

**This Poem Is a Outlaw: The Demonic Inversion of Justice
in Ishmael Reed's *beware: do not read this poem*
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In literature the supernatural or metaphysical is often meant to work justice where it seems otherwise unavailable. The justice accomplished is poetic, employing metaphor because the physical, fallen (literal) world comes up short in that regard. With its *contrapassi* punishments, Dante's *Inferno* supplies famous examples. In Cynthia Ozick's "Puttermesser and Xanthippe,"¹ Ruth Puttermesser, formerly a lawyer for the City of New York, creates a golem out of house-plant soil, to transform Manhattan into a neo-Eden where "lost wallets are daily being returned to their owners" and "gangs of youths have invaded the subway yards at night and have washed the cars clean." Lined with beautiful gardens, the litter-free streets echo with soothing music. The libraries are open twenty-four hours a day, and adult continuing education is all the rage. "There is unemployment among correction officers. ... No harm comes to anything or anyone. ... [S]lums undo themselves." Sexually-transmitted disease disappears, and the city's ex-convicts become reformed, productive citizens.² Anticipating the politics of Rudolph Giuliani, Puttermesser accomplishes all this once the golem has made her mayor. Yet, because perfect justice is impossible on Earth after The Fall, evil triumphs: the golem's "Plan" ultimately fails, horrifically.³ This side of Heaven, all is gravity: "perfect justice" is a bitter irony.

Consider, again, Marcel Aymé's "Dermuche." On the eve of his appointment with the guillotine (which also happens to be Christmas Eve), the murderer of the title is transported back

¹ In *The Puttermesser Papers* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 22-101.

² *Id.* at 75-78.

³ By the time we reach "Puttermesser in Paradise," *id.* at 212-36, the last episode in a collection of Puttermesser stories that Ozick insists comprises a novel (though the stories were written and published separately over a thirty-year period and show mostly coincidental intramural dependency), bookish Puttermesser has been stabbed to death and raped, in that order, while otherwise enjoying a quiet night in her Manhattan apartment with Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*, contemplating how mortal imaginings contaminate transcendent justice.

to infancy. From his arrest, the infantile brute has been unrepentant about having killed three pensioners simply so that he could steal a phonograph record they played each Sunday. Its “ritornello” had become Dermuche’s idiot obsession, and all he asks of mercy is that, after he is executed, God restore the record to him in Heaven. Preoccupied more by careerist notions of professional duty than by the Christmas miracle regarding a prisoner fascinated with “the baby Jesus,” prison officials execute Dermuche; they are determined not to let the murderer escape justice through time travel, never mind his apparent helplessness and innocence regained. Dermuche’s lawyer reasons that if time has been erased on the case, the murders never happened. He visits the pensioners’ home to find that, sure enough, they are alive. One thing troubles them, however: their phonograph record has just gone missing. Innocence triumphs all around, redeeming crime and sin, but only via the supernatural.⁴

One way of reading Ishmael Reed’s celebrated poem *beware : do not read this poem*⁵ is as a demonic inversion of this use of the supernatural to impose justice. If there is justice at work in the poem, it is from an underworld, or at least underclass, point of view – in Reed’s vernacular, a Neo-HooDoo view.

The first verse sets the colloquial tone, in the manner of a ransom note:

tonite , thriller was
abt an ol woman , so vain she
surrounded herself w/
many mirrors

⁴ I discuss this in greater detail (with another mention of the Puttermesser stories) in *The Structures of Law and Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013), at 203-05.

⁵ Ishmael Reed, *New and Collected Poems 1964-2006* (New York: Carol & Graf, 2006), 60-62.

It is not just free verse, ignoring rules of scansion, but a real literary scofflaw, reckless of structure and spelling, inconsiderate of its public to the point of abbreviating words and punctuating the punctuation (with exaggerated spacing)⁶ so that the reader must become complicit, an accessory, while trying to follow what the poem says. Even in 1970, this structural play was not unconventional. Yet Reed makes it part of his “Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic,” which he defines most concisely in a poem of that name – published in *Conjure*, the volume that includes *beware* – as “The proportions of the ingredients used depend upon the cook!”⁷ As we shall see, Neo-HooDooism is all about improvisation and resisting received wisdom, particularly that of Western culture.

