

From Atlantis, an Auto-Anthropology, Volume 1: An Abundance of Waters

Throw One

1.1. The Spring slow, held in by rain to the South, the cold front apparently not developing fast enough, the migration spotty. Out at 5 to confirm the miracle, to witness the birth of color again: that for which his blood streamed in the firmament, etc. If it be not here, in this ultimate land, then where? And, in fact, the ultimate land riots with color. No fauna so rich, no flora: no ornithology certainly.

The first creeps. As if he remembered the snake. A warbler this? Guatemala / Summer / 1969: at the terrace's elbow, a tree suddenly full one morning of this, closely observable, bird (others out of failing sight's range: binoculars stolen at customs). Spats made bird. *Mniotilta varia*: Black-and-White Warbler, song: high, thin whistle, a precursor. I can find no other: it is as if he had come alone to claim Pennsylvania for his tribe. "Be grave; they love not to be smiled on." (9-30-1681. Bucks County Deed Book 1, 273). Very soon before this: *Regulus calendula*, the royal claim. American first. Spirals discreetly up the tree, a motion initiatic, resulting in a coronation of fire at the top of the conifer he is working, the head opening, the gates of the skull sliding sideways away from center, to reveal the fiery eye. A succession of Baptists to the Spring, the Lord not yet in sight.

A Cardinal, high in the bare trees, mimics the Tanager. Who could be King. Others here and there, claiming holdings, establishing homes. Building their various principalities at several different levels above the earth: some low, some middling, some high. A hierarchy, class or caste, but of pure form: the food and habitat both discrete: inter-related certainly, but not inter-devouring. Small eyes beading down from all points of the compass at this untimely intruder.

Completion is of the effort (is of the process), thus at any time:
First rituals:

1.2. The intruder lies low, in a cot perhaps, looking up. Pressed down by the weight of the sky: a distant sky, or a mediating ceiling: it is impossible to know. The intruder is very small, very filial, the eyes tilted up at any father who might present himself. The air is . . . yellow, I believe. White-coated men, white-bearded it may be, forming a circle around his feet, look down on him. Almost as if their heads were fruit



among branches. They are very clean. They might be priests, or doctors, or both. It is impossible to know whether the intruder is in exile already and is going to have his exile confirmed by some drastic action, or whether the action about to be implemented is a sending-into-exile. There is nothing ominous about the situation. It is benign.

The beginning of the "I" who can say "I" is a selection in space and time: it may as well be here. It would be good to know in which cardinal direction those feet spoken of pointed. At this stage, however, that information cannot be retrieved.

The beginning is relatively simple. The end is nothing short of the world.

1.3. Procedurally, the word in¹ question would seem to require invention. If that be too ambitious, let us (note, for future definition, the "us"), let us, I say, build on those seniors of ours, those predecessors, and, with their help, take off into the future. Let there be the word *Informaction*. The growth of this word into its meaning has interest for us at this juncture. Observe:

In for input. I am willing to adopt, of past procedures, the notion that this universe comes in at our senses — provided the notion of senses be wide enough for this usage — and that we focus upon that incoming world an *attention* ever more refined. The process of attention including the ear, or hearing sense, opens the hearing to a voice which has as little beginning or end as the *Tao* itself, a voice which, provisionally, we might accept as sourcing from deep within any one of us. The voice, in other words, exists within us from our beginnings: we hear it or not as we please. That *pleasure* must be worked at, hard, for the noises of the universe about us will do their damndest to drown it out. The relation between an "us" and an "I" — we might as well note at this point — will have to do with the depth at which the voice operates in us, or the refinement of our hearing. For the time being, let there be the mystery that the deeper we are an "I," the more *us-lich*, the more collective, will be that voice. I am not one to interfere with mysteries before an appointed time.

Attention to the *In* gives that which we work on *form*: the *koan* of the relation of form to content can, for practical purposes, be left at that. To *inform* a text means to make it: *make it*: the claim, the success, and the holding / the *plot* / all in one. Upon that: homestead. Praxis.

If it be a *text*, or *texture*, we work on, that text is an action brought about by the work, *in-formed* by it, given breath. The action of weaving in space and time brings about the poem of our day. We are

familiar from our masters in this art with the concept of a poem which includes all of history: one in which all ages are contemporaneous. And we might add that prose should be at least as well written as poetry.

