

An Apollonian Scream: Nathaniel Mackey's Rewriting of the Coltrane Poem in 'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun'

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In early December 1965, Nathaniel Mackey, then eighteen years old, walked into New York's Village Gate jazz club, on the corner of Thompson and Bleecker streets in Greenwich Village, with a few friends from Princeton University. He had brought them on this particular evening to hear John Coltrane, who since November had been hired for a month-long residency alongside comedian/social activist Dick Gregory and singer Carmen McRae.

Mackey's party arrived late, after Gregory and McRae had already performed. Trane was up on stage with what seemed an unusually large band: four saxophonists, two drummers, double bass and piano. His 'classic' quartet (Elvin Jones on drums, McCoy Tyner on piano, Jimmy Garrison on bass), to which Mackey had been an avid listener on albums such as *Coltrane Live at Birdland* (October-November 1963), *Crescent* (April and June 1964), and *A Love Supreme* (December 1964), were all there, but had been noticeably augmented.¹ On drums, Jones had been joined by Rashied Ali, an expert at playing the multidirectional, pulseless rhythms to which Coltrane (although Mackey didn't know it at the time) was becoming increasingly interested. Out front, Trane had been joined by three other saxophonists, all distinctive post-bebop voices and members of the 'New Thing' experimental brigade that was making a stir in New York jazz circles: the tenor saxophonists Archie Shepp and Pharoah Sanders, and the alto saxophonist Marion Brown.

¹ *Coltrane Live at Birdland*: Impulse! 051198-2; *Crescent*: Impulse! 051200-2; *A Love Supreme*: Impulse! 051155-2.

For Mackey, as he recalled in our interview in his office at the University of California, Santa Cruz on 19 May, 2008, all of this came as a shock. A lag between the recording of Coltrane's albums and their release by Impulse! Records meant that the last record he had heard was in fact *A Love Supreme*, Coltrane's 'spiritual conversion' narrative that went on to become the highest-selling jazz album of all time up until that point. But *A Love Supreme* was a far cry from what Coltrane had been recording throughout 1965, most notably on *Ascension* (25 June).² As free jazz musicologist Ekkehard Jost has noted, the former was ostensibly modal music, noteworthy for its use of motive as a structural tie between sections (a new feature in Coltrane's work), its proclamation of a new, outwardly spiritual attitude, and its intensely concentrated quartet playing. *Ascension* was something different. Described by reviewer Bill Mathieu as 'possibly the most powerful human sound ever recorded', it was free (rather than modal) jazz and featured a much expanded ensemble to that encountered in recent Coltrane recordings: the 'classic' quartet joined by two alto saxophones (Marion Brown and John Tchicai), three tenor saxophones (Coltrane plus Shepp and Sanders) and two trumpeters (Freddie Hubbard and Dewey Johnson).³ Moreover these soloists, when required to play above the rhythm section (rather than in passages of 'collective improvisation'), adopt a very different method to what was traditional in jazz improvisation. Rather than develop their solos melodically, via pitch, rhythm, dynamics and so on, they give far greater priority to timbre, producing what Jost calls 'a-melodic structures primarily delineated by changes in colour and register'.⁴ Coltrane, for instance, makes extended use of overblowing ('screaming') in the highest register, split-tones, multiphonics and rapid successions of related phrases to sound as if he is in some kind of acute self-dialogue (Amiri Baraka likened it to a 'grown man learning to speak'⁵); Shepp, adopting a 1930s-style vibrato, avoids fixed pitch as much as possible by bending and stretching his notes with smears and glissandos; Brown employs extremely rapid tremolos and trills to give an impression of playing multiple sounds at once; while Sanders

plays hardly any lines that have a recognisable melodic context. Predominant in his improvising are multiple sounds—some sustained, some given a speechlike cadence—all without

² *Ascension*: Impulse! 543413-2.

³ Qtd. in Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (New York: Da Capo, 1994), p.86.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.95.

⁵ Amiri Baraka, *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), p.59.

clearly definable pitches. Breaking up these sounds are extremely fast runs through the range of the saxophone. But the runs must not be taken as melodic elements either. Their purpose is kinetic.⁶

As Mackey recalled, there was something of this ‘kinetic’, timbre-prioritising approach to improvisation on display when he entered that night at the Village Gate. Coltrane’s large ensemble, most of whom had performed on *Ascension*, were working their way through familiar material: the Mongo Santamaría composition ‘Afro Blue’, an F minor blues first recorded by the Carl Tjader Sextet (with Santamaría on percussion) in April 1959 and made famous as a quartet performance on *Coltrane Live at Birdland*. But Mackey quickly noticed that this version, exploring harmonic, rhythmic and timbral tangents almost unrecognisable from the main tune (‘head’), was ‘much wilder’ from what he had heard previously.⁷ (Later, he realised it was more like the forty-minute version heard on Coltrane’s July 1966 recording *Live at Japan*.⁸) After the piece finished, Mackey noticed that Coltrane had sat himself by the bar, drinking scotch, on a chair not far from where his Princeton group were sitting. Sensing an opportunity to meet a musical idol, Mackey decided to go up to him.

I walked over and said hello, shook his hand, and told him I really loved his music. And I made a request [laughter], I asked if he would play [the Coltrane original] ‘Equinox’ in the second set, and he said ‘Well, no, we’ve got something else planned’. And they came out for the second set and they played [the Harold Arlen standard] ‘Out of this World’, and that was the whole set. They played an hour-long version of ‘Out Of This World’, an hour plus. It was wild.⁹

Twelve years later, while teaching in the English department at the University of Southern California, Mackey began writing a poem that attempted to capture something of that ‘wildness’ of Coltrane’s hour-long performance of ‘Out of This World’ in language.¹⁰ A. B. Spellman—who

⁶ Jost, *Free Jazz*, p.90.

⁷ Nathaniel Mackey, ‘Interview by Luke Harley’, no pagination.

⁸ *John Coltrane Live in Japan*: Impulse! GRD-4102.

⁹ Mackey, ‘Interview by Luke Harley’, no pagination.

¹⁰ In an email correspondence dated 20 October, 2010, Mackey claims that it was ‘toward the end of 1977 (November or December)’ that he started writing

had attended the Coltrane engagement at the Village Gate and been similarly impressed—said that ‘trane’s horn had words in it’, and Mackey began contemplating what these words might be.¹¹ But Mackey, of course, was far from alone. In fact nearly a decade before Mackey composed the poem that was to become ‘Ohnedaruth’s Day Begun’, the Coltrane poem, as Kimberly W. Benston notes, had fast been emerging as a recognisable subgenre in black poetry, to the extent that Henry Lacy proclaimed it ‘an expected piece in the repertoire of the black poet’.¹² Hundreds, if not thousands of poems were being written in Coltrane’s honour, most of them between 1967 and 1969, in the two years following his passing. Yet not all African American poets clamoured to eulogise the saxophonist in verse, Sam Greenlee for instance, in his 1971 poem ‘Memorial for Trane’, observing: ‘Yeah, man, / I’ll help out / with the / memorial for/ Trane. / But, I wonder / how come / a people / who dig life / so much / spend / so much / time / praising the dead?’¹³

Among jazz poetry anthologies, Stephen Henderson’s *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1972) included a number of Coltrane poems; likewise Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa’s *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* (1991), compiled nearly two decades later, and their follow-up volume *The Second Set* (1996). Mackey and Art Lange’s *Moment’s Notice: Jazz in Poetry & Prose* (1993) takes a less mainstream stance, its editors aiming to ‘better represent the experimental end of the spectrum’.¹⁴ Despite prohibitive permission-to-reprint fees, they include seven such examples: Michael S. Harper’s ‘A Narrative of the Life and Times of John Coltrane: Played by Himself’ and ‘Peace on Earth’, David Henderson’s ‘A Coltrane Memorial’, John Taggart’s ‘Giant Steps’, Wanda Coleman’s ‘Cousin Mary’, Amus Mor’s ‘The Coming of John’, and Mackey’s own “‘John Coltrane Arrived with an Egyptian Lady’”.