In *beware* Reed pushes his variety of post-modernism into the actual narrative. The narration becomes even scarier given its childish, barely literate fascination with what it relates, as though by a Dermuchian madman, congenitally outside the law. *Thriller’s* “ol lady” regresses into a hermit whose “whole life became the / mirrors.” When the villagers broke into her house, “she disappeared / into a mirror” and each subsequent occupant “lost a loved one to / the ol woman in the mirror.” Then comes the funny-shocking narrative shift: like the ol lady’s evil mirrors, the poem swallows its readers:

the hunger of this poem is legendary

it has taken in many victims

back off from this poem

it has drawn in yr feet

⁶ My primary source is the version printed in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, eds. A. N. Eastman, A. W. Allison, H. Barrows, C. R. Blake, A. J. Carr, & H. M. English (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970), 1189-90. In later editions (as below), the spacing is generally more conventional.

⁷ *New and Collected Poems 1964-2006*, *supra* note 4, at 34.

back off from this poem

it has drawn in yr legs

As certain critics of the reader-response school⁸ would tell us, poetry is a mirror, reflecting back to us our subjective view of it; but here there is a double metaphor: Reed's poem is also the mirror as predator, consuming us in our own image, gobbling the reader up feet first – again, a sort of childishly extra-scary detail, as though it has knocked us down to drag us in, or has sunk itself to the floor, and also, perhaps, a sexualized seduction, one body part at a time. (In a more rational alternate universe, or at least one that follows the laws of our own, presumably a poem would cannibalize your hands first, where you hold it, or maybe begin with your eyes.) Reed makes the mirror-poem association explicit in the next two lines: “back off from this poem / it is a greedy mirror.” Metaphor can be dangerous, particularly when, childishly ignorant of the rules, pre-law, we take it literally, falling into it as into a pretty pool whose depths hide lethal tangles of seaweed. This poem is bobbing for apples in Eden, you might say, doubling metaphors. You can't resist its forbidden pull – like Narcissus gazing at his reflection in the murderous waters – and now look what you've done:

you are into the poem from

the waist down

nobody can hear you can they ?

this poem has had you up to here

belch

this poem aint got no manners

⁸ Guyora Binder and Robert Weisberg, *Literary Criticisms of Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 139-145; Ian Ward, *Law and Literature: Possibilities and Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 45-52; Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1980).

This poem just don't care about the norms of civil society, any more than its objective correlative, the bloodless mirrors, care about those norms. It just sucks you in. If it weren't outside nature, it would be sociopathic. From our conventional perspective in the natural world of Earth, it certainly is evil – unless, again, you take the Freudian perspective that it describes a natural, ecstatic (lawfree) act of sex.

Then we have a curious pronoun shift:

you cant call out frm this poem

relax now & go w/ this poem

move & roll on to this poem

do not resist this poem

this poem has yr eyes

this poem has his head

this poem has his arms

this poem has his fingers

this poem has his fingertips

this poem is the reader & the

reader this poem

The seduction is, so to say, on the other foot. Certainly the poem has the reader's eyes, and of course there is plurisignative play here, studied, scary (or at least sado-masochistic) ambiguity: Reed has caught our eye with his writing, and his writing has caught our eye for breakfast. But then it "has" not our head but *his* head, arms, fingers... The reader is still outside the poem, observing and experiencing all at once, not quite in two places at once: "this poem is

the reader & the / reader this poem.” The poem is still *you*, reading/interpreting from the outside, but also *him*, swallowed up where the laws are dangerous, unknown, *unlaws*, all Id.

