



Ethnopoetics: Somapoetics

while on
 Obadiah Bruen's Island, the Algonquins
 steeped fly agaric in whortleberry juice
 to drink to see

—Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, II.90¹

The provenance of ethnomycology traces a curious genealogy. Rooted in a certain conception of mycology surely, ethnomycology has been but imperfectly grafted to anthropology and ethnography yet has long been nourished from an underground wellspring of literature, poetry, and oral tradition. R. Gordon Wasson, never reluctant to lay claim to his own role as the putative founder of ethnomycology, successfully positioned his landmark publications—*Mushrooms, Russia, and History* (1957) and *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (1968)—as the twin pillars of ethnomycological inquiry.² Each of these bears an equal burden of a profound and lasting impact: the former, far less about Russia than an account of the use of psilocybe mushrooms in Mazatec shamanism, contextualized the Western reconnaissance of native uses of psychoactive fungi as a predominant paradigm, setting the general tone for the field; the latter, a speculative but brilliantly convincing

historical reconstruction of religious traditions attendant to the Soma plant in the *RgVeda*, fixed attention on a single psychoactive fungus, *Amanita muscaria*, as a model of the source of human relations with the sacred, expressed in religion and in verse. With these and subsequent writings, Wasson effectively launched ethnomycology as a sub-conventional sub-discipline tangential to much of anthropology (Wasson was *not* an anthropologist, and the politics of his fieldwork in Oaxaca remains troubling and problematic), thus to situate the field, at least for a period of time, relative to inquiry about (and experience with) states of consciousness induced by psychoactive mushrooms. That this offshoot of mycology was responsible, in part, for the psychedelic revolution of the 1960s has been well-documented.³ Wasson thereafter insisted that the term *entheogenic*, a coinage meaning “revealing the god within,” refer to the effects of mind-altering mushrooms in a desperate replacement for the vulgar term *psychedelic*—a vain attempt to distance the high holiness of his quest for *teonanacatl* in Oaxaca from the street acid antics of merry pranksters and deadheads sharing their shrooms.

Since the 1950s, ethnomycology has come to share fairly common ground with ethnobotany insofar as indigenous uses of plants



Amanita muscaria. Photo courtesy of Michael Wood.

and mushrooms often prove associated, if not always in practice then in the theoretical formulations that organize systematic inquiry into these subjects. Harvard botanist Richard Evans Schultes, Wasson's contemporary, made the most Herculean efforts to advance the ethnobotany of plant hallucinogens; in fact, he wrote about *teonanacatl* and the Aztecs in 1940, years before Wasson's researches.⁴ Ethnomycology underwent significant cross-fertilization with ethnobotany but has affiliated less with *ethnoscience*, a branch of anthropology predicated on point-by-point mapping of indigenous taxonomies and linguistic categories that describe the natural world *in toto* from the native point of view. One classic model of this kind is Harold Conklin's studies of the plant world of the Hanunóo of the Philippine Islands, which in turn provided data utilized by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the structuralist anthropology of *The Savage Mind* (1962). Because less aligned with the rigors of participant observation and the holistic approach of anthropological fieldwork, one tendency of ethnomycology has been to rely on historical sources, as Wasson did in *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*. Wasson's case that *Amanita muscaria* was Soma, the divine intoxicant in the *RgVeda* was bolstered by extensive quotation from explorers, travelers, and anthropologists in Siberia from the 17th century onward. Deploying ethnohistorical evidence about indigenous uses of psychoactive mushrooms has been pushed to extremes, however, particularly by enthusiasts of these mushrooms. A case in point is Peter Lamborn Wilson's *Ploughing the Clouds: The Search for Irish Soma* (1999). Relying solely on inter-

pretations of Celtic myth, Wilson attempted to show that there was an Irish version of the Vedic Soma cult and that "the ceremonial and sacramental use of Soma might have spread between India and Ireland." His premise that "whatever we may find in Ireland that looks like Soma, and smells like Soma, might very well be Soma" is tendentious speculation at best. Lacking scientific evidence that species of *psilocybe* are native to Ireland or historical evidence of an actual "mushroom cult" in the Emerald Isle, he offers us instead apples, hazelnuts, and rowanberries as metaphoric substitutes. According to Wilson, if the fungal Soma is absent, then botanicals that fulfill a "Soma-function" provide sufficient evidence that the Irish and their predecessors have been ploughing the clouds with *psilocybe* for centuries. Wilson has not consulted the mycological literature or even considered the phyto-geographical dimensions of his unwarranted conclusions, and his speculative history heeds a literary calling but teeters on the brink of pseudo-science: supposition presented as fact.⁵

