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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-norness 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 leechd 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

your “house,” by which Spicer figures the language, craft, experiences or other “pieces of furniture” (*H*, 85) the Outside will arrange in transmitting a message which, the borrowed furniture notwithstanding, is not “yours.” In practical terms, then, Spicer in no way advocates automatic writing but rather a receptive yet disciplined vigilance which includes “censoring” (*H*, 7) elements recognized as originating from the “personal,” from “things that you want” (*H*, 7), rather than the Outside: “you don’t get the radio program if the radio set has static in it” (*H*, 15). To the extent that poetry is then discipline and self-denial, the “individual abilities” necessary to the poet “are the same as the individual abilities in sainthood” (*H*, 17).

In his call to use discipline, craft (such as rhyme schemes (*H*, 37)), guile, and even subterfuge in order to empty oneself as a “vessel” (*H*, 85) for poetry, Spicer can sound like Rimbaud, an important poet for him, but one he never mentions in these connections. Certainly, dictation echoes Rimbaud’s famous slogan “Je est un autre” (250), but Rimbaud’s extrapolation of what such an alterity means for the poet takes us even closer. “Si le cuivre s’éveille clairon, il n’y a rien de sa faute” (250),²³ Rimbaud suggests, also likening the poet to “le bois qui se trouve violon” (249),²⁴ an instrumentality which Spicer’s radio upgrades to twentieth-century technology, while inscribing an uncanny distance by replacing the Rimbaldian bugle and violin, which still hark back to inspiration as “breath” or possession as touch, with the impalpable, all-penetrating radio wave. Beyond Rimbaud’s own writings, Enid Starkie’s account of the Rimbaldian project in her famous biography sounds so uncannily like Spicer, down to the very vocabulary, that a lengthy citation is warranted:

The outworn conception of the personal writer producing his own work is totally false. The writer is merely the vehicle for the voice of the Eternal, he himself is of no account for he is merely the unconscious expression of someone speaking through him . . .

The poet can, nevertheless, of his own accord make an effort to become a suitable wood for the celestial fiddle. To achieve this end he must break down entirely everything that builds up human personality, all that distinguishes it, all the egoism that forms it. He must break it up, just as the soil is broken up by the plough, he must uproot from it all the weeds of habit and prejudice, for only in a soil thus prepared will the seeds of the invisible world grow and flourish. (128–9)

The “invisible world” became a crucial term of Spicer’s in the 1960s, naming the alterity that the imperative of dictation asks the poet to tune into, at personal peril and cost: “I am sick of the invisible world and all its efforts to be visible” (*CP*, 342). And aside from the recourse to the

“Eternal,” it is hard to imagine a better summation than the above of Spicer’s own program of “dictation,” which annoyed the Vancouver audiences partially because Spicer insisted that the Outside and dictation be taken absolutely literally, and not as loose figures for useful compositional practices and attitudes. Indeed, the mistake would be to contain Spicer’s “theory” as no more than intriguing practical instigations to the writing of good poetry, when the opposite is more to the point: to understand seeming workshop discussions as an allegory for how Spicer wants us to think about what poetry is and does. From this perspective, the echoes of Rimbaud help us to hear Spicer as something other than mystic, mystifier, or self-appointed nuisance to narcissistic models of lyric expression. For in addition to all these, Spicer’s erasure of the subject in the theory of dictation must be read as a philosophically considered if not always elaborated or consistent position regarding what might be called the “worldliness” of the work of art. As Hannah Arendt put it, “The artist, whether painter or sculptor or poet or musician, produces worldly objects, and his reification [used by Arendt literally, and outside its negative connotations in Marxist thought] has nothing in common with the highly questionable and, at any rate, wholly unartistic practice of expression. Expressionist art, but not abstract art, is a contradiction in terms” (323). “Dictation” is one of the names of Spicer’s desire for an invisibly worldly, or invisible-worldly poetry.²⁵

