

MANI RAO

Automatic Writing—Real, Surreal, Hyper-real

I.

While reading “Ah Sunflower . . . ,” Allen Ginsberg hears a “very deep earthen grave voice,” “like the voice of the Ancient of Days.” “Without thinking twice,” he knows this voice belongs to Blake.¹ There are two voices here—Blake’s and God’s. Blake’s voice is a certainty for him. But when Ginsberg compares it to God’s voice, we do not take it to mean that Ginsberg knows what God’s voice sounds like, we understand that it is an imaginative projection. This distinction raises the fundamental question in the examination of automatic writing, especially in the practice of poets.

Ginsberg’s description is dramatic; he is narrating an unusual experience. By contrast, Blake’s visions were everyday occurrences. God peered through his window and gave him a scare when he was four, he saw Ezekiel under a tree as a child, and talked to Voltaire, Milton, and Shakespeare. When asked why he does not document visitors with drawings, he replies, “there are so many that the labour would be too great. And there would be no use in it.”² Blake’s visitors and visions dictated his writing. He says of his poem “Milton,” “I have written this Poem from immediate Dictation twelve or sometimes thirty lines at a time without Premeditation & even against my Will.”³ He also claims, “when I am commanded by the Spirits, then I write, and the moment I have written, I see the words fly about the room in all directions.”⁴ Note the violence of this process: “against my Will.”

A skeptical reader may consider Blake’s visions as symbols, allegories or political satire, but Blake speaks about them as if he saw them with his physical eyes, not with his mind’s eye. It is because they are “as near ridiculous as heterogeneous”⁵ that Frederick Tatham finally trusts the authenticity of Blake’s visions. Blake does not explain Albion, Enitharmon, Ulro, Beulah, or Urizen. The coherence and immediacy of Blake’s world comes across in his writings and engravings. Unlike the metrically neat poems in *Songs of Experience and Innocence*, Blake’s “Milton,” “Jerusalem,” “Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” and “America: A Prophecy” are energetic

and fluid. In “Milton,” Milton talks through Blake, Blake talks through Milton, Milton merges with Blake, and each becomes the other’s medium. “Book the First” opens with an invocation to the Muses, asking them to “record the journey of immortal Milton” by coming into his hand and “descending down the Nerves” of his “right arm” and from “out the portals” of his “Brain.”

Why does this description of writing under remote control not undermine Blake’s authorship, turn him from author into automaton? After all, literary careers are built on proof of creativity and talent, and the author is supposed to be active rather than passive. Frederick Tatham writes that Blake “copied the vision (as he called it) upon his plate or canvas, he could not err, and that error and defect could only arise from the departure or inaccurate delineation of this unsubstantiated scene.”⁶ This talent for unerring reception comes with erasure of what Blake calls “Selfhood.” Selfhood is the pernicious element in Blake’s universe, and divides humanity from divinity. Selfhood is the isolated and separate ego of a humanity that is disconnected from the universe. With selfhood out of the way, the erased self reproduces whatever is seen and heard without distortion, writes automatically. Northrop Frye summarizes: “The essential principle of the fallen world seems to be discreteness or opacity.”⁷ Opacity makes the “other” world invisible. Transparency makes author seer. Blake considers his experience forthcoming for everyone: “The time is now arrivd when Men shall again converse in Heaven & walk with Angels . . .”⁸

II.

Blake is in the tradition of writers popularly considered prophets and messengers of God. Moses writes with his right hand for the human world while his left hand is in communication with the divine sources. The messianic *Psalms* of David often use the first person as if Jesus, who is not yet born at this time, were talking. Over seventy scholars come up with an identical translation of the Bible for the *Septuagint*. Indira Devi in the early 20th century sings the devotional lyrics of 16th century Mirabai spontaneously, without having known them previously. Theosophists Mme. Blavatsky, Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater receive dictations from ascended masters. In all these examples, the sources are divine, which makes the text a “wisdom text.” The writer who works with the divine is as if a representative with the weighty task of passing on a message to humanity. They are taken over by, or handed over to, a superior power:

But when you are handed over, do not worry about how to speak or what to say; what you are to say will be given to you when the time comes, because it is not you who will be speaking; the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you (New American Standard Bible, Matt. 10:19–20).

