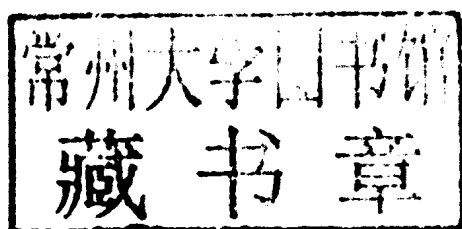


THE POETRY OF
JACK SPICER

DANIEL KATZ

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Abbreviations

- B* “Jack Spicer Papers,” BANC MSS 2004/209, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- CP* Jack Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This To Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008.
- H* Jack Spicer, *The House that Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, ed. and Afterword Peter Gizzi. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.
- P* Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian, *Poet, Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

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Introduction: "All Is Not Well"

"In his own work, Spicer disturbs," wrote Robert Duncan, introducing his difficult friend to a poetry reading in 1957, "That he continues to do so is his vitality" (*B*). This vitality would remain undiminished throughout the rest of Jack Spicer's life, personally and poetically, testing the limits of his friends, editors, associates, and readers until his death from chronic alcoholism in 1965. Only weeks before his final collapse he began his last poem, addressed to Allen Ginsberg, like this: "At least we both know how shitty the world is" (*CP*, 426). Not long after, he lay dying in San Francisco General Hospital, in and out of coma, but rousing himself for one final proclamation, in Robin Blaser's now legendary telling:

Jack struggled to tie his speech to words. I leaned over and asked him to repeat a word at a time. I would, I said, discover the pattern. Suddenly, he wrenched his body up from the pillow and said,

My vocabulary did this to me. Your love will let you go on.

The strain was so great that he shat into the plastic bag they'd wrapped him in. He blushed and I saw the shock on his face. (*The Fire*, 162–3)

Blaser's portrait is so haunting because while it leaves Spicer literally enveloped in the shit his poetry needed so often to point to, it ends with a no less characteristic ghostly telegram of love. In 1957, Duncan had continued, "Life throws up the disturbing demand 'All is not well' – sign after sign generated of accusation manifest – which it is the daring of Spicer at times in poems to mimic" (*B*). But this shouldn't obscure the social, communal, and ethical dimensions of Spicer's disappointment and rage, as he understood them. As Theodor Adorno put it, "It is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces, and there is a straight line of development between the gospel of happiness and the construction of camps of extermination so far off

in Poland that each of our own countrymen can convince himself that he cannot hear the screams of pain" (63). For his part, in the context of early gay-rights activism, Spicer wrote: "Homosexuality is essentially being alone. Which is a fight against the capitalist bosses who do not want us to be alone. Alone we are dangerous. Our dissatisfaction could ruin America" (CP, 328). It follows that spreading this dissatisfaction, rousing others from torpor, is an imperative in which the ethical and the aesthetic are indissoluble:

When shall I start to sing
A loud and idiotic song that makes
The heart rise frightened into poetry
Like birds disturbed?

(CP, 45)

Spicer had written these lines a few years before Duncan's introduction, perhaps suggesting its terms.¹ That poetry, even as song, had to make space for the discordant and stupid was central to Spicer's poetics, but "idiotic" needs to be read etymologically, as so much of Spicer's vocabulary does, back through the Greek *idios* to the sense of the isolate, private person. "Loneliness is necessary for pure poetry" (CP, 150) Spicer wrote, which would be an effective gloss, if only Spicer believed that poetry could or should be "pure," or that solipsistic self-sufficiency was in any way more powerful, or even fundamentally different, from enforced communal conformity.² As we shall see, at the very heart of Spicer's disturbances is this: that few if any of the positions he opposes to the targets of his attacks are themselves allowed to stand, intact. At work throughout much of Spicer at his most compelling is a relentless negativity, not only aggressive but also at once self-entrapping, self-consuming and self-fueling: a perverse version of the "beautiful machine which manufactured the current for itself, did everything for itself" (H, 5) which Spicer thought the poet should *not* be. If Spicer's "Outside" and its concomitant "dictation" are meant to combat the "idiotic" poet in this sense, they will need to do so by way of idiocy's wily cousin – nonsense, the wrench in the gears of the negative dialectic that opens a tiny breach for love, poetry, friendship, sex: "Being faithful to the nonsense of it: The warp and woof. A system of dreaming fake dreams" (CP, 304). Nonsense, which Spicer theorized by way of Dada, is an explicit version of more general dynamics widely in play throughout his work. Spicer's poems, while everywhere crying out petulantly to the reader for understanding, recognition, subtlety, and care, just as frequently thwart the ideal reader they invoke; as Peter Gizzi puts it, they "disrupt even their own procedures by jamming the frequencies of meaning they set