Such a poetry doesn’t transcend the subject, but leaves it precisely as the site of error and lack. The Vancouver lectures insist throughout that parapraxis is the mark of authentically dictated poetry, the poem saying the opposite of what the poet “means” or “wants” to say. Yet elaborating on this, Spicer points out that the very word “wants” says two things too, in a passage that is central to both dictation and his work as a whole:

[Charles] Olson says the poet is a poet when he says what he has to say. Now, you can read that two ways: what he “has” to say, namely “I want to sleep with you honey,” or “I think that the Vietnam crisis is terrible,” or “some of my best friends are dying in loony bins,” or whatever you want to say that you think is a particular message. That’s the bad thing.

But what you want to say – the business of the wanting coming from Outside, like it wants five dollars being ten dollars, that kind of want – is the real thing, the thing that you didn’t *want* to say in terms of your own ego, in terms of your image, in terms of your life, in terms of everything.

And I think the second step for a poet who’s going on to the poetry of dictation is when he finds out that these poems say just exactly the opposite of what he wants himself, *per se* poet, to say. Like if you want to say something about your beloved’s eyebrows and the poem says the eyes should fall out, and you don’t really want the eyes to fall out or have even any vague

connection. Or you're trying to write a poem on Vietnam and you write a poem about skating in Vermont. (*H*, 6–7)²⁶

The Outside speaks not what the ego thinks it wants, but what is wanting to the ego's own sense of its desire. Whence a poetry at once worldly and of the unconscious, rather than from or about it: a poetry of the unconscious not expressed or laid bare, but thrown into the world as one of its events and acts. Which means that the Outside writes a poetry of mistakes through broadcasts, letters, insults, and interpellations. The Outside acts out: "If nothing happens it is possible / To make things happen" (*CP*, 168).

This book will trace what happens with Spicer, moving mostly chronologically through his writing life, but not exclusively so. Chapter 1 will examine his early lyrics, following the evolution of the thinking that led to the theory of the serial poem in 1957, by way of careful analysis of published work and archival material. Here, the addition of a temporal dimension to a predominantly spatial model of poetry will prove decisive. Chapter 2 will focus primarily on *After Lorca* and *Admonitions*, as well as the *Letters to James Alexander*, in an exploration of Spicer's poetics of "correspondence": a punning term which allows him to join the practice of translation to epistolary exchange in the elaboration of a poetics which sees the work as part of an ongoing network across the bounds of life and death, as well as different languages and moments. Here we find a negotiation between a Whitmanian poetics (as mediated by Lorca) of the body, the locality, and the corpus, and what for Spicer becomes a Dickinsonian poetics of the letter, the call, the absent address, and the rant. It is the "admonition," the injunction to the other, which fully translates Spicer's "correspondence" from post-Baudelairean symbolism to an exchange of texts, messages, and desires. Chapter 3 focuses specifically on Spicer's queer poetics, already central to his exchanges with Whitman and Lorca, and their relation to Spicer's more general concerns with community, exchange, and therefore politics – some of the longest-standing concerns in Spicer criticism, stretching from pioneering work by Maria Damon and Michael Davidson to very recent studies by Miriam Nichols and Christopher Nealon. This chapter will examine the recently published "Oliver Charming" papers in the context of Spicer's involvement in the gay rights organization the Mattachine Society and Robert Duncan's stance in "The Homosexual in Society," before reading in close detail *The Heads of the Town up to the Aether*, to see the various genealogies behind and arguments within Spicer's conception of the "city" – a space which, for Spicer, should also be one of argument itself. Chapter 4 examines Spicer's frequent mobilization of classical