In his introduction to *New and Collected Poems 1964-2006*, Reed writes:

Irish writers have influenced black writers since at least the 1930s: the exploration of Celtic mythology by Yeats and his circle led me to use Egyptian allusions in my early poetry as a way of avoiding colonial influences. Toward the end of the [nineteen-] sixties, a painting by Joe Overstreet that included ververs, the geometric designs or landing patterns for *loas* or ‘saints,’ led me to study African religion in New Orleans and Haiti. The Irish writers had, for me, inspired a model imposed from the outside. This was to return to one’s roots. For them it was the Celtic Revival. For me Neo-HooDooism ‘Hoo Doo’ stories – which used magical realism before there was a term for it – had been part of the oral tradition and recorded by writers like Charles Chesnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes.⁹

In other words, he is deliberately resisting European literary convention or poetic “law,” presumably to impose poetic justice thereon, to better convey his own reality. Critical response has provided the justification: Reed claims his inspiration is Neo-HooDooism, which these commentators affirm derives from the Voodoo (or Voudon) practice of grafting its African belief system onto Christianity, particularly Catholicism in places such as Haiti, imposed by colonizers, slave-masters, and the like in the New World.¹⁰ In the jargon, to reinvigorate a repressed,

⁹*New and Collected Poems 1964-2006*, *supra* note 4, at xvi.

¹⁰ See, for example, Helen Lock, “‘A Man’s Story is his Gris-gris’: Ishmael Reed’s Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic and the African American Tradition,” *South Central Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), 67-77, especially at 69. In his

Christianized culture, Neo-HooDooism hybridizes or is determinedly syncretic,¹¹ inhabiting America while rejecting much of the mythos of its dominant culture, so as to both reflect and consume. The regurgitated synthesis becomes cultural artifacts such as jazz and black dance creations, Neo-HooDoo literature, food of and for the soul.¹²

This is not to say this Neo-HooDoo synthesis is altogether coherent. In his *Neo-HooDoo Manifesto*, a “poem”¹³ also published in *Conjure*, Reed says that Neo-HooDoo is “the lost church” of American culture¹⁴ – that is, Neo-HooDoo is alienated but properly a part of the greater societal whole. But here and in much of his writing he seems to reject (bitterly) *any* validity in the dominant culture. Yahweh is a “dangerous paranoid pain-in-the neck a CopGod,” and the H-Bomb “a typical Jeho-vah ‘miracle.’ Jeho-vah is why we are in Vietnam. He told Moses to go out and ‘subdue’ the world.”¹⁵ In *Catechism of the Neoamerican Hoodoo Church* (a few pages on from *Neo-HooDoo Manifesto* and *The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic*), even Gandhi, whom you would think personifies “syncretic” or at least multicultural, is a “middleclass lawyer stuck on himself. / freed d brahmins so they cd sip tea & hate cows.”¹⁶ As for Christianity, at its “center ... lies the graveyard,” repressed and life-hating while Neo-HooDoo is sensual and

novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Atheneum, 1972) Reed writes (at 47) of how “the Haitian elite pays homage to Catholicism but keeps a *houngan* [a Voodoo priest] tucked away in the background.” See also the next note.

¹¹ Reed uses the term in this fashion – e.g., in Peter Nazareth and Ishmael Reed, “An Interview with Ishmael Reed,” *The Iowa Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Spring, 1982), 117-13, at 123. In “Ishmael Reed’s Neo-Hoo-Doo Slave Narrative,” *Narrative*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (May, 1994), 112-139, Ashraf H.A. Rushdy writes: “It has long been recognized that what Reed calls Neo-HooDoo – which is Reed’s term for a Voudon-based religious system with its own aesthetics – provides him with a strategy and a form for parodying all kinds of ‘monisms,’ that is, largely Western reified systems of beliefs and values which define themselves by excluding other usually African or African-derived syncretic systems of beliefs and values.” See also Robert Elliott Fox, “About Ishmael Reed’s Life and Thought,” *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹² See *Mumbo Jumbo*, *supra* note 9, *passim* and particularly at 152.

