: Blake outlines an
elaborate physiological mechanism that allows an embodied poetic consciousness to
conjoin itself with otherworldly entities, and Dickinson portrays our acousto-linguistic
capacities as catalysts of our perception and knowledge of the beyond. We must also
recall how deliberately Blake and Dickinson conceptualize space within these
frameworks. For both poets, the beyond quite literally stands beyond our corporeal,
human realm, but poetry facilitates an important exchange between these two arenas that,
in turn, begins to dissolve their barriers. What motivates both poets’ parapoiesis, then, is
their shared belief that, because human characteristics are so closely linked with
otherworldly activity, a humanistic pursuit like poetry is part of an otherworldly
continuum, which means that it can reveal and deepen our fundamental bonds with the
beyond that might not otherwise be obvious. The opening of “R.A.F,” though, does not
partake in this kind of systemization and spatialization. For one, the pilot’s spirit
communicates as naturally and with as much ease as a living human being would, and the
speaker is able to meet his eyes as they would the eyes of any typical corporeal
interlocutor. Moreover, the speaker does not need to travel to an otherworldly plane, nor do they identify the mechanics that will allow them to do so.

We might be tempted to argue that this element of the poem signifies a crystallization of what we saw in “Hermes of the Ways”: the otherworldly has become so enfolded into material reality that it is indistinguishable from the worldly, as natural as a human or the seashore upon which they tread. Following this thinking, we can claim that H.D. has, in devising her own poetic style to represent the otherworldly as sensible and quotidian, jettisoned Blake and Dickinson’s drive to carefully chart the points of contact between humanity and the beyond. But there is a line later in the piece that reverberates explicitly with Blake and Dickinson’s renderings of the beyond, which suggests that H.D.’s Imagistic otherworldliness is a poetic practice that she derives not from her relationship with Pound, for instance, but from the tradition of parapoiesis. As the poem progresses, the speaker briefly mentions how, during their chat with the deceased R.A.F. pilot, they were “for a moment infected” with his “stammer” so long as they remained in each other’s presence (487; ln. 55). This moment, of course, alludes to the importance of mediumship and spirit possession that H.D. would have almost certainly encountered during her forays into spiritualism, but it is also an eerily succinct convergence of the Blakean and Dickinsonian strands of parapoiesis. On the one hand, the speaker’s otherworldly encounter runs directly through the operations of their body just as it does for the speaker in Blake’s Milton; as opposed to, say, language in a strictly conceptual sense, a stammer that “infected” brings to mind both the physicality of speech and sound and the embodied experience of a disease, and it is embodied physicality that lies at the
center of Blake’s synthesis of the beyond and material reality (487; In. 55). On the other hand, though, the speaker acts in true Dickinsonian fashion when they conceive of the stammer as the moment at which the otherworldly and the human collapse into each other. That is, the stammer is a recapitulation of Dickinson’s acousto-linguistic framework in Blakean terms; Dickinson’s insistence that the beyond can be accessed through human activities like music and language because of its own sonic foundation lingers in this moment, but it is blended with Blake’s insistence that otherworldly energies course within the human body’s components that make such activities possible in the first place.

H.D.’s sly integration of Blake and Dickinson here reveals one of the principal logics of her parapoietical style in both “Hermes of the Ways” and “R.A.F.” It may seem as if she is consciously departing from Blake and Dickinson’s systematizing impulses to craft her own Imagistic method that conveys otherworldliness, but we should not foreclose the possibility that Imagistic qualities—observational clarity, minimal abstraction, and directness of expression—also signal her awareness of a certain poetic genealogy. In other words, H.D. does not need to illustrate the complex processes by which humanity can experience the beyond because this is precisely what she has imbibed from Blake and Dickinson. Once again, in the parapoietical landscape that these two poets helped formulate, nature, the human body, and poetic expression are interconnected parts of an otherworldly whole, which H.D. takes as her premise in “R.A.F.” In this sense, poetry’s ability to capture the phenomenological ubiquity and even naturalism of the otherworldly is not entirely a consequence of things like occultism
penetrating the collective artistic consciousness. This understanding of the poetic form is also a testament to a poet like H.D.’s sensitivity to her literary predecessors, along with her willingness to implement and expand their thinking. To take things further, H.D.’s brand of Imagism was not simply devised to achieve formal experimentation via concision and constraint, nor to reflect a world wherein a preponderant interest in the beyond made otherworldly concepts ordinary elements of daily existence. Her Imagism is instead an inheritance, born of how Blake and Dickinson came to shape her otherworldly affinities, and it reveals the origins and contours of these very affinities which animated her poetry for most of her career.

Because the parapoietical tradition is concerned primarily with the transformative capabilities of poetry, I would also like to examine how “R.A.F.” conceptualizes the genre in light of the work’s integration of Blake and Dickinson’s thinking. As is the case with “Hermes of the Ways,” “R.A.F.’s” vision of poetry largely resides within the domain of the genre’s representational power, its unique capacity to capture, for example, a poet’s interactions with an immanent otherworldliness due to its own associations with the beyond that we outlined earlier. However, for Blake and Dickinson, poetry did not begin and end with its ability to merely represent the beyond. For the two of them, their craft’s otherworldly ethos is what enables it to become a unifying, generative, emancipatory force, an artistic practice that can radically alter how we inhabit and influence our realities. In Blake’s mind, the communion between an embodied poetic consciousness and the beyond was the catalyst for social and temporal upheaval, and the act of poetic creation itself signified humanity’s capacity to not only reimagine historical
trajectories but conjure entirely novel ones, too. Dickinson’s parapoiesis was less explicitly revolutionary in its aims, but it certainly maintained a liberatory spirit. Poetry to her was a method by which humanity’s inherent connections to the beyond could be grasped and harnessed to reconfigure our perception of what makes us human to begin with.

Since H.D. incorporates pieces of Blake and Dickinson’s visions in “R.A.F.,” we ought to expect the poem to display these kinds of self-referential logics that ultimately compel us to interrogate our relationships with the world and each other. What we get instead, though, is something a bit different. As “R.A.F.” proceeds, its speaker mentions how their encounter with the deceased pilot made them realize that “whatever becomes of our earth,” our reality is “branded for eternity / with the mark of the new cross, / the flying shadow / of high wings” (487-88; ll. 74-78). The assertion here seems to be that the R.A.F. airmen who succumbed to wartime conflict, those whose spirits remain in our corporeal plane, have changed the world or initiated a new era, which, in the most basic sense, parallels Blake and Dickinson’s interest in engendering upheaval. But the images in these lines depart from Blake and Dickinson in a few key ways. First, the ambiguity about what will happen to “our earth,” what we might even call the speaker’s indifference to the world they occupy, is entirely removed from Blake’s vision of the earth following the poetical journey into the beyond (487; ln. 74). H.D. offers no pathway toward a reorientation of social relations or history that is grounded the embodied characteristics of humanity and their affinities with the otherworldly. Second, and speaking of embodiment, H.D. decisively embraces abstraction over the concrete or the physical in
this sequence. Instead of invoking Blake and Dickinson’s notion that the embodied human subject’s poetic faculties are what stimulate sociohistorical or perceptual transformation, H.D. references the “cross” to imply that the pilots have established a new kind of religious orthodoxy, which, in turn, manifests not as an actual cross but as a shadowy “mark” (487; ll. 75-76). These images are even a departure from the stammer scene found earlier in the poem. Our locus is no longer all the embodied presences that populate a material reality but is rather an oblique spirituality that literally floats above the naturalistic totality to which humanity, poetry, and the otherworldly belong. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this movement toward the abstractions of religiosity coincides with an elision of any references to poetry as a practice or method, which were vital for Blake and Dickinson’s projects. We can detect how H.D. conceives of poetry’s ability to capture otherworldly essences through implication as we did earlier, but here, the agency poetry draws from its connections to the beyond, the nucleus of parapoiesis, is superseded by poetry’s representational function; poetry can relate encounters with otherworldly entities and the revelatory aspects thereof, but, in “R.A.F.,” the engine of change is the transition of the otherworldly into a primarily immaterial, distant, and inaccessible religious ideology.

There is yet another indication that H.D. is expanding beyond Blake and Dickinson’s paranormal poesis near the end of the poem. After discussing—or imagining—a train ride across Europe with the pilot’s spirit, the speaker concludes the piece with a peculiar assertion of their individuality:

If I dare recall
his last swift grave smile

I award myself
some inch of ribbon

for valour,
such as he wore (492; ll. 169-72)

They go on to insinuate that their motivation for granting themselves this “ribbon” is that they alone recognize what the pilot’s ethereal manifestation indicates: the triumph of courage and virtue, all while “ineptitude, sloth, [and] evil” prosper (492; ll. 174-180). In their conviction that their parapoiesis can instigate broad transformation, Blake and Dickinson operated under the assumption that their art’s otherworldliness enabled an expansion beyond their individuality, a reorientation away from their own poetic consciousnesses and toward the expansive sense of the collective that poetry instills. This assumption is self-evident in a poem like Milton that is principally concerned with sociohistorical change, but, for Dickinson, it is found within her command of linguistic subtleties; in “This World is not Conclusion,” for instance, there is no semblance of subjectivity but, instead, a kind of democratic appeal to the sensualness of the beyond, which is, perhaps, a vestige of her encounters with nineteenth century spiritualism’s political dimensions. “R.A.F.’s” ending, in contrast, is entirely situated within an individual speaker’s recollection, and the new religious order that the pilots engender is relegated to both the experiences and interiority of a single voice. There is not even an attempt to outline how this order would accrue converts, how it would manifest across different populations of its adherents, and so forth. Indeed, the speaker’s invention of the ribbon ritual, coupled with their declaration that all else has fallen into depravity,
positions them as a kind of priestess of an order whose tenets appear to only be known and practiced by them. Words like “sloth,” “ineptitude,” and “evil” comprise something of a vocabulary of sin, and the image of the “cross” implies a reverberation with Christian tradition, but we are not granted knowledge about the theological underpinnings of this vocabulary, so to speak, that the speaker presumably has (492; ll. 174-80).

In essence, H.D.’s divergence from Blake and Dickinson here is beginning to grant us a fuller picture of how she conceives of poetry’s relationship with the otherworldly. To H.D., poetry is no longer the vehicle through which our otherworldly encounters can alter our realities. As a poem, “R.A.F.” is able to mimetically present the otherworldliness of the speaker’s immediate surroundings, but its chief function is to enclose the meaning of this otherworldliness into an impenetrably abstract system, one whose rituals and ethics are expressed in glimpses through the solipsistic perspective of the work’s speaker. Much like Maud Gonne, H.D.’s willingness to channel the otherworldly into something that is both self-serving and self-contained also results in the historical paralysis that Yeats feared; just as Gonne’s otherworldly proclivities served her interest to revive her deceased child and return to her own past, “R.A.F.’s” quasi-religious climax involves an eternal memorialization, of the pilots, of the speaker’s encounter with one of their spirits, and of the destruction of war. H.D., in other words, is not disclosing an iteration of parapoiesis that catalyzes our ability to imagine humanity’s liberated future. Instead, she is advancing the argument that poetry serves as one of the instruments by which an immanent otherworldliness can be transmitted into a larger construct that exists beyond historical progress, corporeal reality, and humanity.
altogether. Within the realm of poetry, we can discern how the beyond resides among us and manifests as sensorial, temporally contingent phenomena, but we are ultimately driven toward an apotheotic moment, the assumption of the otherworldly into a new kind of “beyond” that is made possible within the forms of poetic expression.

The question that naturally arises during H.D.’s departure from Blake and Dickinson’s parapoiesis, of course, is: what motivates her to use poetry to establish these affiliations between the otherworldly and things like abstraction, eternity, solipsism, and incorporeality? She clearly believes, as we discussed earlier, that the otherworldly is an integral, shared component of our embodied experiences and realities, so what can explain her shift away from this framework, and how, exactly, does poetry help explain this shift? Before we can locate the most thorough answers to these questions in her poetic works, we can gather some preliminary ones if we briefly turn our attention to a few contextual texts. We might first answer, for instance, that H.D.’s motivation has to do with an idea she devised well before “R.A.F.” was written. One of the earliest precursors to her shift can be found in the writings she produced amid her visionary encounters with the beyond that occurred during her journey across Mediterranean Europe with Bryher in 1919. These writings, which were later collected and published as *Notes on Thought and Vision* (1919), not only capture H.D.’s rapidly expanding interest in otherworldly traditions and phenomena; they also offer a fragmented, inchoate attempt to explain the origins of her visions and illustrate how they can be a phenomenological possibility in the first place. Since the notes were written at the height of H.D.’s Imagistic renderings of the otherworldly that we briefly explored earlier, they are first and foremost
interested in explaining how an embodied subject can engage with ethereal presences that belong to the subject’s material reality. She contends that even the “spirits” of the highest world can “access” and embed themselves within the “lower” corporeal world of humanity, and she outlines a conception of the human body that is rooted in the imagery and activity of the beyond: even though one’s physical body may “burn out,” it can transfer its spiritual “heat” to other physical bodies, a transfer that rests upon the notion that “we cannot have spirit without body, the body of nature, or the body of individual men and women” (48).

Even though H.D. articulates a similar kind of naturalistic, physicalized totality here that we see in a poem like “Hermes of the Ways,” she also begins to present some of the more abstract and immaterial elements of this totality. Chief among them is her concept of the “over-mind,” which, she claims, differs significantly from the body and the “physical character” of the mind that governs the production of “creative scientists, artists or philosophers” (17-8). In contrast, the over-mind is something of an unadulterated consciousness, not entirely without “definite body” but nonetheless capable of achieving “super-feeling,” an ability to comprehend and manipulate the otherworldly components of one’s environment (18). Indeed, a deployment of the over-mind, in spite of its superficial connotation of universalism, requires an intimate knowledge of one’s individual capacities, and, according to H.D., should only be used by individual artists who carefully refine their attunement to it: “two of three people,” if they developed the right kind of “over-mind” receptors, could gather “together in the name of truth, beauty, [and] over-mind consciousness” to make art that would “bring the whole force” of their
“power...into the world” (27). Despite the fact that H.D. conceives of poetry, the otherworldly, and humanity’s embodied experiences as interconnected parts of an immediately accessible natural world, she nevertheless expresses a transcendent imperative in these notes: in order for an elect poet to realize and disseminate their artistic vision, to manifest their particular “power,” they must summon otherworldly phenomena to a realm of absolute consciousness (27). In this sense, the “over-mind” is not dissimilar to the glimpse of the novel religious system we see at the end of “R.A.F.” It is its own abstract, self-contained framework into which the otherworldly can be elevated (17). Perhaps we can argue, then, that the poem’s ending is designed to establish a distinct conceptual genealogy within H.D.’s corpus, to illustrate the ramifications of the “over-mind” model on her subsequent poetic output. Alternatively, we can make the case that the entire poem captures the gestation of a poetic over-mind. If we think about the speaker as an artist who accesses their own over-mind to engage with otherworldly forces, then perhaps the system they articulate during the piece’s conclusion instantiates their particular artistic vision, the “whole force” of their “power” brought into the world (17; 27).

---

6 There is an intuitive semantic connection one might make between H.D.’s “over-mind” and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Over-Soul,” but some important distinctions between them should be acknowledged. Emerson remarks that, although human beings “live in succession, in divisions, in parts, in particles,” our souls, our individual components of an “eternal,” divine “One,” unite us fundamentally: “that unity, or Over-Soul, within which every man’s particular being is constrained and made one with all other; that common heart, of which all sincere conversation is the worship” (Emerson par. 3). H.D.’s “over-mind,” by comparison, has less explicitly to do with spiritual unification than it does with revealing how an elect group of artists can use their work to initiate sociohistorical transformation—in this regard, it is much more closely related to occultic traditions that privilege individual agents of mystical revelation. Moreover, and because of its status as instrument of progress, the “over-mind” maintains nominal relationships with embodied humanity, whereas Emerson’s “Over-Soul” is formulated through an almost entirely spiritual vocabulary.
Another answer might have to do with H.D.’s involvement in psychoanalysis. Her idea of the over-mind, particularly when it came to her belief that it was the principal conduit for her otherworldly visions, played a significant role in her later relationship with Sigmund Freud (17). This relationship is of particular importance for us because it encompasses H.D.’s further divergence from the logics of Blake and Dickinson’s parapoiesis, her growing investment in the utility of the immaterial and the ineffable. H.D.’s brief but intense sessions with Freud came in the 1930s near the end of Freud’s life, all of which she later chronicled in *Tribute to Freud* (1956). Her assessment of the psychoanalysis is, to put it mildly, complicated. Freud was quick to dismiss her visions of spirits, which she initially professed were as “real as…the Professor’s table,” as the product of an unconscious mind that was plagued with various traumas and “shocks” that could be traced back all the way to her childhood encounters with death (28). Freud’s incorrigibility, along with his austere dismissal of H.D.’s investigations of spiritualist and occultic texts to make sense of her visions, had a few significant effects on the poet. In one sense, H.D.’s encounter with his psychoanalytic schema propelled her further away from the naturalistic framework of her earliest poetry and toward that which traffics in abstractions, symbols, dreams, and all else that draws a distinction between the beyond and our definitively sensorial experiences. As Sword notes, H.D. even received a “séance message” from Freud’s spirit in 1944 that commanded her to “prove the work” of psychoanalysis’ systemizations of the human mind by integrating them into her concept of the “over-mind” and, thus, appropriating them as instruments that could deepen our ties to otherworldly phenomena (Sword 126).
H.D. was eager to accomplish this because, as much as she found herself indebted to Freud’s emphasis of the incorporeal qualities of humanity, she also maintained that he “shut the door on transcendental speculations” and slammed “the door on visions of the future” (H.D. 102). Perhaps what motivates the ending of “R.A.F.,” then, is H.D.’s willingness to abandon the tradition of parapoiesis in favor of the ethos of psychoanalysis. The religious ideology that the poem’s speaker devises is, in this regard, not necessarily an instance of their “over-mind’s” otherworldly encounters bringing an artistic vision into the world; the fact that this ideology is known intimately by the speaker and no one else might suggest a recontextualization of Freudian practices (17).

That is, the speaker could be reconstituting their personal experiences of the beyond as a larger system of meaning, complete with the kinds of ritualistic behavior and symbology that might be identified by a psychoanalytic interpretation of, say, how someone’s unconscious desires manifest across each facet of their life. Just as Freud attempted to diagnose H.D.’s visions according to psychoanalysis’ understanding of her mind’s various constructs, so, too, does “R.A.F.’s” speaker attempt to comprehend the implications of their experience with the pilot’s spirit through a framework that abstracts this very experience. In other words, the poem could be a testament to H.D.’s willingness to imbibe and rectify psychoanalytic precepts, all to affirm her poetry’s ability to conjure a new kind of epistemology of the beyond.