‘Ohnedaruth’s Day Begun’ and that it ‘might have taken me until early 1978 (January or February) to finish it’. Given it was over thirty years ago, he adds that ‘those details are pretty fuzzy’.

¹¹ A. B. Spellman, ‘Did John’s Music Kill Him?’, in Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa (eds.), *The Jazz Poetry Anthology: The Second Set* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: UP of Indiana, 1996), p.168, l.15.

¹² Kimberly W. Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African American Modernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.117.

¹³ In Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa (eds.), *The Jazz Poetry Anthology: The Second Set*, p.65, ll. 1-14.

¹⁴ Art Lange and Nathaniel Mackey, Editor’s Note to *Moment’s Notice: Jazz in Poetry & Prose* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1993), p.ii.

dramatically as Sanchez reflects on ‘the quiet / aftermath of assassinations’ and ‘the massacre / of all blk/musicians’ before unleashing the graphic depiction of Coltrane’s overblown ‘scream’ seen above. The poet then changes tone again, rather aggressively aligning Coltrane’s music with many black nationalists’ anti-white, anti-capitalist sentiment:

BRING IN THE WITE/MOTHA/fuckas
 ALL THE MILLIONAIRES/BANKERS/oI
 MAIN/LINE/ASS/RISTOCRATS (ALL
 THEM SO-CALLED BEAUTIFUL
 PEOPLE)
 WHO HAVE KILLED
 WILL CONTINUE TO
 KILL US WITH
 THEY CAPITALISM/18% OWNERSHIP
 OF THE WORLD.
 YEH. U RIGHT
 THERE U ROCKEFELLERS. MELLONS
 VANDERBILTS
 FORDS.
 yeh.
 GITem.
 PUSHem/PUNCHem/STOMPem. THEN
 LIGHT A FIRE TO
 THEY pilgrim asses.¹⁸

Scott Saul has noted that, for the Black Arts writers, Coltrane’s music, such as that heard on *Ascension*, suggested hope not only for a ‘new world, a world without ghettos’ but also a ‘wilful turn away from reasoned argumentation, patient analysis, and the whole regime of nonviolent direct action’.¹⁹ Mackey, like many of the young black writers that followed in the aftermath of the black nationalists, identified with this desire for an ‘immanent elsewhere’, a non-racial, non-discriminatory world, as he calls it in ‘Song of the Andoumboulou: 56’, a poem published in his most recent volume, the National Book Award-winning *Splay Anthem* (97). His longstanding interest in the Atlantis and ‘mu’ myths derives from this same theme of utopian longing that lured the black-nationalist artists to imagine

¹⁸ Ibid, pp.184-85.

¹⁹ Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge, Mass.: UP of Harvard, 2003), p.245.

a world beyond the injustices of that in which they existed. Part of this imagining involved differentiating black culture from what was considered the worst aspects of Western culture, including its worshipping of reason at the expense of what Baraka calls ‘actual feelings’.²⁰ The new black society of the future would need to ‘emancipate our minds from Western values and standards’, as James T. Stewart put it.²¹ Yet, although Mackey understood the thinking behind such opinions, and warmed to John Henrik Clarke’s appeal for black scholars to reclaim a ‘rich and ancient African heritage’ from ‘distorted’ Western perceptions, he was troubled by the black-nationalist insistence on retreating into a black monoculture and studying only black art.²² ‘The models must be non-white,’ Stewart opined.²³ Yet Mackey, like Baraka before him (during his Greenwich Village days, at least), was an avid reader of white avant-garde poetry—especially work by Williams Carlos Williams, H.D., Charles Olson, Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley—and to him the notion of ignoring such writers for political reasons was utterly anathema. As he said in our interview:

If only writing on black writers and only referencing black material was a hoop that was being held up, it wasn’t a hoop I was jumping through... which is not to say that I was not engaged with black material. But if it meant being engaged with that material to the exclusion of all else, no, I’d never been in that place. And there was no reason for me to all of a sudden to step into that place.²⁴

Moreover Mackey had identified a worrying tendency among some of the black nationalists to construct awkward dialectics between reason and ‘feelings’. He considered over-exuberant praise for the emotionally (rather than rationally) expressive to be anti-intellectual—and an especially odd position for writers purporting to uphold the finest African American intellectual traditions to take. Where, after all, did this leave the reflective,

²⁰ Baraka, liner notes for *Four for Trane* (Impulse A-71). *Black Music*, pp.160-61.

²¹ James T. Stewart, ‘The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist’. In Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal (eds.), *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 2007), p.3.

²² John Henrik Clarke, ‘Reclaiming the Lost African Heritage’. In Baraka and Neal (eds.), *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, p.11.

²³ Stewart, ‘The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist’. In Baraka and Neal (eds.), *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, p.3.

²⁴ Mackey, ‘Interview by Luke Harley’, no pagination.

the intellectual, the Apollonian? Should art merely be the product of instinct? After renouncing Greenwich Village bohemia and converting to black nationalism in 1965, Baraka began pushing arguments such as these, prompting Mackey to rebuke his jazz-poetry predecessor in an important 1978 essay. He quotes a passage from Baraka's 'New-Sense' (1966) that, as a young artist-intellectual, caused him particular discomfort:

The thinkers try. The extremists, Confucius says, shooting past the mark. But the straight ahead people, who think when that's what's called for, who don't when they don't have to. Not the Hamlet burden, which is white bullshit, to be always weighing and measuring and analyzing, and reflecting. The reflective vs. the expressive. Mahler vs. Martha and the Vandellas. It's not even an interesting battle.²⁵

Why this opposition between the 'reflective', which was 'white bullshit', and the 'expressive', Mackey wondered? Was it really necessary for artistic impulses to be separated along racial/cultural lines? Baraka, whom Benston has called 'Coltrane's most sublime critic', had embarked on a misguided course; driven by an irrational need to banish any traces of white influence from what he was constructing (rather exclusively) to be 'black America', he was in fact denying himself the right, as an artist, to think critically and rationally about his own work.²⁶ Mackey couldn't let the matter pass. Many years later, in a 2005 interview with Sarah Rosenthal, he defined himself in opposition to this anti-rational tendency. While many others had gone (and were still going) to great lengths to construct Coltrane's 'scream' as the signature sound of black collectivity, a Dionysiac rage against white oppression, Mackey had heard in it a more cerebral sound, and different opportunities for poetic expression.

The word 'scream' is interesting. Coltrane got to the point in some concerts where he would take the horn from his mouth and just start yelling. Rashied Ali ... talks about an occasion on which that happened. Ali was rather taken aback, and asked

²⁵ Baraka, *Tales* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1969), p.96. Qtd. in Mackey, 'The Changing Same: Black Music in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka'. *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge, Mass.: UP of Cambridge, 1993), p.42.