The crux of the matter is precisely literary. Despite the objectives of historical reconstruction implicit in their arguments, despite the authentic embrace of mycology as a branch of biological science, what is most remarkable in both cases—Gordon Wasson and Lamborn Wilson (and there are others)—is the depth of their connection to forms of literary representation. The assumption that ethnomycology will naturally follow an ethnographic means toward an anthropological end (i.e., the factual description of the uses of mushrooms in other cultures) has been thwarted again and again by the poetics of the mushroom. From the very beginning, Wasson himself was responsible for this detour from anthropology to poetry for at least three reasons: he did not follow anthropological method but rather his own fascinated quest for psychoactive fungi; most of his writings, but especially *MRH* and *Soma*, are highly idiosyncratic literary endeavors before they are anything else; and, finally, he lavished attention on literary form in his focus on the poetic utterance of Maria Sabina and the exegesis of the *RgVeda*. Wasson came to see his own initiation into mycology in mythic terms: the oft-repeated story of his Catskills honeymoon in which, to his amazement and horror, his newly wed Valentina Wasson revealed her passion for mushroom collecting has acquired the aura of a myth of origins. His writing suffers from theatrical posturing that is bombastic, rhetorical, and stylistically excessive; e.g., from his elevation of nonce words like "mushroomic" to the level of technical jargon to his publication of a grand series of Ethnomycological Studies, of which *Soma* was the first, that included several cranky polemical rejoinders to published criticism of his work as if ethnomycology was a tournament of misguided scholars where Wasson alone jousted in defense of the Truth. The American literary critic Edmund Wilson remarked of *MRH* that besides being unmanageable, inept, and muddled Wasson's etymological musings on the derivations of mushroom words that form the bulk of *MRH* volume one are

“terribly compromised . . . by entangling them in a web of improvisations that have no basis in science or common sense.” Edmund Wilson complained that the “literary style of the Wassons is calculated to horripilate the literary as well as to alienate the scientific reader.”⁶

This, then, is the literary ground of ethnomycology. Terence McKenna shrewdly noted the importance of the literary aspects of Wasson in his essay “Wasson’s Literary Precursors” and named Lewis Carroll, H. G. Wells, and John Uri Lloyd among those who created fantasies that seemed to predict the existence of psychoactive fungi before they were known to science.⁷ Wasson himself drew casually on the work of William Blake, William Henry Hudson, and A. E. Housman to shore up the weaknesses of his literary conception. Easy to see how the fiery tongues of Blake’s prophetic verse apply to seekers “bemushroomed” by psilocybe, or how Wasson’s enchantment with fungi finds a cozy parallel in W. H. Hudson’s devotion to nature, but what of classical scholar Housman, best known for the poetry of *A Shropshire Lad*? Wasson was fond of Housman’s lecture “The Name and Nature of Poetry” (1933), which seems an unlikely foundation on which to erect a literary theory, especially one that claims relevance to ethnomycology. Housman argued that poetry is more physical than intellectual, a secretion of the human spirit just as turpentine is a secretion of the fir tree, or the pearl of the oyster. Housman de-emphasized meaning in poetry, and Wasson exploited the idea that poetry is “measurable by physiological reflexes” to explain the link between the ineffability of the mushroom experience and the poetic utterance that paradoxically makes it manifest in language.⁸ The emphasis on the physicality of what is essentially lyrical or spiritual is curiously rooted in the differing meanings of the word “soma.” In the first, from the Greek, *soma* is “the body of an organism in contrast to the germ cells;” consequently, “somatic” refers to that which is bodily, corporeal, or physical. In the second, from the Sanskrit, *soma* is “an intoxicating drink holding a prominent place in Vedic ritual and religion; prepared from the juice of a plant commonly supposed to have been *Asclepias acida* or *Sarcostemma viminalis*.”⁹ Wasson overturned this supposition by identifying Soma as *Amanita muscaria*; when his *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* hit the scene in 1968, it found a most receptive environment—if not particularly within mycology itself, then certainly in academia and fractally along its fringes.