We can find the best answer to what motivates H.D.’s shift toward abstraction, however, in Trilogy (1945), a sequence of poems that represents the culmination of H.D.’s reconfiguration of Blake and Dickinson’s parapoiesis—Trilogy certainly
demonstrates the enduring influences of the over-mind and psychoanalytic thought on H.D.’s creativity, but it is also here where she expresses a new conception of poetic agency that, in detaching itself from Blake and Dickinson’s corporealized notions of poetry’s transformative capacities, preserves the otherworldly’s role in facilitating sociohistorical change (17). I will turn my attention here primarily to the first poem in the sequence, “The Walls Do Not Fall” (1944), since, like Milton and “This World is not Conclusion,” it explicitly discusses the nature of poetry’s methodological relationship with the beyond, as well as the broader significance of this dynamic.

An important entryway into the poem’s thinking is its setting. Unlike those in “Hermes of the Ways,” the opening images of “The Walls Do Not Fall” emerge from a world that has been decimated by war; the speaker gazes upon their “old town square” and sees “mist and mist-grey, no colour…ruin everywhere” (509; [1] ll. 3-4). Nevertheless, this world, true to the conception of the beyond that H.D.’s Imagism establishes, teems with otherworldly essences. Ruination, the speaker insists, “opens…the temple,” reveals the “Spirit” and the shrines that lie “open to the sky,” the “spectrum-blue…Presence” that haunts the passersby, the “alchemist’s key,” and the entire pantheon of antiquity—Hermes, Thoth, Ra—who are conjured through mass death (509-10; [1] ll. 11-13; 20-23). The expansion of the otherworldly within the corporeal plane should, according to the logics of both “Hermes of the Ways” and parapoiesis, entail a coeval expansion of poetry’s expressive and transformative capabilities. For Blake and Dickinson in particular, the more embedded the otherworldly was in embodied subjects and their physical environments, the more poetry could engage with the
otherworldly to successfully revolutionize definitions of the human or alter historical trajectories and reality itself.

The problem, here, though, is that these very subjects and environments have been irreparably destroyed, so much so that the fact of a stable embodied existence is now foreclosed: “the flesh? It was melted away, / the heart burnt out, dead ember, / tendons, muscles shattered, outer husk dismembered” (510; ll. 44-48). It is not surprising, then, that the speaker associates this destruction with the ostensible loss of poetry’s ability to capture and transform the world; as if they are directly addressing the limitations of Blake and Dickinson’s perspectives, they acknowledge the prevailing belief that poetry is now nothing more than “trivial / intellectual adornment,” as well as the notion that poets “are not only ‘non-utilitarian,’ / we are ‘pathetic’” (516-17; [8] ll. 4-5, 13-14). In its current state following the collapse of material reality, without any kind of rehabilitation, poetry amounts to “jottings on a margin” and can only be encountered as an “indecipherable palimpsest scribbled over / with too many contradictory emotion…without meaning” (533; [30] ll. 3-6). Moreover, the speaker attests to the atomization that this dilapidated poetics engenders. They compare themselves to a “sea-shell” that must be “indigestible, hard, ungiving,” and, most importantly, totally enclosed within its “own limit” to ward off an “invasion of the limitless” (513-14; [4] ll. 2, 22-28, 41-43). In short, the poem’s setting implicitly makes two claims about why the otherworldly cannot, in H.D.’s particular temporal moment, catalyze any kind of significant change. First, the space wherein this change would occur has been annihilated by war—the poem’s continual incorporation of ancient culture and images initially
suggests that, because of the devastation of the world, historical progress or the
advancement of knowledge in a linear, teleological sense is no longer possible. All that
remains imaginable to us, in other words, is a long-deceased past. Next, because the
material world has effectively been destroyed, poetry’s connection to the beyond, as it is
conceived by parapoiesis and H.D.’s early Imagism, has been severed. The sea-shell
sequence, of course, ties both points together: the limitless transformative possibility that
once emerged from poetry’s connections to a seemingly limitless beyond, connections
that established a shared sense of our humanity and our capacity to participate in
sociohistorical reinvention, has given way to isolation, fragmentation, and apprehension.
Poetry can still exist, and the otherworldly can manifest more frequently and immanently
than ever before, but the chain of associations between them, the parapoietical movement
from embodied consciousness to otherworldly encounter to poetic creation to worldly
transformation, has been broken.7

What this poem begins to reveal is that H.D.’s gradual procession toward
intangibility was something that became inevitable. As the space that enabled the
possibility of Blake and Dickinson’s artistic projects vanished, so, too, did H.D.’s ability
and willingness to continue to inherit the parapoietical tradition without any
complications. But her procession does not mean that she was complicit in poetry’s
newly identified “non-utilitarian” quality, a label that she in fact derisively calls “the new

7 Indeed, if we strictly conceive of poetry as an integral component of the natural world as H.D. invokes
Blake and Dickinson to do in “Hermes of the Ways,” we might be able to go a step further and contend
that, because nature has been obliterated, poetry itself has, by extension, gone with it. H.D. does not reach
this point, though, following her reorientation toward abstraction and intangibility and the recovery project
thereof.
heresy” (516-17; [8] ll.13-15). Indeed, it is not enough to consider what motivates H.D.’s desire to use poetry to abstract the otherworldly into quasi-religious systems. We must also consider why she does this, along with the consequences of such an elevation out of destruction and into an immateriality that her poetry is uniquely attuned to. There are several interlocking pieces to this consideration. The first arrives when the speaker discusses the desolation and corruption of materiality, the flesh “melting” away and the “dismemberment” of the “outer husk” (510; [1] ll. 46-48). Crucially, they also note that, amid this gruesome destruction, “the frame held” (510; [1] In. 49). If we conceive of this scene not as a literal death but as a metaphorical representation of H.D.’s departure from Blake and Dickinson’s parapoiesis, then the image of bodily dissolution signifies the termination of the corporeality that enables parapoiesis in the first place. But what exactly is the “frame” that endures (510; ln. 49)? Is it the foundation for a reconceptualization of poetic agency vis-à-vis the otherworldly? We might immediately be tempted to say that the “frame” is something akin to H.D.’s over-mind concept, a reconfigured poetic consciousness that, by enfolding otherworldly phenomena into itself, reaffirms artists’ capacity to influence the world’s proceeding, even amid utter devastation (510; [1] In. 49). The sea-shell metaphor, after all, evokes the particular kind of solipsism that H.D. uses to describe the over-mind, and the poem’s speaker frequently alludes to what they call their “personal approach to…eternal realities”: within the framework of the over-mind, the speaker’s art is the product of their ability to access the beyond as it manifests in an ineffable sense, within an individual realm of consciousness that is detached from the elements of and other entities within corporeal reality (540; [38] ll. 21-22).
Although the concept of eternity is key, the pure consciousness of the over-mind is not the poem’s chief concern. Toward the end of the piece, the speaker introduces a concept they call “spiritual realism,” an artistic practice that, through “palette, point pen or brush,” invokes “the true-magic, lead[s] us back to the one-truth,” and revitalizes the “eternal verity” (537; [35] ll. 4-6, 13-14). They go on to insist that poets can initiate a return to the “one-truth” by revealing the “meaning that words hide,” after which they provide an example:

Osiris equates O-sir-is or O-Sire-is;

Osiris,
The star, Sirius,

Relates resurrection myth
And resurrection reality

Through the ages (540-41; [39] ln. 6; [40] ll. 2-7)

There are a few observations we can draw from these lines. First, the term “spiritual realism” does not refer to an attempt to position the otherworldly within an “objective” reality, nor does it suggest an effort to concretize or make sensible otherworldly phenomena; as we discussed earlier, both these things are essentially the case at the poem’s outset (537; [35] ll. 4-6). Rather, “spiritual realism” evokes the transcendent and treats that which is entirely “spiritual” as such: distinguishing itself from parapoiesis as a creative methodology, it reformulates the otherworldly as phenomena that lie beyond the rhythms of historical temporality and embodied human subjects (537; [35] ll. 4-6). Second, it is poets who, through their particular sensitivity to language, can reposition the otherworldly within “eternity” and abstract it from a
decimated, inert world (540; [38] ln. 21). As the speaker implies through their dismemberment of the word Osiris, language, like the reality within which the speaker finds themselves, can be fragmentary and unstable—words themselves do not explicitly possess otherworldly qualities like they do for Dickinson here, but their creative manipulation through poetry does instantiate a poet’s ability to articulate a coherent vision of the eternal “one-truth” and “true-magic,” to reveal the pathway back to a systematic unification of the otherworldly within an actual beyond (537; [35] ll. 13-14).

Finally, and most significantly, when we take all that the poem’s ending offers us into consideration, we can arrive at an interpretation of H.D.’s artistic trajectory that illuminates the conclusion of “R.A.F.” What she presents in “The Walls Will Not Fall” is a certain kind of poetic agency that is motivated, above all else, by preserving that which she knows has the power to change the world. While she largely departs from Blake and Dickinson’s parapoiesis because she is engulfed by sheer ruination, her interest in reconceptualizing poetry serves to remove the otherworldly from this ruination, which suggests that she has retained Blake and Dickinson’s belief that the otherworldly is the foundation of art’s transformative capacity. In this sense, when “R.A.F.’s” speaker awards themselves an “inch of ribbon” after channeling otherworldly essences into an abstraction, one that is both suspended in eternity and the product of an eternal memorialization, they are not celebrating their individuality or abstraction in itself: they are proclaiming the necessity of preserving, through a kind of refurbished parapoietical mode, that which lies at the heart of poetry’s ability to imagine new futures and transfigure reality (492; ln. 172).
Post-Script: How Long Will the Wind Blow?

In 1917, the poet Mina Loy met the Swiss writer and boxer Arthur Cravan at a war benefit in New York, where he delivered an eccentric, drunken speech on “The Independent Artists of France and America” at the behest of Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia. The two immediately fell in love and, after marrying in 1918, relocated to Mexico to avoid America’s military draft and a burgeoning national fervor for America’s involvement in World War I. Their time abroad would be beset by run-ins with secret police, harassment from those within the professional boxing communities, and the relentless pursuit of creditors, but Loy always recalled the experience fondly. In an excerpt from her largely unpublished autobiography Colossus, whose title was taken after the name she called Cravan, she writes:

Our life together consisted entirely in wandering arm in arm through the streets. It never made any difference what we were doing – making love or respectfully eyeing canned foods in groceries, eating our tamales at street corners or walking among weeds. Somehow we had tapped the source of enchantment. (Loy, quoted in Burke 255)

Eventually, however, the couple’s destitution and Cravan’s paranoia began to take their toll; afflicted with a series of fevers, Cravan finally decided that he needed an escape from the madness of his new life. He and Loy exhausted the remainder of their

---

funds on a small sailing vessel that they repurposed into a miniature yacht, and on the
same day they had finished outfitting the vessel, he insisted that he take it out on the
water for a while. Loy watched from the pier as a steady breeze caught the vessel’s sail
and her husband dipped behind the horizon. This would be the last time anyone ever saw
Arthur Cravan.

Like nearly all her artistic peers in the early-twentieth century, Loy gravitated
toward spiritualist and occultic practices and traditions, not only for creative inspiration
but also to further explore the contours of the afterlife and the characteristics of the spirits
who dwelt within it. Carolyn Burke traces Loy’s earliest encounter with these practices
and traditions to Frederic Myers’s *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*
(1903), a copy of which she obtained from a friend who frequented séances.9 Myers’s
book coincided with her own participation in séances and, as Lara Vetter argues, her
exposure to Christian Science, a late-nineteenth century religious movement founded by
Mary Baker Eddy whose beliefs about the unreality of matter and “metaphysical” healing
derive from earlier permutations of spiritualism (Vetter 34). Indeed, her investment in
these otherworldly ventures became so robust that it motivated Loy to alchemize and
systematize them according to her own interests; Vetter contends that her familiarity with
spiritualism facilitated her studies of electromagnetism and the power it had to unveil the
transgressively “erotic subtexts” of the otherworldly, while Burke notes that her
engagements with spirits culminated with her development of what she called “Auto-

9 See Burke pp. 144-46 and 277 for more details on the exchange between Myers’ ideas and Loy’s poetic output.
Facial-Construction,” a “method of physiognomic renewal” that was organized around her ability to manipulate the souls within her patients, as it were (Vetter 34; Burke 277). Nevertheless, Loy’s fascination with the religio-scientific discourses surrounding otherworldly activity eventually waned, largely because the “dissertations” she was reading and devising “lack[ed] the element of taking risks—that art & life have” (Burke 277). In “art & life,” Loy identified the possibility for a more authentic, dynamic understanding of the beyond, one that did not attempt to confine it to an academic vocabulary but rather strove to appreciate its expansive, fluid significance across time, place, and artistic practices (277). Indeed, there is a kind of impressionism or volatility in Loy’s approach to otherworldly phenomena that distinguishes her from H.D.’s more deliberately crafted, systematized project to direct her poetic energies toward the salvation of this phenomena. As Guest notes, H.D. was “not friendly with” Loy, despite the fact that the two belonged to many of the same artistic circles and shared myriad acquaintances, possibly because she found Loy’s confrontational and experimental style distasteful (Guest 162).

Considering all this, one might expect any of Loy’s attempts to contact her deceased husband or process his absence through an otherworldly framework to manifest as art, especially the kind of art that differs from H.D.’s aesthetic vision. This manifestation is precisely what we get in “Letters of the Unliving” (1949), a poem Loy composed later in life that details the relentless emotional turmoil her husband’s death initiated. The piece’s framing is Cravan’s love letters to Loy, which, within the piece’s understated narrative, Loy is presumably examining once again amid a period of
accentuated grief. In addition to the title’s suggestiveness, the piece frequently deploys language and imagery that evoke the otherworldly. At one point, for instance, the speaker notices an “uneasy mist” rise from “this calligraphy of recollection,” which reminds them that their “husband’s” absence is “merely earthly,” that some undisclosed component of his essence can “echo out of void” (Loy 129; ll. 36-37). Later, the speaker questions whether their husband was a kind of phantasm all along—“Can whom had ceased to be / Ever have had existence”—and remarks that his “ghostly reference” was, perhaps in hindsight, all that ever constituted the “sweet once were we” (131; ll. 58-59, 81-82).

What the poem appears to offer in these lines is the presentation of the otherworldly as a phenomenological reality that we have seen so often throughout Blake, Dickinson, and H.D.’s work. Even amid the cessation of their embodied life, the essence of a human being, Loy suggests, can linger in the corporeal plane, and there may not even be a clearly perceptible distinction between the ethereal and the embodied to begin with. The speaker’s claim that their husband’s absence is “merely earthly,” in a basic sense, suggests that human life endures beyond embodiment in another ontological stratum, or what might be colloquially called “the afterlife” (129; ln. 36). However, in the context of Loy’s engagements with spiritualism¹⁰, this “merely earthly” absence does not necessarily imply that he has vanished entirely from earth” (129; ln. 36). Rather, it advances the notion that his earthly existence is configured differently than the speaker’s.

¹⁰ I will reiterate here, of course, that spiritualism drew no spatial distinctions between the afterlife and the mortal world—spirits walked the earth alongside the living, engaged with material objects and their living ancestors, but could only be accessed by the living through various spiritual or psychic means.
He might still manifest within and among earthly environments, but he is not embedded intractably within them, not fixed within the phenomenological register of the living, in the way that the speaker is. Additionally, the image of the speaker’s husband’s “mist” rising from his written letters indicates a significant parallel between Loy and the tradition of parapoiesis; she establishes here a relationship between writing and the beyond, one so ostensibly formidable that simply encountering words on a page can conjure otherworldly phenomena (129; ln. 36). This relationship most obviously recalls Dickinson’s idea of the link between humanity’s acousto-linguistic capacities and the beyond, but it also resonates with Blake and H.D.’s belief that poetic practice and agency are conditioned by the genre’s enmeshment with the beyond.¹¹

A deeper analysis of the poem’s reverberations with H.D.’s work, however, reveals that Loy is not entirely on the same wavelength as her contemporary, and that the connection between poetry and the beyond is not so formidable after all. On the one hand, we can argue that, given H.D.’s own familiarity with and creative attraction to spiritualism, Loy’s line of thinking is not too different from what H.D. depicts in poems such as “Hermes of the Ways.” Like H.D., Loy uses the forms of poetic expression to articulate the interconnectivity of material reality, the otherworldly, and poetry itself.¹¹

¹¹ As is the case with many woefully understudied historical figures, the extent of Loy’s encounters with Blake and Dickinson is unknown. Her eagerness to abandon tradition entirely—she was even so distraught with futurism’s sexual politics that she wrote her own “Aphorisms on Futurism” (1914) and reclaimed the movement through her own brand of feminism—makes this kind of archeological project a difficult enterprise to begin with. It is probably safe to assume, however, that her participation in the same artistic circles as H.D. exposed her to all that the latter was exposed to. The second part of Burke’s biography, “Becoming Mina Loy,” remains the best reconstruction of Loy’s social, aesthetic, and intellectual influences.
Within the poem’s ecosystem, the “esoteric” is linked with the speaker’s “body,” the otherworldly “void” is associated with the worldly “bloom” and “decay,” and the “uneasy mist” arises out of “calligraphy,” all to convey Loy’s own version of H.D.’s naturalistic totality (130; ll. 39, 42, 43, 45). On the other hand, the poem has a few elements that point to a departure from H.D.’s model. Chief among them is how it presents writing and language. Even though the speaker notes the otherworldly mist of their deceased husband emanating from his letters, this frustratingly amorphous image marks the extent of his spiritual presence in the poem; the speaker is not only denied an encounter with his fully anthropomorphized spirit, but the poem indicates that this might not even be a possibility on account of how dilapidated and lifeless words themselves have become. The poem opens with the speaker asserting that “the present implies presence,” but, because “these letters are left authorless” and are thus “unauthorized by the present,” they have “lost all origin,” and their meaning has been effaced by “death’s erasure” (129; ll. 1-7). Without the husband’s “presence,” spectral or otherwise, all the speaker has left is his “dead language of amor” and their desolated “Ego,” which causes them to plead for the affliction of “final illiteracy,” an elimination of their linguistic capacities altogether so that they no longer have to despair over all the vacant, “creased leaves” left behind (129; ln. 20; 131; ln. 62). As if these lines did not sufficiently articulate writing and language’s powerlessness, the poem’s visual qualities reinforce the speaker’s lamentations. There are several stanzas that are particularly striking in this regard:

The present implies presence
thus
unauthorized by the present
these letters are left authorless—
have lost all origins
since the inscribing hand
lost life — — —

The hoarseness of the past
creaks
from creased leaves
covered with unwritten writing
since death’s erasure
of the writer — — —
of the lover — — —

[…]

As erst my body and my reason
you left to the drought of your dying:
the longing and the lack
when the racked creature
shouted
to an unanswering hiatus
“reunite us”

— —till slyly— — soporose
patience creeps up on passion. (129; II. 1-14; 129-30; II. 22-30)

The em dashes immediately recall Dickinson’s work, of course, or perhaps even
morse code, a subtle allusion to the speaker’s attempts to contact their husband amid a
mysterious disappearance. However, given the poem’s depiction of writing, these dashes
possess another semantic dimension; they suggest both a kind of fragmentation and
stagnation, as if the poem’s author was unable to sustain creative momentum or their will
to thoroughly process their husband’s demise through writing. As floating signifiers that
we might visualize as substitutions for words, they unmoor us from the speaker’s
thoughts and experiences, which further implies that they parallel the speaker’s
contention that written language, poetry included, has become ineffectual as an
expressive medium. What is most significant about both the structural and conceptual qualities of the poem, though, is how devoid of and detached from otherworldliness they are. According to Loy’s logic, a genre like poetry can facilitate impressionistic encounters of otherworldly phenomena, such as the “mist,” but it has no agency born of its connection to the beyond, no capacity to transform our positions within historical time and our understanding of the human, alive or dead (130; ln. 36). Unlike H.D., Loy does not even claim that poetry can elevate the otherworldly out of ruination and into a higher, eternal realm. Such hopefulness for preservation and restoration is totally absent, and there are no deific presences or spiritual interlocutors to guide us toward it—there is only a long, “unanswering hiatus” (130; ln. 26).