²⁶ Kimberly W. Benston, 'Late Coltrane: A Re-Membering of Orpheus'. *A Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship*, eds. Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto (Urbana, IL: UP of Illinois, 1979), p.420.

Trane about it later. Trane said, 'I ran out of horn'. I've heard people who do in poetry something that emulates what Coltrane does. They'll actually scream, do things of that sort. Certainly relative to that I'm very Apollonian. My screaming is going on in a different way. It's the fraying of meanings; it's the colliding of sounds that create certain consternations of meaning that might be the counterpoint of the scream, analogous to the scream.²⁷

Mackey didn't want to stymie the imagination in art; far from it. Rather, he simply insisted upon the necessity of intellect, technique and craftsmanship in the artistic process, which in Baraka's 'New-Sense' he felt to be under threat. But it was a craftsmanship that upheld indeterminacy, rather than explicitness, as a crucial aesthetic goal. Mackey's 'scream' is reflective and self-interrogative; as a poet, his aim is to trouble, perturb and complicate what he calls 'the unequivocal referentiality taken for granted in ordinary language'.²⁸ Over the course of his career he has resisted any semblance of political sloganeering, instead aiming to restore to language its manifold resonances, to reinstate the rich overtones and undertones of meaning that are too often neglected within propaganda language of the kind sometimes employed by Sanchez, Lee, Rodgers and others. In his essay 'Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol' he borrows a quote from Mexican poet Octavio Paz that provides a theoretical underpinning for his own attempts to 'fray' meanings:

Each time we are served by words, we mutilate them. But the poet is not served by words. He is their servant. In serving them, he returns them to the plenitude of their nature, makes them recover their being. Thanks to poetry, language reconquers its original state. First, its plastic and sonorous values, generally disdained by thought; next, the affective values; and finally, the expressive ones. To purify language, the poet's task, means to give it back its original nature. And here we come to one of the central themes of this reflection. The word, in itself, is a plurality of meanings.²⁹

²⁷ Sarah Rosenthal, 'The Atmosphere is Alive: An Interview with Nathaniel Mackey'. *New American Writing* 24 (Mill Valley: Oink Press, 2006), pp.49-50.

²⁸ Mackey, 'Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol'. *Discrepant Engagement*, p.233.

²⁹ Qtd. in 'Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol'. *Discrepant Engagement*, p.233.

If a ‘tone’, or series of tones, can connote a vast field of reference, Mackey has attempted to bring back to language something of its multivocal meaning and connotative richness. Steven Feld, an important theorist for Mackey, uses a different phrase, describing the poet’s task as to ‘amplify, multiply or intensify’ the relationship of the word to its referent.³⁰ Discussing the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea in *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression*, Feld notes the clear delineation in that society between highly assertive, conversational discourse (what the Kaluli call *to halaido*, or ‘hard words’) and polysemous poetic language (‘bird sound words’).³¹ Poetic language is ‘bird-language’, a highly metaphoric style of discourse that laments the rupturing of tribal kinship and strives to bring about, through song, some spiritual solace.³² Feld’s is a text to which, in essays (‘Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol’, most notably), interviews, lectures, and his own poems, Mackey repeatedly refers. In ‘Song of the Andoumboulou: 18’ for instance, from his third poetry volume *Whatsaid Serif* (1998), Mackey speaks of a ‘we’ in search of a ‘thrown obliquity’: a music/language zone of in-betweenness where word-intent has been amplified and multiplied to such an extent that the nondenotative (or less-denotative) realm of tones is achieved:

voice,
 thrown obliquity, bled. Sound so
 abstruse
 we struck our heads, ‘Where did it
 come from?’ Point song. Point-
 lessness. Words not wanting to be
 words...
 (WS 16)

Coltrane’s sound, his ‘unruly, agonistic’ wail, was indeed ‘abstruse’: a bird-language of his own. But black-nationalist treatments of Coltrane, in Mackey’s view, all too often responded to his abstrusity with a mind-numbing simplicity. The ‘scream’, as it was called, was interpreted to mean one thing only, political rage; those ‘plastic and sonorous’ values in

³⁰ Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Philadelphia, UP of Philadelphia, 1990), p.17.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.34.

³² *Ibid.*

language to which Paz refers being very much suppressed. Furthermore Mackey was not at all convinced that Coltrane's 'scream' was the cry of political rage, a call-to-arms against white oppression, that many black nationalists supposed—or hoped—it to be.³³ Coltrane, after all, had spent most of the late fifties and early sixties rejecting suggestions that he was an 'angry tenor', and had long since refused to be pushed into a corner on the subject of black politics. While violence flared up on the streets, he had kept his thoughts on Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and others to himself, rarely speaking on matters other than music.

For some critics, such as Frank Kofsky, this proved more than a little frustrating. Kofsky, a white Jewish Marxist, had heard in Coltrane's scream a counterpoint to Malcolm X's politics, a cry of the black masses in uprising against longstanding persecution. In one interview, published later in *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (1970), he asks the saxophonist about the relationship between his music and Malcolm X, whom he previously identified, with more than a whiff of presumption, as of 'great symbolic significance for the new generation of black musicians'.³⁴ Coltrane, avoiding the ringing endorsement his interviewer so desperately sought, instead replied,

Well, I think that music, being an expression of the human heart, or of the human being itself, does express just what is happening. I feel it expresses the whole thing—the whole of human experience at the time that it is being expressed.³⁵

Although Kofsky neglected to ask Coltrane about music and spirituality, it was a topic that Trane was normally more than willing to discuss. Like

³³ Tempering this argument somewhat is the fact that on 28 March, 1965 Coltrane had appeared at a benefit concert for Baraka's soon-to-be-established Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS) in Harlem. Although, in order to gain a sufficient audience, it was held downtown at the Village Gate, the concert was marketed under the nationalist rubric 'New Black Music', apparently with the go-ahead from Impulse! producer Bob Thiele (who had agreed to record the event). In addition to Coltrane's quartet, Baraka had put together a program featuring Albert Ayler, Charles Tolliver, Billie Higgins, Marion Brown, Bobby Hutcherson, Grachan Moncur III, and Sun Ra. For Coltrane to agree to perform, especially given Baraka's growing reputation as an anti-white agitator, was something of a coup.

³⁴ Qtd. in Nisensen, *Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest* (New York: Da Capo, 1995), p.179.

³⁵ Ibid.

Kirk, Sanders, Ayler and Sun Ra, among many others in the jazz community, he was a deeply religious person; Baraka called him a ‘God-seeker’ whose music ‘is a way into God. The absolute open expression of everything.’³⁶ After studying non-Western music, particularly Indian, East Asian, and African music, he came to believe that music had a great spiritual purpose, that it was not mere entertainment, that it could positively effect change upon society. Coltrane had been raised a Christian, regularly attending church on Sundays. But his beliefs gradually changed and became more eclectic. In 1957, after coming into contact with Islam through his first wife Juanita Naima Grubb, he underwent a ‘spiritual awakening’ concomitant with his overcoming drug addiction. This was followed in the late fifties and sixties by study of Sufism, Buddhism, the Kabbala, the Torah, yoga and other books on science, the occult and esoteric mysticism. Nisensen lists Paramahansa Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi*, a blending of Eastern and Western spirituality, as a text that held pride of place in Coltrane’s library, while Lewis Porter, in his biography *John Coltrane: His Life and Music*, mentions Einstein’s mixing of science and mysticism, as well as Mabel Collins’ *Light on the Path*, a ‘treatise written for the personal use of those who are ignorant of the Eastern Wisdom’, as crucial influences.³⁷

Mackey’s wide-ranging study of texts on spirituality and mythology during the sixties and seventies echoed Coltrane’s own search for ‘other ways of knowing, multiple ways of knowing’.³⁸ Growing up in California, Mackey too had been raised a ‘God-seeker’, dutifully attending Baptist services every Sunday in Rodeo (Northern California) at the behest of his mother. But, in his teenage years in Santa Ana (Southern California), he had begun drifting away from organised religion after he started feeling that it was

³⁶ Baraka, ‘The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)’. *Black Music*, p.193.