The groundswell of notoriety attained by *Mushrooms, Russia, and History* in its depiction of the ritual use of *Psilocybe caerulescens* and allies by the Mazatec shaman Maria Sabina catalyzed not only an incipient drug culture in the U.S. but also the American academy: anthropology, psychology, literary studies, and poetics. The ferment of the 1960s witnessed turmoil in higher education as students and scholars created new disciplines of study from the old and supercharged the interdisciplinary connections among them all. George Quasha and Jerome Rothenberg are two poets/

scholars most responsible for creating and developing the field of *ethnopoetics* as part of the burgeoning awareness of peoples and cultures (via mainstream anthropology and globalization) based on their acute sense of the need to promote expression of indigenous voices from the underground stream of the world’s poetries. In their initial forays into ethnopoetics, Quasha and Rothenberg celebrated and published native poetries from around the world, but in this they accomplished much more: they potentiated a scholarly/literary movement that combined a heightened awareness of *ethnos* and *poesis* by identifying the original source of human meaning in vocal utterance as sacred action, finding this source time after time in native oral traditions and poetic experimentation. Rothenberg has been fond of quoting the poet David Antin’s idea of ethnopoetics as “People’s Poetics or the poetics of natural language.” As Antin elaborated, “What I take the ‘poetics’ part of ethnopoetics to be is the structure of those linguistic acts of invention and discovery through which the mind explores the transformational power of language and discovers and invents the world and itself.”¹⁰ It is neither a deep secret nor should it be a big surprise that ethnopoetics gained significant measure of its inspiration and material from sources close to ethnomycology.

Among Jerome Rothenberg’s many publications relating to ethnopoetics and indigenous poetry, *Technicians of the Sacred* (1968) and *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1972) stand out as path-breaking anthologies that quickly established the wildly heterogeneous nature of the field. He and George Quasha together edited *America, A Prophecy* (1973), a wide-ranging anthology of poetry from the Americas, Blakean in its expansiveness of outlook and pre-Columbian in depth of history. In the 1960s, Quasha taught at the State University at Stony Brook in New York, and in 1968 he started the poetry journal *Stony Brook* whose circle of advisory editors was international in scope. Among these Rothenberg was awarded responsibility for “Ethnopoetics” in *Stony Brook* 1/2; indeed, this is where the word first saw print. In 1970, Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock founded a new journal in association with the Stony Brook Poetics Foundation headed by Quasha; known as *Alcheringa*, it quickly became the unifying voice for ethnopoetics in the U.S. through the 1970s. *Alcheringa* (which means “the Eternal Dream Time,” derived from the Arunta of Australia) positioned itself as “a first magazine of the world’s tribal poetries,” and in its devotion to poetry as “the free development of ethnic self-awareness” it emphasized translations of tribal poetries whose intrinsic value far superseded their contextualization as ethnographic data.¹¹ *Alcheringa* stood foremost amid a host of independent literary journals loosely organized around ethnopoetics such as *Kuksu* (Journal of Backcountry Writing), *NewWorld Journal* (published by Turtle Island Press and the Nezahualcoyotl Historical Society), *Coyote’s Journal* (edited by James Koller), *Truck* (edited by David Wilk) and *Io* (edited by Richard Grossinger). *NewWorld Journal* and *Io* deserve special comment. The former issued only four numbers from



Psilocybe cyanescens. Photo courtesy of Fred Stevens.

1975 to 1980; published by Bob Callahan, Turtle Island Press promoted Charles Olson, Carl Ortwin Sauer, and particularly the renegade linguist/storyteller Jaime de Angulo as primary inspirations in one of the most illuminating explorations of the biogeography and ethnohistory of North America from an oblique orbit around mainstream anthropology. Jaime de Angulo, whose reading of *Indian Tales* on KPFA radio in Berkeley, California in the 1940s was legendary, proved an important precursor for *Alcheringa* as well. The ethnoastronomy and Olson-Melville Sourcebook issues of *Io* were equally remarkable, covering much of the same esoteric ethnohistorical territory as *NewWorld Journal* and *Alcheringa*.