The reason why Loy is able to make these claims also has to do with her particular divergence from H.D.’s thought, especially as it appears in “The Walls Do Not Fall.” We can arrive at this conclusion by examining how the poem depicts the natural world within which its speaker finds themselves abandoned and despondent. Images of material decay and death abound throughout the piece—the speaker refers to their body as a “cloud-corpse,” discusses their “scar-tissue,” and notes the “disgust” that accompanies “life’s impermanence”—but there are also a few lines that address the state of the world writ large: the speaker refers to it as a “defunct reality” and describes natural conditions following their husband’s disappearance:

The deathly handler
left no post-mortem mask — — —
only a callous earth made mouldy
(130; ll. 47-49; 131; ll. 67, 74, 78-79)
The “defunct” and “mouldy” earth is not dissimilar to its characteristics in H.D.’s poem from only a few years prior, so why does Loy’s rendering of writing as a practice differ so dramatically from H.D.’s redemptive perspective on it (130; ln. 49; 131; ln. 57)? The answer, if we tie all the pieces of “Letters of the Unliving” together, lie in the fact that Loy takes H.D.’s model to a logical conclusion that its creator never did. As we briefly mentioned earlier, Loy, like H.D., alludes to the entanglement of the earthly, the otherworldly, and poetry early in the work, and she appears to develop something like H.D.’s naturalization of the latter two concepts within a larger methodological framework. However, if we accept H.D.’s premise that poetry is an integral component of the natural world while simultaneously acknowledging that the natural world itself has been decimated, then poetry, too, ought to collapse along with it. H.D. does not present the genre as such, of course, but rather maintains that its principal responsibility is to extract the otherworldly from devastation and channel it toward a reformulated, abstract notion of the beyond. Loy, though, explicitly couples this devastation with poetry’s dereliction and, in so doing, illuminates a crucial gap in H.D.’s project. If we are going to conceive of poetry and the otherworldly as that which belongs to material reality, we must reconceptualize our definitions of poetry and the otherworldly if material reality is irrevocably damaged. She offers a glimpse of the otherworldly’s endurance amid worldly destruction, but she goes where H.D. did not in suggesting that, like the earth itself, poetry is “defunct” (131; ln. 57).
Chapter III: The Magician Longs to Hear

_Beware the Body, Beware the Soul: Surrealism, the Otherworldly, and Myth in the Caribbean_

In 1945, the same year Mina Loy composed the anguished “Letters of the Unliving,” André Breton’s life was in disarray. The journey to this point in his life began years earlier, in 1930, when he published his incendiary “Second Surrealist Manifesto” (1930) in response to Walter Benjamin’s evaluation of the movement in his essay, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (1929). Benjamin acknowledges and respects Breton’s commitment to revolutionary Marxist politics throughout the piece, arguing that surrealism draws its revolutionary power from its capacity for “profane illumination,” or, as Jason Earle frames it, its “ability to dislodge transformative energy from seemingly obsolete or degraded material forms” (Benjamin 190; Earle 133). However, Benjamin also criticizes the movement’s insular appeal to a rather clandestine circle of avant-garde enthusiasts, which diminishes, he argues, its commitment to revolutionary principles: “There is always, in such movements, a moment when the original tension of the secret society must explode in a matter-of-fact, profane struggle for power and domination, or decay as a public demonstration and be transformed” (Benjamin 178). In seemingly agreeing with Benjamin’s assessment that the movement fails to align itself with the mass politics of class struggle, among other
things, Breton’s “Manifesto” disparages surrealism’s practitioners as insufficiently radical and proclaims that it must now jettison those who do not believe it can be implemented to completely overhaul the social order. To accomplish this, Breton argues that an “occultation” of surrealism must occur: the movement must receive inspiration from the likes of Corneilius Agrippa and Nicolas Flamel, two early modern natural philosophers known for their alchemical studies and affinities for magic, in order to conjure a new reality altogether (Breton 178). Many of Breton’s surrealist acquaintances, recognizing his paradoxical investments in revolutionary, materialist politics and hermeticism that Benjamin had anticipated, splintered from the group and published *Un Cadavre* (1930), a pamphlet that lambasted Breton as a maniacal despot and featured an image of the surrealist luminary with a crown of thorns adorning his head. Following this turmoil, Breton would become increasingly wrathful and isolated, and France, the birthplace of his artistic and political convictions, would succumb to fascism and betray him; he physically assaulted Soviet journalist Ilya Ehrenburg in Paris in 1935, which resulted in surrealism’s expulsion from France’s International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture, and, in 1941, the country’s Vichy government banned his writings, which they deemed “the very negation of the national revolution” (Rosemont 82). He escaped to New York in 1942, where he remained in exile before leaving for Haiti in 1945.

As Terri Geis observes, Breton “insisted” that his goal for his voyage to Haiti was to “align surrealism with the cause of the Haitian peasantry,” a neo-colonial impulse, of course, to see how well Haiti fared as an incubator for the movement’s revolutionary
aesthetics (Geis 69). But Breton’s attraction to Haiti was also entwined with his burgeoning interest in occultation and his desire to, once and for all, effectively present his artistic practice as a pathway toward revolution. The country’s Vodou culture was of particular interest to Breton, and he sought to investigate whether it instantiated its own kind of occultation that, when channeled through the precepts of surrealism, could foment sociohistorical upheaval. Breton found the manifestation of his vision in Hector Hyppolite, a self-taught painter and Vodou priest who appeared to have embraced surrealist imagery and techniques without ever having set foot in France, let alone meet any of the movement’s practitioners. (Hyppolite, for his part, did not even speak French.) Initially, Hyppolite’s paintings made a powerful impression on Breton. His surrealist amalgamation of spirit possession, Afro-Carribean mythological traditions, and the politics of the Haitian Revolution compelled Breton to write “Haitian painting will drink the blood of the phoenix” at Port-au-Prince’s Centre d’Art, which was exhibiting a few of Hyppolite’s works (Breton, quoted in Geis 66). Particularly due to Hyppolite’s depictions of the revolutionary leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines as Ogoun, a pan-African deity associated with, among other things, the advancement of human intelligence, justice, and liberation, Breton came to laud Haitian painting as the chief “vehicle of the endless transmission of freedom,” the unimpeded, spontaneous expression of the Haitian

\[1\] In many of his public-facing endeavors, Breton expressed fiercely anti-imperialist sentiments. He signed the Manifesto of the 121 in 1960 to encourage the French government to abandon its imperial pursuits in Algeria, and, while in Haiti, he gave a lecture calling for mass action by the Haitian proletariat which, after being published in the newspaper La Ruche, helped initiate a general strike a surge in unionization efforts. I would like to suggest here that Breton is not so much a victim of his country’s ineluctable colonial fantasies but is rather an ignorant participant in the long, sordid history of Euro-America’s manipulation of Haiti, which persists to our current moment.
proletariat’s political will that would catalyze a permanent, anti-colonial revolution (Geis 66).

As Breton attempted to integrate Hyppolite’s revolutionary syncretism into the tenets of European surrealism, though, his enthusiasm would decline into ambivalence and trepidation. When asked to clarify the connections he saw between things like dialectical materialism, mythology, and Vodou in an interview with Haitian poet René Bélance, Breton would remark: “I’ve always taken great care to point out that I considered the hypothesis of ‘spirits’ ridiculous” (Breton 194). Roger Cardinal interprets Breton’s reservations as an extension of surrealism’s long-standing, Marxist commitment to atheism: “it would have been monstrous to suppose that [surrealism] should ever flirt with notions of a deity or an afterlife” (Cardinal 26). Geis, in turn, argues that Breton’s preoccupation with Western esotericism and the “occultation” of surrealism prohibited a full-throated endorsement of Hyppolite on the painter’s own terms. Like Milo Rigaud after him, Breton “specifically chose to associate” Vodou’s practices and symbols with the Tarot and enfold them into a Western lineage of magic, which meant that its “unassimilable” qualities needed to be jettisoned (Geis 64). Whatever the case, Breton left Haiti without a clear sense of how otherworldly phenomena could engender sociopolitical change, strangely disabused of his notion that Haitian painting was going to foster an end to imperial power. He never tried to speak at length with the reclusive Hyppolite, who would die suddenly in 1948, and, for much of the remainder of his life, he remained “reluctant to write or speak directly about Haiti or Vodou,” or anything that could be called otherworldly, for that matter (56). In 1957, François Duvalier would rise to power in Haiti and begin to consolidate his authority with the help of
Vodou; as he grew increasingly paranoid and despotic, he expelled communist revolutionaries from the country and maintained that he was both a Vodou priest and a manifestation of Baron Samedi, one of the religion’s _lwa_ spirits. At the time of his death, Duvalier had successfully formulated a perverted Bretonian scheme, harnessing the inherent associations between the otherworldly and the political that artists like Hyppolite depict in order to transform the country according to his interests and beliefs.

To consider how Breton’s downfall and subsequent journey to Haiti exemplify a particular lifecycle of surrealism’s otherworldly preoccupations, we must first account for the movement’s otherworldly ethos that flourished beyond Breton’s vision of occultation and even predated the artist himself. Like the tradition of parapoiesis that runs through Blake, Dickinson, and H.D., the origin of surrealism’s otherworldly affinities is distinctly literary. As Nadia Choucha notes, the nineteenth century writers whose work laid the conceptual and stylistic foundations for surrealism, namely Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, were deeply familiar with otherworldly traditions and texts. Baudelaire’s proclamation in _Le Spleen de Paris_ (1869), for instance, that his “poetic prose” could “adapt… the lyrical impulses of the soul” was directly inspired by the writings of Éliphas Lévi, a French poet-magician who, between 1854 and 1856, published _Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie_, an extensive treatise on ritual magic and its aesthetic pertinence—for Baudelaire, “poetic prose” functioned as a kind of ritual magic in its own right, a hermetic practice that revealed and even conjured the “deep and shadowy uni[ty]” of the natural world, which maintained a

---

2 For more information about Duvalier’s manipulations of spiritual religious symbols and institutions in Haiti, see pp. 220-233 of David Nicholls’s _From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour, and National Independence in Haiti_ (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1996).
“correspondence” with the poet’s “soul” [l’esprit] (Baudelaire ix-x; 15). Indeed, Baudelaire also held throughout his life the belief that “the whole natural world corresponds to the spiritual world, not only the natural world in general but also in every particular,” an assertion he appears to have lifted directly from Swedenborg’s mystical revelations in *Heaven and Hell* (1758): “Consequently, whatever in [a human’s] natural world, that is, in his body and its senses and actions, comes into existence from his spiritual world, that is, from his mind and its understanding and will, is said to be a correspondence thereof” (Robertson par. 6).3 Rimbaud was a devotee of Baudelaire’s work and osmotically encountered occultic ideas through his studies of it, but he also gravitated toward the otherworldly on his own accord.4 After being introduced to occult literature by a friend at a young age, he, like Baudelaire, drew upon Lévi’s perspectives on magic for inspiration, after which he read Jules Michelet’s *La Sorcière* (1862), a work of historical fiction that celebrated witchcraft’s transgressive decadence and posited that its popularity during the Middle Ages instantiated a deliberate, peasant-led rebellion against feudalism and the

---

3 Baudelaire’s occultic interests have received considerable scholarly attention. For an analysis of his incorporation of Lévi’s thought, see Jon Leaver’s “‘Sorcellerie évocatoire’: Magic and Memory in Baudelaire and Eliphas Lévi” in *Symposium* (Syracuse) 66.3 (2012):139-149. For a discussion of his implementation of Swedenborg’s revelations, see the fifth chapter, “Baudelaire’s Correspondances: Language, Censorship, and Mourning,” of Lynn Wilkinson’s *The Dream of an Absolute Language: Emmanuel Swedenborg and French Literary Culture* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1996). For a broad overview of Baudelaire’s occultic milieu, see David Allen Harvey’s “Beyond Enlightenment: Occultism, Politics, and Culture in France from the Old Regime to the Fin-de-Siècle” in *The Historian* 65.3 (2003): 665–94.

4 For a deeper exploration of Baudelaire’s influence on Rimbaud—his captivation with the poet’s visionary obscenity and his ultimate severance from it—see chapters seven and eight of Graham Robb’s *Rimbaud* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), “Needful Destruction” and “The Seer,” respectively.
Roman Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{5} These sentiments, unsurprisingly, would have a profound effect on Rimbaud who, according to Choucha, was inspired by the book to develop a creative vision that stood as an inflammatory emancipation from his period’s fashionable literary currents.\textsuperscript{6}

As surrealism began to crystallize throughout the 1920s, its practitioners expanded Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and the rest of the symbolist oeuvre’s impulse to reconstitute human creativity altogether through a systematized technique. As Tessel Bauduin contends, several members of the earliest surrealist collective in France had studied psychiatric medicine prior to meeting each other and eventually “pursued the practices and theories of dynamic psychiatry to creative, primarily literary, ends”: Breton had nearly completed a degree in psychiatric medicine, but “Louis Aragon had trained in psychiatry as well, Max Ernst had studied psychology in Bonn and Pierre Naville and Philippe Soupault had some background in medicine too” (Bauduin 41). One of the most significant consequences of these surrealists’ educational backgrounds was that they had all developed an affinity for the early works of Sigmund Freud, particularly his rendering of the unconscious mind as a container for a kind of unbounded authenticity, the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{5} The most significant treatment of Rimbaud’s interest in magic and occultic literature remains Gwendolyn Bays’s \textit{The Orphic Vision: Seer Poets from Novalis to Rimbaud} (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1964), especially the chapters entitled “The Occult” and “The Seer in French Romanticism.” A closer examination of Rimbaud’s influence on Breton’s “occultation” of surrealism can be found in Simon Rogghe’s “‘Ni dans le monde sensible, ni sensiblement en dehors de ce monde’: The Occultation of Surrealism and Rimbaud’s \textit{Assassins}” in \textit{The French Review}, 93.2 (2019): 64-76.

\textsuperscript{6} A comprehensive overview of how Baudelaire’s occultic proclivities transferred to Rimbaud, along with an analysis of French symbolism’s indebtedness to Romanticism’s investments in otherworldly phenomena, can be found in the first chapter of Choucha’s \textit{Surrealism and the Occult: Shamanism, Magic, Alchemy, and the Birth of an Artistic Movement} (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1992), “Occultism in the Nineteenth-Century.”
\end{footnotesize}
embodied correlative, perhaps, of Rimbaud’s singularly liberated poetical imagination. Recognizing the creative applicability of Freudian thought, the surrealists developed their quintessential technique they called “automatism,” a form of writing—mostly poetic writing in the case of Breton and his ilk—that, through practices such as hypnosis, allowed them to “enter into an intermediate state located between dreaming and waking” in order to traverse the depths of their unconscious and spontaneously generate words, phrases, or sentences that were incommensurate with contemporary literary conventions and taste (45). Following the first successful experiment with automatic writing, Breton and Soupault’s widely popular Les Champs magnétiques (1920), automatism began to serve as the chief expressive vehicle for many of the surrealists’ Marxist beliefs. As Robert Short notes, they believed that automatic writing’s capacity to access and represent the activity of the unconscious mind, a faculty “common to all” humans that had been “hitherto ignored or suppressed by a culture obsessed by technological progress and material comforts,” fostered an indelible sense of collectivity that was necessary for social transformation:

> From the moment poetry was conceived as a spiritual activity accessible to all men, it ceased to be a purely aesthetic matter and became an ethical one. In Paul Eluard’s words: “Toute véritable morale est poétique, la poésie tendant au règne de l’homme, de tous les hommes, au règne de notre justice.” [“All true morality is poetic, poetry dignifying the kingdom of man, of all men, the kingdom of our justice.”] Surrealism thus affirmed the ethical basis of all expression and the “communism” of poetry. (Short 4)

> Despite its intimate relationships with early-twentieth century psychology, medical science, and materialist politics, automatism can be traced back to earlier
iterations of nineteenth century spiritualism and, in fact, experienced a resurgence in popularity that was coeval with the modernist revival of spiritualism that we discussed in the previous chapter. Bauduin argues that the quasi-hypnotic prerequisite of surrealist automatism, the “sleep séances” whereby a liminal state of consciousness was induced, was borrowed directly from spiritualist mediums’ techniques (Bauduin 50). For instance, René Crevel, one of the earliest proponents of surrealism, “had been ‘initiated’ by a spiritualist medium and used this knowledge in arraying the sleeping séances” that became instrumental to Breton’s artistic collective (50). Robert Desnos was an enthusiastic participant in these séances and, as Alan Ramon Clinton argues, used automatism to presage, by nearly twenty years, the ascension of fascism that would eventually lead to his death in a Nazi concentration camp in 1945: “Desnos’ automatic speech continually alludes not only to clairvoyance, but to the technological roots of automatism. His clairvoyance…looks in fear toward the machinery of fascism” (Clinton 33). Breton himself frequented the séances of the Parisian clairvoyant “Mme Sacco,” eventually proclaiming that automatic writing was a practice “inherited from the mediums” (Bauduin 51). But his conceptual and ideological scope was a bit larger than his surrealist comrades, his attraction to automatism’s spiritualist genealogy more complicated. Through his psychiatric studies, Breton encountered Frederic W.H. Myers’ psychical research as it was presented in his most exhaustive work, Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death (1903). As David Lomas observes, Myers’s peculiar union of nineteenth century spiritualist beliefs about spirit possession and the afterlife with scientific rationalism was motivated by a single aim: “I desire integration of the
personality—intellectual, moral, spiritual concentration” (Myers, quoted in Lomas 68). Breton echoes this sentiment in “The Automatic Message” (1933) and, in doing so, attempts to reconfigure spiritualist doctrines and methodologies: “contrary to what spiritualism proposes, a dissociation of the psychological personality of the medium, surrealism proposes nothing less than the unification of that personality” (Breton, quoted in Lomas 68). As Lomas puts it, the surrealists understood the unconscious as “a locus of heterogeneity, of otherness,” and they drew upon spiritualist terminology to acknowledge it as such—its multiplicity and fragmentation “haunt” the embodied subject like a spirit, but, through automatism, the unconscious can be elevated into the conscious (Lomas 5, 68, 130). This elevation, in turn, results in a liberatory cohesion of the human imagination and the subsequent emergence of a collective political agency.