³⁷ Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (Ann Arbor: UP of Michigan, 1998), p.259.

³⁸ Mackey, ‘Interview by Paul Naylor’. *Paracritical Hinge*, p.327. Texts encountered by Mackey during this period included Mercia Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959) and *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1972), Victor Turner’s *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (1967), Henry Corbin’s *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (1960), and *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi* (1969).

no longer necessary to maintain one's sense of spirituality. Of course as I was reading more as a teenager, especially learning more and reading more, learning philosophy and stuff like that. I had to deal with doubt and scepticism, atheism, that kind of thing.³⁹

While he retained a 'metaphysical bent', it was a spirituality that found increasing outlet in esoteric, hermetic traditions (expressed mainly in music and poetry) rather than conventional Christianity.⁴⁰

'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun,' the only Mackey poem published by Feinstein and Komunyakaa in *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*, is a work of strident originality, bespeaking of a young poet eager to leave his own personal imprint on the 'Coltrane poem' genre. Having witnessed faddish interpretations of the saxophonist in the late sixties as a mouthpiece for political rage, Mackey focuses on his preferred guise, as a mystic, striving to enunciate what Benston calls Coltrane's 'fierce and visionary *askesis*, [his] quest for cosmic knowledge and salvation'.⁴¹ The poem takes its subtitle ('bright light of shipwreck') from George Oppen, within whose poetry lighthouses and shipwrecks appear as recurrent tropes; in *Of Being Numerous* (1968), for instance, Oppen associates shipwreck with individual disintegration in his seventh poem ('Obsessed, bewildered / By the shipwreck / Of the singular'). Since his days as a literature graduate at Stanford (1970-74) Mackey had become interested in Oppen's writing, and here appropriates his phrase to not only suggest Coltrane's artistic isolation, but also that his condition might somehow be curative ('bright light').

According to the simple mathematics required by the poem, 'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun' is set on 17 July, 1967, the day of Coltrane's passing (from liver cancer) at Huntingdon Hospital, Long Island, exactly sixty-eight days prior to what would have been his forty-first birthday.⁴² *Ohnedaruth* (meaning 'compassionate one') was the Sanskrit name bestowed on Coltrane by his second wife, Alice, immediately after his

³⁹ Mackey, 'Interview by Luke Harley', no pagination.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Benston, 'Late Coltrane: A Re-Membering of Orpheus'. *A Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship*, p.413.

⁴² In an email correspondence (23 March, 2009), Mackey recalled how, during the poem's composition, he counted on a calendar exactly how many days separated the two events.

strictures, suggests this same prolonged overblowing for intense emotive effects of the kind heard on *Ascension*. But in Mackey's handling it becomes prayer rather than scream; a spiritual gesture that is 'not / so thickly veiled', despite many Black Arts writers, such as Sanchez and Lee, misinterpreting it as political statement.

'Anubic sisters,' meanwhile, might refer to the prominent women in Coltrane's life: his step-daughter Syeeda, his first wife Naima, with whom he remained close friends, and his second wife Alice, whom he married in 1966—all guided by the Egyptian god Anubis in preparing his deceased body for the afterlife.⁴⁵ Anubis, also called 'Anpu', was the god of the dead in Egyptian mythology, normally represented in hieroglyph by a jackal. Responsible for escorting deceased souls into heaven, Anubis was also the reputed inventor of embalming, and attracted attention for exhibiting these skills at Osiris' burial. In the next section Mackey portrays Coltrane's spirit (*akh*) led by 'bird-gods' through the private rooms of an Egyptian tomb, undergoing a burial ritual normally administered for pharaohs.

These bird-gods
 anoint me with camphor, escort me
 thru each a more private room, the
 chronic juices of lust flood an
 ended earth
 whose beckoned image
 burns on
 (EW 70)

Coltrane here watches on while his body, lathed in camphor, a millennia-old medicinal extracted from the camphor laurel tree, is healed; later in the poem, after the process is completed, he suddenly announces, "'Heal / dank world. Goodbye, I'm thru'" (EW 72). But the 'bird gods' to which Mackey refers quite possibly suggest another mystical tradition as well: shamanism. In the *Encyclopedia of Religion* birds are described as occupying 'a very important place in the spiritual world of hunters generally and of northern

⁴⁵ In an interview, Alice Coltrane said of her husband's choice of second wife: 'I think John could have just as easily have married another woman... Not myself and not because I was a musician but any woman who had the particular attributes or qualities to help him fulfil his life mission as God wanted him to' (Qtd. in Nisensen, *Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest*, p.192).

Eurasia in particular, where shamanism has been a dominant magico-religious force'.⁴⁶ Among the Altaic and the Uralic peoples of northern Russia, birds are traditionally symbolised, as in ancient Egypt, as divine spirits, as the departed souls of the deceased. Trane, as *Ohnedaruth*, becomes a bird-god among bird-gods; in the afterlife, glancing from afar upon the material world, he finds his spirit purged of desire ('chronic juices of lust'), ready for its final ascent to heaven. But it is an ascent that he recognises, ruefully, he will have to undertake without his closest spiritual companion, his wife (and band-member) Alice.

While Mackey complicates any sense of obvious meaning, preferring figuration rather than direct statement, familiarity with Coltrane's personal history assists interpretation. Early in 1966, a few months after the Village Gate performance, Alice Coltrane (née McLeod), whom John had met in 1963, replaced Tyner in her husband's band. Primarily an organist, she also played harp, an extremely rare instrument in jazz, and after her husband's death committed herself to playing music 'according to the ideals set forth by John', continuing to 'let the cosmic principle, or the aspect of spirituality, be the underlying reality behind the music as he had'.⁴⁷ She played harp on *Monastic Trio* (1969), with accompaniment by Sanders, Ali, Garrison and Ben Riley (on drums), and continued to employ it on her albums *Journey to Satchidananda* (title track) and *Ptah the El Daoud* ('Blue Nile').⁴⁸ For Alice Coltrane, the ethereal timbre of her harp conveyed her avowed spirituality, first and foremost, but also affirmed a unique, counter-mainstream musical aesthetic. In the following lines, where lineation becomes increasingly sparse, Mackey depicts her husband's spirit alone, isolated ('shipwrecked') without his wife.

not a harp no
fingers pluck played on by
wind
(EW 70)

At this nadir, hands are left nubbed, unable to pluck strings and ease the ache of spiritual rift. As with the neurological sensation of the phantom

⁴⁶ *Encyclopedia of Religion: Second Edition*, p.948.