up" (*H*, xxiv), thus provoking the betrayal they lament. "I want one true word / With you Jack Spicer / Today tomorrow and every other day" (4) writes Simon Smith, forty years after Spicer's death and from across the Atlantic, capturing beautifully where Spicer leaves his readers: mourning our failure to possess the poet who only wants to give himself to us. In this way, through its incompleteness and unanswerable address, Spicer's work often resonates with the prophecy and promise which the last half of Blaser's dictated message from the dying Spicer broadcasts: your love will let you go on, yes, but no less will it force you like Orpheus to look back over your shoulder, at Spicer, in his vocabulary, and where it has left him: "Going into hell so many times tears it / Which explains poetry" (*CP*, 383). Your love, reader, means you will not bring Spicer back: "You can start laughing, you bastards. This is / The end of the poem" (*CP*, 72).

When Jack Spicer died on August 17, 1965, he was largely unknown, especially beyond the San Francisco Bay Area. He had been published in Donald Allen's transformational *New American Poetry Anthology* in 1960 and earlier in the *Evergreen Review*, but had no books out with major publishers, and was not arousing the interest that peers or friends like Creeley, Ginsberg, Duncan, Olson, Levertov, and Ashbery were, or that O'Hara soon would. Recent readings and lectures in Vancouver, however, had been warmly greeted, and Spicer had been offered a position at Simon Fraser University meant to begin in the autumn of 1965. His death ensured that he would forever be remembered as the California poet he was always keen to insist he integrally was, a core poet of first the Berkeley, then the San Francisco Renaissance.³

As of this writing, Spicer's general popularity and academic reputation are higher than they have ever been. The critical acclaim that greeted *My Vocabulary Did This To Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer* on its publication in 2008 is only the most visible sign of a rising wave of interest in Spicer.⁴ Up to now a rarely anthologized poet and one often ignored in large-scale overviews of American poetry, it seems likely that henceforth Spicer will figure prominently in both.⁵ Explanations for Spicer's tardy reception – belated even in the context of the relative marginalization of the "New American" poets – are not hard to find and indeed, are frequently noted by scholars of his work. Spicer's personal petulance and hostility to those disposed to help him, his ambivalent difficulty in separating success and recognition from selling out or "whorship" as he called it, his principled refusal to exercise copyright over his own work, all contributed to thwart various forms of career advancement available even to the avant-garde. These, combined with his early demise, meant that almost all of his major work was either scantily

available or simply unpublished until Robin Blaser's landmark edition of *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* appeared in 1975, ten years after his death.⁶ These circumstantial explanations are important, along with the fact that audiences and readers that did have access to his work – in Berkeley, Boston, San Francisco, or Vancouver – unfailingly responded to its power. But beyond this, the causes of Spicer's long years of relative obscurity can be further probed. In his excellent introduction to Spicer's famous "lectures" on poetics, Peter Gizzi points out that Spicer too can be characterized by the words John Ashbery found to explain the neglect of Frank O'Hara – quite moderate compared to Spicer's – when he dubbed him "too hip for the squares and too square for the hips."⁷ Like O'Hara, Spicer fails to fall comfortably on either side of most of the structuring poetic oppositions of his time, but it is striking to see just how far this neither-nor extends in his case, and in how many contexts.