Among scribes, poets have played a special role as messenger and artist. Homer's reputation for authoritative knowledge derived from the Muses becomes a bone of contention for Plato. Virgil's fourth eclogue is considered prophetic. Rama asks Sage Valmiki to write the epic *Ramayana*, including events that have not yet occurred. And Sage Vyasa's writing of the epic *Mahabharata* actually calls for the obstacle-removing god Ganesha to play scribe. This reversal in the *Mahabharata* is curious; it demonstrates how capable both dictator and scribe need to be. Ganesha agrees to be the scribe if Vyasa will dictate without pause. Vyasa demands that Ganesha must understand before transcribing. Thus, they become worthy of each other. When both dictator and scribe are ready, the writing flows automatically; no effort is called for. The idea of effort goes back to the "fall" in the Bible, the fall from Eden. Emanuel Swedenborg, whom Blake appreciated, says:

It is worth noting that in heaven writing flows immediately from thoughts, as effortlessly as if the thoughts simply projected themselves. The hand never hesitates in search of a word, which spontaneously appears.⁹

III.

When disembodied rather than divine sources show up, things are not so straightforward. Unlike Blake, W. B. Yeats could not hear and see things, but his wife could—Yeats recognized the value of this and transcribed what she heard, whereas Blake did not have (or did not talk about) confusing sources. Yeats' dictators were frustrating to him. They sometimes brushed aside days of dictation as "frustration" by *other* trouble-making entities they called "frustrators." They were dictators in the totalitarian sense of the word. Yeats says, "the communicator, as independent of her ignorance as of her knowledge, had no tolerance for error."¹⁰

The dictators frequently withheld the core concept until the end of that set of dictation. "They shifted ground whenever my interest was at its

height, whenever it seemed that the next day must reveal what, as I soon discovered, they were determined to withhold until all was on paper."¹¹ The dictators ask Yeats, self-confessedly unschooled in philosophy, not to read philosophy until the exposition is complete. Yeats reconciles himself to these tactics by reasoning thusly: "had I grasped their central idea, I would have lacked the patience and the curiosity to follow their application of it, preferring some hasty application of my own."¹²

Yeats has doubts about his own experience. He notes evidence such as fragrances or sounds with the diligence of someone who has to defend himself to a disbelieving world, or to himself. He shares a communication from the dictators where the entire phenomena is explained as a creation of his and his wife's minds.

One said in the first month of communication, "We are often but created forms," and another, that spirits do not tell a man what is true but create such conditions, such a crisis of fate, that the man is compelled to listen to his Daimon. And again and again they have insisted that the whole system is the creation of my wife's Daimon and of mine, and that it is as startling to them as to us. Mere "spirits," my teachers say, are the "objective," a reflection and distortion; reality itself is found by the Daimon in what they call, in commemoration of the Third Person of the Trinity, the Ghostly Self. The blessed spirits must be sought within the self which is common to all.¹³

One wonders whether Yeats says this in order to cozy up to a disbelieving reader. After all, in the earlier edition, he has concocted an Arabian tourist as the author of the work, and the revised account of visitations could simply be another strategy, one untruth that tries to earn its credibility by toppling another untruth. A closer look reveals that it is not only the reader but also Yeats who is in a precarious position. Yeats does not know what is true and what is not. He is open to the possibility that the dictators are part of a dream somehow shared by his wife, by him, and occasionally by others. He wonders if imagination can be concretized, objectified:

A dream that can take objective form in sounds, in hallucinations, in scents, in flashes of light, in movement of external objects. [. . .] I remember that Swedenborg has described all those between the celestial state and death as plastic, fantastic and deceitful, the dramatic personae of our dreams; that Cornelius Agrippa attributes to Orpheus

these words: “The Gates of Pluto must not be unlocked, within is a people of dreams.”¹⁴