¹³ *New and Collected Poems*, *supra*, note 4 at 25-33. Reed would perhaps angrily call me an Atonist for those quotation marks and this defense of them: Even in a volume of “post-modernist” poetry, this manifesto is what it proclaims itself to be, prosaic polemics, only occasionally poetic by even the most liberal or accommodating cross-cultural definition.

¹⁴ *New and Collected Poems*, *supra* note 4 at 25.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 31.

¹⁶ *Supra* note 4 at 49.

vibrant, celebrating human impulse and desire.¹⁷ In Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, Moses is at first an anti-Establishment ("Hoodoo") rebel, and Reed notoriously remarks that "Atonists" (Occidentalists) "confuse" the African-American's contemplation and relaxation "with laziness because he is not hard at work drilling, blocking the view of the ocean, destroying the oyster beds or releasing radioactive particles that will give unborn 3-year-olds leukemia and cancer."¹⁸ The John Milton of *Paradise Lost* is an "Atonist apologist extraordinaire [who] saw the coming of the minor geek and sorcerer Jesus Christ as a way of ending the cult of Osiris forever ...; that's why English professors like him, he's their amulet, keeping niggers out of their departments and stamping out Jes Grew [Osirian-founded Neo-HooDooism] before it invades their careers."¹⁹

In *Catechism of the Neoamerican Hoodoo Church*, which prosodically, syntactically, and sometimes thematically resembles *beware* closely ("i am d mad mad scientist in love w/ d dark. / d villagers dont understand me. here they come / with their torches. there goes a rock / thru d window..."), he writes of constraints on artists in American culture:

this is how yr ears shd feel
his hs what u shd eat
this is who us shd sleep w/
this is how u shd talk
this is how u shd write...
these are the new gods we made for u ...

DO YR ART D WAY U WANT

¹⁷ *Id.* at 26, 28.

¹⁸ *Supra* note 4 at 45.

¹⁹ *Supra* note 9 at 171-72. It is of course typical of Reed, the iconoclast provocateur, to personalize the argument.

ANYWAY U WANT
ANY WANGOL U WANT
ITS UP TO U/ WHAT WILL WORK
FOR U.

so sez d neoamerican [sic] hoodoo
church of free spirits who
need no
monarch
no gunhoguru
no busybody ray frm d heddahopper planet
of wide black hats & stickpins. he was
just a 666* frm a late late show &
only d clucks threw pennies.
*false prophet of the apocalypse²⁰

The asterisked gloss is Reed's. Note that here the late show is scary from the other side of the mirror, looking into a fearful world where everything is oppressive, prescriptive law and custom: spontaneity and improvisation are repressed.

But Reed otherwise insists in all his work that Neo-HooDooism is the synthesis of ancient African and modern American culture, the former warming the blood of the latter, often

²⁰ *Id.* 46-55 and 51-53.

against the latter's anaesthetic reflex.²¹ The poem's sober end again makes manifest this Neo-HooDoo *double entendre*:

statistic : the us bureau of missing persons reports
that in 1968 over 100,000 people disappeared
leaving no solid clues
nor trace only
a space in the lives of their friends

We are back outside the mirror, returned to the light of the natural Western world, protected by the dull, adult scrim of statistics. But we carry the funk of where we have been. The dark side lingers, invisible until night falls, with its black humor.²²

In the literary genealogy quoted above from his introduction to the collected poems, Reed makes analogy to how Irish writers have done something similar, grafting Celtic "paganism" onto Christianity, inventing a new philology in English. Thus does James Joyce reconfigure English to convey the dream-state depicted in *Finnegan's Wake*, about which Louis Menand has remarked,

Normal syntax is designed for a law-abiding reality, for a reality that is organized temporally, spatially, and causally. In dreams, these laws are suspended, which means that, to represent the dream life, normal syntax has to be suspended, too. And images in dreams can represent two things at

²¹ Regarding this equivocal cultural blending in Reed's work, see also Sharon Jessee, "Ishmael Reed's Multi-Culture: The Production of Cultural Perspective," MELUS, 13: 3/4, "Varieties of Ethnic Criticism" (Autumn - Winter, 1986), 5-14.