In a lifetime, it is unlikely, to speak minimally, that one action will suffice. An *action*, a *formation*, inserted into the continuum as an *information*, will serve as springboard to yet other actions, yet other textures. *Information* bears in it a crux: the crux of the matter is *informaction*. Even the alphabet aids us in this regard.

Tell them now that this lurch forward bears the weight of the procession of memory. Uncertain steps, from an arbitrary point in time, move forward into their own remembrance of themselves. Remembrance is an imperfect tool at best: but, here too, refinement operates. *Summa Memoria*: a recuperation, a diving into the wreck of precision, bringing up, from time to time, as the matter arises, a leavening, ever more profound, of the selfsame existence.

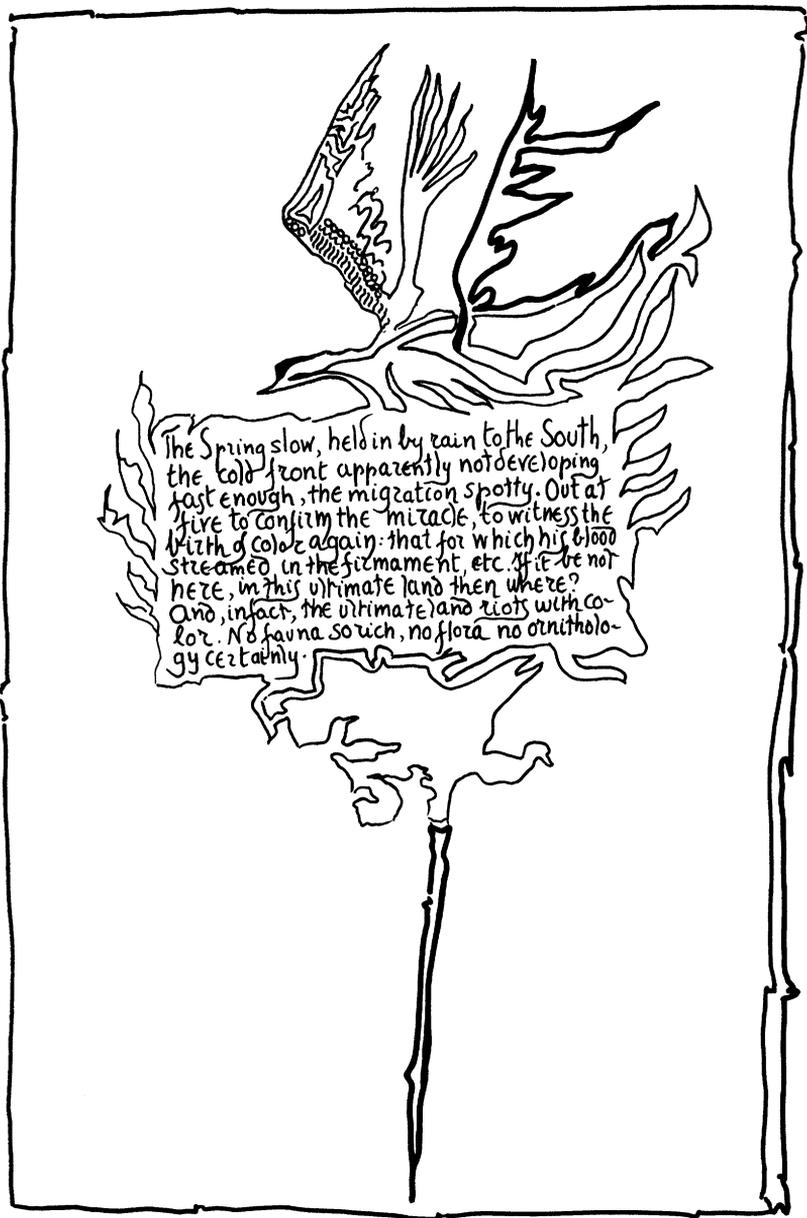
A scrap, left out for dogs or cats, becomes a meal. A meal becomes a communion. A communion may or may not reveal the presence of a living divinity within it, and, hence, within ourselves: it is too early to say. The priesthood works on, as if the divinity were present, or as if, by its informactions, a divinity could be induced to breach into our lives.

“Us,” Durkheimianly, the possibility of that breaching.
All the ordinary, black, whales, surrounding the white.