Despite this skepticism from the scribe himself, do we dismiss *A Vision* as imagination? The theories of the Masks, Gyres, Thesis and Antithesis, Discord and Concord, Will and the Creative Faculty, mathematical drawings of “Spiritus Mundi,” and the Phases of the Moon are complex, and seem a valid, reasonable, and useful theory. Yeats’ descriptions and explanations are full of literary references, and his own understanding of the world is via literature and philosophy. An example:

I had never read Hegel, but my mind had been full of Blake from boyhood up and I saw the world as conflict—Spectre and Emanation—and could distinguish between a contrary and a negation. “Contraries are positive,” wrote Blake, “a negation is not a contrary,” and again, “There is a place at the bottom of graves where contraries are equally true.”¹⁵

Yeats even makes his uncertainties a part of his theory. “It was part of their purpose to affirm that all gains of man come from conflict with the opposite of his true being. *Was communication itself such a conflict*”¹⁶ (italics mine). Many of the concepts in Yeats’ poetry come from his experience in automatic writing. An understanding of the concept of “gyres” is a prerequisite to appreciating the poem “The Second Coming.” Yeats includes his own poems in *A Vision*; the chapter “Dove or Swan,” which explains the history of the world via the phases of the moon, is prefaced by his poem “Leda and the Swan.”

Blake’s writing features God / Jehovah, Savior, and Holy Ghost as divine characters. When Yeats mentions Jesus, it is only as a historical figure. Both Blake and Yeats are interested in revealing the order of the universe, perfection’s underlying principles as they see it. Both Blake and Yeats offer readers the information they receive, affirming their function as seers and messengers, poets who show humanity the way. But for Yeats, automatic writing is not about unity and selfhood.

IV.

Blake in the 18th and 19th centuries, and Yeats in the early 20th century were situated differently. By the time Yeats was writing, the industrial revolution Blake saw taking shape had its impact, rationality was important, the subconscious had come into its own with Sigmund Freud’s

ideas, and creative imagination was a part of clinical psychology. Marxism and existentialism focused attention on materiality, God as entity became unfashionable, and inexplicability—as well as explanation—was relocated in the subconscious. It is in this context that Yeats’ self-doubt makes sense.

French surrealists writing at the same time as Yeats go further. They do not just wonder about the subconscious, they force the issue. André Breton’s definition of surrealism is the concept of automatic writing: “SURREALISM: [. . .] psychic automatism in its pure state [. . .] dictated by thought, the absence of control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.”¹⁷ The dictator here is *thought*. In a famous anecdote about how Breton discovered automatic writing, a phrase comes “knocking at the window”¹⁸—and there are no gods or disembodied entities involved. In “The Mediums Enter,” Breton describes experiments with séances, and rejects spiritualism: “at no point [. . .] have we ever adopted the spiritualist viewpoint [. . .] I absolutely refuse to admit that any communication whatsoever can exist between the living and the dead.”¹⁹ But a reverential attitude is present—the apprehension of a universe beyond the sensory-perceptible, a desire to *marvel*: “the marvelous always is beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact only the marvelous is beautiful.”²⁰

The surrealist automatic writer is a bridge. They “will be considered as having tried nothing better than to cast a conduction wire between the far too distant worlds of waking and sleep, exterior and interior reality, reason and madness.”²¹ The aim is to reach “states of perfect receptivity [that] suffer no diminution in time.”²² When Paul Valéry asked Breton why he devoted himself to poetry, he replied, “to obtain (to procure for myself?) states of mind like those which certain odd poetic movements had aroused in me.”²³ The surrealists’ purpose was to free themselves from the restraints of the rational and the predictable. In Breton’s definition of surrealism, spontaneity is permissible, while willed and voluntary writing is not. Of course, the surrealist wills to become involuntary and produce creatively from that state.

