



Ethnopoetics : Somapoetics

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

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

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

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

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