myth or highly invested medieval topoi such as Arthurian legend, in the context of both Eliot's "mythical method" and post-war "mythopoeics," often Jungian in inspiration. Taking my cue from one of Spicer's letters, I will argue that his interest in these topoi is more "pragmatic" than "mythopoeic," allowing him to bring them into dialogue with the great American poet of "pragmatics" in the linguistic sense of the word: William Carlos Williams. For this reason, Spicer's *A Red Wheelbarrow* will be read alongside *The Holy Grail* and *Helen: A Revision*. Chapter 5 discusses Spicer's last two works, *Language* and the *Book of Magazine Verse*, suggesting that they be seen as in implicit dialogue. In the former Spicer brings to bear on poetry his expertise in linguistics, brought to a new urgency and complexity by his work on an automated children's literacy project at Stanford University, where he was engaged as a researcher during the writing of the book. Examination of archival material related to that project shows its importance in what might be considered Spicer's "poetry of language" in *Language*. Conversely, the *Book of Magazine Verse*, composed of poems expressly written for the very magazines likely to refuse to publish them, can be seen as an investigation into the "language of poetry" – the social and economic structures constraining and defining what "poetry" is allowed to be, and which Spicer doggedly asks them to confront. Most important, however, is that a close look at the books in tandem shows that Spicer did not view these questions as separate, but as fundamentally interrelated. In line with Spicer's interest in poetry as pragmatics, both books are concerned with nothing so much as context – social, historical, regional – of language within and without "poetry." Finally, a brief coda returns to 1958: a key moment in Spicer's trajectory, where the theoretical breakthroughs of *After Lorca* and *Admonitions* are supplemented by the very different but also decisive projects of *A Book of Music* and *Billy the Kid*.

Samuel Beckett famously wrote that "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living" (*Disjecta*, 145). Spicer's own fidelity to failure, it should be said, extended fully to the last two items on Beckett's list. While Yeats wrote "The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life, or of the work" (*Poems*, 296), Spicer chose neither, while insisting on rethinking that very parsing. Surly, grumpy, chronically depressed, sexually frustrated, and alcoholic, Spicer leaves behind a body of work which is remarkably liberating and generative, not only in its re-imagining of the possibilities of poetry, but also in its reticence with regard to the possible as such. Perhaps here more than anywhere else, the late Beckettian imperative to "fail better" finds the voicelessness necessary to carry it into the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. “Disturbance” is a term Spicer employs in his own discussions of poetics, in both *Admonitions* and the “Vancouver lectures,” and also figures prominently in critical work on Spicer from Robin Blaser and Jed Rasula. I shall return to this in Chapter 2.
2. In this context, “loneliness,” implying lack, also should be distinguished from solitude.
3. Thanks to the brilliant work of Lew Ellingham and Kevin Killian, Spicer’s life has been told in illuminating detail. The biographical elements which follow here are drawn mostly from their work and the excellent introduction and chronology in *My Vocabulary Did This To Me*, as well as archival sources. I will of course refer to salient biography throughout this study, but only in moderation, as any reader who wants the full story can easily find it in *Poet, Be Like God*.
4. Another is the existence of the book you are now reading, along with the 2011 collection of articles *After Spicer*, edited by John Vincent, the first academic book solely devoted to Spicer’s work. Similarly, it is highly revelatory that a study like Christopher Nealon’s *The Matter of Capital* can take for granted both the importance of the San Francisco Renaissance for post-war American poetry and Spicer’s central position within that movement; such assumptions would have required some explanation only a few years ago. And if it is less surprising that a book largely on the Duncan circle would have a chapter on Spicer, note that Miriam Nichols’ *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside* takes its title from Robin Blaser’s crucial 1975 essay on Spicer, “The Practice of Outside” (*The Fire*, 113–63). An overview of twenty-first-century work on Spicer should also include chapters by John Emile Vincent and Michael Snediker in recent books on queer poetics, and Jonathan Mayhew’s in *Apocryphal Lorca*, his study of the Spanish poet’s reception and appropriation in American poetry. All this activity was spurred by the 1998 publications of Ellingham and Killian’s *Poet, Be Like God*, and Peter Gizzi’s edition of the “lectures” on poetics, *The House that Jack Built*.
5. Spicer was included in both the original *New American Poetry* anthology, and its successor volume of 1982, *The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revised*. He also figured in Eliot Weinberger’s 1993 *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders*, and two anthologies from 1994: Douglas Messerli’s *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry: 1960–1990* and Paul Hoover’s *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology* of 1994, though he is nowhere to be found in the 2003 third edition of the larger *Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, which includes work by Duncan, Creeley, Olson, O’Hara, Levertov, and Gary Snyder. However, David Lehman put him in his *Oxford Book of American Poetry* of 2006, and a chapter on Spicer has been commissioned for the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to American Poetry*, a further signal of his changing fortune.
6. In this hugely important volume – the only source of Spicer’s major works in print until Gizzi and Killian’s *My Vocabulary Did This To Me* appeared in 2008 – Blaser also published his glorious long essay on Spicer, “The