After five issues, Rothenberg and Tedlock inaugurated the *Alcheringa* new series in 1975 with renewed dedication to recharge language by exploring “tribal ontologies, cosmologies, and the poetics that present them [via] transcriptions and translations of oral poems from living traditions, ancient texts with oral roots, and modern experiments in oral poetry.”¹² When *Alcheringa* ceased publication in 1980, Rothenberg quickly established its successor, *New Wilderness Letter*, along with a series of books called New Wilderness Poetics, whose first and only publication was *Maria Sabina: Her Life and Chants* (1981). Whereas Wasson had enshrouded the mushroom ritual of Maria Sabina in a costly, inaccessible, and lavishly self-indulgent monograph (*Maria Sabina and her Mazatec Mushroom Velada*), Rothenberg preferred to bring her Word to public attention via this inexpensive paperback: the vulgate of Maria Sabina, so to speak, compared to Wasson’s King James Version. The revelations about Maria Sabina had long reverberated through ethnopoetics just as it had through the psychedelic counter-culture. Her ritualized expression of the velada and its meaning was rooted in poetic performance, a fact that Wasson himself recognized from the very beginning. As he wrote breathlessly of his Oaxaca field trip to William Jacob Robbins in 1955:

Our trip this time has been, my dear Dr. Robbins, sensational. On our third try, and building on our previous experience, we broke through the reserve of our Indian friends, and my photographer companion and I attended two all-night vigils or mushroom rites on June 29 and July 2, with a shaman (a woman) putting on an absolutely first-class performance. She was fully possessed by the inebriating mushrooms, and also always fully self-possessed. She gave us the mushrooms, which we too ate unwashed and raw. We too had visions, powerful ones, with eyes wide open. . . . I suspect we have come upon an hallucinogen of major importance.¹³

Casting himself as an explorer racing breakneck toward the antipodes in search of the Grail, Wasson glorified ethnomycolgy as a “daring hypothesis” for which he alone had proprietary claim. Rothenberg’s presentation of Maria Sabina to the reading public has had a more salutary character. As an internationally acclaimed poet who has explored his own ethnic identity through poetry along with such disparate subjects as Dada and surrealism, numerology, jazz, and his ethnographic fieldwork among the Seneca, he has emphasized Maria Sabina’s visionary language as an authentic form of poetry, not “alien/exotic” but whose words embody a sacred power to heal and to re-create the world. Because he found her central to the historical origin of ethnopoetics, Rothenberg did not abandon her or her poetry: he included her “Midnight Velada” in a major anthology, *Poems for the Millenium* (1995–1998) and, more significantly, he edited *Maria Sabina: Selections* (2003) in the Poets for the Millenium series of the University of California Press. This volume is essentially an expanded and more carefully crafted edition of *Maria Sabina: Her Life and Chants*. Both volumes vividly present the story of Maria Sabina’s discovery of psilocybe mushrooms (whom she calls “saint children”) and their relationship to language and the sacred.

The Wise Man Juan Manuel had arrived to cure Uncle Emilio Cristino; for the first time I witnessed a vigil with the *saint children*. . . . I saw how the Wise Man Juan Manuel lit the candles and talked to the Lords of the Mountains and the Lords of the Springs. I saw how he distributed the mushrooms counting them by pairs and gave them to each of those present, including the sick person. Later, in complete darkness, he talked, talked, and talked. His language was very pretty. It pleased me. At times the Wise Man sang, sang, and sang. I didn’t understand his words, but I liked them. It was a different language from what we speak in the daytime. It was a language that without my comprehending it attracted me. It was a language that spoke of stars, animals, and other things unknown to me. . . . Years later . . . I gave myself up for

always to wisdom, in order to cure the sicknesses of people and to be myself always close to God. One should respect the little mushrooms. At bottom I feel they are my family. As if they were my parents, my blood. In truth I was born with my destiny. To be a Wise Woman. To be a daughter of the *saint children*.¹⁴

In the essay “The Mushrooms of Language,” Henry Munn (Rothenberg’s contact with Maria Sabina) explained the poetic nexus of the shaman’s experience in the Mazatec ritual: “The shaman has a conception of *poesis* in its original sense as an action: words themselves are medicine. To enunciate and give meaning to the events and situations of existence is life giving in itself.”¹⁵ Indeed, Maria Sabina attributed an intensively personifying role to the mushrooms, allowing her to open up the Book of Language to become one with the *saint children* in the moment of utterance. She said:

Language belongs to the *saint children*. They speak and I have the power to translate. If I say that I am the little woman of the Book, that means that a *Little-One-Who-Springs-Forth* is a woman and that she is the little woman of the Book. In that way, during the vigil, I turn into a mushroom—little woman—of the Book . . .¹⁶