Several scholars have argued that Breton’s disengagement from spiritualism exemplifies the wariness of otherworldly phenomena that lies at the core of surrealism, a recognition of the incompatibility between surrealists’ materialist philosophies—physiological, political, or otherwise—and all that which, once its creative value has been extracted, exceeds such a framework. We can legitimately contend, for example, that even Breton’s occultation, his turn to otherworldly traditions amid his inability to

---

7 See the tenth chapter, “The Dawn and Rise of the New Dynamic Psychiatry,” of Henri Ellenberger’s book, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (London: Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 1970), for perhaps the most notable argument against a symmetrical relationship between surrealism and spiritualism—Ellenberger insists that the surrealist “technique of automatic writing had nothing in common with that of spiritualists” (Ellenberger 837). For a more rationalistic explanation of Desnos’s séances, see Katherine Conely’s book, *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everyday Life* (Lincoln, U of Nebraska P, 2003). In the first and third chapters, Conely posits that Desnos’s attraction to spiritualist mediumship may have been a way for him to grapple with his feminine essence and the emergent technology of the radio, both of which proved to be a powerful source of inspiration and turmoil for him throughout his life.
maintain control of an increasingly a disjointed, impotent movement, had virtually nothing to do with the otherworldly in and of itself. Occultism, particularly the early modern hermetic variation that Agrippa and Flamel practiced, is a highly systematized epistemological endeavor whose aim is to reveal the hypostatic order of nature, the stability of which likely would have been its chief appeal to Breton as his artistic stature became jeopardized. However, I would like to suggest that, precisely because the surrealists repeatedly cast automatism and the unconscious in otherworldly terms, the movement’s skeptical undercurrent is not necessarily directed at otherworldliness. Indeed, if we situate the process Lomas outlines within the narrative of parapoiesis, we can detect some profound reverberations. The surrealist notion that the unconscious, when conceived as a kind of otherworldly reservoir, can be accessed through automatic writing, unified with the conscious mind, and subsequently help facilitate social transformation stands as a coherent response to H.D.’s vision: if, to H.D., poetry’s responsibility is to transfer the otherworldly energies that fuel material change into abstraction and safeguard them from worldly destruction by doing so, automatism is a method of literary creation that can summon them back into the world and once again unleash their transformative potential. The surrealists do not dispense with abstraction itself, but they do offer a writing practice that brings its otherworldly qualities and associations out of H.D.’s solipsistic, atomized paradigm and into collectivity, a concept, they argue, that is required for any kind of social change. The basis of both H.D. and the surrealists’ perspectives, of course, is their mutual belief that the otherworldly is the bedrock of creative innovation and our ability to reimagine our material conditions, but
there is a productive, almost symbiotic exchange between them that emerges from their differences. Unlike Blake, Dickinson, and H.D., the surrealists do not perceive art as otherworldly in and of itself, which might explain Breton’s explicit disavowal of otherworldly phenomena, but they nevertheless enrich a literary tradition that does, conceptualizing artistic production as that which can reinvigorate the parapoietical vision of the otherworldly as a catalyst for change.

Even so, we must ask why surrealism failed to initiate the kind of revolution Breton foresaw when he arrived in Haiti and saw Hippolyte’s work. The painter had not only demonstrated to Breton an astonishing expressive command of surrealist tendencies and techniques, creating works that indicated a unique brand of visual automatism—he also deliberately emphasized and intertwined the movement’s otherworldly and political qualities. If we subscribe to the logic of surrealism’s relationship with parapoiesis, Hippolyte’s paintings and the tradition of Haitian visual art to which they belonged should have been able to radically transform Haiti’s material reality. Instead, the things that inspired the paintings, namely Vodou, helped facilitate abject oppression, paranoia, and economic turmoil. Where, then, did Breton get it wrong, and why did he eventually dismiss the tradition’s otherworldliness, the very engine of surrealist automatism’s political power? Was he simply unable to overcome the (linguistic, religious, class, etc.) barriers between his avant-garde Parisian sensibilities and Haitian folk culture? Or was there something else at work, too?

To address these questions, I would first like to reacknowledge the atmosphere Loy produces in “Letters of the Unliving” and consider the relationship Breton’s
occultation of surrealism maintains with it. If we follow Loy’s logic, surrealism’s capacity to recover the otherworldly from H.D.’s abstracted constructs and reintegrate it into material reality would, despite its conceptual sophistication, do nothing to ignite a transformation of said reality. As H.D. herself suggests, the decimation of the world has fundamentally disrupted the communion between materiality, art, and the otherworldly that conditions the otherworldly’s status as an engine for change, which Loy takes a step further. Even if otherworldly entities can populate a broken world, and even if poetry can still successfully represent them or reintegrate them into material reality, Loy’s belief in the genre’s possibilities has vanished, and, while the work serves as an elegy for her deceased husband, it also continually laments how “defunct” poetry and the written word itself have become (Loy 131; ln. 57). Loy, who was in close proximity to surrealism for a significant portion of her career, captures a sentiment here that is quite similar to a crucial surrealist anxiety, one that illuminates the deeper function of Breton’s occultation: the absence of myth.8

The French intellectual Georges Bataille, despite his contentious relationship with Breton, most thoroughly documents and asserts this absence in his mid-century writings on surrealism. Myth, Bataille claimed, no longer operated according to its ancient foundations, which established, as Michael Richardson notes, a “mediation between mankind and the natural world through which the cohesion (and necessity) of society

8 See especially Burke’s account of Breton and Loy’s spat over Cravan’s unpublished writings on pg. 401—Breton believed that Cravan’s work represented something of “great historic interest,” and Loy, whose relationship with surrealism was nearly as complex as the one she had with Cravan, eventually acquiesced (Bruke 401).
would be affirmed” (Richardson 13). Instead, contemporary society’s post-Enlightenment rationalism, believing humanity had now held total dominion over nature, developed a myth that, paradoxically, was the absence of myth itself, which, for Bataille, had deleterious consequences: “Quite simply, the notion of an ‘absence of myth’ meant a failure of communication which touched all levels of society. And a society which ceases or is unable genuinely to communicate ceases to be a society. In a very real sense, it becomes an ‘absence of society’ or, more specifically, an ‘absence of community’” (13). Breton was largely in agreement with Battaile on this point, and, as Bauduin points out, he consulted works such as J.G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890) throughout the 1930s and 40s in order to contemplate how surrealism’s political vision can actualize through the creation of a “new collective myth”; excursions into the unconscious were no longer enough (14). In the most basic sense, Loy, Battaile, and Breton all recognize how entwined the collapse of society and communicative paralysis are, but the figures’ parallels also have implications for the trajectory of parapoiesis. All three would seem to agree that, in order for the otherworldly to dwell among the earthly and facilitate change, a new mythic order must be formulated. Humanity must believe in otherworldly possibility again, perceive nature, art, and the beyond are harmoniously integrated, and, in so doing, upraise a world of ruination, stagnation, and fragmentation into a restorative collectivity. More specifically, the surrealist reintegration of the otherworldly into material reality can only occur if said reality is prepared to receive it, which, in turn, is only feasible if the world’s governing myth organizes it as such.
With all this in mind, we can easily see how Breton’s occultation instantiates the surrealist’s attempt to conjure a new myth. He understood that surrealism could not function as an expansion of the parapoietical tradition without the presence of a myth that made the world receptive to the movement’s aims; once again, an occultic rendering of the world rests on the belief that there is no distinction between the otherworldly and the natural, or, at the very least, that there is a continuous interplay between them which prohibits a discrete categorization of either. That is, if surrealism posited an occultic world, it would also be able to bring the otherworldly out of abstraction and seamlessly reinstate it into material reality, revitalizing its sociopolitical potency in the process. Through this new myth, Loy’s pessimism, along with H.D.’s resignation amid utter destruction, could be circumvented, and we would ostensibly return to a Blakean paradigm, one that conceives of the otherworldly as the catalyst for transformation precisely because it is an integral component of the natural order. However, Hyppolite’s art, which Breton originally believed exemplified his mythic occultation, maintains a different orientation from Breton’s mythmaking that, I would like to suggest, resulted in Breton’s ultimate dissatisfaction with it. We must remember that, despite its capacity to develop the parapoietical tradition further, surrealism does not subscribe to Blake, Dickinson, and H.D.’s notion that art is inherently enmeshed with the beyond. Automatic writing, its chief expressive method, is a kind of assembly line aesthetic that moves from the incubation of myth to the reclamation of unconscious activity to the (sensible) inscription of the unconscious to material change. This writing is a process that can redistribute the otherworldly into the world, but it does not draw upon its own
otherworldliness to *restructures* the world, nor does it directly engage with otherworldly phenomena—spirits, for instance—to establish a prerequisite myth.

In contrast, Hyppolite, whose work emerged from his status as an artist-priest, synthesizes all these pieces into single art objects, merging numerous spiritual, magical, and sociopolitical lineages to conjure a myth that dramatically reconstitutes, not simply restructures, the world. He does not, in other words, begin with the surrealist assumption that earthly destruction can be mended with the help of a new myth that prepares it for the retrieval of the otherworldly from an abstract without; instead, he enfolded the gestation of a new myth into the genesis of a new reality, demonstrating the need to jettison the Eurocentric attachment to a decimated, post-war world as the site for social change and begin afresh. Hyppolite’s painting *The Congo Queen* (1946) is one of the best examples of his art’s divergence from occultation. The piece depicts Ezilí Dantor, one of the major *lwa* of Haitian Vodou who is thought to be a syncretic representation of a Polish icon, the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, which Haitians first encountered thanks to Napoleon Bonaparte’s Polish legion defecting to the Haitian revolutionary cause in 1804. Hyppolite portrays her holding a naked infant, its face black and body white, its right hand extended and pointing slightly upward as if he were issuing a

9 The piece’s title, much like the piece’s visual content, eludes easy categorization. It references African heritage, albeit through the corrupted, colonialist word “Congo,” and “Queen” suggests, of course, regal power. Is Hyppolite’s point to synthesize as much of his (and Haiti’s) cultural background as possible, in a way that is perplexing to those not immersed in it like he is? Or is title perhaps a commentary on the ineluctability of colonial power structures? Or, even still, does it imply an attempt to wrestle this power away from colonial rulers and articulate a new paradigm of rulership in the painting’s “otherworld?” Everything is likely in play here, but, for our purposes, it is important to note how Hyppolite navigates concepts like authority and the directionalities of such concepts, since his broader interest is to think and build the world anew, as we will see in the following pages.
directive. Moreover, there are two seraphim at either side of her, and tying the piece together is a variegated, wooded landscape populated by coruscating clouds which envelop all four of them; the vibrancy of the painting’s natural objects echoes the radiant determination on Dantor’s face, and the positions of the figures’ bodies suggest that she is moving out of the painting’s field of vision quickly and resolutely, since the seraphim are latching onto her arms in order to maintain their proximity to her.

![Painting](image)

*Figure 1: Hector Hyppolite’s The Congo Queen (1936, Museum of Modern Art)*

The painting’s allusion to the arrival of the Christ child, coupled with its naturalistic setting, indicates its concern with myth in Bataille’s sense of the word. The
mythic being who will inaugurate a new sociohistorical paradigm is, with the help of Dantor, authoritatively traversing nature, the trees’ parallel height with the figures implying a communion between the figures and the forest. That is, this imagery initially suggests the kind of mediation between human society and nature—a negotiation of the two which draws distinctions between them but does not lend one an ultimate authority over the other—that myth facilitates, according to Bataille. But this myth is, of course, a syncretic one that freely and innovatively amalgamates myriad traditions, a multiplicity that is reflected in the qualities of the child itself: it displays at once characteristics of infancy and a mature cognizance; it possesses the physical features of both black and white people; and its sex is indeterminable, all of which encapsulate Hyppolite’s willingness to attest to Haitian identity’s irreducible diversity and situate it within a boundaryless instant, a moment that dispenses with linearity and differentiation in favor of an ecstatic articulation of his country’s history and people. What we have here, then, is not necessarily a myth that carefully arranges a mediated world and the discrete categories thereof but rather one that allows contradictions to coexist as part of a harmonious totality. Even though the child’s characteristics signal an unboundedness, it is nevertheless bounded by a certain space, and it is navigating it with conviction alongside Dantor, which implies a temporally-contingent directionality; there is nothing to mediate, in other words, because the painting does not assume any traditional opposition between, for instance, the ecstatic and the corporeal, expressing instead a productive interplay between these ostensible binaries which govern its universe. Because of this quality, one might already be able to glean a basic symmetry between the
painting and the naturalistic totality of H.D.’s poetry, which would necessitate, in turn, a
closer scrutinization of the kinds of otherworldly components that the painting might
have. To get there, though, we must meet the painting’s most elementary aspects on their
own terms and analyze the setting within which its figures find themselves, since this will
reveal the finer details of Hyppolite’s departure from surrealist mythmaking.

Our entryway into this analysis can be distilled into two simple questions: where
are the painting’s figures going, and what can we say of their environment? After all,
despite the piece drawing a visual parallel between the figures and the forest, the figures’
 positionalities and dynamism indicate, at first glance, that they might be leaving the
forest, not comfortably dwelling within its resonances. Insofar as the Vodou-Christ child
encompasses Hyppolite’s attempt to conjure a uniquely Haitian myth, its apparent
departure from the wilderness could foreshadow, on the one hand, an eventual
penetration of human civilization where the myth can begin to establish its legitimacy;
perhaps the luminous beauty of the trees and clouds, coupled with the drab,
monochromatic brown of Dantor’s clothing, signifies that the figures are transitioning out
of an Edenic realm and headed toward the postlapsarian world which we all inhabit, one
that, as the child’s presence alludes to, is awaiting transformation. This is not to say that
the scene neatly parallels the ethical dimensions of the expulsion from Eden and Jesus’s
redemption of humanity but rather that Hyppolite might be drawing from yet another
strand of Judeo-Christian mythology to illustrate the mechanics of his own mythmaking.

Just as Adam and Eve’s exit from Eden signals the dawn of human civilization, so, too,
might the child’s journey beyond the wilderness entail a convergence with humanity and
radically alter how humans occupy and engage with the world. On the other hand, we can also argue that, since the child—the myth—has already arrived, the world of the painting is a novel reality itself, and that the absence of, say, industrialized human society, or any other human beings, for that matter, indicates an absolute, reinvigorated potentiality. Following this line of thinking, we might claim that Dantor and the child are actually venturing deeper into the nascent wilderness, to the heart of a reality forged in accordance with the new mythic order, so that they can enshrine this order as the template for a new sociohistorical paradigm. These two interpretations need not compete, of course, because, together, they capture Hyppolite’s divergence from surrealist occultation and automatism. For Hyppolite, the introduction of a new myth and the emergence of a wholly transfigured reality are inseparable and simultaneous, and he certainly does not depict a decimated world which a myth must readjust prior to any significant sociohistorical change. Breton’s elaborate creative process, with its numerous preconditions and sequential steps, gives way here to Hyppolite’s penchant for entanglement, his ability to locate the mythic in the transformative and the transformative in the mythic.

What is even more important, however, is how the painting conveys otherworldliness as an element of Hyppolite’s vision, an otherworldliness which occultation and surrealist automatism attempt to rescue but do not incorporate into themselves explicitly. Like the surrealists and every participant in the parapoietical tradition, Hyppolite appears to acknowledge the otherworldly’s transformative power: a Haitian lwa, accompanied by two seraphim, carries the new myth into (or throughout) the
world, which establishes an immediate connection between the function of Hyppolite’s
mythmaking and otherworldliness. But the child, given its physical liminality and the
multifarious quality of everything else in the painting, is not simply a new myth and a
new myth alone—it’s composed, authoritative gesture and demeanor reveals another facet
of its identity. As Dantor holds it in her arms, it points upwards, not, it seems, out of
some half-formed curiosity or infantile attraction to unfamiliar surroundings. Rather, its
body language suggests that it is orchestrating the scene itself, guiding Dantor and the
seraphim’s journey toward human society, perhaps, or, if we consider its generative
power as a myth within Hyppolite’s framework, constructing the very world of the
painting which we behold, extending its finger as if it were a painting utensil to recall
Hyppolite’s own craftsmanship.10 There are a few claims we can make about the child as
mythic artisan. The most obvious is that it situates myth’s ability to conjure realities
within acts of artistic creation, or, at the very least, a broad artistic sensibility or
imaginative agenda. Artists are not only responsible for conducting the transfigurative
work of myth but are also, as the child’s depiction implies, actual myths themselves,
which means that their mere presence within the world is just as significant a catalyst for
change as their creative activities are.

Furthermore, the otherworldly plays a critical role in this equation. Dantor’s

10 The child’s solitary finger distinguishes it from the centuries-old convention in Christian art whereby the
Christ child raises two fingers in an allusion to the crucifixion, the “Hand of Benediction,” and so forth.
Hyppolite doubtless had this convention in mind, but its absence is significant in that it enables interpretive
possibility.
demonstrates a vital interplay between otherworldly forces and artists’ mythic agency; it is a spirit, flanked by two seraphim, who transports the child, a spirit who harbors the child as a mother might but also recognizes and submits to its power, all of which alludes to Hyppolite’s belief that an artist’s transformative capacities as a mythical entity are both nurtured by otherworldly forces and contingent on an artist’s command of them. We can also claim that the child—and the Hyppolitean artist, by extension—possesses a certain kind of otherworldliness in its own right, given its chimerical skin tones, associations with the Christ child’s spiritual import, and sagacity of expression despite its infantile body. We need not, however, plumb the depths of each interpretive possibility to recognize the nexus Hyppolite establishes through this painting, one that, when read against surrealist automatism and occultation, reveals an incompatibility with Breton’s vision that explains the writer’s eventual aversion to Haitian art: the mythic and the artistic are one and the same, and it is artists, thanks to their identification with myth and ability to channel the otherworldly, who inhabit and enable myth’s reinvention of the world, all without the need of occultation’s mythic scaffolding and the methodological extraction of the otherworldly that constitutes automatic writing. Hyppolite, in short, reintegrates all the pieces of the surrealist project within the artist.