⁴⁷ 'Alice Coltrane: Jazz Musician, Composer'.
<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3430500020.html>

⁴⁸ *Journey to Satchidananda*: Impulse! 051128-2; *Ptah, The El Daoud*: Impulse! 051201-2.

limb—that feeling of absence and presence which Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris compares with the experience of listening to music—the non-harp played by non-fingers, to borrow Mackey’s words in relation to Harris’ novel *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), ‘reaches toward a wholeness to which it can only refer, the cosmic fulfilment we at once intuit and are “cut off” from’.⁴⁹ The personal thus becomes a microcosm for the universal: conjugal estrangement, as a result of Trane’s death, morphs into African American spiritual estrangement at large, ‘All the gathered / ache of our / severed selves’, as Mackey puts it in ‘Grisgris Dancer’, another of the poems published in *Eroding Witness* (17). With ‘augur’s full to bursting / overload of sense’ (*EW* 71), an intensity of emotion that threatens to overwhelm words themselves, Mackey then alters the voice of the poem, refusing to let meaning settle. The ‘I’ no longer speaks as Coltrane, but Mackey himself. Knowledge of personal history is again useful: in 1951, when Mackey was four, his parents, Sadie Wilcox and Alexander Mackey had separated, Sadie being left to raise her two elder sons, Thomas and Richard, her daughter Doloros (‘Lois’), and her youngest son Nathaniel on her own. The following lines, Mackey admitted to Brent Cunningham, is ‘some of my personal history bleeding into the figure of Coltrane. We share the “I”’:⁵⁰

my divorced mother
daddied me to death, my road is
wet,
shows Century City against
a futuristic sun.

(*EW* 71)

In his essays, most notably ‘Cante Moro’, Mackey comments on *duende*, an Andalusian word suggesting that ‘inexplicable power of attraction’ present among certain flamenco artists, bullfighters and poets that enables them, on rare occasions, to send waves of spine-tingling emotion through audiences.⁵¹ Mackey writes after Federico García Lorca, who, in his various lectures from the twenties and thirties, attempts to define *duende*, recognising that to gain a better understanding of this ‘mysterious power which everyone senses and no philosopher explains’ (Goethe’s words)

⁴⁹ Mackey, ‘Limbo, Dislocation, Phantom Limb: Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Occasion’. *Discrepant Engagement*, p.176.

⁵⁰ Mackey, ‘Interview with Brent Cunningham’. *Paracritical Hinge*, p.322.

⁵¹ Christopher Maurer, preface to *In Search of Duende* (New York: New Directions, 1998), p.ix.

would go a long way towards better understanding the essence of art itself.⁵² *Duende*, says Lorca, brings the artist face to face with death: it is a ‘question of true, living style, of *blood*’ and must be awoken ‘in the remotest mansions of the *blood*’ [my emphasis]. When commenting on this excerpt to Cunningham, ‘bleeding’ was thus a verb chosen quite specifically by Mackey as a reminder of this content—this sense of an art striving for what Robert L. Zamsky calls ‘a metaphysical yet emotively powerful beyond’.⁵³

Sadie’s ‘daddying’ her son ‘to death’ suggests an over-caring mother’s choking of a young man’s independence, a stymieing of his spirit. But his critique of his mother, as the hyperbolic ‘to death’ indicates, is affectionate; the (self-deprecating) implication is that her ‘daddying’ might not have been as life-threatening to Mackey as it then seemed. The reference to Century City meanwhile, an exclusive suburb on the West Side of Los Angeles known for its skyscrapers, luxury hotels, and abundance of lawyers and executives, might well allude to Sadie’s material aspirations for her son that, in adulthood, he earns enough money to move out of the working-class neighbourhood in which their family lived during the late fifties and early sixties (‘futuristic sun’, with ‘sun’ punning on ‘son’). More likely is that Mackey, especially in the following stanza, is referring less to himself than to Coltrane, who, in 1953, then twenty-seven, found himself stranded in Los Angeles after a tour there with Johnny Hodges’ band. Strung out on dope, it was only through the aid of a local stranger, Eric Dolphy, that Coltrane was able to pull himself together and find the money to make it home back east.⁵⁴

So there I sit outside the
Heartbreak Straits at twenty-seven,
sad blackened bat-winged angel, my

⁵² Qtd. in Federico García Lorca, ‘Play and Theory of the Duende’, in *Deep Song and Other Prose* (New York: New Directions, 1980), p.43.

⁵³ Robert L. Zamsky, ‘A Poetics of Radical Musicality: Nathaniel Mackey’s ‘-mu’ Series’. *Arizona Quarterly*, Vol 62, No 1 (Spring, 2006), p.118.

⁵⁴ According to Nisensen, Dolphy was well known among musicians in Los Angeles for his altruistic behaviour. Despite enduring long periods without work, Dolphy would never shirk coming to the aid of fellow musicians, buying them groceries or helping them with accommodation. Coltrane never forgot Dolphy’s help when he was at his lowest ebb in Los Angeles. When he was offered a lucrative new contract with Impulse! Records in 1961, he immediately enlisted Dolphy as a soloist and arranger for *Africa/Brass*, his first album for the new label (*Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest*, p.104).

new day not of light but a watery
 nest. My new day roots beneath
 a basement of guts but also rises
 in the flash of my falling there.

Though none

of its light comes down to me the ark of its
 rising sails.

(EW 71)

‘Heartbreak Straits’ here functions as a trope for this low-point in Coltrane’s life. Not only was he struggling with heroin and alcohol, artistically he was struggling to make an impression. In musical circles he was considered a journeyman hard-bopper, little more, ‘better than most, but scarcely an original voice’, as one critic described him.⁵⁵ Showing few signs of prodigious creativity, Trane was a long way from the major talent he was to be widely recognised as being after getting his start in Miles Davis’ group in October 1955 and later, in 1957, playing alongside Thelonius Monk. Inspiration—*duende*—was lacking. As a result, Mackey might well imagine him as a ‘sad blackened bat-winged Angel’: *bat* symbolising both his nearness to death, burdened by his addictions; *winged* symbolising his hidden potential, that mysterious genius that emerged over the next fourteen years and appeared most spectacularly in works such as *A Love Supreme* and *Ascension*.

Yet Mackey means something more by ‘Heartbreak Straits’—and its connotative secrets are tied up in textual hints offered elsewhere in *Eroding Witness*. In the third section of ‘Song of the Andoumboulou: 7’, the final instalment of Mackey’s serial poem in his first poetry volume, N., Mackey’s intermittently autobiographical narrator, tells Angel of Dust, his letter-correspondent, of a poem he had conceived (but not yet written) the previous evening in which ‘the two of us were singing in some distant “church”’.

A combination acoustic/electric ‘church’ in which the floorboards splintered while something like leg-irons gave our voices their weight. I call it the Heartbreak Church. It sits on an island known as Wet Sun, which itself sits only a mile or so southeast of the Heartbreak Straits. Henry Dumas wrote about it in that story of his, ‘Ark of Bones’. (EW 54)

⁵⁵ Nisensen, *Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest*, p.29.