For example, Spicer was an early gay-rights activist and an open, unabashedly gay poet who marked his sexuality throughout his work. However, while he remained largely free of predictable tropes of queer abjection and self-loathing,⁸ he was wary of many prevalent gay aesthetic traditions, especially camp, and also had little time for the insistence on gay sex and love as liberating and transformative that is prominent in poets otherwise as diverse as Ginsberg, Duncan, and O'Hara. Tracing idealized visions of gay love back to Whitman (a poet he nevertheless revered) Spicer acidly characterized "Calamus," Whitman's poems on "the manly love of comrades" (272), as: "In the last sense of the word – a fairy story" (*CP*, 56). For Spicer, the erotic is almost always a space of disappointment and frustration, and his take on sex, straight or gay, often seems close to the classic Lacanian formulation, "there is no sexual relation." His work was hardly propitious for a nascent movement of gay affirmation, nor did it seem a telling example of long-buried underground queer traditions.⁹

Similarly, Spicer's offhand demotic tone and fondness for anecdote, recourse to obscenity, rhetorical violence, and interest in jazz can seem similar to prevalent Beat tendencies, while the outpourings of rage, sorrow, and fatigue bear some comparison to the kind of "confessional" writing found in Berryman or Plath. Yet in manifold ways, and most notably through his elaboration of inspiration as alien "dictation" from the Outside, Spicer's poetics work against the precepts of immediacy and personal, subjective authenticity both those schools share.¹⁰ This emphasis separates Spicer from most of the dominant extrapolations of Charles Olson's "projective" position as well, and in some respects leaves Spicer surprisingly close to a poet this self-professed enemy of

“academic poetry” might have been thought to despise, but in fact read with great care: T. S. Eliot. On the other hand, it is crucial to note that the Spicerian form of “impersonality,” to use a potentially deceptive shorthand, was in no way consonant with the sort of anti-subjectivist strain one might find in contemporaries like John Cage and Ashbery. Spicer’s poems rarely show signs of transcending or foregoing the subject which they everywhere cross out, and this is why Gizzi’s allusion to Beckett is entirely apt. As in Beckett’s case, intimacy is fundamental to his work in a manner that distances it from much conceptual writing whose precepts Spicer to some extent shared.

Turning to other significant trends, one might think of Spicer the self-consciously regional poet and vociferous champion of the local, his work steeped in the Californian coastal landscape. Again, however, he fails to find a place within a larger movement: his skeptical, destructive, and even deconstructive work resolutely rejects the mythological eco-poetics of a Gary Snyder, to name a poet on the fringes of his circle, or a Robert Bly, to name one who wasn’t. For Spicer, the crashing ocean speaks to us precisely because it “means / Nothing” (*CP*, 373) not because it offers the possibility of sense, belonging, harmony, or any of the various forms of spirituality, often of Buddhist or Native American inspiration, that are so typical of counter-cultural poetics in the 1960s – especially in the Bay Area – and which Spicer does not accept. Indeed, Spicer was disillusioned with the 1960s before they even happened, which makes him most eminently a poet of the 1970s, and it’s not surprising that it was during this decade that his work first came to prominence, if not yet within the academy, then certainly with poets and artists.¹¹ That is, Spicer’s work and thought are “untimely” aside from the accidents of publication and distribution. To some extent, Spicer was simply ahead of his time: his speculations on Emily Dickinson’s manuscript variants and her practice of embedding poems within letters foretells the path-breaking work of Susan Howe in the 1980s, while *After Lorca*’s implicit dialogue with Pound’s “Homage to Sextus Propertius” anticipates the sort of theoretical work on Pound as translator which has only come to the forefront over the last twenty years or so.¹² Likewise, in many ways his late work, thoroughly informed by linguistics, prefigures the concerns that came to be received under the broad title of “post-structuralism” in the United States in the 1970s, and Spicer has been seen as a privileged precursor by many of the “Language” poets, as well as scholars of their work.¹³ But on another level, Spicer’s obsessive assault on what he saw as poetic expediency or fashion is also an assault on the notion of the “timely” itself. While wholly identifying with the traditional avant-gardist oppositional stance, as we shall see throughout this study, Spicer’s work and

above all his theories of “dictation” and the “serial poem” displace the historicity of both the poet and the poem in ways which trouble the implicitly temporal claims of any avant-garde. One part of the Spicerian emphasis on the ghostly is, precisely, to champion an avant-garde whose time can never arrive.