1.4. Nothing else I can think of at this juncture lays a greater claim to being the first American poem — for that touching the white races is understood — than the 435 plates of J.J.A’s *Birds of America*, the forms of which, derived from water, are now on view for the first time at the New York Historical Society. In Japan, an older hand at these things, they would probably be housed in a temple and permanently on show as a “National Treasure.”

New York, 5-12-73. The mass of this work bears down upon me for the first time, and that it all started from France. 6-30-28: beginnings of this scriptor, rue Francois Premier, Paris, France. A. had the advantage of a sunny disposition in the Isles: my Isles came much later, when I had already created them in my own head.

Let it be a detail, here, merely. Of the work which went into the 435 plates, I learn now, three water-colors were absent in the purchase of 1861. One plate, the Californian Condor, was subsequently found: two others are still at large, if not destroyed.



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These two plates are of blue birds. I shall comment on one only. On that first American day among the warblers (Princeton, N.J.: 5-10-70), two blue creatures had been missing in the riot of discovery: the Cerulean and the Black-Throated-Blue. Gazed at lovingly in the pages of Peterson, these birds had become a haunting.

Saint John, U.S. Virgin Islands: 6-12-70. In a dark grove, among palms and lianas, a stop for hummingbirds. Nothing more tropical in the whole world. The glasses focus on a branch at random, searching the gloom for the small vibrations. Suddenly, from the whole world about him, a male Black-Throated-Blue makes his appearance. Wintering here, as the Black-and-Whites had wintered in Guatemala. Small, infinitesimal web in the pattern of Islands: part of a spiralling return to an early American travel.

Of the two missing plates, one was the Black-Throated-Blue. Tho' JJA had, in effect, painted the bird: mistaking the female for another Species.

It might have been thought that a son addicted to books would receive of his progenitors more than one volume. Of those remembered far back as emanating from a father, one alone stands out. It had not, I believe, been purchased, but, rather, had been recuperated from an old hoard, or found in a bin thrown out to the elements . . . Perhaps indeed, the source of touching *was* that it had been bought: I cannot remember.

The book, still with me, in one of the libraries disposed here and there among these wanderings, was a copy of Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird* in a small edition, with a rather battered blue cover. Its receipt touched me for years, almost to crying. I doubt I read the book.

Back of that, perhaps: Michelet's *L'Oiseau*: a gaudy tropical pair on the dust-jacket. Blue in their feathers certainly: but also the orange of a fiery sun. Read with French-speaking mothers, at a very early time.

1.5. The weather is fine. The apartment is sunlit. Perhaps it is raining, but the rain is illuminated. There is a carpet. Our beds, my brother's and mine, with their wooden bookcases surrounding the wall-side; our desk, two-sided, in the same wood no doubt, other furniture as well. We are playing some games: my mother might be knitting. The endless conflict between my brother and myself (he teasing, I reacting with violence, I getting punished for same) momentarily stilled. A great peace within me, as if everything had suddenly been stopped, as if one's past life (whatever one could remember of that) and the whole, far lengthier, future hummed about us on all sides. For whatever reason, the distant park, a park called

Park of the Nightingales, is not being visited today: but its treasures, its long lawns and its bushes, its waffles and cream-cheese-on-rye restaurants, perhaps its bird songs, stand securely, a few miles away, ready to be visited on another occasion. As few other things stand secure, in a world which is perpetually vanishing — a world in which nothing appears but to disappear and never be seen again.

In an explosion of love, remembered for all time, whether the memory be of the thing itself or the memory of the thing, I leap demonstratively towards my mother and say, over and over again, until she wonders what has bitten me, "I am so happy, I am so happy, I am so happy."

- J1.1. Relation of "A" to "The Abundance of Waters"? I see the layering effect I wanted to achieve coming up here, altho I had not been thinking of it consciously. The "Abundance" could become a central, lyrical section perhaps? Abundance: birth-breaking waters. Remember the pie-in-slices model of book growth. New sections to be insertable: e.g. between 1.3 and 1.4, you would have 1.3.1. or some such. Read *Finnegans Wake*.
Read E.P. — J.J. *Letters*; see where E. P. begged off, or v.v.
American nation: the last on earth. In trouble. Atlantis sinking. Check exact details in Plato and elsewhere.
Check previous use of "Atlantis" as a title.
"Atlantis: a Biography."
"Atlantis: (a) Prose in progress."
"Atlantis: Text in progress."
"Atlantis: a Texture."
ATLANTIZ: Atlant — *is*, phonetically.
Work out Atlanta, Atlas, Atlantic, etc. etc.