‘Ark of Bones,’ published posthumously in Dumas’ *Ark of Bones* and *Other Stories*, tells of two young men, Headeye and Fish-hound, who, after discovering a mojo bone, receive a ‘call from the spirit’ (AB 6). The mojo bone’s strange powers of ‘voodoo’ lead them to the Mississippi’s edge where they encounter a huge ‘soulboat’ that they initially think to be Noah’s Ark. However, after noticing that no animals are on board, they step forth upon the soulboat and climb its stairs, each of which is numbered with a year: the last step dated 1977, the year, incidentally, that Mackey wrote ‘Ohnedaruth’s Day Begun’ (7). Headeye and Fish-hound are then led into the Ark’s bowels by its captain, and there encounter a vast quantity of cabins filled to the brim with bones of fellow African Americans, those victims of the slave trade and the brutalities of the Jim Crow South. Yet these bones are handled with the greatest of care, crews of black men carrying them ‘like they... babies or something precious’, according them the highest respect (9). As Headeye and Fish-hound return to the deck, overwhelmed by the sights they have seen, the bone-hauling continues, the Ark’s boatmen all the while chanting an African-sounding dialect, ‘Aba aba, al ham dilaba / aba aba mtu brotha...’ as they go on pulling innumerable skeletons from the river (AB 9).

‘Ark of Bones,’ as its title suggests, is a tale of loss, of death, but also of communion with death, the spirits of the dead, those ‘lost / voices’ Mackey refers to in “‘John Coltrane Arrived with an Egyptian Lady’”, the other ‘Coltrane poem’ published in *Eroding Witness* (66). It is writing that, content-wise, courts what Lorca rather poetically calls ‘the rim of the wound’, the terrain of death prerequisite for the arrival of *duende*. (Indeed Headeye, by being ‘ordained’ by the old man on the ship, we discover later is being prepared for his own imminent death at the end of the story.) Yet, contrary to what N. writes in ‘Song of the Andoumboulou: 7’, there is no ‘Heartbreak Straits’ or ‘Heartbreak Church’ in Dumas’ ‘Ark of Bones’: such places are purely of Mackey’s invention. Rather than list real-life place-names, Mackey usually prefers to invest fictional places with symbolic resonances: the Heartbreak Church for example, where ‘leg-irons’ give voices their ‘weight’, is a ‘house of generations’, to borrow Dumas’ phrase; it is a place where ‘Every African who lives in America has a part of his soul’ (AB 7). N.’s intimation, therefore, is that his creator and Dumas share aesthetic interests, that both seek an art that brings the past into a spiritually active present.

rasp and grunts of the material (*EW* 23-24). In doing so, Trane's soaring yet guttural saxophone is heard as a challenge to centuries of separation in Western culture, stretching back to Plato and before, of the immanent and transcendent, the physical and the nonphysical, the earthy and the astral. With 'ears cocked Eastward', he articulates not only a modern African American condition, and African American suffering, but a world condition at large, a *spiritus mundi* that finds its locus in Egyptian mythology:

Quivering
reed between implosive teeth, Nut's tethered son,
I groan the ache of Our Lady's earth-
encumbered arch, the bell of my axe
become a wall whose bricks I
dabble on in blood as if neediness,
fed us
(*EW* 72)

In Egyptian religion, Nut was a goddess of the sky and the heavens, often depicted as a woman arched over the earth god Geb ('Our Lady's earth- / encumbered arch'). Trane, with 'Quivering / reed', speaks of her 'ache', his timbre betraying recognition of man's suffering on earth as the 'Andoumboulouous we' referred to by Mackey in his preface to *Splay Anthem*, those 'rough drafts' of humanity created by an imperfect demiurge.⁵⁷ Elsewhere in *Eroding Witness* Trane's reed, which is made out of wood, is described as 'splintered' (46), so evoking the cracking floorboards of Heartbreak Church, born down by 'leg-irons'. Other images of forced, fraught migration throughout the volume are invoked as well, such as the 'sea-weary drift of boatlifted / Haitians' (*EW* 83) mentioned in 'Capricorn Rising', a poem written 'for Pharoah Sanders' (and named after the final cut on Sanders' 1967 recording *Tauhid*).⁵⁸ 'Splintered' suggests crack, rafts collapsing and occupants drowning: the travails and agonies of the Middle Passage. 'Encumbered' subsumes these images: it intimates a burdensome relation between Nut and earth, a 'blutopic' arrangement, to borrow a term coined by Duke Ellington in 1944, in which utopia is 'tinged with the blues', stained with memories of the past.⁵⁹ Earth's faults,

⁵⁷ Mackey, preface to *Splay Anthem* (New York: New Directions, 2006), p.ix.

⁵⁸ *Tauhid*: Impulse! AS-9138.

⁵⁹ Graham Lock, *Blutopia : Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p.5. 'Blutopia,' as Lock points out, was the title of a brief –

mankind's perennial suffering, weigh down 'Our Lady', who is 'tethered' to Geb, urgently seeking escape from his fraught embrace.

Coltrane too refuses to forget past suffering in his 'endless / dwelling on air'. His saxophone ('axe') constructs an auditory 'wall' of optimism-against-the-odds, a blutopian vision for the future with bricks 'dabble[d] on in blood as if neediness / fed us' (*EW* 72). Yet such gnostic enunciation of what Peter O'Leary calls a natural eschatology of 'fallenness' is more a feature of Sun Ra's aesthetic than Coltrane's: Ra's philosophies might be said to be bleeding into the saxophonist.⁶⁰ Whereas Coltrane tended to reference West Africa in his song titles—'Liberia', 'Dahomey Dance', for instance—Ra, who Mackey has 'long thought of as something of a latter-day gnostic', had been valorising and explicitly naming Egypt in his music since the early fifties.⁶¹ As Graham Lock notes in *Blutopia* (1999), for Ra ancient Egypt was root of culture and truth, a longed-for but distant Other. Born Herman Blount in Birmingham, Alabama, by 1952 he had changed his name to the Egyptian sun-god as a means of differentiating himself from Christianity, which he regarded as a maleficent force in black America. Ra's particular quarrel was with Moses, 'a murderer, liar and deceiver' whose idealisation within Judeo-Christian mythology caused African Americans to identify with the Israelites rather than their true historical legacy, the black civilisation of Egypt.⁶²

When it appeared in 1954, Ra closely read George G. M. James' *Stolen Legacy*, a work countering prevailing white scholarship on ancient Egypt that ignored its scientific, religious and philosophical impact upon Greece.⁶³ In following years he incorporated James' arguments as a basis for a reconfigured mythology that never tired of promoting the people of

and musically unexceptional – composition by Duke Ellington, performed at his orchestra's Carnegie Hall concert in December 1944. For Mackey, 'blutopia' (a word he learnt from Lock's book) comes to stand for an 'optimism-against-the-odds', a utopian longing that nevertheless refuses to forget the atrocities African Americans have experienced in America (Mackey, preface to *Splay Anthem*, p.ix).

⁶⁰ Peter O'Leary, 'Deep Trouble/Deep Treble: Nathaniel Mackey's Gnostic Rasp'. *Callaloo*, Vol 23, No 2, Nathaniel Mackey issue (Spring, 2000), p.531.

⁶¹ Mackey, 'Interview by Paul Naylor'. *Paracritical Hinge*, p.342.

⁶² Lock, unpublished interview, 1990. The author claims that Ra 'referred to several biblical stories to substantiate his accusation against Moses. He also insisted that his antipathy to Moses was not fuelled by anti-Semitism' (Lock, *Blutopia*, p.224).