The idea of involuntary writing also absorbed Gertrude Stein, who was involved with automatic writing experiments in the Harvard Psychological Laboratory under Hugo Münsterberg. The idea was to deliberately disrupt regular modes of conscious writing and unhook oneself from self-consciousness via distraction to access a “secondary personality.”²⁴ Breton’s “no diminution in time” is similar to Stein’s “continuous present.”²⁵ Both actively sought a transported state-of-mind (unlike Blake, who

wrote against his will). Stein's interest was the materiality of language; the surrealists were looking for psychic and esoteric realities, "mysterious exchanges between mental and material worlds."²⁶

Breton was looking for demystification: "We may hope that the mysteries which really are not will give way to the great Mystery. I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, into a kind of absolute reality, surreality."²⁷ In his second manifesto, Breton talks about the surrealist's desire to resolve contradictions. "There exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, cease to be perceived as contradictions."²⁸ Like Yeats, Breton is interested in the swing between the subjective and objective. He narrates how Leonardo da Vinci invited his students to copy their paintings from what they would see when they stared at an old wall for a period of time: "The whole problem of the passage from subjectivity to objectivity is resolved there."²⁹

Breton differentiates himself from Freud. While he thanks Freud for "bringing back to light a part of the mental world,"³⁰ and admires the insane person's access to imagination and indifference to social conventions, he rejects Freud's reductions:

Freud again is surely mistaken in concluding that the prophetic dream does not exist—I mean the dream involving the immediate future—since to hold that the dream is exclusively revelatory of the past is to deny the value of motion.³¹

Like Blake and Yeats, the surrealists deal with violence, but it is they who are the violators. "The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd."³² In this image, it is the surrealist automatic writer who barges into the body of society, violating it.

Federico García Lorca, who mixed with the French surrealists and wrote exuberant automatic poetry, invokes a violent muse called "duende." The muse, whom he has seen twice, is "weary," but the duende has "to be roused in the very cells of the blood."³³ Lorca describes the relationship of the poet with the duende as a struggle for survival, and specifically associates the duende with Spain: "While Germany has, with some exceptions, a muse, and Italy has permanently an angel, Spain is always moved by the duende."³⁴ Lorca's remark that he has seen the muse twice is more in line with Blake, and less with Breton.

The zeal in the surrealists' project of automatic writing makes it apt to say they had a dream. Was the dream realized? The automatic writer's sense of an expanded, transcended, and satisfied self is indisputable. "The mind of the man who dreams is fully satisfied by what happens to him."³⁵ What did the automatic writing otherwise achieve? A phrase came knocking at Breton's door, he welcomed it. The phrase has no speaker, it is the speaker. Language is entity, and validated by the very fact that it shows up, regardless of value or comprehensibility. *Magnetic Fields*, co-authored by Breton and Soupalt, is especially interesting because the phrase comes knocking on *both* their doors—one writer becomes alibi for the other, both are "magnetized" by the writing and become an absolute, unquestionable universe. In short, writing has origins beyond the writer's consciousness, and the writer does not possess it, the writer is possessed by it. This is one mystery solved, but it does not seem like a "great Mystery."

This takes us back to Blake and Yeats. Did *their* work solve the "great Mystery?" Did their work make us wiser about what Breton calls "fundamental questions?" Or are they no more than concepts, coded universes to be appreciated aesthetically? Today we may read Blake and Yeats mostly for pleasure and partly for instruction, but we are aware of the claim that these were messages to them, and via them to us. By contrast, from the surrealist automatic writer one does not expect any messages. They are writers trying a new trick. There is no dictator to be thanked or blamed, and one holds the writer responsible. When everything is open to chance, "the encounter of an external causality and an internal finality,"³⁶ it raises questions of arbitrariness. A line from Yeats—"diamond and hourglass revolve on one another like the sails of a windmill,"³⁷ can be as arbitrary as a line from Breton—"I married the all-powerful commander of the night of the sunflower."³⁸ Yeats proposes a theory about order and cycles in *A Vision*, whereas Breton's theory *is* surrealism and spontaneity—it is concerned with the writing process.