Spicer was born on January 30, 1925, to upwardly mobile lower-middle-class parents in Los Angeles, where he grew up. After two years at the University of Redlands in southern California he transferred to the more cosmopolitan and more demanding University of California at Berkeley, arriving in 1945. Very shortly thereafter, he met the two friends who would forever remain most important to his life as a poet, to his life: Robin Blaser and Robert Duncan. Born the same year as Spicer, Blaser too was a transfer student and undergraduate at UC Berkeley, but Duncan was a very different proposition.¹⁴ Six years older than Blaser and Spicer, by 1945 Duncan was already widely published and well connected, a rising star in certain bohemian literary circles and well more advanced in life and craft than his two new younger friends. Duncan was also that rarest of things in 1945, an uncloseted gay man. Indeed, Duncan had brought himself out of the closet in the most dramatic and public of fashions, by way of his signed essay “The Homosexual in Society” which had been published in Dwight MacDonald’s influential review *Politics* in 1944.¹⁵ The “Berkeley Renaissance” – to use the half-ironic term favored by the poets themselves – which coalesced principally around Duncan, Spicer, and Blaser was also to a very large extent a gay renaissance; sexuality, gender, homosexuality, and queer poetry and poetics were at its core. Meanwhile, if close friendship with an older, successful poet must have been immensely exciting to the undergraduate Spicer, it should be stressed that the impression he made on Duncan was no less powerful: despite his experience of established literary circles on both coasts, Duncan felt Spicer was the first certifiably important poet he had ever met, perhaps a Pound to his Eliot. In February 1947 he wrote: “I treasure most, I suppose, the extreme demand you make upon my poetry. I have never had anyone to write for that could see as much as you do and want as much more than I accomplish. That has been my extreme and rare pleasure. And then, of course, I have leeches upon your poetry. For Jack Spicer, *il miglior fabbro*” (BANC MSS 78/164c). As well as serious disputes about poetics, crucial to Spicer’s vexed relationship to Duncan over the next two decades was his jealousy of the poets who soon came to displace his pre-eminence with him, notably Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Denise Levertov.

Spicer studied mostly literature and linguistics at Berkeley and stayed on for graduate work, receiving his MA degree in 1950 but subsequently

leaving, as he refused to sign the anti-communist loyalty oath required of all State of California employees (which Spicer technically was, as a teaching and research assistant at the university).¹⁶ He spent nearly two years at the University of Minnesota and then returned to California in 1952, taking part in the activities of the clandestine gay rights organization the Mattachine Society, and supporting himself over the next few years by teaching at UC Berkeley (as loyalty laws had since relaxed) and the California School of Fine Arts across the bay in San Francisco, where he moved in 1954. Through his students there, he became increasingly involved in the Bay Area visual arts community, and was in fact one of the “six” of San Francisco’s 6 Gallery, where Allen Ginsberg gave his now legendary reading of “Howl” on October 7, 1955. Spicer missed it; the previous summer he had moved to New York, which he immediately detested, and then on to Boston, having convinced himself that it would be easier for him to make a career as a poet in the publishing and cultural centers of the east coast. Spicer was desperately unhappy in both places (as he had often been in Berkeley and San Francisco, to be fair), though the poets of the Boston scene, especially Stephen Jonas, were crucial in instigating the burst of creativity which came forth from him shortly after his return to San Francisco in 1956, under the added catalyst of the epochal “Poetry as Magic” workshop which he led at San Francisco State University in 1957.