Writing is not yet quite exhausted, but nearly. We are always at the penultimate, last work but one. We shall move soon to a total sensorial space in which reader-listener-viewer-feeler, etc. (the mind includes fucker soon enough) turns into *experiencer*. The experience to be so complete, however, that it can be taken over, moved into, invested, acted out. Information/ Informaction: from experiencer to *actor* and out of old art altogether to-wards "la poésie faite par tous"!

- J1.2 I should have said: Build each day's notes for the ongoing process into the text under the classifier: J. for: your guess should be valuable here.

5/13/73

Throw Two

- 2.1. A sudden awakening at 03.15. I am gazing at the skirting of the wall

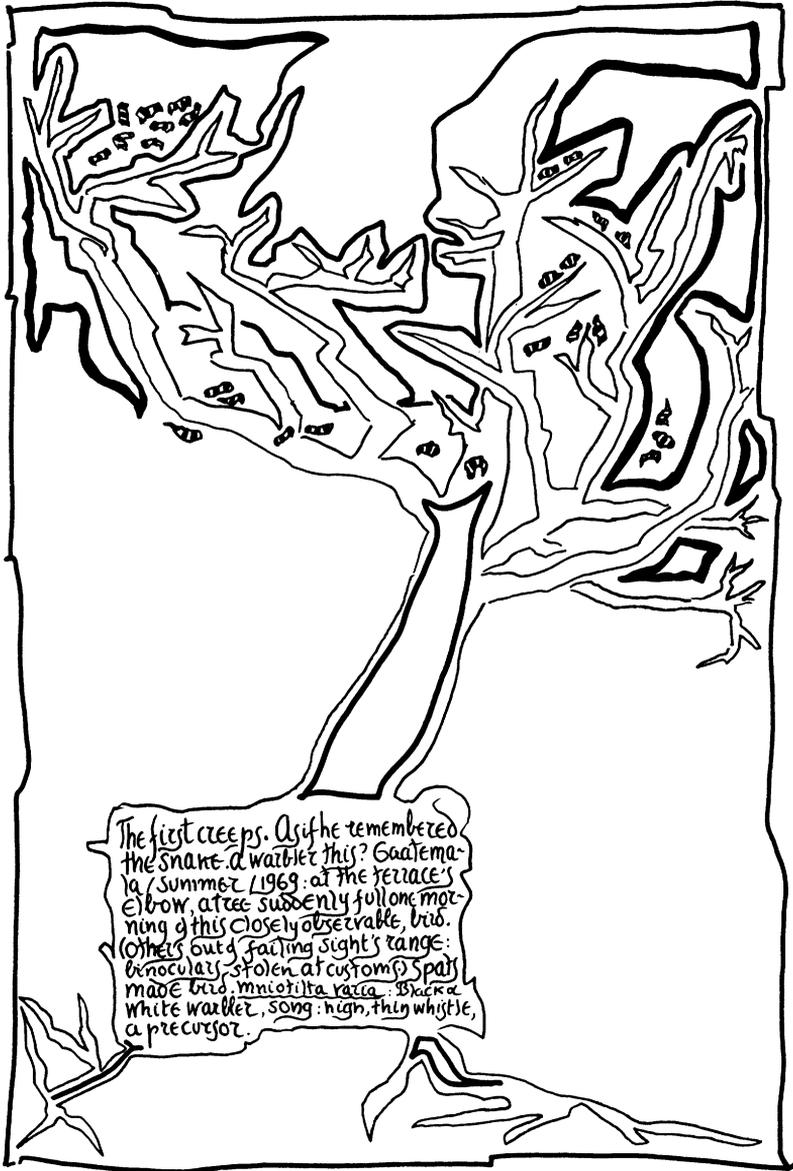
on the right of the bed, wondering whether to read or not, and what. A strange object, out of place, near the books, and larger than it should be. A garden spider. I manage decisively to trap it under a drinking glass and get it out into the garden. Strangely: some weeks ago, a similar sudden awakening had produced a similar result. The spider, more or less in the same place, had been smaller but more repulsive: the body fatter and hairier. Also: the bedroom carpet is not conducive to sliding: a postcard has to be inserted under the glass for the operation to be successful. On that first occasion, it had been messy. I had finally achieved sleep thru avenues of frail legs bent into every posture I know their legs will take.