Breton's idea of spontaneous art was challenged in 1941 by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who questioned how it could have aesthetic value. Breton responded that he was not interested in establishing hierarchies.³⁹ The answer to Lévi-Strauss' concern is expressed by Maurice Blanchot in the essay "From Dread to Language." Blanchot presents automatic writing as the ideal way to write, and talks about the presence of "a new law" in automatic writing, subtler than the more obvious rules of aesthetics:

To give oneself to language is to abandon oneself. One allows oneself to be carried away by a mechanism that takes upon itself the responsibility

of the act of writing. True automatic writing is the habitual form of writing, writing that has used the mind's deliberate efforts and its erasures to create automatisms. [. . .] The instinct that leads us, in dread, to flee from the rules—if it is not itself flight from dread—comes, then from the need to pursue these rules as true rules, as an exacting kind of coherence, and no longer as the conventions and means of a traditional commodity. I try to give myself a new law, [. . .] a law that imposes itself with a rigor I am aware of and that impresses more heavily upon me the feeling that it has no more meaning than a toss of the dice.⁴⁰

If automatic writing is defined as dictation by entities other than the author, then the French surrealists' automatic writing must be redefined as free writing, spontaneous writing, or inspired writing. If automatic writing is defined as the absence of the conscious author, a process that reveals a world that operates on its own laws, then one can say that the French surrealists and Stein practiced it. This is either a reduction of the scale of the author who can no longer rely upon an external source for new knowledge, or an expansion, with the subconscious added to the author's resources. Either way, the principle is the same—the writer is witness, not author. By the time Roland Barthes declares the author dead in 1967, the principle has become a part of poets' manifestos.

V.

Blake, Yeats (via Mrs. Yeats), and Lorca see and hear things, Breton and Stein do not. The former seem placed in fortuitous positions, the latter have to work for it. Blake, Yeats, and Lorca are empirical, their experience is immediate and tangible to them. In this, they have more in common with modernists and objectivists than do the surrealists. Although Breton and his circle experience a transcended state, their loud and conscious effort places the emphasis on desire rather than experience; in this sense, they are Romantic. But the milestone is choice—with Breton, the writer has become *willfully* capable of transcending the limitations of conventional writing. One has also arrived at a democratic attitude—any writer can practice automatic writing if they can figure out how to reconnect with the something out there, or in here.

We find no mention of the term automatic writing in the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and Louis Zukofsky, but the idea of the author as channel is prevalent. It is as if automatic writing is no longer

a special activity, it has dissolved into the idea of a poet. From Williams' "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower":

But the words
made solely of air
or less,
that came to me
out of the air
and insisted
on being written down,⁴¹

In "Kora in Hell," Williams talks about the author as "gourd, vine, empty form."⁴²

Consider how the form of a poem is transformed at this time. Just as the author is the empty vessel that is filled and formed by the message, the poem's form is now set free, the spirit of the poem *dictating* the form, the vessel, of the poem. Free verse is based on ideas of freedom from tradition's constraints, and on self-discovery, which is what automatic writing was about. The *poem* now becomes medium. Automatic writing has exploded out of its definition and become the creative act. It is now the poet who is the outside entity, who watches the process. The poet is invisible, the dictator is invisible, the dictation is invisible, the visible entity is the poem.

This invisibility could be a cover, or camouflage in a rational environment. Robert Duncan writes in "The Truth and Life of Myth" that the modern mind has "chickened out on God."⁴³

Time and time again, men have chickened out on what that hawk, the genius of Poetry, threatens, and surrendered their imaginations to the proprieties and rationalizations of [. . .] commonsense philosophers, arbiters of educated best taste.⁴⁴

Duncan links this denial to a Keatsian negative capability: "the intellectual adventure of not know, returns."⁴⁵

VI.

Jack Spicer spoke extensively on poet as medium. While he used more specific terms and discussed the mechanics of automatic writing, he presents a fragile poetic state of "not knowing." In his Vancouver Lecture 1,

he notes three stages in the development of a poet as an automatic writer. The first stage is when there is a “fast take.” In the second stage, the poet is compelled, they have to say what they say, not what they want to say. In the third stage, “you get some idea that there is a difference between you and the outside of you which is writing poetry—where you feel less proud of the poem that you’ve written, and you know damn well that it belongs to somebody else.”⁴⁶ Spicer does not see automatic writing as a practice unique to him, he says “all poetry, good poetry is written this way, in spite of the poet.”⁴⁷ The poet is like a radio, a receiver, conveyer of the message and does not know what is going on or how. But the poet’s “individual talent” is used in the process—“the more you know, the more languages you know . . . the more building blocks the Martians have to play with”⁴⁸—and the poet is marked by the process—“The trouble with comparing a poet with a radio is that radios / don’t develop scar-tissue.”⁴⁹