Even though it begins to explore novel conjurations of realities alongside transformations of our present one in a way parapoiesis has not yet done so, Hyppolite’s vision instantiates something of a return to the origins of the tradition, the principal assumption of which was that artists’ transformative capabilities were engendered by their affinities with the beyond—a paradoxical recapitulation, perhaps, since surrealism
exhibits a thorough grasp of the tradition’s developments and a willingness to engage them directly, while, in contrast, there is no evidence that Hyppolite ever substantively engaged with poetry, let alone parapoietical figures like Blake, Dickinson, H.D., or Loy. Nonetheless, this element of Hyppolite’s work puts him in proximity with someone who was very much attuned to historical and contemporaneous poetical currents, the Martinican author Aimé Césaire. In 1944, Césaire published an essay, “Calling the Magician: A Few Words for a Caribbean Civilization,” which opens with the suggestion that the emptiness of Caribbean life that has arisen from the imperial management of its people and resources: “From all our machines put together, from all our roads charted in miles…from our regulations, from our conditioning, not the slightest feeling could emerge” (Césaire 119). He does not refer here to “feeling” as a kind of emotional experience but rather as a sense of the “wondrous generalized communion” one achieves when they belong to a cohesive “civilization” (121). Following Battaile, Césaire argues that “myth,” in turn, is “the true manifestation” of “civilization,” but, since myths “all around the world” are “dead or dying,” so, too, are “civilizations” (120). The solution to this mass death, he claims, is to re-establish “a magical contact with things,” which must recall the Caribbean’s otherworldly beliefs or practices ("The true ideal: the ‘possessed’ woman") and be accomplished through poetry; it is the “poetic spirit” which “links and reunites,” which serves as the “only avowed refuge of the mythic spirit,” which calls upon its practitioners, its “magicians,” to infuse the world with new myths and, in so doing, build it entirely anew (120-21).
What this essay begins to offer, in essence, is the transposition of Hyppolite’s vision of mythic, otherworldly artistry into the realm of poetry. Like Hyppolite’s child, Césaire’s “magicians” are able engender social change because their art can conjure new realities altogether, an ability born of their distinct synthesis of the mythic and the otherworldly (120). Césaire’s investment in “a magical contact with things,” in other words, resonates with the parapoietical tenet that otherworldliness is the catalyst for transformation, and it is poets’ capacity to facilitate this “magical contact” which allows them to devise and implement the myths that organize a new world (120). Once again, the centrality of the artist is the most crucial element of Césaire’s framework, and it distinguishes him, perhaps even more than Hyppolite, from Bretonian surrealism’s approach to revolutionizing sociopolitical conditions. Even though he praises Breton’s anti-bourgeois sentiments at the essay’s conclusion, Césaire’s amalgamation of historical materialism and the Caribbean’s rich folk spiritualities, the traditions that honor the applicability of magic in the first place, rejects Breton’s vision of surrealist automatism; Césaire casts poets’ identities and activities in explicitly otherworldly terms and views their otherworldliness as the predicate of their transformative mythmaking, a far cry from Breton’s insistence that sociohistorical change must arise from surrealist poetry, for example, transmitting otherworldliness back into a demolished, remythologized world.

Our earlier questions about why Breton abandoned his investments in Haitian art’s revolutionary potential can thus be largely answered as follows: Breton’s process of mythmaking via occultation assumes the possibility of worldly rehabilitation through a series of discrete aesthetic mechanisms, which is incommensurate with Hyppolite and
Césaire’s idea of conjuring an entirely new reality through a kind of fully-integrated artistry. The latter, of course, incorporates distinctly Caribbean elements that Breton dismissed as ridiculous, but beneath his cultural chauvinism lies a conceptual discrepancy that prohibits Breton’s revolutionary vision from gaining traction anywhere in the Caribbean, if we subscribe to Césaire’s arguments. However, Césaire’s recovery of Hyppolitean thought vis-à-vis a magical poetics does not tell the whole story; this poetics was also one of the animating forces of Négritude, a broader critical framework he developed alongside Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon Damas which advanced its own strategy for sociopolitical emancipation and transformation that was not much more successful than Breton’s. While all three figures drew upon myriad different sources\(^{11}\) to fashion the movement’s beliefs and aims, Négritude was characterized generally by its philosophic-poetic revolt against colonial subjugation, an endeavor its founders hoped would establish a unified Afro-diasporic identity born of the affirmation of Blackness—the vital rhythms of Black art, the durability of Black fraternity, and the ancient echoes of Black knowledge.

As is the case with Césaire’s aforementioned essay, Négritude did not conceptualize and prioritize the iteration of otherworldliness that we might find in, say, Blake’s work, but one of its most exemplary moments can be found in Césaire’s attempt

\(^{11}\) In addition to the widely recognized influence of Baudelaire, Breton, and Rimbaud, the movement also drew inspiration from sources as diverse Harlem Renaissance literature and Parisian literary salons run by Jeanne Nardal, whose essay, “Internationalisme noir” [“Black Internationalism”] (1928) refigured many of the movement’s ideas by a decade or longer. For a more detailed examination of Harlem Renaissance influences and the movement’s transatlantic history, see David Murphey’s article, “Birth of a Nation? The Origins of Senegalese Literature in French” in Research in African Literatures, vol. 39, no. 1, 2008, pp. 48–69.
to perform the function of a poet-magician and position an engagement with the otherworldly as an integral component of Black liberation. In *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal [Notebook of a Return to the Native Land] (1939)*, Césaire comparatively describes the unique ontological orientations of pre-colonial (or de-colonial, in an idealized state) individuals:

Those who have invented neither powder nor the compass  
Those who have tamed neither gas nor electricity  
Those who have explored neither the seas nor the skies  

[...]  
But they abandon themselves, possessed, to the essence of all things  
Ignoring surfaces but possessed by the movement of all things  
Heedless, taking no account, but playing the game of the world.  
Truly the elder sons of the world  
Porous to every breath of the world  
Flesh of the flesh of the world throbbing with the very movement of the world.  
(Césaire 35; [61] ll. 3-6; 37 [67] ll. 1-6)

Broadly speaking, these lines provide a cohesive portrait of Césaire’s ideological contributions to Négritude: his continual emphasis of the “things” within the “world” emblematizes the movement’s materialist political foundations; his insistence that disenfranchised colonial subjects, those who have neither “invented” nor “tamed” nor “explored,” can coalesce within the “very movement of the world” exemplifies the movement’s fusion of materialist politics with a diasporic, anti-imperialist perspective; and his references to the self-abandonment of “possession” and “essences” which lie beyond our immediate encounters with “surfaces” resemble his ideas in “Calling the Magician” (*Notebook 35; [61] ll. 3-6; “Calling ”120). Through poetry, he narrativizes the mythic origin of a “magical contact with things,” a novel way of inhabiting, experiencing,
and articulating the world that is born of “possession” by a literal kind of otherworldliness (“Calling” 120). In Césaire’s mythic account here, we are not simply given the foundation for a new civic reality that ruptures and exceeds the circumscriptions of colonial power, along with the revelation of a world defined by collective liberation and cohesion: dispossessed colonial subjects become these two things. In participating in a new mythic paradigm and, subsequently, a new world, they conjure their own “flesh,” and they “throb” in rhythm with this world’s vital movements (Notebook 37; ln. 6). It is here where Césaire aligns himself with and even clarifies Hypplotie’s slightly ambiguous visual metaphors, which sought, in a basic sense, to identify artistry with a mythic otherworldliness. For Césaire, the term “otherworldly” itself maintains two distinct, interwoven definitions: it comprises what we might call the ethereal or the spectral, given the credence he lends to things like spirit possession, but he also presents this quality as the catalyst for the gestation or discovery of an “otherworld” that, crucially, courses through the veins of those who imagine and occupy it. Gone, in other words, is Bataille’s emphasis on myth’s social-natural mediations, and here to stay is a collectivity that is itself a totality.

Césaire’s journey from a rather scholastic magical poetics rooted in Bataille to an increasingly democratic vision of ontological expression suggests that he recognized a link between poetry and Caribbean emancipation, but, as Négritude gained traction, its critics would begin to halt its momentum. Once it had penetrated the Francophone intelligentsia, the movement attracted the attention of Jean-Paul Sartre, who eventually composed a preface to Senghor’s Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de
**langue française [An Anthology of the New Negro and Malagasy Poetry in French]** (1948) called “Black Orpheus.” Sartre’s piece, named after a “myth dolorous and full of hope” about a “woman who is born to die,” ultimately dismisses Négritude as impotent, chiefly because it does not subscribe to orthodox Marxist notions of revolutionary potential and action (Sartre 63). He acknowledges, first and foremost, the “miraculous” poetic “weapons” it wields against French colonialism, which are effective precisely because the movement’s poets fulfill the initial aims of the French surrealists: to perform an “auto-destruction of language” and, in so doing, speak the language of their oppressors “in order to destroy it” (23). However, poetry is also the movement’s chief issue for Sartre. He argues that Négritude diverges from the proletariat’s class interests, which are the breeding ground for revolutionary politics, because, up to Sartre’s contemporary moment, the proletariat “has not found a poetry that is sociological and yet finds its source in subjectivity”; poetry has hitherto “remained in the hands of well-intentioned young bourgeois who found their inspiration in their personal psychological contradictions, in the dichotomy between their ideal and their class “(17-18). Among other things, Sartre directly condemns Césaire’s attempt to amalgamate race and class as an “antiracist racism” that would undermine any significant Marxist project (“[T]he notion of race does not mix with the notion of class”), but he continually sets his sights on poetry, ultimately designating Négritude as “pure Poetry” whose limitation is that it can only articulate a “certain affective attitude toward the world,” not a transgressive, emancipatory mythic substructure for a new Black reality (35-6, 49). For some Black authors and critics, “Black Orpheus” signaled the beginning of Négritude’s demise.
Knowing that the movement would subsequently never achieve any substantial traction, Frantz Fanon summarized the Sartrean deathblow as such: “Help had been sought from a friend of the colored peoples, and that friend had found no better response than to point out the relativity of what they were doing…Jean-Paul Sartre, in this work, has destroyed black zeal” (Fanon 135). Today, Négritude’s well-intentioned quest for a pan-African identity sits as a rather archaic and uncomfortable essentialism alongside post-colonial perspectives, despite experiencing something of a revival in recent years. What it certainly failed to do, a failure figures like Fanon would attribute to the critiques of Sartre and other French intellectuals, was initiate Césaire’s revolutionary vision within the realm of material reality. The movement’s poetry endures as an important testament to its adherents’ principles and insights, but Sartre’s assessment, which actually anticipates some of the post-colonial reservations about the movement, continues to define its legacy.

All the warranted criticisms of its essentialist tendencies aside, Négritude fell victim to the same incommensurability between French and Caribbean sensibilities— aesthetic, political, anthropological, and so on—that doomed artists like Hypplolite to obscurity following Breton’s visit to Haiti. Once again, the Euro-American strand of parapoiesis subsists on the introduction of a transformative mythic order into the world

---

12 A few of the relatively recent attempts to recover Négritude’s ethos: Souleymane Bachir Diagne’s “In Praise of the Post-racial: Negritude Beyond Negritude” in Third Text, 24:2, 241-248; and Donna V. Jones’s The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Diagne argues against the critical charges of essentialism and carefully explores the movement’s emphases on “mixture, hybridity, demultiplication of identities, interactionality,” whereas Jones, who concedes that the movement relies too much on the specters of racial biologism, champions the “greater complexity of Césaire's poetics and vision” (Diange 242; Jones 150).
via aestheticized otherworldly mechanisms, whereas the Caribbean strand collapses these things into a single ontological nexus whereby artists and their art themselves instantiate the mythic, the otherworldly, and the literal otherworld all at once. While Sartre’s thinking is largely incompatible with the Euro-American parapoietical tradition’s specifically otherworldly elements, we can see a semblance of the tradition’s logic unfolding across “Black Orpheus”; sociopolitical transformation rests of the germination of conventional Marxist narratives of proletarian solidarity, themselves indicative of a distinct mythic foundation of social progress that must be integrated into our present reality prior to any kind of transformation actually occurring. As horrendously dismissive as Sartre is on things like the intersections of race and class or the otherworldly Caribbean folk lineages that were informing Césaire’s work (Sartre refrains from mentioning them in his essay and instead defines Négritude in the terms of the classical West), I would like to specifically address his evaluation of poetry and aesthetics, recuperating some of Césaire’s parapoietical ideas in the process.

Since we have critically examined the limitations and failures of parapoiesis throughout this chapter, we now ought to interrogate Sartre’s orthodox Marxism, one of parapoiesis’ apparent obstacles, in order to illuminate Césaire’s impact on this aesthetic tradition’s final stage. Let us, then, pose our last big question to Sartre himself: where is the inevitable proletarian revolution and ensuing demise of capitalism which Marx and
Engles famously promised? Particular historical examples of anti-capitalist upheavals exist, of course, but they are either anomalous or no longer vigorously extant. Decades after Sartre and Césaire were producing their most influential writings, little has changed, as capitalism has consolidated its power in both insidious and spectacularly overt ways; capitalism is a homogenizing, ubiquitous force whose aim is to manage and stabilize the world, efficiently disempowering attempts to usurp it by dictating the terms of historical development itself, as we saw earlier during our exploration of Francis Fukuyama’s work. Indeed, Fukuyama is not the only figure who “haunts” this moment in parapoiesis’ trajectory. In addition to his insights into hauntology, Mark Fisher also developed an idea he called capitalist realism, which, he claims, encompasses the dominant post-war ideology (or anxiety) that capitalism is not only the sole “viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher 2). He argues that Fukuyama’s thesis, while widely “derided” among leftist academics, is so widely “accepted…at the level of the cultural unconscious” that, within the minds of billions of humans, capitalism functions as a “kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action,” a barrier that prohibits the simple act of playfully envisioning non-capitalist social organization, let alone initiating social transformation (Fisher 2).

13 Since the project is concerned with art’s potential to instigate sociohistorical change writ large, I do not wish to suggest here that anticapitalist, Marxist paradigms are the only kind of “change” that can or should occur, even though I am obviously partial to it. However, given the vast tradition of critical theory which roots itself in Marxism, and given Césaire’s own obviously Marxist inclinations, it will be important for us to conceive of change through a Marxist apparatus here.
If we take Fisher at his word, we might be tempted to say that William Blake’s iteration of parapoiesis offers us an escape route, since his materialization of Derrida’s hauntological defiance of capitalist realism advances a coherent vision of sociohistorical change—in opposition to Sartre, Blake demonstrates the concrete and even physiological resonances between poetry and the otherworldly, which, taken together, comprise the essential catalyst for Blake’s revitalized reality. However, we must remember that Blake’s vision is entirely tethered to nineteenth century Lambeth’s particular terrains, which signifies two things. First, it does not represent a total severance from his current, oppressive material conditions; Blake does imagine an otherworld which is in a continual exchange with the phenomenal, human world, but, ultimately, he articulates a kind of rearrangement of the latter space, not an eradication of the deepest foundations which enabled Lambeth’s misery in the first place. In other words, Blake’s vision leaves open the possibility, in Fisher’s terms, for the industrial-capital institutions Blake valiantly combatted14 to assert themselves as an “infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact,” thereby gradually corrupting and obliterating all that Blake’s work established (6). Second, and related to this, Blake’s position within the parapoietical tradition allows him to assume the capability for performing this rearrangement of reality, but, following H.D., Loy, and Breton, the

14 The ending of Blake’s Milton is notable in this regard—the transformation it enacts is a political incendiary one, a conscious rebellion against the oppressions of slavery, unregulated labor practices, and so on, even if those things are not explicitly addressed. To explore this line of thinking further, see Erdman’s Blake: Prophet Against Empire (New York: Dover, 1934) and E.P. Thomson’s Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1993), both of which detail Blake’s disdain for the Industrial Revolution’s political consequences, particularly those which relate to British imperial expansionism.
tradition begins to acknowledge the unfeasibility of such a capability; at worst, reality itself has become irreparably fractured or destroyed, and, at best, it needs to be rebuilt following the emergence and implementation of a new myth. Both Breton and Fisher would argue that the prevailing myth amid reality’s languishing in disrepair is a manifestation of capitalism that attempts to make sensible the world’s insensible ruination, but what is paramount here, if we prioritize Fisher’s analysis, is that the Bretonian model begins from the vantage point of reconstruction. The intention of fashioning a new myth through the parapoietical method is to inject it into a broken reality in order to incrementally restore and radically recalibrate, not imagine or conjure novel alternatives, processes which would directly mitigate capitalist realism’s stranglehold on human consciousness.

Capitalism’s formidability and intransigence that Fisher accounts for but Sartre does not is precisely why Césaire’s engagement with parapoiesis marks a turning point in the tradition’s development: Césaire’s confluence of poetry and the otherworldly demonstrates the necessity of crafting and inhabiting novel “otherworlds” through artistry, the necessity of the imagination amid overwhelming stultification. That is, what makes Sartre’s evaluation of Négritude’s aesthetics misguided is not his allegiance to a certain permutation of Marxism, but rather his inability or unwillingness to recognize what ought to lie, as Fisher suggests, at the heart of such a permutation: a foundational capacity to imagine an alternative reality that abolishes any trace of malignant social forces. For Césaire, of course, this capacity does not simply manifest as action but as being; artists and their art are conjured otherworlds, and the otherworldly is an
ontological fact, an expansion of Blake’s parapoiesis that jettisons his intricately systematized and strangely verisimilar mythos in favor of a kind of pure or ineffable being. Indeed, it is this element of Césaire’s work that will propel the remainder of this chapter. In the context of Breton, Sartre, and Fisher, Césaire’s parapoiesis offers a way of reframing or, potentially, eliminating the perception of sociohistorical paralysis, which is a sufficient justification of its literary merit. However, Césaire’s parapoiesis is also, I claim, an important hermeneutical framework that reveals parapoietical associations and kinships across twentieth century artists, all of which sees Césaire’s insistence of an otherworldly ontology further crystallize in poetic practice.