⁶³ The full title of James' book in its original form is *Stolen Legacy: The Greeks Were Not the Authors of Greek Philosophy but the People of North Africa, Commonly the Egyptians*.

ancient North Africa, especially their blackness, as a source of beauty. Hieroglyphics adorned Ra's record jackets, Egyptian costumes were a feature of his Arkestra concerts; his Saturn record label was renamed Thoth, after the two-headed Egyptian god; his song titles referred to Egypt: 'Tiny Pyramids', 'Sunset on the Nile', 'Ancient Aiethopia'. By the sixties, as Mackey observes in his essay 'Palimpsestic Stagger', Ra's efforts had caught on within the black studies revolts. Egypt became 'contested ground', scholars such as Cheikh Anta Diop, in *The African Origin of Civilisation*, E. A. Wallis Budge, in *Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection*, and John G. Jackson, in *Introduction to African Civilisations*, attempting to reinstate the ancient nation, rather than Greece and Rome, as the cradle of Western civilisation.⁶⁴

Ra, of course, wasn't the only post-bebop musician to reference ancient Egypt during this period. Cecil Taylor called his 1961 trio album *Nefertiti, The Beautiful One Has Come*; one of (Pharoah) Sanders' best-known tracks post-Trane was called 'Upper Egypt Lower Egypt' (the seventeen-minute opening to *Tauhid*); Albert Ayler performed a version of Sanders' composition, entitled 'Venus/Upper and Lower Egypt', on 21 January, 1968 (later collected on his album *Holy Ghost*).⁶⁵ Among the white avant-garde poets that Mackey was reading while at Stanford, valorisations of Egypt could be found as well. In Duncan's *Tribunals*, for instance, the poet sings of Egypt's Africanity, her 'river out of Africa':

... Egypt, the image of
Heaven, Africa
Her land, Her plants, Her animals,
Osiris, the ever flowing
returning river out of Africa...⁶⁶

A black African civilisation, root of the world, ancient Egypt was 'some Other place', as Mackey calls it in the final lines of "John Coltrane Arrived with An Egyptian Lady" (*EW* 66). It was conceived as the site of an original African utopia, before armies arrived from Europe and cut a swath through her economic, cultural and spiritual progression. Yet the

⁶⁴ Mackey, 'Palimpsestic Stagger'. *Paracritical Hinge*, p.66.

⁶⁵ Cecil Taylor, *Nefertiti, The Beautiful One Has Come*: Revenant 202; Albert Ayler, *Holy Ghost: Rare and Unissued Recordings (1962-1970)*: Revenant 9CD box.

⁶⁶ Robert Duncan, *Tribunals: Passages 31-35* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1970), pp.7-8.

Coltrane's performance of 'Out of this World' at the Village Gate, as Mackey remembers it, here becomes a cry for 'some Other place', what we might assume to be the longed-for utopia of Egyptian antiquity. Relentless, it starts 'like a leak' in Trane's throat and 'won't quit' (73). In this way it is not unlike *duende*, that tormenting, gremlin-like spirit which, according to Lorca, demands that the best flamenco singers (such as Pastora Pavón) sing with 'scorched throat', at the limits of their expressive power.⁶⁸ In 'Deep Song' Lorca writes how the Gypsy singer Manuel Torre had advised him, when queried about the definition of *duende*, 'What you must search for, and find, is the black torso of the Pharaoh'.⁶⁹ That night the 'black torso of the Pharaoh' was quite literally alongside Trane up on stage, Sanders 'screaming' into his tenor saxophone. But Torre was of course speaking metaphorically: as Mackey notes in 'Cante Moro', 'he meant that one has to root one's voice in fabulous origins, find one's voice in the dark, among the dead'.⁷⁰ In 'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun', these are victims of slavery, the vast multitude whose remains are found within the Ark of Bones.

As Mackey's tropes swirl with semantic potentialities, the poem's thematic focus shifts again—this time to the 'spiritual exegesis', as Norman Finkelstein puts it, of *ta'wil*.⁷¹ 'What "climb" will Nut ask of / me next? *ta'wil* to where?' he imagines Trane thinking during his 'wild' performance, his 'climb' an ascension towards the heavens (the realm of Nut), towards artistic rapture and ecstasy (*EW* 73). But he is also being climbed upon, 'ridden by' (73) one of the *orishas* (divinities) associated with Haitian *vodoun*, Brazilian *candomblé*, and Cuban *lucumí* and *santería* rites. Within such traditions—all appropriations of West African religions brought over on slave ships—the spirit of a divinity is usually said to mount the host, who is characteristically likened to a horse. Maya Deren, in *Divine Horsemen*, explains possession as a 'psychic phenomenon' in which the *gros-bon-ange*—the soul, spirit, or psyche—is temporarily displaced within the human.⁷² During this process, actions and utterances of the

⁶⁸ Lorca, *Deep Song and Other Prose*, p.46.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.140.

⁷⁰ Mackey, 'Cante Moro'. *Paracritical Hinge*, p.182.

⁷¹ Norman Finkelstein, 'Nathaniel Mackey and the Unity of All Rites'.

Contemporary Literature, Vol 49, No 1 (Spring, 2008), p.27.

⁷² Deren is careful when translating *gros-bon-ange* into English: 'The exclusive use of the word 'soul' (which has moral and mystic connotations),' she writes, 'would... misrepresent the sense of *gros-bon-ange* or spirit, which is understood, in Voudoun, as the invisible, non-material *self* or character of an individual, as

possessed person ‘are not the expression of the individual, but are the readily identifiable manifestations of the particular *loa* or archetypal principle.’⁷³

During possession, one’s individual being is briefly occupied by a god, spirit or demon. As Mackey writes in ‘Cante Moro’, it is a process where ‘something beyond your grasp of it grabs you, that something that gets away from you’.⁷⁴ Lorca, in ‘Play and Theory of *Duende*’, compares the effect of listening to a flamenco singer (such as Pavón) gripped by *duende*, to possession, to ‘the blacks of the Antilles’ who, in the “lucumi” rite, ‘huddle in heaps before the statue of Santa Bárbara’.⁷⁵ Mackey claims to think of possession similarly, as somehow ‘related to *duende*’.⁷⁶ Trane, within these richest intensities of trance, is overwhelmed by the divine. And it is here that he locates his voice, that which lies at the far side of technique—plays, in fact, with *duende*. Ta’wil, meanwhile, is the term used by Ismā’īli Islamists for ‘hidden meanings’ that can be found in the Qur’ān. As Asghar Ali Engineer explains, ‘ordinary’ people are not supposed to know the original meaning or the ta’wil; only ‘the chosen few or the initiated who are entitled to know’, namely Allah, the holy Prophet, his legatee (wasi) and imams from his progeny.⁷⁷ Coltrane, his generation’s ‘heaviest spirit’, as Baraka described him in an oft-quoted encomium, becomes, as *Ohnedaruth*, one of these ‘chosen few’.⁷⁸

distinguished from his physical body: i.e., the person John, as a *concept*, distinct from the physical body of John. As a matter of fact, the word ‘psyche’, as it is used in modern psychology, conveys some aspects of the Voudoun *gros-bon-ange* much more accurately than the word ‘soul’, which has been used in most of the literature on Haiti because of its relevant religious associations; and the word ‘spirit’ would approximate the Voudoun esprit only if understood as a person’s ‘life principle’, his ‘nature’ or ‘character’ (as we understand it in such phrases as ‘the spirit of the times’) rather than in its exclusively mystic or spiritual sense’ (*Divine Horsemen*, pp.17-18).

⁷³ Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Dell, 1970), pp.15-16.

⁷⁴ Mackey, ‘Cante Moro’. *Paracritical Hinge*, p.191.