Maria Sabina’s speech and performance have left an indelible mark on the history of ethnopoetics; not surprisingly, they have also supplied inspiration to poets at large. Rothenberg memorialized her in the poem “The Little Saint of Huautla”:

hiding from strangers’ eyes
the way the mushrooms hide
withhold their language
will not speak
except when the children’s voices
tell us¹⁷

More striking yet is Anne Waldman’s “Fast Speaking Woman,” a chanted poem that imitates the incantatory structure and poetic cadences of Maria Sabina’s own recitative. Waldman, co-founder of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute, discovered in Maria Sabina an opportunity to give voice to the free play of the imagination from the perspective of feminist poetics and practice. How the Mazatec collision with Western culture through Wasson’s encounter with Maria Sabina has transformed Oaxaca is beyond the scope of this essay; the interested reader is referred to Benjamin Feinberg’s *The Devil’s Book of Culture: History, Mushrooms, and Caves in Southern Mexico* (2003) as a starting point for a consideration of this history on Mazatec identity.



Just as Rothenberg’s penetrating appreciation of Maria Sabina pursued the poetic implications of *Mushrooms, Russia, and History*; George Quasha’s appropriation of Wasson depends largely on *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*. Quasha’s *Somapoetics* (1973) is a Blakean extravaganza of self-referential, free verse musings on imagination, sexuality, and how we come to know. To break into meaning through the surface tension of this perplexing and enlivening text, one’s mind needs to rev up its cognitive corkscrew to bore into Quasha’s questions, memories, and latter-day proverbs dredged up from the cosmic unconscious and the visions provoked by mushrooms. Mushrooms are abundant in *Somapoetics*, and Quasha is an astute reader not only of Wasson’s *Soma* but of the Vedic texts on which the *Amanita muscaria* theory of Soma derives. This meta-mythological and hermetic text requires both ethnopharmacological and literary savvy of the reader who embarks on its somapoetic journey into language—into *mental space*—through the lyric configurations of the poem. Terence McKenna maintained that the world is not made of “quarks or electromagnetic waves, or stars, or planets, or any of these things. I believe the world is made of language.” Anyone who has pondered, say, James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* or Blake’s *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* as Quasha has is well-positioned to accept this truth. He has insinuated into his poem a psycho-topography of fungi that attests to their role in the formulation of language and consciousness, and he does so without faltering into the quagmire of hyperbole and sophomoric triviality that characterize much of the writing about psychoactive drugs. Walt Whitman claimed that the “cleanest expression is that which finds no sphere worthy of itself and makes one.”¹⁸ In this sense Quasha has produced in *Somapoetics* a new free form, one that searches the mindscape of language in order to query the human spirit, and it does so true to his own muse and the Blakean principle of poetic torsion. It is no exaggeration to assert that Quasha is an heir of William Blake.

Of course, Quasha was not the first poet ever to rhapsodize about Soma. John Greenleaf Whittier, the venerable American poet most famous for “Snowbound,” wrote a poem “The Brewing of Soma” in which he lauds the Vedic verse that embalms “the drink of the Gods.” James Thurber in *Is Sex Necessary?* offers a clever, tongue-in-cheek footnote on the confusing etymology of Soma, which can mean “a god, a liquor, and an asclepiadaceous climbing shrub.” Thurber warns us that “if your eyes stray even a fraction of an inch, in looking up ‘somatic’ [in the dictionary], you are in ‘sölvsbergite’ which includes the feldspars, aegirite, grorudite, and tinguaitite.”¹⁹ And Aldous Huxley, no stranger to experimentation with mind-altering chemicals and their religious implications (*The Doors of Perception* treats his experience with mescaline), con-

cocted a memorable bit of doggerel in his dystopian prophecy *Brave New World* that neatly captures the prefab emotions of the ubiquitous drug that makes everybody happy and normal:

*Hug me till you drug me, honey;
Kiss me till I'm in a coma:
Hug me, honey, snuggly bunny;
Love's as good as soma.*²⁰

But in none of these instances was Soma connected with a mushroom until Wasson scrutinized the verses of the *Rg Veda* to find the intoxicating Soma metaphorically associated with the androgynous clouds from which milk and rain are pressed to suggest that it was plausibly the fly agaric, *Amanita muscaria*.