2.2. I know now that this book was to start with a small spider who, until about three days ago, lived on the ceiling of the bathroom upstairs. A small, compact, elegant – almost military spider. The kind Robert the Bruce would have delighted in watching. In the last hours of his occupation, this spider had seemed determined to discover some small crimp in the ceiling from which, I surmised, he could fasten or cause to depend a threadway to the ground. As he began to work up and down on his invisible thread, he was caught and deported to another room. My intention to mark the theme of a passage from an Above to a Below with this spider, leading from 1.1. to 1.2., had been forgotten. So frail is the web of this quest.

2.3. Subsequent to 1.2., no doubt, the following? Lying in a bed at dawn, or perhaps, at dusk, gazing at a pair of curtains. The curtains are obliterated by a gigantic spider.

2.4. Atitlan: 1951-1952. A small apartment, in the school director's home, consisting of two rooms. A front room, giving onto the street, in which: a desk and two chairs. Back of this, another, smaller room with a camping cot. At the height of the spider season, I would wake every hour or so to find the walls covered with spiders. The walls were not at all smooth: a cheap stucco, painted yellowish, gave the spiders every conceivable foothold and there were far too many for removal. It became a question of killing them, either by swatting or by pursuing the unfortunate beasts with flytox. Exasperated with fear and loathing, I would pursue the larger animals with the juice, until they wallowed in a pool of noxious liquid, the fumes of which were the odor of nightmare for several months.

Burma: 1958-1959, especially in the South. Large garden spiders versus Buddhism. In one way or another, determined not to kill, the object



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was to try to induce the spider to leave the room. Tenaciously, they always managed to cling to unworkable surfaces: a bed cover, for instance, from which it was impossible to remove them. In the chase, they would lose a leg or two. These cripples had to be killed in the end. A terrible disgust at killing; the loathing compounded a hundred fold. Occasions in which, thru the use of various objects forming a corridor leading out of the room, an animal could be led out of the immediate premises, were considered no small triumphs of will and ingenuity.

Japan: 1961. I had written to M.S., a young French Sinologist who had been kind enough to oversee my accommodations, that I would like to live in a Temple. Warnings about spiders. M.S. meets me at the station: everything is arranged, but, first, we will go to his apartment. As I climb the stairs, a spider larger than any I have ever seen greets us at the threshold. During dinner, another appears on the living room floor. I am led to my Temple as to an abattoir.

Left alone in a delightful room, I view the tatami with terror. No elevation off the floor, nothing between oneself and the crawling legs. I insult the tatami by drawing a protective oval of D.D.T. power around the mattress I am due to sleep on. Sweating copiously in the heat, I lie for some time in the dark, convinced I shall not sleep this night.

Morning opens small, ground-level windows onto miniature gardens from which plant leaves bow into the room. A small stone Buddha meditates under one plant: I have survived. A girl brings in breakfast, I squat to enjoy it. Gazing at one of the two windows, I see a large leg suddenly thrust into sight with the grace of a ballerina's testing itself in the wings prior to stage-entry. Within a moment, with a sidling movement, the whole giant comes into view. With a groan of horror, I move cushions and breakfast into the farthest corner of the room and gaze at the animal, as helpless as mouse before snake. The girl returns at my summons and is about to kill when, with copious gestures of piety and reluctance, I indicate that I cannot permit this to happen within a Temple precinct. She shoos the intruder out of the window and I prepare for many sleepless nights. It was an impending flood, however, which eventually took me from the Temple to another location.

2.5. Egg-hunting, bird-egg-hunting, had been abandoned at some such age as 13 or 14, in Derbyshire wilds, when disgust had intervened. The clean collection, consisting in the selection of one egg from a clutch, all too often ending in debacle when, one blowing unsuccessful, I sacrificed or murdered another egg.

Back of this, on the dunes of the Belgian coast, circa 1937 or 1938, disgust closer to the matter of insects. I had concocted a poisonous mixture, rammed into the bottom of a jam-jar and separated from the killing area by a large wedge of cork. Somehow, the powder or liquids from the gas-chamber seeped into the chamber of the captured butterflies, reducing them to a mass of unclassifiable meat-juice. I gave up butterfly collecting at the time other gas chambers were being tested, prepared and used.