²² As successful reformist mayor in New York City, Ozick's Puttermesser notes that "Paradise is on the side of the expected" – of custom, the conventional order. The city has become "a rational daylight place; it has shut the portals of the night." "Puttermesser and Xanthippe," *supra* note 1 at 78.

once, as when we dream of X and know all the time that it is Y. This is why punning is the language of night.²³

beware: do not read this poem is, of course, an extended night-pun, relying as such jokes do on an image's representing two states of being simultaneously, one of them not usually expected. Here the mirror both reflects and ingests, doubling down yet again so that the reader is both the reader and the poem. (Perhaps the old lady is a *loa* – a Voodoo spirit/saint. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, a “radio loa” broadcasts and consumes the listener, or at least his darker inclinations. It “loves to hear the static concerning its victims’ crimes before it ‘eats’ them.”²⁴) Coincidentally, Menand goes on to quote (Irishman) George Bernard Shaw on how in *Ulysses* Joyce offended some of his countrymen with unpleasant truths about them: “If a man holds up a mirror to your nature,” Shaw remarked, “and shows you that it needs washing – not whitewashing – it is no use breaking the mirror.” Whether or not reader-response theory is critical truth (such that there is no use in contradicting it, breaking the ol lady’s mirror), Shaw’s comment could serve as a reply to much of the critical dismissal of Reed’s *oeuvre* (particularly the novels²⁵) as protesting too much (in all senses), especially, one imagines, from Reed’s view, which insists that Western culture constantly fails to understand or even acknowledge the black experience in its midst, never mind that it regularly appropriates it, as with Elvis Presley and the Beatles “covering” black music.²⁶

²³ Louis Menand, “Silence, Exile, Punning: James Joyce’s Chance Encounters,” *The New Yorker*, July 2, 2012, 75.

²⁴ *Supra*, note 9 at 151.

²⁵ See, for example, Bruce Allen Dick, *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999). In interviews, Reed often complains that critics misunderstand or dislike him, but of course one could say that cultivating such reaction is part of his artistic *modus vivendi*.

²⁶ See, for example, Shamoan Zamir, “An Interview with Ishmael Reed,” *Callaloo*, 17:4 (Autumn, 1994), 1131-1157 at 1143, and Reed’s novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*, *supra* note 4, *passim*. Regarding the Beatles: *Neo-HooDoo Manifesto*, *supra* note 4 at 29.

As the critical literature on Reed's "neo-HooDoo aesthetic" points out, Voodoo makes no distinction between object and image. It is metaphorical and anti-metaphorical all at once. As Helen Lock puts it,

the story, the gris-gris, and the self become equated. ... The Voodoo aesthetic is essentially improvisational, allowing for flexibility and adaptability of interpretation, and part of this flexibility is that the *loa* cannot be assigned a symbolic function which would rigidly circumscribe interpretation. Thus in Voodoo art nothing *stands for* anything else: there is no subordination of sign to signified. ... [Reed's] Neo-HooDoo retains the subversive function of Voodoo culture, but in literary rather than primarily visual terms; it retains the Euro-American literary forms while redefining their function; and it revitalizes independence of the sign. Words themselves become instruments of power and control, and control over language becomes control over identity.²⁷

Lock concludes: "Reed shifts the emphasis from the fossilized *forms* of the Euro-American tradition, to the *spirit* which is conjured by the power of the word."²⁸

Cross-culturally, law views certain language as dangerous: defamation, blasphemy, sedition, obscenity, contempt of tribunals, spreading false news, and "fighting words" all are proscribed for threatening the social order as well as individual well-being. The Word, after all, is Law. Of more pertinent interest here is that though Reed views his Neo-HooDoo aesthetic as hearkening back to Egypt and Africa and subverting Occidentalism, he operates (as in this poem)

²⁷ *Supra*, note 4 at 67-69.