We might say that ethnomycology and ethnopoetics gave birth to *Somapoetics*, and while the individual poems that comprise it have effectively been collected into a single volume, the entire sequence of numbered poems has a complicated publishing history. The root of the sequence was the poem “Of the Woman the Earth Bore to Keep” in *Stony Brook*; some appeared early on in *Alcheringa* and *America, A Prophecy. Word-Yum* (*Somapoetics* 64–69) and *Amanita's Hymnal* have appeared separately. In *Somapoetics* Quasha constructs an edifice of language around the multiple associations of Soma, and his gnostic musings lead to the realization that the Muse Herself draws inspiration from the fungal tongues of the earth:

Look
how Mother Clio-Erato secretly smokes Her Claviceps, a
fungus, called “Cock's Spur,” not yet in the field guides,
those passive paradigms
*in our shaking hands.*²¹

Field guides are merely “passive paradigms” of classification (Blake’s “single vision of Newton’s sleep”), whereas the electric pulse of imagination sparks the dynamic forms of consciousness. Quasha returns to the ideas of the Romantics, this time not Blake but Coleridge, for a principle to identify the creativity of the poetic moment. He calls it “esemplastic mushrooming.”²² *Esemplastic* derives from the *Biographia Literaria* of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and means “shaping or having the power to shape disparate things into a unified whole—used of the imagination.” *Esemplastic* mushrooming defines any act of imagination that opens to consciousness the mysterious condition of its own being in the world. In other words, poetic composition happens just like mushrooms springing up, embodying a principle of mysterious birth. Quasha also hit on *somapoeia* as an equivalent, building on Ezra Pound’s tripartite distinction of phanopoeia, melopoeia, and logopoeia. Metaphorically, mushrooms embody the mysterious birth of language. For Quasha, the sudden appearance of mushrooms “had all the conditions for me of what the poetic moment is,” i.e., “they



Amanita muscaria. Photo courtesy of Michael Wood.

appear magically, unpredictably, and nothing you think about matters in the moment you see them, but everything comes alive at that moment.”²³ By the time he came to write *Somapoetics*, Quasha had totally accepted the idea that the Soma of the Vedas was *Amanita muscaria*, and in a fundamental sense *Somapoetics* deals with what mushrooms are to the mind:

Inner fungi
are working day and night in us.
Hail Twin!
Dance freely among my organs,
the phalloids, the stinkhorns, the panthers, the
*muscarines.*²⁴

If Quasha’s poetry appears to us the workings of a dervish oblivious to mycology as a science, like Mayakovsky madly dashing off after his adored mushrooms but missing his train, it’s only because we have failed to cultivate the aesthetic and poetic dimensions of our object of study. Ethnomycology brings us closer to poetry because of its intrinsic relation to psychoactive mushrooms and to primitive mythologies in which fungi (like other natural objects) bear highly charged symbolic meanings. Our somapoetic moments have been tested out only on nomenclature, for when we pause to tease out meaning from species names in botanical Latin, we are apt to discover the poetry anew. Re-

grettably, the names of certain species of psilocybe discovered in the course of the Mazatec fieldwork suffer from a load of scientific hubris; e.g., Wasson accused Rolf Singer of hijacking *Psilocybe wassonii* Heim in favor of *Psilocybe muliercula* Singer. With a wry smile, Alexander Smith once lamented this petty sniping in the title of his *Mycologia* article, “Comments on Hallucinogenic Agarics and the Hallucinations of Those who Study Them.”²⁵ Rather, we should give mycology over to the poets and ask Charles Olson, Jerome Rothenberg, George Quasha, Gary Snyder, or Anne Waldman what to make of the Kingdom Fungi. Olson, of course, is no longer with us, but he was cognizant of psilocybe and fly agaric alike, and they form notable ingredients of his thinking in his last years, and of his masterpiece *The Maximus Poems*. The mycologist William Alphonso Murrill, whose illustrious career at the New York Botanical Garden was cut short due to illness, depression, and despair left us the most honest assessment of these mushrooms at the end of his fractured life, at the very dawn of ethnomycology. The octogenarian Murrill, impoverished and ailing, had read Wasson’s famous *Life Magazine* article of May 13, 1957, describing the encounter with Maria Sabina; shortly afterwards, he wrote a brief note from Florida to a friend in the Bronx:

Dear Rosalie: Thanks for the \$3.00. Lots of rain here and many fleshy fungi appearing. See *Life* for May 13 with a very interesting article on “magic” mushrooms. My *Psilocybe caerulea* was collected by me right here in Gainesville, I think. Some northern species of *Panaeolus* have the same magic effect. Better try some.²⁶

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