In the following pages, we will narrow our focus to one such kinship by turning to Fernando Pessoa, a largely uncategorizable figure who might initially seem to make a strange pairing with Césaire. As Jose Baretto notes, Pessoa was, unlike Césaire, “never political or even a militant supporter of any cause whatever,” preferring an “intellectual elitism and radical individualism” to any kind of revolutionary action on behalf of the disenfranchised and the colonized (Baretto 170). Moreover, despite their mutual affection for certain poetic lineages, there is no evidence that the two ever engaged with each other in any capacity, and there exists no scholarship that stages any kind of dialogic analysis of their output. Nevertheless, Pessoa and Césaire are powerfully united in their blending of poetic impulses and otherworldly affinities, and it is on this basis that we will closely examine the interplay between the two figures’ work to explore how and why Pessoa exemplified Césaire’s rendering of parapoiesis. Ultimately, we will see how Pessoa’s desire to imagine and become an otherworld not only affirms parapoiesis’ ability to foster
change. It also illustrates Césaire’s indispensable contributions to the tradition’s most significant evolutionary step: the movement into its second primary meaning (“para” denoting “alongside” and “poiesis” denoting “making” or “crafting”) which, through its characteristic otherworldliness, prioritizes the conjuration of new realities that exist as distinct alternatives to our current one.

“Lessons of unlearning”: Pessoa and the Otherness of Otherworlds

Pessoa’s encounters with and interests in otherworldly phenomena emerged, as is the case with each poet we have examined so far, from a particular set of literary-artistic, sociocultural, and philosophical circumstances; to analyze each figure’s deployment of parapoiesis is to apprehend the vast matrix of influences which shaped both the tradition itself and its individual practitioners. We can easily accomplish this task with Pessoa, who positioned himself within the parapoietical cosmos almost from the very beginning of his literary career. To begin with, he had developed an intimate familiarity with the French proto-surrealists like Rimbaud and Baudelaire by the time he was in his twenties, figures who, as we discussed earlier, helped construct surrealism’s otherworldly foundations. As Hubert Jennings notes, Pessoa was likely introduced to Rimbaud and Baudelaire’s otherworldly poetics through his correspondence with another young Portuguese poet, Mário de Sá-Carneiro, who was studying law at the Sorbonne in Paris throughout their four-year epistolary relationship; as both poets began to explore alternatives to the “mawkish symbolism” of their juvenilia, they yearned to reach “the
universal and timeless,” and they attempted to do so while “Beaudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Laforgue…were being filtered through” their minds, thanks to de Sá-Carneiro’s newfound Parisian sensibility (Jennings 100-1). Richard Zenith contends that Pessoa grew so obsessed with Baudelaire that, following in the poet’s footsteps, he developed into a “close reader of [Edgar Allan] Poe’s poetry” and even produced Portuguese translations of Poe’s work, just as Baudelaire had done in French (Zenith 202). For Zenith, Pessoa’s early encounters with what he terms the “decadent” French poets cultivated within the young poet a desire to evoke not simply an obtuse sense of timelessness but a “supernal world, a transcendent reality” (203). His “religious sensibility” that he obtained from his Catholic upbringing and education, Zenith argues, compelled him to follow the aforementioned resonances between Baudelaire and Swedenborg, both of whom exemplified a “complex system of symbols corresponding to spiritual realities that cannot be directly apprehended” (204). As Pessoa’s art matured and his creativity mutated, his allegiance to the “decadents” waned, but their “concept of multiple levels or dimensions of reality would permeate his thinking throughout the rest of his life” (204).

Knowing how profoundly imbricated the proto-surrealists’ poetry and the otherworldly are, we can already make the genealogical claim that Pessoa’s artistic incubation was unavoidably inflected by a kind of pervasive, if philosophical, otherworldliness, even if he were not wholly conscious of it. However, the otherworldly would eventually develop into arguably the most significant preoccupation of his creative life, which means that we can move far beyond the territory of conjectural poetic
resonances. According to Jennings, Pessoa’s occultic interests can be traced all the way back to 1896, when the then eight-year-old poet traveled from Lisbon to South Africa with his mother to join his stepfather, a military officer who was appointed Portuguese counsel in Durban, the capital of the British Colony of Natal. In 1903, Pessoa was awarded the Queen Victoria Prize for an exemplary essay in English, an award that included a collection of Ben Jonson’s works. In what might be his earliest cognizant encounter with occultism, Pessoa underlined references “to the Rosy Cross and to the Kabbalah,” the most overt of which was found in Jonson’s *The Fortunate Isles* (1624):

```
Then constable of the Rosy-cross,
Which you must be; and keeper of the keys
Of the whole Kabal, with the seals; [...] (Jonson 649)
```

Perhaps he identified himself as his own kind of “keeper of the keys,” for, as early as 1907, Zenith notes, he was composing poems “about magic” with titles such as “The Circle,” and he was reading systematized accounts of occultic phenomena, such as the French neurologist Joseph Grasset’s *L’Occultisme hier et aujourd’hui [The Marvels Beyond Science]* (1908) (649). As Steffan Dix observes, however, Pessoa’s occultic inclinations began to narrow as quickly as they widened; he briefly engaged with Theosophy but soon dismissed its “humanitarian aspirations” and “mental confusion[s]” concerning its Buddhist influences, preferring instead the masculine “nobility” and staunchly Western esotericism of the Rosicrucian tradition (Dix 8-9). The poet’s political opinions, which are characterized by an oblique conservatism and often baffling or impenetrable, are not as important for our aims as what his occultic interests germinated into: a broader understanding of the otherworldly’s generative power that crucially aligns
his output with Césaire’s revolutionary ambitions. Around 1914, Jennings observes, Pessoa began to experiment with automatic writing and spiritism, producing several “trance writings” under the supervision of mediums (Jennings 165). The earliest of these occurred around his family’s dining room table, as Zenith points out, when Pessoa, along with his aunt Anica and cousin Maria, conjured up several “dead spirits,” some of whom professed to be “Pessoa’s own father” and “both of Pessoa’s grandmothers” (Zenith 392). Séances and the figure of the medium became so vital to Pessoa’s life and work that he eventually came to believe in a “spiritual alchemy” by which a human is able to transmute “the frailty of [their] nature into something higher, fitting [them] to take their place among the higher entities of the realms beyond our sense” (167). In a letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro, which he composed in the final year of his life, Pessoa outlines the convictions engendered by his dealings with the dead:

I believe in the existence of other worlds superior to ours and in inhabitants of those worlds, in the process of diverse degrees of spirituality, subtilizing themselves until they reach a Supreme Entity, who presumably created this world. It could be that there are other Entities, equally Supreme, who have created other universes, and that these universes co-exist with ours, interpenetrating or not (Pessoa, quoted in Jennings 167).

What Pessoa describes here is not an otherworldliness circumscribed within this or that occultic vocabulary; it is an ineffable, rhizomatic otherworldliness, one that exceeds and delimits simultaneously, establishing new worlds and interpenetrations so long as we can imagine them.

In contrast with the handful of Anglophone literary critics who have given significant attention to Pessoa’s work and its otherworldly qualities, I would now like to
argue that there was a clear reason why the poet sketched this particularly impressionistic portrait of otherworldliness at the end of his life; it is a portrait entwined with his “heteronym” project, and it is this project’s otherworldly essence that illustrates how the poet’s work reverberates with Césaire’s conception of the otherworld as an ontological alternative. In the briefest terms, Pessoa’s heteronyms can be described as fictive poetic identities through which Pessoa crafted his work. They are not simply “personae or masks,” as Marilyn Scarantino Jones insists, but are rather “poet-characters” whose lives Pessoa “became”: “each of them is distinct in physical appearance, career, temperament, and poetic style” (Jones 255). Pessoa himself gave differing accounts of why and how he generated his heteronyms, which ranged from his peculiar definition of “sincerity” (the heteronyms’ lives are “sincere” because they are “felt”) and his “organic tendency toward depersonalization” (Rickard 24). However, I would like to give further attention to Zenith’s suggestion that Pessoa’s participation in séances and automatic writing sessions helped configure his representation of his heteronyms; as Zenith points out, Pessoa had “explained that he served as [the heteronyms’] medium” in an “unfinished preface for a planned collection of” their works, a kind of Blakean vessel through which these otherwise intangible figures materialized (Zenith 393). Pessoa’s willingness to associate them with the otherworldly profession of the spirit medium firmly situates within his otherworldly imagination, to be sure. We can, for instance, make a convincing case that they function similarly to spirits who “possess” Pessoa, entities who remain unseen without an earthly interlocuter or host who asserts their existence through linguistic or even physical expression.
It is at this point, though, that we can return to Césaire’s rendering of the otherworldly to explore a different facet of Pessoa’s heteronyms. While we cannot discredit Pessoa’s use of conventional otherworldly ideas to define his heteronyms’ characteristics, we must also, I claim, recognize that the heteronyms instantiate a multilayered fulfillment of Césaire’s insistence that parapoiesis must begin with imagining alterntativity if it is to spur any kind of change. As the heteronyms’ histories, experiences, and personalities unfold across their poetry, they each conjure their own otherworlds, novel realities born of their transmigration into Pessoa. Just as Césaire’s colonial subjects achieve emancipation by dispensing with the imperial institutions and logics that organize reality, so, too, do the heteronyms, arriving into a foreign reality like spirits from without, construct a new world by offering a dramatic perspectival shift. Moreover, the heteronyms accomplish their world-building through Pessoa, which encapsulates Césaire’s articulation of an otherworldly ontology; insofar as Pessoa becomes the heteronyms, he becomes the otherworlds they fashion, all of which is attained, of course, through a magical metapoetics, to borrow from Césaire’s terminology.

The heteronym that exemplifies this process the most is also the original one: Alberto Caeiro, a solitary bucolic poet who, according to Pessoa, died from tuberculosis in 1915 at the age of twenty-six. Pessoa gave differing accounts of Caeiro’s origins over the course of his life, but admitted that, as Caeiro’s voice began to emerge as the “master” within his soul, he experienced “a kind of ecstasy I’m unable to describe,” during which he completed dozens of poems and devised a title for the collection, The
Keeper of Sheep (1925) (Pessoa, quoted in Jennings 104). While not an actual shepherd, Caeiro nevertheless became a kind of steward of all the other heteronyms (fellow heteronym Álvaro de Campos would produce “Notes for the Memory of My Master Caseiro” between 1930-32), and he organized his poetry around his sensorial immersion in nature, an aesthetic Pessoa would call “sensationism”: a “creed,” as Zenith notes, which “held that sensations, since our entire notion of reality depends on them, should be the basis and focus of all artistic creation” (Zenith 390). In expressive practice, sensationism is an odd synthesis of Walt Whitman’s exuberant plain spokenness and the Japanese Zen tradition’s affinity for emptiness and ephemera, but it also possesses another dimension. As Zenith observes, Caeiro’s sensationist poetry “fatally discredit all the theories and explanations Pessoa had accumulated through many years of study and reading,” and, in one of his poems, Caeiro himself refers to the capacity to engage directly with the world as he does require “lessons of unlearning” (380). As Pessoa’s first heteronym, Pessoa’s initial journey into new poetic terrain, Caeiro’s investment in “unlearning” symbolically heralds the dawn of the artistic project that would define the remainder of Pessoa’s career (380). However, if we follow through with our previous linkages and understand Caeiro as an otherworldly entity whom Pessoa channels as a medium channels a spirit, we might be able to collectively read Caeiro’s sensationist “lessons of unlearning” as a Césairean mechanism, a process which thoroughly deconstructs his reality’s predispositions in order to craft an otherworld which Pessoa himself can inhabit (380).
Most of the poems in *The Keeper of Sheep* express Caeiro’s desire to strip reality of all its trappings and perceive it afresh, but the one that arguably does this the most methodically is poem “XXVI.” It reveals a mind that is perplexed by its own interrogation of artifice and nature, a mind attempting to grapple with its precise relationship to the phenomenal world:

```
Sometimes, on days of perfect and exact light,
When things are as real as they can possibly be,
I slowly ask myself
Why I even bother to attribute
Beauty to things.

Does a flower really have beauty?
Does a fruit really have beauty?
No: they have only color and form
And existence.
Beauty is the name of something that doesn’t exist
But that I give to things in exchange for the pleasure they give me.
It means nothing. (Pessoa 28; ll. 1-13)
```

The poem’s language and procession of ideas are so remarkably direct and simple that they too seem to dwell beneath the “perfect and exact light” that illuminates how “real” things in the world really are: we are given the sense that, in such moments of pervasive, disarming clarity, even one’s ability to communicate their own thoughts is simply a fact of unadulterated existence and nothing more (28; ll. 1-2). Of course, since these moments only occur “sometimes,” we must also, the poet suggests, critically examine our predilections and disabuse ourselves of our misguided appellations that distract from what is actually real. Flowers have nothing save for “color,” “form,” and “existence,” and to call them “beautiful” brings to bear a nexus of “exchange” onto it—a
term that evokes commodification and thus the loss of what is most absolutely, spiritually essential—that obfuscates its true nature (28; ll. 5-9). Once again, knowing that Caeiro indicates the first stirrings of Pessoa’s heteronymic aesthetic, we can interpret these lines as self-referential, as the poetic configuration of Pessoa’s abandoning his previous ideals as he ventures into a new creative mode. In other words, to affirm flowers’ mere “existence” and jettison entirely human concepts like “beauty” could be an indication of Pessoa’s willingness to reform when “beauty” itself should be deployed and what it should encompass—if not flowers, then perhaps his new poetic style (28; ll. 7-9).

We can also, though, consider the parapoietical ramifications of this piece. Let us once again recognize Pessoa’s lengthy engagements with otherworldly knowledge and imagine that Caeiro functions within Pessoa’s universe as a kind of spirit that permeates his mind, body, and soul. Through this lens, Pessoa’s burgeoning artistry coincides with the maturation of Caeiro the otherworldly subject within a corporeal plane, a subject who develops his own way of engaging with the alien objects and spaces around him. More specifically, if The Keeper of Sheep exhibits Caeiro’s entrance into the world via Pessoa and the representations of his first encounters with a prefabricated reality, we can interpret this poem as a serious effort to destabilize and reconstruct this reality. To return to Césaire’s magical poetics that envisions the mythic foundations for a post-colonial civilization, the chief characteristic of de-colonized people immediately following their liberation is that they attune themselves no longer to the “compass,” “powder,” or “surfaces…of all things,” but to the otherworldly “essence of all things,” so much so that they become the world’s “flesh” and “throb” in unison with its “movement” (Césaire 35;
That is, these people experience a perceptual and ontological shift in tandem. No longer bound to imperialist institutions and logics, they literally perceive beyond surfaces and see the world as it “really is” within Césaire’s framework, and from this arises a new manner of inhabiting and becoming the world, a world extricated from oppressive regulations and reimagined in accordance with communal emancipation. Caeiro’s poem, with its gradual emphasis on the essentialness of “form” and the purity of mere “existence,” signals that he is beginning to participate in these Césairean shifts in experiencing and being (Pessoa 28; ll. 8-9). He is a kind of inverted tabula rasa whose arrival into Pessoa’s reality is marked by an immediate subjugation to a particular aesthetic economy: “sometimes,” when he apprehends that “beauty” is a meaningless attribution tethered to a system of “exchange” imposed upon natural objects, he is able to shatter the manacles of artifice which constrict his mind and, evacuated of all else save his sensorial encounters, witness how “real” things can “possibly be” (28; ll. 1-2). In the context of Césaire, these lines depict a reality being critically disassembled and whole reconfigured, the initial stages of conjuring an otherworld that departs from a previous world’s governing systems and powers; Caeiro does not articulate a Césairean ontology wherein being and the world are built anew and fully intertwined quite yet, but we can already glean that the necessary phenomenological scrutiny is in place to do so. As Caeiro disentangles himself from the pretenses of his reality with which he was endowed, ostensibly through his inhabitation of Pessoa the poet-medium, he is beginning to peer beyond the “surfaces…of all things,” the veneer of artifice, and witness nature’s authentic, irreducible qualities (Césaire 37; [67] ln. 2). In doing so, Caeiro suggests the
possibility of a procreant scrutiny: an ability to, through poetry, deconstruct the world and wholly reimagine it, just as Hyppolite and Césaire attempted to do.

In another one of the collection’s pieces, poem “XXX,” we see Caeiro’s sensationist vision come to fruition. Having unlearned all that Pessoa’s reality indoctrinated him with, he ascends into a realm of absolute being that is born of his fashioning an entirely novel otherworld, so to speak, for himself. The poem, building on the previous work’s skepticism toward human constructs which obscure nature’s essences, begins with an outright rejection of such a construct before launching into a description of Caeiro’s own sense of who he is and how he occupies his conjured reality:

If you want me to have a mysticism, then fine, I have one.
I’m a mystic, but only with my body.
My soul is simple and doesn’t think.

My mysticism is not wanting to know.
It’s living and not thinking about it.

I don’t know what Nature is: I sing it.
I live on top of a hill
In a solitary, whitewashed house,
And that is my definition. (Pessoa 33; ll. 1-9)

Implicit in the poem’s opening evaluation of “mysticism” is that it resembles, not coincidentally, the attitude toward beauty Caeiro expressed in the previous poem (33; ln. 1)

1) Mysticism and beauty are both divorced from what Caeiro calls “Nature,” largely because they are intangible and imprecise—they have no organic, material basis, but are instead descriptive fictions (33; ln. 6). By this logic, Caeiro’s willingness to adopt his own kind of “mysticism” as a way to accept his apparent designation as a “mystic” speaks to the term’s emptiness and malleability; Caeiro is slyly reiterating here, in other
words, his assertion in poem “XXVI” that, no matter what one calls it, there exists an essential core to “Nature” that cannot be thought or “known” but only experienced and, in this poem, lived (33; ll. 1, 6). We might also accuse, for instance, Césaire of his own kind of “mysticism” insofar as his vision entails an ineffable connection to a nebulous “essence” that lies beyond all else, but to do so would miss the point of both Césaire and Caeiro (Pessoa 33; ll. 1; Césaire 37 [67] ln. 1). What one can label “mysticism” is, for these two poets, “living and not thinking about it,” a way of inhabiting a reality that surpasses cognitive categories because it is in total syncopation with its inhabitants: “I don’t know what Nature is: I sing it” (Pessoa 33; ln. 6). Without the schemas of colonized perception and thought, without the infiltration of social, cultural, and political preconditions, regimentation gives way to melding, an entire ontology governed by one’s seamless integration into and exemplification of a radically reconstituted world.