Spicer is bewildered by his experience. He calls his sources “spooks” and “Martians” but cautions that he only uses these terms as placeholders: “Please don’t get me wrong, Martian is just a word for X.”⁵⁰ And he does not want to know their identities. “I would guess that there are a number of sources but I have no idea what they are, and frankly I don’t think it’s profitable to try and find out.”⁵¹ The reason for this refusal to be curious? Fear. Faust “got messed up by them.”⁵² “The closer you get to it the worse off you get, and the more it eats into you [. . .] like the ring in Tolkien. It’s a pretty powerful juju.”⁵³

Ironically, Spicer discounts Blake’s experience as imagination: “I think he got the idea that he was writing prophetic books all right. And so he started writing prophetic books.”⁵⁴ He is baffled by the dictations the Yeats received: “the verdict on it was at best not proven.”⁵⁵ Spicer’s position discredits his own account. He makes fun of Pentecostals speaking in tongues and dismisses all mediums—“I think mediums are almost always, if not always, fake.”⁵⁶ It is as if he does not realize that this comment may be applied to him. After all, who’s to say what is true, except the person who experienced it? If Blake had no alibi, neither did Spicer.

Spicer situates his sources outside as opposed to inside—and the reference is to the “egotistical sublime” in romantic poets like Shelley. Robin Blaser’s essay “The Practice of the Outside” underlines this point. The distinction between outside and inside is confusing. Spicer reduces dada and surrealist experiments as arbitrary juxtapositions, but Breton’s writings indicate there is more to it than that. Is Breton’s subconscious located inside or the outside? Is Breton’s subconscious personal, or universal? What is the evidence that Spicer’s dictators are outside (visitors)

and not inside (imaginative)? Nothing except his word, and that is not easy to frame because Spicer does not, can not, identify his sources. All that may be noted is that Spicer’s sources are felt but invisible, present but unnamable.

Spicer’s disapproval of the self-important poet is in fact no different from Blake’s presentation of Selfhood, a limited self divided from the universe. So when Spicer criticizes Blake for imagining himself a prophet, we can tell that the meaning of the word “prophet” has changed since Blake. Louis Martz throws some light on this in *Many Gods and Many Voices*, where he discusses prophetic voices among poets. In the basic Greek meaning of the word, he says, a prophet is one who speaks for another—for God, for gods, or for other human beings.⁵⁷ By this definition, every automatic writer-medium is a prophet.

Spicer is not a happy prophet. In the Vancouver Lecture, he describes the automatic writer as a mother delivering a baby. Spicer himself does not hope for deliverance. He does not expect to learn anything from his experience and does not see his sources as sources of knowledge: “this Martian, this ghost, this whatever the hell it is, may be just as dumb in its own way as you are and may misstep too.”⁵⁸ Nor does he set up his poetry as wisdom text: “I can’t remember any good advice that I’ve gotten from one of my poems [. . .] poems are pretty useless for anything like that [. . .] they’ve kicked me in the teeth a few times, but they’ve never really helped me much.”⁵⁹

VII.

An exception to this trend of denials is James Merrill. His sustained interest in contacting the “beyond” is similar to that of Yeats and Breton. He and David Jackson worked with the ouija board to communicate with an entity named Ephraim and departed writers including W. H. Auden, Maya Deren, and Gertrude Stein. Ephraim, Merrill tells us, is a “fallen angel,” and looks like a “red-hot bat.”⁶⁰ A statement from Ephraim that Rimbaud ghostwrote *The Waste Land* is a natural part of the context of *The Changing Light at Sandover*.⁶¹ But when Merrill reproduces it in a speech or essay, the bluntness shocks.⁶² The least one expects from a writer in New York in the late 1970s is a minor show of doubt, or struggle, in accepting a bat’s word without question. After all, even the 17th-century Hamlet makes allowances for his own, and the reader’s, skepticism when the ghost claims to have been murdered. It is only when Claudius is shaken by the play he directs that he is convinced: “Oh, good Horatio, I’ll take

the ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?"⁶³ To-believe or not-to-believe is not a problem that bothers Merrill. On the other hand, there is no hint of inflation in Merrill. He does not claim special faculties and does not call his writing automatic. He works rigorously working at a poem's detail, and looks towards the "level of the psyche we no longer recognize as ours" for "education."⁶⁴ He seems to disapprove of Pound's "oracular" voice, how "he tries, I think to write like a God."⁶⁵

VIII.

Blake, Yeats, Spicer, Ginsberg, and Merrill work with a corporeal reality. They may express uncertainty or marvel, but they draw our attention to sources outside themselves. Breton and the surrealists work with language as material, and channel the surreal sub-conscious—our attention is drawn to the vast and marvelous potential of the mind. Instead, Williams subsumes the experience of poet and poem as channel or medium into the poetic state, and it is this position that seems to have survived, with some variation, even among poets who use the capital G word. George Bowering says: "The potent resides in the material and energy particles that might give themselves up to the poem. [. . .] I prefer to imagine its place to be in the language itself, in the phonemes we poets must become experts in."⁶⁶ Bowering has a poem about meeting God. Years after the publication of the poem, asked in an interview what he would feel if he really met God, he says, "I'd be scared."⁶⁷ The poet is an "expert," but no maker:

Do you remember Blake's picture of Jehovah kneeling to free lightning bolts from his fingers? The poet is not Jehovah, no matter what the atheist Romantic poets say. The poet is the person waiting under the tree, waiting for lightning to strike. Waiting with pen in hand.⁶⁸

Here the poet is Thoth-like, pen in hand, having relinquished control, in a posture of readiness, giving over to the poem, not expecting any visitation other than the poetic state.

When a poet writes from this state, the boundary between the corporeal and imagined is blurred for the reader, and one is in the open realm of the hyper-real. Donald Revell makes the same point about who the poet is not: "A poet, whatever else he or she may be, is not a creative writer."⁶⁹ He writes in the poem "O Rare": "God is flat on the ground, I lie beside him." The etymology of the word "idea" (*idein*: to see) comes to mind,

which makes a vision, idea, and an idea, a vision. If vision is idea, and idea, vision, then one has both if one has either. Revell flips Williams' notion of imagination as reality:

Clearly there's no need for imagination. It would be a downright hindrance. The poem is entirely of its real place and moment. Nothing is missing which imagination might supply. Write where you are. Our art is simply one form of attention.⁷⁰

NOTES

1. Allen Ginsberg, "The Blake Experience," *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. Lewis Hyde (Ann Arbor University of Michigan Press, 1984), 120–123. From an interview with Thomas Clark recorded in June 1965 and published in the *Paris Review* (Spring 1966).
2. Henry Crabb Robinson, "From Reminiscences," *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, eds. Mary Lynn Johnson and John E Grant, (New York, London: W. W. Norton 2008, 1979), 513.
3. William Blake, "To Thomas Butts, April 25, 1803," *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, 483.
4. Robinson, 513.
5. Frederick Tatham, "From the Life of William Blake," *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, 506.
6. Tatham, 506.
7. Northrop Frye, "Blake's Treatment of the Archetype," *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, 529.
8. William Blake, "Letter to John Flaxman," *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, 473.
9. Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, tr. George F. Dole, (United States: Swedenborg Foundation, 2002), 262.
10. W. B. Yeats, *A Vision*, (New York: Collier Books, 1956, 1969), 21.
11. *Ibid.*, 11.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 22.
14. *Ibid.*, 23.
15. *Ibid.*, 72.
16. *Ibid.*, 13.
17. Andre Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," *Andre Breton Selections*, ed. Mark Polizzotti, tr. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London:

- University of California Press, 2003), 20.
18. *Ibid.*, 15.
 19. Andre Breton, "The Mediums Enter," *The Lost Steps*, tr. Mark Polizzotti (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 92.
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