The year 1957 was in many ways a triumph for Spicer: it saw the publication of his first book, *After Lorca*, while the success of the “Poetry as Magic” workshop firmly placed him at the forefront of the San Francisco scene, allowing him to start to emerge from the shadow of Duncan as well as Ginsberg and the Beats, recent arrivals whom Spicer always resented for a variety of reasons, ranging from serious differences in poetics to turf war, misplaced localism, and sexual jealousy. But 1957 is also in some ways the year in which Spicer’s biography freezes. From here on in – the eight short years of poetic “maturity” as he himself sometimes saw it – his life is largely his increasingly passionate and difficult reconciliations and squabbles with friends and acolytes; sequential disappointments in love and sex; bitterness, jealousy, admiration, and disdain, in various admixtures and sometimes all together, for the poets he considered his peers, companions and rivals; increasing difficulty holding down increasingly marginal jobs; increasing abuse of alcohol; increasing frustration, anger, sorrow, and despair among those who loved him. The real events are poems and letters, the additional five books he saw published before his death. Yet the details just mentioned are more than only incidental to them: Spicer’s often self-destructive and self-defeating behavior, his extreme ambivalence about all forms of

success – and above all the literary variety – the distrust and suspicion he felt for rival “schools” and poetic formations all create the context which Spicer needed for his work to be dispatched. His love for the letter as form, his desire that poems and letters each work as the other, testify to this: the catastrophe of his life must also be read as *part* of the work.¹⁷ As has been recognized since serious study began on Spicer, and even more, since groundbreaking investigations by Michael Davidson and Maria Damon in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Spicer’s later work cannot be read beyond the contexts of community, coterie, and networks of exchange, within and for which he imagined it.¹⁸ From 1957 onwards, Spicer insisted on poetry (as distinct from the isolated poem as traditionally conceived) as a collective event which might also be an interpellation or a provocation, as the title of his book *Admonitions* attests, but that in every instance must be an assault on the boundaries enclosing subject, object, sender, addressee, poet, and poem according to the logic of the “idios.” It is out of these concerns that came into being some of the most unlikely artifacts of the Spicerian archive: the so-called “Lectures on poetics” of 1965, and the theories of the “serial poem” and “poetry as dictation” which they expound.

The “lectures” consist of the recordings of three talks, along with ample question and answer sessions, which Spicer gave during his June 1965 visit to Vancouver, as well as the shorter address to the Berkeley Poetry Conference which he delivered on July 14 of that year – just over two weeks before he was found unconscious in his apartment building elevator and taken to hospital. Although substantially cited and discussed by Blaser in “The Practice of Outside,” they remained in their vast majority unavailable to readers until transcribed and edited by Peter Gizzi in *The House that Jack Built* in 1998.¹⁹ These lectures, concerned above all with the theories of the serial poem (also called composition by book) and poetry as dictation, have become almost as important a part of Spicer’s legacy as the poems themselves, due no doubt in part to their tantalizingly fragmentary availability over so many years. There are, however, important distinctions to be made between the two theories mentioned.

The “serial poem” or seriality more generally was a long-standing collective concern of Blaser, Duncan, and Spicer, at the heart of the latter’s reflections in 1956 and 1957, and extensively explained in his letter to Blaser in the book *Admonitions*.²⁰ Indeed, in that opus Spicer declares his mature work to begin with *After Lorca* precisely because it was his first work to form a “book” – to move beyond the “poem” as individual, self-enclosed entity. Thus, the theory of the “serial poem” bears an especially heavy burden precisely because of Spicer’s own marking of it – within a book of poetry – as responsible for the birth of his truly

significant work. As of *Admonitions* of 1957 (published after his death but widely read and disseminated among his coterie) “seriality” and “composition by book” become an essential part of the framework of Spicer’s reception within his circle, and thoroughly inform his own sense of the kind of work he wished to produce. Inscribed within venerable and recognizable twentieth-century investigations of poetic form and closure, these theories coalesce at a moment Spicer himself chose to mark as foundational, and for this reason, they are best understood as they emerge from the major problems that inform the “early” work. The discussion of seriality, then, will be largely deferred to Chapter 1, which will examine at length the genesis of Spicer’s self-declared poetic break with his “foul” (*CP*, 163) past.