2.6. We have an entry into collection. Possession of a closed, ordered world: a world which will not betray, nor talk back too loudly, and which will increase in value as time goes by (no other ways to save for children) — all of this in good time. Re the matter of order made in spite of disorder, the constant re-iteration of order, the rage against the irruption of disorder (loss, misplacement, memory-block, etc.) into an ordered world — another vortex is required.

Here, let there be *heraldry*. Its fascination being connected with variations or transformations of content within a standard, relatively simple form. A love of heraldry may be the mark of a maker who, once and for all, long ago, fell from a great height into loss or pain and cannot any more bear with the thought of an open, infinitely expanding universe. I take it that the relatively simple form provides no more nor less than a guarantee of stability, a guarantee of order within which the ludic function may be exercised. We shall have to talk of closed versus open gardens, also: the early passion for the *hortus conclusus*, the enclosed garden — seen then as illuminated tho with no light from the outside but rather a subtle, inner light. The whole issue of pastorality/wilderness is also brought into question.

Delight in transformation, then, within some kind of playpen. Wild Reader, mistake not the joys of this; have no contempt for the swaddling bands this maker is trapped in by birthright! There but for God's grace . . . for are we not all prisoners?

I say then that early delight consisted remarkably often in the imagination of a slight variation within a standard mode. Most times, the imagination played around color: I would look hard at a favorite pencil whose fate in life was to be a red pencil (the outer covering red, the rind, not the lead) and I would approach ecstasy thinking of what this pencil would be like if its fate were to change it into blue. Likewise, a privileged toy car, bouncing and roaring along on its four rubber wheels, would change from orange to yellow, or black to green.

Similarly, is it not so that the charm of many collector's items, of many "collectibles," resides in their being a system of transformations? Butterflies, birds' eggs or birds themselves, postage stamps, toy models (involving very often the notion of livery, or uniform), coins: most of these have one form and an infinite variety of content. Nor does the sophistication of collecting stop here: it spreads into the visual field where the world in its infinite variety becomes a prey. A passion for warblers, genus *Parula*, heralds in one observer that particular cast of mind. Or for the liveries on men and machines: trains, cars, aeroplanes. We are in the realm of *la pensée classificatrice*, tho I cannot remember without checking back whether or not Lévi-Strauss dealt with the vice of collection. And heraldry itself, of course, bespeaks the classificatory instinct, in a world where social relations, within the pale, is part of a steady world-order, where everybody can, eventually, *even* when once unmasked, be recognized and recognizable.

"It is not to be known that we ask," I wrote most recently, "but to be recognized."

That collecting and a heraldic system go hand in glove, then, whether the collector be a sense like that of sight or a possessional enterprise, must arise out of this need for order, this enormous and all-encompassing requirement of security. That progress, of more than one sort, in the work and in the spirit, would seem to require of us today that we adopt an open view of the universe and an open view of that labor which we choose above all to perform therein, may well go against a most intimate grain in the human spirit — that grain which organized the known geography into pivots, cardinal directions, ordered systems of signatures among stones or among stars — the very grain, indeed, which, from another angle, those very workers in open-field systems like to think of as their favorite lore. If one part of the mind weighs anchor then, and sails across periploid seas, another part of that same mind may tie itself down more securely within very old topographies? No discussion of the poem today can, it would seem, be complete without the notion that freedom in one aspect may call for a lack of freedom elsewhere and that the spirit will trigger in one direction what it will inhibit in yet another. Of such stuff shall much of this be made: no other obsession is so potent, nor is any theme so germane to the problem of the all and the many: a major ploy.

J(M)2.1. Re J1.1.: at the time of writing, had not yet decided on subtitle: "Volume One: An Abundance of Waters." The term "auto-anthropology" not yet coined.

Unconscious as yet of rhyme Atitlan/Atlantis.

For further, metalinguistic, development of these two "throws," see "The Heraldic Vision: Some Cognitive Models for Ethnopoetics," a paper delivered at the Ethnopoetics Conference, Center for Twentieth Century Studies, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, April 1975. Birds are often present as elements in a heraldic system in *Lyrics for the Bride of God*, *New Directions*, 1975, as well as in such poems as *Three Comings to the House of Leaves*. On spiders as earth/air mediators, see *Narrative of the Spiders* (1975).

J(M)2.2. Written on the day of "The Trickster." 2.27.74.

5/14/73