⁷⁵ Lorca, *Deep Song and Other Prose*, p.46.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Asghar Ali Engineer, ‘Qur’ānand Ismai’li Ta’wil’. *Panjabilok* website. <http://www.panjabilok.net/faith/islam/islamismaili.htm>

⁷⁸ Baraka, *Black Music*. The author dedicates his work: ‘For John Coltrane / the heaviest spirit’ (10).

But ta'wil *to* where? Mackey responds in the following lines by writing, 'to what love / turned into loss by my getting here / as Night's reign whips on to where / someday / weaned of time's ghosted light we / begin again, our Boat as was in / the beginning, the sea itself?' (EW 73). The *sea itself*: a new beginning of essences, where the Boat (Ark) merges into the sea and time itself is 'weaned', is an imagining of Unity, a world without divisions. Yet such imaginings inherently draw attention to the very capacity of symbol, as a mode of signification, to describe it. As Paul Ricœur, in *The Symbolism of Evil*, warns,

There does not exist, in fact, any act of signifying that is equal to its aim... it is always with something that plays the role of analagon as starting point that the symbol symbolizes; the multiplicity of the symbols is the immediate consequence of their subservience to a stock of analoga, which altogether are necessarily limited in extension and individually are equally limited in comprehension.⁷⁹

Robert Duncan, in *Bending the Bow*, similarly alerts to the inexhaustibility of the cosmos as a field of reference and the inability of linguistic analoga to fully grasp that field:

The poet works with a sense of parts fitting in relation to a design that is larger than the poem. The commune of poetry becomes so real that he sounds each particle in relation to parts of a great story that he knows will never be completed.⁸⁰

World, then, overwhelms word. Or, as Duncan puts it, 'the theme is much too big / to cover all o'er'.⁸¹ For David Halliburton, this demands a more ambitious hermeneutic. Concluding a phenomenological study on Edgar Allen Poe, he claims: 'The interpreter's job... is not merely to read the actual poem but to explore the one that was never written.'⁸² Mackey, reflecting on this quote in his Stanford doctoral dissertation, *Call Me Tantra: Open Field Poetics as Muse* (1974), associates this job with *ta'wil*,

⁷⁹ Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p.168.

⁸⁰ Robert Duncan, *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p.vi.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.26.

⁸² David Halliburton, *Edgar Allen Poe: A Phenomological View* (Princeton: UP of Princeton, 1973), p.420. Halliburton was one of the examiners for Mackey's Stanford Ph.D. dissertation.

an ‘exegesis which carries the soul back to truth’.⁸³ From Henry Corbin’s *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* he learned:

The truth of the *ta’wil* rests upon the simultaneous reality of the mental operation in which it consists and of the psychic Event that gives rise to it. The *ta’wil* of texts supposes the *ta’wil* of the soul: the soul cannot restore, return the text to its truth, unless it too returns to *its* truth, which implies for it passing beyond imposed patencies, emerging from the world of appearances and metaphors, from exile and the “Occident”.⁸⁴

Corbin goes on to explain that, for the Isma’ilis, it is only through rigorous grounding in a ‘text of a book or a cosmic text’ that the soul can be raised ‘to the rank of a real, but inner and psychic Event’.⁸⁵ This Event, which is the soul’s encounter with its own intentionality, ‘carries us to the utmost limit of the world; at this limit, the cosmos yields before the soul, it can no longer escape without being interiorised into the soul, being *integrated* with it’.⁸⁶ During this phase, ‘psychic energy’ performs the transformation of the text into what Corbin describes as a ‘constellation of symbols’.⁸⁷

Coltrane, whose study of the Qur’an, as well as many other religious texts, was rigorous and longstanding, is deemed to have fulfilled these prerequisites. *Ta’wil* of texts has been achieved: his soul is ready to be reunited with the cosmos. And in the final two stanzas of ‘Ohnedaruth’s Day Begun’, it is exactly this ‘integration’ of soul and cosmos that is depicted, his soul at peace with the world in which it once existed:

The backs

of our necks caressed by African pillows,
 the far side of her voice by
 the flutter of birds blown out to sea...
 While ‘each is both’ we bask in
 an air swept clean of all distance,

⁸³ Mackey, *Call Me Tantra: Open Field Poetics as Muse*, p.158.

⁸⁴ Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (New York: Pantheon, 1960), p.31.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.32.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

attended by bells...
 Attended by
 birds, in their beaks the hem of dawn's
 skirts
 lifted
 (EW 74)

Amid the tolling of the bells and the fluttering of the birds, Coltrane's spiritual journey through the afterlife reaches its final resting place. His soul, in Corbin's words, 'suddenly visualises its *own* archetypal Image, that Image whose imprint it simultaneously bears within it, projects, and recognises outside of itself'.⁸⁸ The 'her' is his muse, recognisable from the poem's preceding stanza: 'her thread of words a white froth at our / feet as I forget myself' (EW 73). The 'we' might be Sanders, Shepp, Jones, Ali, Brown, Garrison, Tyner—Coltrane's band-members that night at the Village Gate—who are caressed by 'African pillows', their heads cushioned by a far-flung but soothing Africanicity. But the 'we' could be mankind-at-large as well, integrated, without divisions, within this Event. Separations are transgressed, distances between humans bridged: 'While "each is both" we bask in / an air swept clean of all distance,' Mackey writes (EW 74).

'Dawn's / lifted / skirts,' the poem's final image, links the day's first appearance of light with sexual desire. Mackey's specific allusion, however, is to the wisdom of the blind Dogon elder Ogotemmêli, whose first-hand account of the myth, religion and philosophy of the Dogon of Mali proved another key influence on his thinking in the sixties and seventies. 'Coiled fringes of the skirt,' Ogotemmêli told Marcel Griaule during a conversation in 1946 (in a text later published in 1965), were 'the chosen vehicle for the words which the Spirit desired to reveal to the earth'.⁸⁹ The birds, divine attendants to Unity, carry in their beaks the hems of this 'lifted / skirts', the ill-defined speech at the beginning of all things.⁹⁰ Ron Silliman, in an essay on Jack Spicer's poetry, made the observation that language, 'like sex ... is about power. Power over production and

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (London: UP of Oxford, 1965), p.20.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

consumption of meaning.⁹¹ Mackey's poem raises the possibility, in these final lines, of a language being cast anew, a poetry 'swept clean of all distance', cleansed of the racially prejudiced ideologies that have all too frequently saddled poetic representations of Coltrane in the past.

'Ohnedaruth's Day Begun,' to be sure, has none of the simplistic language that Ogotemmêli describes having existed at the world's origins. Allusive and, on occasions, obliquely self-referential, its symbolism and rich intertextuality confound easy comprehension. Like Coltrane's music, it is *bird-language*, thick with open-ended meaning. But the poet was simply refusing to reduce his subject to something more prosaic than the vast range of meanings his music could, if given the chance, be heard to express. 'Trane is a mature swan whose wing span was a whole new world,' Baraka wrote in 'New Black Music'.⁹² And in trying to capture this 'mature swan' in language, the almost limitless hermeneutic possibility of his 'unruly' saxophone wail, Mackey found a literary voice of his own.

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⁹¹ Ron Silliman, 'Spicer's Language'. In Bob Perelman (ed.), *Writing/Talks* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: UP of Southern Illinois, 1985), p.181.

⁹² Baraka, 'New Black Music: A Concert in Benefit of The Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School Live' (liner notes for *New Wave in Jazz*, Impulse A-90). *Black Music*, p.173.