²⁸ *Id.* at 72.

within an established legal-literary paradigm central to Western thought. Schematically, the paradigm looks like this:

I. Supreme authority/legislator	Law Creator/Language of fiat
II. Realm of judges/Legal Fictions	Juristic/interpretive/mediative: language of justice
III. World of experience/lawyers	Advocacy: language of legalism
IV. Underworld	Anti-legislative/Reversal of the legislative “mean”: language in the mirror

When Reed says “this poem is a greedy mirror” in a strictly metaphorical sense, he is taking language as “received wisdom” (level I) – where “poetry” and “mirror” have separate, literal denotations – and re-interpreting it, as Western priests and judges do with Law and law (level II), mediating meaning between the highest authority and the citizenry it governs. That is, when our law courts say that French fries can be “meat” (and can therefore be sold legally as a “complete” meal to the poorer classes on Sundays)²⁹ or that, for the purposes of an automobile insurance claim, when you walk into a pole loaded on a stationary truck the vehicle strikes you (that is, you don’t strike the pole),³⁰ they engage in metaphor, ostensibly to work justice. They take the “received wisdom” of dictionary language from above and refine it according to advocacy from below, creating a legal dialect. When Reed pushes that envelope to say he also means “this poem is a mirror” literally, he moves to level IV, demonic reversal or inversion – language (aptly) in the mirror.

If we make analogy to the “French fries are meat cases,” and the related, anti-metaphorical case holding that ice cream cannot be meat (unlike French fries, it is a treat, so to

²⁹ *Bullen v. Ward* (1905), 74 L.J. (K.B.).

³⁰ *Lewis v. Economical Insurance Group*, [2010] O.J. No. 3158.

say, a “sweetmeat,” something not as sustaining as a “meal,” and which therefore cannot be sold on “the Lord’s day”),³¹ the paradigm structures itself as:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| I. Legislature | Supreme authority says we sell only meat on Sunday. |
| II. Judicial, reasonable man | Presumptively, potatoes and ice cream are not meat. |
| III. World of Experience/Advocacy | Interpretively, potatoes and ice cream are meat because
“meat” can signify sustaining food of any sort. |
| IV. Underworld | I’ll eat what I want, when I want. (Rejection of authority/
convention) |

As interpreters, judge-critics of the reader-response school might say that a poem can rebut the presumption that it is not a mirror, particularly insofar as readers in the “world of experience” (non-professional interpreter, level III) might advocate for that meaning, metaphorically. But when the poem literally becomes man-eating furniture, this turns the paradigm upside down, putting the demonic on top. Reed as Neo-HooDoo *houngan* (priest) purports to reject the socio-linguistic mean established by the counter-forces of lexicography or conventional philology on one hand (the “authorities” which provide the “received meaning” of language, level I) and, on the other, the vulgate – the colloquial forces (level III) that change language such that “bad” can mean “good” (as in “That be a *bad* tune, man!”), “dope” is “brilliant,” and potatoes can be meat. Mediating, the poet-author does what judges do, but from the other direction, more or less like William Blake, in the name of what convention calls dark forces, yet what Reed sees as liberating us from repressive Western hegemony. The informing archetype is the narrative of the Tower of Babel. Mediating between the conventional/legislator’s language and the interpretations proposed by the citizen/proponent or litigant, poets

³¹ *Slater v. Evans*, [1916] 2 K.B. 124. I discuss these “Sunday observance” and insurance cases in more detail in *The Structures of Law and Literature*, *supra*, note 4, at 139-49.

and judges seek to re-establish a single or “chosen” meaning that, for the time being, becomes common currency. The language evolves through revolutionary metaphor. And just as a new judicial interpretation creates new precedent, Reed seeks to reshape “Western tradition,” moving it forward by integrating the demonic hegemony of the *loas* – reinvigorating Egyptian and African traditions he believes the West has demonized and thereby repressed.