Indeed, if we dive deeper into this poem’s details, we can detect just how sophisticated its presentation of otherworldliness is; all of parapoiesis’ tenets—its engagement with a spectral kind of otherworldliness, its capacity to ignite change, and its role in fashioning and articulating novel realities through poetic language—are at work here in a delicately choreographed pageant of expression. First, I would like to consider how the poem displays Césaire’s understanding of the otherworldly. We not only get the discarding of the artificial impositions here that we saw in the previous poem; we also see the transition from that step into the construction of a new, ontologically-contingent reality. As Caeiro proclaims that he “sings,” not experiences, “Nature” and that his main preoccupation is “living” as opposed to “thinking,” we are once and for all brought into
his otherworld, which is not dissimilar to the once Césaire envisioned for colonial subjects (33; ll. 5-6). Now that he has stripped “Nature” bare and devised his own sensationist method of interacting with it, Caeiro positions himself as a naturalistic entity who, like Césaire’s figures, simultaneously dwells within and becomes the very world he has molded according to his imaginative will (33; ln. 6). Once again, his manners of perceiving and being the otherworld he establishes are so closely enmeshed that no distinction exists between the two: he comprehends “Nature’s” essence, “sing[s]” it into creation, and thereafter simply “lives” within his song, allowing it to become his “definition” (33; ll. 5-6). The fact that he lives at the “top of a hill / In a solitary, whitewashed house” is, however, perhaps the most succinct portrayal of how cohesive his otherworld has become (33; ll. 7-8). While the rest of the poem carefully outlines the mechanics of his otherworld—its sensationist origins, its ontological implications, and so forth—this image captures a literal otherness, a separation from all that is human and a simultaneous power over and reliance on the very conception of “Nature” he has engendered; Caeiro’s “solitary, whitewashed house” on a lone “hill” elevates him within his otherworldly domain and puts him in a gleaming white edifice that could perhaps be likened to the sun itself, but, without “Nature’s” hill, he would not have the all-encompassing vision or “definition” he currently has (33; ll. 5-9). What this image conveys, in other words, is a distinctly Césairean conflation: Caeiro’s otherworld unavoidably becomes him, and he unavoidably becomes it.

Second, we ought to explore how the otherworldly’s conventional valence functions in this piece, since it deepens our sense of how Césaire’s notion of an
otherworldly ontology manifests. If we are to once again approach Caeiro as a spirit who possesses Pessoa, as it were, then we can make a potentially fruitful speculation: Caeiro’s otherworld was created while he was within Pessoa himself, and he has presumably used Pessoa’s physical body to compose a poetic articulation of this otherworld. We will recall, of course, that this is not simply a way of conceiving of mediumship and automatic writing that Pessoa would have been intimately familiar with; it is also central to parapoiesis itself, particularly Blake’s iteration of it. As Blake opens *Milton* (1804), he beseeches the “Daughters of Beulah” to pass into the “Portals” of his “brain” and descend down the “Nerves” of his right arm in what is an astonishingly physiological illustration of otherworldliness (Blake 96; ll. 6-7). Caeiro does not really display a Blakean attention to physicality in his poems, but he does recurrently emphasize traits like “form,” “definition,” and “color,” which suggests that he is, at the very least, more closely aligned with materiality than his critics who charge him with “mysticism” would like everyone to believe (Pessoa “XXVI” 28; ln. 8; “XXX” 33; ln. 9). Moreover, Pessoa himself, as Patrícia Oliveira da Silva McNeill points out, owned a 1905 collection of Blake’s poems compiled by W.B. Yeats, which evidently “captured his particular interest,” given how thoroughly he annotated the book (McNeill 253). Perhaps, then, to make my claim more concrete through associative thinking, Caeiro serves as a kind of “Daughter of Beulah” to Pessoa’s Blake. We can imagine a process whereby Caeiro the spirit penetrates Pessoa’s body and harnesses it as the vehicle through which he encounters and reconfigures reality, ultimately manipulating Pessoa’s sensory faculties to arrive at his sensationist conclusions and formulate an otherworld from them. If we can assume the possibility of
this argument, we can also assume that Caeiro’s work approaches Césaire’s otherworldly ontology from another angle: in addition to Caeiro becoming the otherworld he creates, Pessoa, by extension, would become it, since he is the very entity that facilitates its construction and eventual expression. Without first immersing himself in Pessoa’s material reality through the vessel of Pessoa himself, Caeiro would have no means through which he could deconstruct and reconstruct anything, let alone verbalize how and why he set out to accomplish these things. Inasmuch as Pessoa contains Caeiro’s thoughts, actions, and vision, he carries within him the otherworld that Caeiro conjures.

Finally, what we do not have to conjecture is the crucial role poetry plays in Caeiro’s enactment of Césaire’s otherworldliness, a role that hearkens back to parapoiesis’ earliest foundations. The obvious point to be made here is that, like every other parapoietical figure we have examined throughout this project, Caeiro’s deliberately chooses poetry as the mechanism by which his sensationist otherworld is presented: within the confines of poetry, he ponders the alterations he can make to the world and even imagines an alternative reality, and he achieves these things at least partially because of his own status as an otherworldly figure, an entity whom Pessoa himself likened to a spirit. However, while Pessoa was steeped in the symbolist and proto-surrealist that, as Sartre says, was thoroughly aware of the intricate possibilities and limitations of poetic language, his parapoietical flourishes are not as self-consciously playful with this language as, say, Emily Dickinson’s are; neither he nor his heteronyms develop an elaborate physio-linguistic apparatus through which we can apprehend the beyond, for example. There is, though, a minute but significant detail in Caeiro’s poem
that reveals poetry’s stature within the Pessoan universe. As Caeiro insists that he has become the otherworld he has forged for himself, he insists that he does not know or experience “Nature” but rather “sings” it (Pessoa 33; ln. 6). We can readily interpret this phrase, like we did above, as a testament to Caeiro’s ontological communion with his otherworld; he “sings” the “Nature” he has articulated because there is an unending interplay between his being and his environment (33; ln. 6). The more subtle observation we can stage, however, is that Caeiro’s “Nature” is an emanation of his poetic song, a product of his poetic practice and performance that spills out into the world around him and transforms it utterly (33; ln. 6). In this regard, poetry, as it has been across the parapoietical tradition, is the nucleus of each one of the convergences we have analyzed so far. Caeiro’s status as an otherworldly spirit, his sensationism, his world-making capability, and his occupation of his own, literal otherworld are the poetic notes of his song, and it is because of poetry that they congeal into a harmonious whole. Caeiro and Pessoa represent, inflected by Césaire, an apotheosis of the parapoietical tradition up to this point, and it is their ideas and work that quietly enshrines poetry as the tradition’s most vital, essential force.
Epilogue: “The recreate, the recreation”

Strange Worlds in My Mind

Although we must encounter Alberto Caeiro’s poetry as the product of an individual consciousness that was distinct from Fernando Pessoa’s, its preoccupation with solitude nevertheless reflects the enduring phenomenon of Pessoa’s life. Just as Caeiro’s otherworld kept him sequestered from human civilization and all its operations, Pessoa’s poetic oeuvre failed to exhume the poet from his social and creative isolation, since his work went largely unrecognized during his lifetime. Pessoa had been hounded by loneliness since the days he was a precocious schoolboy, but, as Jennings notes, this loneliness only “increased as his none too robust constitution began to fail” while he aged (Jennings 205). Tormented by various debts and incessant abortive attempts to cultivate the literary reputation he craved, Pessoa developed severe alcoholism, which eventually manifested as delirium tremens. In 1935, a “chance visitor found Pessoa lying unconscious on the floor surrounded by his manuscripts,” after which he was promptly taken to a French hospital in Lisbon (206). Three days later, the poet succumbed to his illness. His final words, composed on a pad of paper he requested from the hospital staff, were in English: “I do not know what tomorrow will bring” (206).
In the following year, a young man from Birmingham, Alabama, who was then known as Herman Poole Blount, would begin a decades-long journey to discover what, exactly, tomorrow will bring. Like Pessoa, Blount was a rather lonesome individual with a keen interest in spirituality and otherworldly occurrences. A significant factor that contributed to his feelings of isolation and aimlessness was his upbringing as a Black person in the Jim Crow South, where time and space themselves were codified by white supremacism and the perpetual, violent subjugation of Black citizens. As William Sites points out, Birmingham’s segregationist policies would have an especially profound effect on Blount’s consciousness. In 1917, Oscar Adams, a Black newspaper publisher, predicted in a public speech he delivered before a Birmingham crowd that the United States was prepared to realize the “full triumph of the brotherhood of man” and move beyond “race hatred, race prejudice, political supremacy, and political extravagancy” (Sites 11). The white-owned *Birmingham News* quickly disseminated an editorial response to Adams, in which they fervently argued that Black people were “permanently trapped in an earlier stage of human development—forever stuck in time” (11). A young child when this incident took place, Blount would later refuse to answer questions about when he was born, perceiving time and the spaces it organized as mechanisms of oppression that were akin to a “prison” (11). As he went off to college and began to study and perform jazz music full-time, his sense of belonging and timeliness grew increasingly dubious, and he began, as John Szwed notes, a Cartesian exercise in self-reflection, addressing questions that had haunted him since the earliest days of his life relating to “who he was, his place in the world, [and] his relationship with God” (Szwed 28). After
many nights consuming as much poetry, religious literature, and historical texts as he could in his school’s library, Blount decided to drop out and live what Sites calls a more “place-based” musical life, synthesizing his multidisciplinary interests with a love for jazz in order to explore his identity and purpose more robustly (Sites 39).

Jazz, however, was not the sole avenue through which Blount began to develop himself. Despite his overwhelming alienation from a city, country, and world dictated by white omnipotence, he eventually found solace and, to a certain extent, community in his budding attraction to the otherworldly. While he did not have the kind of formal, bourgeois education Pessoa had, Blount was a voracious reader and consumer of things that would have doubtless captivated a young Pessoa’s imagination: he began attending the Colored Masonic Temple of Birmingham and studying intensely in its library, where, as Sites notes, books by or “in the vein of” Emmanuel Swedenborg and Helena Blavatsky; he started to explore, according to Szwed, “prophetic and utopian tradition[s],” seeking “angelic guidance” and analyzing the role that Satan plays in “human life” and “doctrines” of myriad religious organizations; and he likely encountered Edgar Cayce, a “clairvoyant and psychic healer” who visited Birmingham in the 1920s to give demonstrations of his “special powers,” which culminated with the founding of the city’s theosophical society a few years later (Sites 40; Szwed 28). Blount was well on his way to becoming what Paul Youngquist calls a “deep scholar of occult wisdom” during these formative engagements with otherworldliness, but the rest of his education, so to speak, arrived in the sudden, feverish grip of a dream-vision sometime in 1936. Blount would recount the incident many times across his life “with remarkable
consistency,” but one such recitation goes into considerable detail about what he experienced that night, withdrawn in his apartment, simmering in his most intimate and outlandish ideas, alone in his quest to discover the true implications of his terrestrial existence:

[T]hese space men contacted me. They wanted me to go to outer space with them. They were looking for somebody who had that type of mind. They said it was quite dangerous because you had to have perfect discipline… I’d have to go up with no part of my body touching outside of the beam, because if I did, going through different time zones, I wouldn’t be able to get that far back. So that’s what I did. And it’s like, well, it looked like a giant spotlight shining down on me, and I call it transmolecularization, my whole body was changed into something else. I could see through myself. And I went up. Now, I call that an energy transformation because I wasn’t in human form. I thought I was there, but I could see through myself.

Then I landed on a planet that I identified as Saturn. First thing I saw was something like a rail, a long rail of a railroad track coming out of the sky, and landed over there in a vacant lot… Then I found myself in a huge stadium, and I was sitting up in the last row, in the dark. I knew I was alone. They were down there, on the stage, something like a big boxing ring. So then they called my name, and I didn’t move. They called my name again, and I still didn’t answer. Then all at once they teleported me, and I was down there on that stage with them. They wanted to talk with me. They had one little antenna on each ear. A little antenna over each eye. They talked to me. They told me… there was going to be great trouble in schools. There was going to be trouble in every part of life. That’s why they wanted to talk to me about it. ‘Don’t have anything to do with it. Don’t continue.’ They would teach me some things that when it looked like the world was going into complete chaos, when there was no hope for nothing, then I could speak, but not until then. I would speak, and the world would listen. That’s what they told me. (Ra, quoted in Szwed 29-31)

It was on account of this episode that Blount would elude the binds of time and space that characterized his upbringing and devise the mythic foundations of his new identity: Sun Ra, a figure who, having received commandments from his “space men”
brethren to lift the world out of its hopelessness and refurbish it through the power of his own voice, amalgamated jazz, theater, film, and an array of other mediums to fulfill the prophecy bestowed upon him (30). As his vision grew into the singularly defining narrative of his (new) life, Ra became convinced that he was a member of a Saturnian race whose art made sensible his home world, a “pure solar world” whose inhabitants communicated through him the necessity to cultivate, above all else, an emancipatory joy: “I would hate to pass through a planet…and not leave it a better place” (Ra, quoted in Litweiler 141).

One of Ra’s most cherished mediums, one that receives far less critical attention than his music and filmmaking, was poetry, which he wrote voluminously over the course of his life. Like Caeiro’s work, Ra’s poems display a kind of isolation in a “deep cosmic sense” from human epistemologies and institutions, lingering reverberations, perhaps, of his youthful alienation from his spatial and temporal circumstances (Youngquist 8). Following his space men vision, however, Ra transmuted these feelings into the very essence of his otherworldly imagination. Whereas Caeiro saw emptiness and sequestration as pathways toward a sensationist method of experiencing the natural world absent the shrouds of artifice, Ra saw them as that which enabled encounters with his Saturnian otherworld, as paradoxical facilitators of otherworldly connections and communities. In one of his later poems titled “The Endless Realm,” the final version of which he composed in 1980, Ra begins in a similar place that Caeiro does—that nothingness must be achieved and practiced if we are to dissolve our allegiances to
meaningless concepts like beauty—but gradually infuses his otherworldly preoccupations with an understated sociological, democratic ethos:

I have nothing
Nothing!
Nothing is mine.
How treasured rich am I
I have the treasure of nothing………
Vast endless nothing
That branches out realm beyond realm………
This and these are mine;
Together they are nothing.

I have the treasure of nothing,
All of it is mine.
He who would build a magic world
Must seek the exchange bar
In order to partake of my endless treasure
From my endless realm of nothing. (Ra 24; ll. 1-15)

First and foremost, while the poem does not directly reference Ra’s space men vision or his dalliances with occultic texts, we can make the case that it exemplifies a characteristically otherworldly way of thinking, both in the term’s conventional sense (spirits, alien beings, etc.) and in the manner that Césaire understands it (the process of conjuring and occupying a literal otherworld): Ra’s Saturnian heritage certainly resonates with the piece’s linguistic traversal of boundless “realms” and “magic worlds,” its basic enthusiasm about envisioning spaces beyond earth’s corporeality, and it is one of these “realms” which the speaker inhabits as their own otherworld; “nothingness” is a catalyst for otherworldly generation here as it was for Caeiro, but it is also an otherworld in and of itself, an illogical, non-spatialized space that is nevertheless tangibly precious (an “endless treasure”) and cognizable to the speaker, who repeatedly identifies it with
himself (24; ll. 7, 12, 14). The first-person declamations and possessive imagery might suggest, at the very least, some ontological slippage between the speaker and their “realm” à la Césaire, but one of the poem’s key elements is the extent to which its speaker holds dominion over their otherworld (24; ln. 7). At first glance, the speaker appears forceful and preeminent, a figure who asserts that “all of it is mine” and that anyone wishing to establish their own “magic” otherworld must first agree to bear the mark of the speaker’s “realm” of absolute nothingness (24; ll. 7, 12). This otherworld is drastic, uncompromising, and, given its reach across other “realms,” self-propagating; it is mysteriously constitutive, and it lends its sole occupant a power that is pure and entirely consolidated (24; ln. 7).

The piece’s otherworld does, however, have a contradiction at its core: how can one preside so authoritatively over nothing? Why must otherworldly artisans partake in nothingness as a precondition to their world-building? We can formulate an intertextual answer to these questions, as we have been doing already: like Caeiro, the poem’s speaker acknowledges the significance of purification, of omitting all artifice on the road to seeing things as they “really” are and fashioning an otherworld from that vantage point. But the poem’s implementation of nothingness seems to suggest another, ironic dimension. In declaring that the originators of “magic worlds” must first obtain some of the speaker’s nothingness, perhaps these originators already possess the material required to begin their otherworldly endeavor (24; ln. 12). They need nothing because they maintain a power that the speaker does not necessarily have, the power of conjuration, an attunement to *everything* and a capability to direct the potential thereof. In other words,
the speaker’s conviction about their authority can be read as something of an otherworldly imperative, a subtle recognition that those who wish to construct a “magic world” need not be as intricately mystical as, say, Ra himself was (24; ln. 12). In that case, the implication here is that even a figure like Ra has nothing, and that otherworldly possibility awaits those who, like him, strove to reconstitute the ordinary as the extraordinary. This thinking is, of course, a departure from Caeiro and Pessoa, both of whom conjured elaborate otherworlds from the position of loneliness, self-imposed or otherwise. In the most basic sense, the poem is interested in exploring the possibility of connection despite its speaker’s totalizing power: the speaker’s nothingness “branches out” to other realms, and those who wish to establish “magic words” must first proceed through an “exchange” with the speaker, which signals the possibility of an otherworldly heritage or network that persists beyond the speaker’s singularity (24; ll. 7, 12-13).

Inherent in these moments of connectivity, however, is a larger gesture: if the “magic worlds,” which anyone can ostensibly create, are partially conditioned by their “exchange” with the speaker’s “realm,” than perhaps everyone has the potential to be fundamentally connected (24; ll. 7, 12). In this sense, the word “exchange” drops the restrictively commercial meaning it had in Caeiro’s poetry and metaphorizes the poem’s otherworldly logic; to recognize humanity’s world-building potential in the way the speaker does is to affirm the otherworldly’s capacity to assemble and transform, both of which, of course, are vital to parapoiesis all the way up through Césaire (24; ln. 13).

Indeed, in another poem called “The Flesh” (1972), Ra gives us the opportunity to contextualize the perspective of “The Endless Realm” through language and its sonic
foundations, the essence of parapoiesis. He entwines language’s restless generative drive with his permutation of otherworldliness, which positions poetic expression as the vehicle through which the otherworldly can reconnect and revitalize. Ra expands parapoiesis once again, imagining how conjured otherworlds that are detached from material reality’s regulatory systems can jettison solitude and develop their own sociologies. “The Flesh” is organized around references to the Gospels and the New Testament more broadly, but its viewpoint bends toward the galactic and enigmatic, unable to be defined by religious doctrine or historical texts as the poem reaches its conclusion:

The word that was made flesh was made fresh
It is the new, the new test … the new tester, the test-tester-testament
The testament new
Words, words, words
Made fresh, made again
The recreate, the recreation . . .
The word was made fresh
Thus is the cosmic reach
Dark meanings brought to light
See the mystery
Hear the sound duplicity
The double opposite parallel
Hear the sound duplicity
The double opposite parallel. (29; ll. 1-14)

The phrase that establishes the work’s residence within Ra’s otherworldly vernacular is “cosmic reach,” which not only resonates with his space man vision but also captures the spirit of “The Endless Realm”; the piece is striving beyond earth and entering the expansive territory of “realms” and “magic worlds,” some of which, as was the case with the previous poem’s speaker’s “realm,” “branch out” or “reach” toward other realities (“Flesh” 29; ln. 8; “Realm” 24; ll. 7, 12). Importantly, the thing that
conditions this “cosmic reach,” this otherworldly connective tissue, is “the word” that is made both “flesh” and “fresh” on its way to becoming the new “test,” “tester,” and “testament” (“Flesh” 29; ll. 1-3). Actualizing Césaire’s vision in a manner Caeiro did not, this poem’s speaker first sketches a relationship between a linguistic medium and the urgency to create an otherworld that is both distinct from present realities and enmeshed with certain ontological formulations. The “word” simultaneously becoming “flesh” and “fresh” succinctly illustrates poetry’s ability to meld otherworldly conjuration and being, to fashion and populate novel realities that are exemplified in the very material features of those who inhabit them. And it is this ability which reverberates across the cosmos and implies the possibility of an interconnected universe not dissimilar to Césaire’s post-colonial world (29; ln. 1).