Practice of Outside,” very recently reprinted in *The Fire: Collected Essays of Robin Blaser*. “The Practice of Outside” remains to this day one of the finest pieces ever written on Spicer, but its inclusion in the *Collected Poems*, the author’s close personal connection with his object, and the account of Spicer’s death with which I began this introduction, have made the essay the undisputedly privileged critical window for access to Spicer for over thirty years. See Peter Middleton for a fascinating account of its importance in the history of post-war American poetics.

7. Cited in *H*, p. xxi. Gizzi’s introduction is illuminating on just how anomalous Spicer’s poetics were in their time.
8. Though not according to Robert Duncan, who saw such tendencies behind much of Spicer’s criticisms of his work. In this light, it’s worth noting that Spicer’s legendary rejection of Duncan’s *The Venice Poem* was based on very specific grounds: Spicer felt Duncan betrayed his violent masterpiece of jealousy and rage by the addition of an affirmative “Coda,” which heals the wounds and leaves the poet restored: “Little cross-eyed king held / secure in the center of all things” (*First Decade*, 107). Lisa Jarnot cites a letter from January 2, 1959, where Spicer writes Duncan that the poem “. . . will knock the Snyderites on their asses. I still disagree with the ending of VP but hell” (183).
9. On these points, Maria Damon’s path-breaking work on Spicer’s association of gay life with “acute alienation” (*Dark End*, 144) and how that positions him among his peers is extremely helpful, as are John Vincent’s interesting speculations on how “being homosexual itself creates difficulties in meaning making” (*Queer*, 153) in Spicer, as well as Michael Snediker’s considerations of Spicer and queer “personhood” in *Queer Optimism*. The earliest of these works dates from 1993 and it’s not coincidental that sustained study of Spicer as a gay poet begins when queer studies enters an institutionally self-conscious phase. The publication of the “Oliver Charming” papers in *The Collected Poetry* and Kevin Killian’s recent archival research into Spicer’s involvement with the Mattachine Society (“Spicer and the Mattachine”) further enhance Spicer’s legibility as a queer writer. Chapter 3 of this study examines Spicer’s queer poetics in detail, and in the wake of Killian, Vincent, and Snediker, much more work in this vein is likely to follow.
10. As Gizzi puts it, “dictation also works as a joust with culturally sanctioned myths of poetic authorship that were definitive in Spicer’s time, from confessional poetry to the Beat aesthetic. The very process of dictation is one of vigilance, which is both spiritual practice and materialist tedium, placing Spicer closer to the sensibility of Samuel Beckett than to the automatic writing of the dadaists and surrealists, the first-thought-best-thought of the Beats . . .” (*H*, 176).
11. Though academic work on Spicer begins here too, notably with the landmark special Spicer issue of *Boundary 2*, published in 1977. In contrast to the general trend, it should be noted that even before Spicer’s death major claims for his work were tentatively suggested by Gilbert Sorrentino in extremely subtle scattered reviews, now collected in *Something Said*. By the mid-1970s Spicer had also attracted considerable attention abroad, notably in England among the Cambridge poets, especially Peter Riley, and