But if “seriality” belongs as much to 1957 as 1965, this can’t be said of poetry as dictation. If this idea becomes so dominant in Spicer’s late thought that by 1965 “seriality” is in many ways seen as an outgrowth of it, it was also slower to emerge than the theory of the “serial poem,” and crucially, less widely shared by his closest circle. To some extent, the theory of “dictation” can be read as a typically hyperbolic Spicerian account of the old story of inspiration, stipulating as it does that the poet should be no more than a radio tuning into and broadcasting an alien message received from “Martians” or the “Outside,” or the haunted vessel of an entirely other ghostly voice. In this light, “dictation” is the latest addition to a very long series of speculations about the role of the poet’s subjectivity in relation to the art he or she produces, which goes all the way back to Ancient Greece. Certainly, Spicer’s poetics can and should be considered in relation to, say, Keats’ negative capability, as well as sources demonstrably closer to home: Socratic accounts of divine possession, Blake, or Lorca’s *duende*.²¹ From such a perspective, many of dictation’s claims can seem both familiar and banal. Yet Spicer inflects these potentially tired paradigms to bestow upon them a new violence and force, one sufficient to provoke strong opposition from many recent critics as well as his sympathetic audience in Vancouver and many friends and associates over the years. Crucial here is the sheer extent of Spicer’s refusal of the specifically human subject: if dictation insists throughout on the bracketing of the superficially personal or the blatantly volitional, this is not undertaken in order to let a deeper, truer self emerge, as might be the case in Surrealism, Beat immediacy, or Jungian mythopoetics, but rather to give place to something entirely other to the poet, something perhaps entirely other to life and the human themselves. The jokey sci-fi figure of “Martians” as source evokes this anti-humanist strain, and the radio set even more so, leaving the poet no more than a machine: “essentially you are something which is being transmitted into” (*H*, 7).

The poet as radio was suggested by Jean Cocteau's *Orphée*, both play and film (*H*, 7) but especially the latter, in which poems from the underworld are broadcast through a car radio. Still, for Cocteau the radio remains a medium of transmission to the poet, and is not the poet "itself," as in Spicer's more radical version. Spicer's appropriation of Cocteau – a crucial intertextual backdrop to his major work of 1960, *The Heads of the Town up to the Aether* – is also determined by Spicer's deep engagement with the myth of Orpheus, which began before he saw Cocteau's film, and which too was a means for him to work through the questions which came to be considered under the heading of "dictation" and the analogy of the radio set. For it is often by way of Orpheus that Spicer stresses a crucial element of the dynamics of "dictation": that the poet has a privileged relationship to death, not only speaking for the dead and from their world, but even more, only speaking truly when speaking *as* dead, as *After Lorca* will explore, in an investigation carried forward throughout the rest of Spicer's work. Thus, the radio set leads both to the classical underworld by way of Orpheus but also to spiritist tropes of ghostly communication, all of which inform dictation, as Spicer marks at the outset of the first Vancouver lecture, where he presents the spiritist automatic writing experiments of W. B. Yeats and his wife Georgie as a paradigmatic example of dictation and the Outside, linking their practice to Spicer's own "haunting" by Lorca, in his first dictated book.²²

What "dictation" always stresses in Spicer's account, and what has made it so hard for his listeners and readers to accept, is loss: it is a process of becoming less human, less alive, less distinctive, less oneself: "I really honestly don't feel that I own my poems, and I don't feel proud of them" (*H*, 15), Spicer declares, which also means the traditional property relations between poem and poet no longer obtain, on both the most abstract and most concrete financial levels, in what is also, then, an assault on market exchange. But it is above all the massively anti-expressivist and anti-subjectivist position that provokes dissent throughout the Vancouver lectures, where there is general incredulity at Spicer's repeated insistence of his utter ignorance of and distance from the poems that "speak through" him. At the same time, if "dictation" in general depreciates the role of the poet, now no longer the source of an utterance "projected" outward by the poet's singular voice but rather a receiver attempting to take in and reproduce an alien charge, this does not imply spontaneity, passivity, or freedom from the ego or will. On the contrary, there is effort and violence, in part turned back at oneself: "You have to interfere with yourself" (*H*, 14) in order to make yourself empty and available for the "guest" (*H*, 85) who must inhabit