We can also begin to see some divergence from Césaire, however, in the multivalent wordplay of the work’s second line, and it is from this point that the poem marches toward its depiction of otherworldly relationality. As “test” transitions into “tester” and “tester” into “testament” before all three words collapse into each other, we not only get an actual representation of words being made “fresh” (29; ln. 2). The “testament” the poem fashions, its demonstration of its own kind of Biblically-adjacent law, is characterized by “tests” and “testers,” both of which signal a ceaseless experimental urge to “[make] again” and “recreate”; “test,” in other words, does not seem to refer to anything adversarial, but rather to something vaguely scientific, a fluctuating alchemical process that helps organize the “realms” within the “cosmic reach” by building, transmuting, recombining, deconstructing, and doing it all over again (29; ll. 2,
6-8). While Césaire’s vision of an otherworld was marked by finality and cohesion, the total unification of decolonized subjects within a fully-formed global community, this poem’s “testament” suggests an otherworld that is, paradoxically, given coherence by its continual reformulations (29; ln. 2). The “cosmic reach” is all-encompassing, to be sure, but the poem implies that it is only so because of the certainty and breadth of its malleability, which is readily encapsulated, of course, by the poetic form (29; ln. 8).

By the piece’s end, the speaker provides a more direct portrait of how these assertions inflect one of the “cosmic reach’s” otherworlds and the possibility of social relations therein (29; ln. 8). In the lines “Hear the sound duplicity / The double opposite parallel,” we are initially confronted by deceit and friction: “sound,” perhaps language itself, is duplicitous—inauthentic—in its “recreation,” and the “double opposite parallel” ostensibly entails a kind of incommensurate doubling, one in which there is little possibility for interpenetration (29; ll. 6, 13-14). However, since the poem’s governing principle is the “cosmic reach,” the shared medium within which otherworlds are born and drawn together, we must consider the other semantic registers of these lines (29; ln. 8). What is generally most significant about them is that concepts like doubling, opposition, and parallelism all indicate relationality—as Ra himself says in the 1980 documentary A Joyful Noise, “You can’t have anything without its parallel, without its opposite” (Mugge 20:00-04). That is, while the words do not suggest a Césairean notion of kinship, they offer, when taken together, a “recreation” of relationality itself, which endures and, according to Ra, grants existence to things within the “cosmic reach” in spite of an ultimate instability: “double” could refer to duplication or replication, which
involves exact similarity; “opposite” indicates the disparateness of two things but is nevertheless defining them in the context of one another; and “parallel” implies both likeness and difference, two entities characterized by a symmetry that might not ever overlap, so to speak (29; ll. 8, 12-14). Hence, the phrase “double opposite parallel” is a prismatic rendering of relationality, and it helps tie Ra’s parapoietical schema together (29; ln. 14). For Ra, the ability to conjure otherworlds is a widely accessible one that runs directly through our linguistic capabilities and social imaginations—we can harness a genre like poetry to devise alternative realities and, unlike Caeiro, establish connections within and between them, always crafting with an eye and ear toward disseminating and reconstituting these connections. Without expansive and unending “recreation,” the word itself becomes stagnant, otherworlds languish in isolation or are never fashioned to begin with, and we are given no choice but to dwell within the spaces and temporalities arranged by oppressive forces (29; ln. 6). Relationality, in other words, is a necessity for Ra’s identity and is necessarily entangled with the otherworldly paradigm that allowed his identity to flourish in the first place, both of which are hauntingly expressed in one of his many spoken-word jazz poems:

    In some far off place
    Many light years in space
    I’ll wait for you.
    Where human feet have never trod,
    Where human eyes have never seen.
    I'll build a world of abstract dreams
    And wait for you. (31; ll. 1-7)
Where There Is No Vision, the People Persevere

At this point in parapoiesis’ trajectory, we have emerged from the ashes of H.D.’s resignation to destruction and begun to imagine the basic conditions of otherworldly societies once again. While a return to William Blake’s parapoietical vision, the redemptive revelation of the otherworldly within material reality, might still be irretrievable, Ra’s interest in relationality nevertheless demonstrates a Blakean investment in altering the very social foundations upon which intersubjectivity is built; both Blake and Ra’s work is motivated, at least in part, by establishing new communal logics that are determined by their particular engagements with otherworldliness. What we must ask of Ra, however, is the following question: what might a community on an otherworld within the ever-morphing “cosmic reach” actually look like? (29; In. 7) His poetry gives us a sense of what the operative conditions of social relations look like in such a space, but, given their inherent mutability, do these relations ever move beyond the suggestive and offer us any kind of depiction of a functioning cosmic community? The visual dimensions of Ra’s work, which are equally as provocative and grandiose as his music or poetry, might provide some answers to these questions, if anything because his physical presence was the most immediate way that others could encounter his otherworldly doctrines apart from, say, his records. During performances and public appearances, Ra typically donned ostentatious costumes, most of which resembled ancient Pharaonic attire through its distinct headdresses and shimmering gold hues. As with his parapoietical notion of relationality, his clothing encompasses the continuous
interplay of the familiar and strange. On the one hand, its vaguely Egyptian iconography places this purported Saturnian within a distinctly pre-diasporic African heritage, a community whose descendants, according to pan-African anthropologists like Cheikh Anta Diop, may have been Black Americans themselves.¹ On the other hand, the clothing’s surrealistic bombast—odd jewels, globular crystals, a tuning fork-like object atop the headdress—is difficult to contain within any associative or communal framework; it suggests a regality that is entirely otherworldly, a command of a realm that lies beyond our earthbound iterations of time, space, and comprehension. We might be able to ascertain an impulse to connect with and elevate humanity into an otherworld in Ra’s costumes, but we cannot necessarily think predictively about how these connections might blossom into a society on this otherworld.

In the most powerful visual representation of his otherworldly affinities, the 1974 film Space Is the Place, things are not quite as abstruse, but we are not really lent any further insight into what a potential cosmic community would look like. The film, a kind of retelling of Ra’s space men vision, opens Ra’s arrival on an intergalactic otherworld: he meanders through a forest in his usual regalia, gazing at floating hands, flowers that look like trumpets, and a figure donning a black robe who has a mirror for a face. He declares that “the whole planet” earth can be “teleported” to this otherworld “through music,” all in an effort to extract Black people from a stagnantly White reality—in this otherworld, Ra proclaims, “time” as Black humans know and experience it, will be

“officially ended” (Coney 2:43, 2:59-3:04). The film concludes with a concert from Ra and his musical ensemble, the Arkestra, which appears to bring his declaration to fruition. One by one, Black people board Ra and the Arkestra’s spaceship in what is a deliberate, liberatory antithesis of the Middle Passage, and they depart to the otherworld from the film’s opening while earth is obliterated; images of volcanic destruction and collapsing dams flash across television screens on the spaceship while a woman’s voice intones Ra’s aforementioned spoken-word jazz poem. As the credits roll, we know where earth’s previous inhabitants are going, and we know why they are going there, but we are left with a distant static shot of the planetary otherworld, left to wonder how, exactly, their new society will unfold: we can presume that all the racist sociopolitical mechanisms which prohibited Black self-actualization on earth will be abolished, but we can do no more than speculate how this will be accomplished and how the resultant community, if one were to even emerge at all, would organize itself around this newfound solidarity vis-à-vis emancipation. Speculation, of course, may very well be the point, given the prominence of “recreation” in Ra’s mythos (29; ln. 6). If otherworlds themselves are engendered by a series of mutations and variable interrelations, perhaps the communities that germinate on them are similarly fluid and in a state of perpetual reconstitution. Whereas parapoiesis’ earlier permutations grappled with the prospects for conditioning social change, Ra’s version seems to posit that the social cannot exist without change. There is a reality from which we can depart, but not one which we can change for the better, all because change is socially, not spatially, contingent, a process by which we can
conjure otherworldly communities simply by encountering and interacting with each other in a kind of passage to the beyond.

Indeed, while we can imagine Ra’s spaceship as the initial, temporary location within which the social formations of his new otherworldly “colony” begin to manifest, we might also consider whether such contact can ever be possible on earth, which Ra abandons to ruination; Ra’s parapoiesis suggests that we must think intergalactically if we are to evade the utter solitude of Caeiro’s otherworldly “Nature,” but can otherworldliness, following H.D.’s insistence of worldly destitution and annihilation, actually foster alternative communities like the one Césaire envisioned through art (Pessoa 33; ln. 6)? In their recent work on Black identity and community-building, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney indicate that we might be able to answer “yes” to this question. Their essay entitled “Hapticity, or Love” (2013) builds from the image of the passage that concludes Ra’s film. But, unlike Ra, Moten and Harney contend that it is the enduring, brutal legacies of Black people’s voyages aboard slave ships which actually comprise the nucleus of an otherworldly, politically subversive relationality on Earth itself. To not be “on the right side of the Atlantic,” the essay begins, is to experience a “certain distance from the settled, from those who determine themselves in space and time, who locate themselves in a determined history,” a recognition that certainly afflicted the mind and soul of a young Herman Poole Blount in Birmingham and instigated his affection for otherworldly phenomena and tracts (Moten and Harney 97). However, buoyed by their quest to identify redemption within depravity, Moten and Harney gradually articulate their claim that it is precisely Black people’s transportation
across the Atlantic that allows them to conjure, practice, and inhabit two concepts they call “hapitcality” and “the undercommons” (98). Hapticality, first and foremost, refers to a “social poesis” by which Black subjects, through the “experiment of the hold” that occurred aboard slave ships, begin to “feel…through others” in radically incognizable ways; hapticality is a process of engendering connections and communities whose relational methodology is not containable within “settlement, nation, state, territory or historical story,” but rather encompasses surreal, Ra-like amalgamations of sensorial contact such as “skin talk, tongue touch, breath speech, hand laugh” (97-8). The undercommons, in turn, refers to the otherworld, as it were, that arises from this distinct relational paradigm. It is not necessarily a physical space, but it is an inhabitable, unifying, subliminal sensibility born of the haptic connections between oppressed or discarded people, people who converge and love within a shadowy alternative, who refuse and are refused entrance into “a state, a religion, a people, an empire, a piece of land,” preferring instead to embrace the haptic-affective collisions generated by “fugitivity,” dispossession, and miscreantism (98).

In short, Moten and Harney head in the opposite direction from Ra. While Ra seeks to elevate certain strands of humanity above earthly suppression and guide them toward the “cosmic reach,” Moten and Harney reside within the subaltern and are interested in fashioning a transgressive kinship that reclaims this suppression as an interrogative and dismantling force (Ra 29; ln. 8). For Moten and Harney, social change relies on the articulation of an otherworld and a kind of “poesis,” two principal elements of parapoiesis, and their argument appears to recapture some of the concrete, materialist
facets of Blake that Ra diverged from entirely (Moten and Harney 97). Hapticity’s etymology and conceptual weight within Moten and Harney’s framework exemplifies, in other words, a quasi-materiality that starts to bring us full circle. While the term signals an ultimate unboundedness and impulse to reformulate sensorial encounters, its capacity to fashion communities that expose and oppose prevailing imperial logics is nevertheless situated firmly within embodied experiences. The undercommons can only arise as an otherworldly alternative if subjugated bodies and their imposed encounters with one another are recuperated as liberatory, if the senses themselves become the collective vehicle through which solidarity is achieved among those who presently suffer under contemporary social regimes. Physiological presence and embeddedness are thus paramount for Moten and Harney, just as they were for Blake; the two critics do not maintain that spirits traversing a human being’s nerves precipitates social change, obviously, but they do imply that the potential to spur social change through otherworldly conjuration and community-building, the potential to imagine an ecstatically reconstructed world in the first place, dwells within the very reality from which some might feel compelled to dismiss or forsake altogether.

Since we have dealt almost exclusively with the aesthetic dimensions of otherworldliness throughout this project, we ought to now ponder what Moten and Harney’s return to earth might look like as an artistic practice. They gesture toward “poesis” and “sociopoetic forces” occasionally, but, for all their trenchancy and ingenuity, they do not present an exemplary creative rendering of hapitcality, for instance (97). To explore and deepen their emphasis on material, sensory-driven environments and
interactions, we will conclude our parapoietical journey by acknowledging the single, monumental artwork of James Hampton, a Black, American janitor turned prophet who displays a synthesis of Ra, Moten, and Harney: he is wholly invested in “recreation” in a material sense, and his material recreations instantiate his interest in unifying and sanctifying the undercommons itself (Ra 29; ln. 6). Little is known about Hampton’s background aside from a few important details. He spent most of his early youth in South Carolina among a family of Black sharecroppers and tenant farmers before relocating to Washington, D.C. in 1928 at age nineteen. As Lynda Hartigan notes, much of his life in D.C., which he spent with his brother, revolved around his residence in a neighborhood that was known as “Fourteenth and U,” a regional epicenter of Black “businesses, religious activities, and nightlife from the turn of the century well into the 1950s” (Hartigan 33). Hampton was also exposed, however, to myriad poor and working-class Black people who “gravitated toward the neighborhood's network of bustling and crowded alley dwellings and businesses,” and he eventually came to count himself among them when he took a job as a janitor for the General Services Administration, a position he held until his death in 1964 (33).

According to Regenia A. Perry, Hampton “believed that he began receiving visions from God” as early as 1931, and, perhaps drawing coeval inspiration from the communities within the undercommons he now found himself immersed in, he began to collect garbage he found at work and on the streets—aluminum foil, used bandages,

---

newspaper clippings, and so forth—in order to construct a sculpture dedicated to his prophetic experiences (Perry 82). The result of this decades-long project was a monument he called *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations’ Millennium General Assembly*, a massive, stately edifice that intended to convey his authority as “Director of the State of Eternity.” Stephen Jay Gould summarizes what we know definitively about the piece’s characteristics and provenance:

Most of the larger pieces are built upon a base of old furniture. The central throne is an armchair with faded red cloth cushions; two semicircular offertories are built from a large round table sawed in half. Merchants in a used-furniture district near Hampton's garage recalled that he often browsed among their wares and then returned with a child's wagon to haul away his treasures […] Around these foundations, Hampton wrapped, nailed, glued, and otherwise affixed his glittering ornaments. He scavenged the neighborhood for gold and aluminum foil collected from store displays, cigarette boxes, and kitchen rolls; he even paid neighborhood vagrants for the foil on their wine bottles… (Gould 48-49)

Sadly, art critics and scholars have been unable to recover more information about Hampton and his creation beyond these observations and accounts from his acquaintances, which were few, given the artist’s reclusiveness. At the time of his death, Hampton did leave behind a 108-page notebook entitled *St James: The Book of the 7 Dispensation*, but, aside from a few supplementary notes in English, it is written in a peculiar script that remains undeciphered to this day. As Babatunde Lawal observes, however, Hampton inscribed a phrase on several “constituent” parts of his throne and throughout his otherwise inscrutable notebook: “Where there is no vision the People Perish,” an essentially verbatim quote of Proverbs 29:18 and a parallel “too close to be coincidental” with Black theology’s historical interests in “messianism” (Lawal 102).
Regardless of which aesthetic, philosophical, or theological strands he was drawing from, Hampton seems to have designed his throne as a demonstration of the sublime heights an otherworldly vision can reach. His throne is not only a testament to his ostensibly prophetic experiences, but also a reverential treatment of his neighborhood’s material features, a sacred reconstitution of the discarded and the overlooked that both serves as an anthropological record of a Black community and an alternative way of imagining its inhabitants lives or activities.

Figure 2: James Hampton's The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations’ Millenium General Assembly (1950-1964, Smithsonian American Art Museum)
Figure 3: Detail of Hampton's throne (Smithsonian American Art Museum)
In the context of Moten and Harney, though, Hampton’s throne instantiates a distinctly material intersection of art, the otherworldly, and relationality, a kind of apotheosis of the parapoietical tradition as we have hitherto analyzed it. For one, the throne signifies hapitcality on account of Hampton’s chosen material. Hampton himself is literally not sensing or “feeling” other Black subjects through his work, but he is certainly cataloguing the objects they might have held, exchanged, or implemented, establishing a monumental network of interpersonal relations by transmuting (Ra’s voice echoes: “the recreate, the recreation…”) his community members’ banal commodities into a holy relic; each scrap of discarded newspaper and used bandage carries with it a haptic history,
and all these histories, taken together, are the necessary conditions upon which Hampton’s otherworldly vision can actually manifest (Moten and Harney 97; Ra 29; In. 6). In short, Hampton’s throne can be read as an attempt to further reify hapticity, to craft a physical representation of its ability to unite and foster love across the distances and between the bars of time and space. Building on this interpretation, we can also claim that Hampton’s throne itself constitutes an undercommons. If each rubbish-object on the throne possesses a haptic essence or lineage, then Hampton’s assembly of the piece mirrors, at the very least, the assembly of an undercommons, a haptic community of disregarded, peripheral entities whose congealing interrupts the dominant social order; this is not to say that Hampton reductively conceived of people as objects, but rather that his prophetic capabilities and esoteric spirituality, which were both positioned against America’s Christian orthodoxy, demanded that he begin to imagine a new, subversive relational schema, a religious community over which he presided. In this regard, the throne demonstrates the two meanings of “otherworldly” that we have dealt with over each chapter: it is otherworldly in an ethereal sense, since it was born of Hampton’s visionary engagements with God, and it is an actual otherworld, since its employment of garbage indicates a redemptive transformation of the marginalized through a conjured set of interrelations and social rearrangements. Above all else, the throne illustrates the possibility of recreating and reinterpreting reality itself. Rather than journey to a cosmic otherworld, Hampton suggests that we can simply reconsider our entanglements with material objects to reveal new pathways toward communion—even amid alienation, despair, and invisibility, we can deconstruct a force as totalizing as commodity fetishism.
and begin to detect the splendorous human possibilities in the very things we are otherwise accustomed to disposing.
Works Cited and Consulted


Bauduin, Tessel M. *Surrealism and the Occult: Occultism and Western Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton.* Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press. 2014. Print.


Biography