- in France where, for example, Jacques Roubaud translated *The Holy Grail* in 1976.
12. Michael Snediker notes “Years before Susan Howe’s material accounts of Dickinson’s texts, Spicer’s own analyses seem no less exacting” (*Queer*, 136). In *The Birth-mark*, Howe herself had stated “. . . Spicer saw quite clearly, in the late 1950s, the textual problems her letter-poems and poem-letters raise. You don’t find this issue mentioned in the endless books now being churned out on Dickinson” (157). The extent to which that last sentence no longer holds shows not only how much Howe has changed scholarship on Dickinson, but also how such changes have made Spicer’s interests and methods far more legible than they were twenty years ago. See Chapter 2 of this study for an extended look at Spicer’s relationship to Dickinson in terms of epistolary poetics, and to Pound regarding translation.
 13. Above all, by Ron Silliman. See Nealon, pp. 107–39, for more on the links between Spicer and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. The sense of Spicer’s relevance to “post-structuralism” is consistently stressed in the Spicer number of *Boundary 2* of 1977.
 14. For biographical information on Blaser, see Miriam Nichols’ excellent chronology in *The Fire* (401–10).
 15. See Chapter 3 of this study for an extended discussion of this essay and its importance to the Berkeley poets.
 16. Among prominent scholars at Berkeley that Spicer studied with are the Americanist Roy Harvey Pearce, the anthropologist Paul Radin, and the poet Josephine Miles. By far the most important for him and the “Berkeley Renaissance” as a whole was the famous émigré Medievalist, Ernst Kantorowicz. See Maria Damon, *Dark End*, and Kelly Holt, for more on the latter.
 17. See Chapter 2 of this study for a reading of Spicer’s epistolary poetics, and the challenge they pose to traditional parsings of “life” and “work.”
 18. Crucial here would be his involvement with very local, micro-press journals, such as *J*, which Spicer edited in 1959, and *Open Space*, edited by Stan Persky in 1964 and consistently publishing Spicer as well as polemicizing with him.
 19. In addition to Blaser’s citations, a fragmentary transcription of the first lecture was published in *Caterpillar* 12 in 1970. Recordings of the three Vancouver lectures in their entirety are now available online at Pennsound: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Spicer.html>.
 20. The correspondence between the three poets at this time frequently returns to these questions. See Spicer’s “Letters to Robin Blaser.” Blaser mentions “serial composition” to Duncan in a letter of June 16, 1957 (BANC MSS 79/68).
 21. Spicer refers to *Phaedrus* repeatedly from the late 1950s onwards, and *After Lorca* testifies to his interest in the Spanish poet. Spicer also habitually lists Blake among his favorite poets and explicitly lists him as a central poet of dictation (*H*, 5). Blake also used Spicer’s vocabulary to explain the process: “I have written this Poem from immediate Dictation . . . without Premeditation & even against my Will” (cited in *H*, 43 n. 4).
 22. See *H*, 135–6. Spicer is not the only one to link haunting, automatic

writing, and radio or telegraph transmission. See Laurence Rickels' fascinating account of Ludwig Staudenmaier in *The Case of California*, which details how the latter explained his sense of his transformation from a "writing medium" into a "listening medium" by way of metaphors of telegraph and gramophone (14–16).

23. "If the brass comes awake as a bugle, it's not its fault" (my translation).
24. "the wood that discovers it's a violin" (my translation).
25. My reading here closely follows some of the earliest, if long dormant, thinking about dictation in Spicer, as Robin Blaser suggests something similar near the outset of "The Practice of Outside," insisting that for Spicer poetry had to be "an act or event of the real, rather than a discourse true only to itself" (*The Fire*, 113). An enthusiastic reader of Arendt, Blaser later goes further into her vocabulary: "For this reason, Jack would remove himself, as that which is expressed, from his language in order to reopen the worldliness of language" (123); on the serial poem he opines "I call this openness worldly because it measures the I of the poetry and includes the poet in a world" (129).
26. Susan Vanderborg suggests that a similar play on "wanting" is used by Spicer in *A Textbook of Poetry* (58).