THE IDEA OF THE ALIEN
IN JACK SPICER'S DICTATED BOOKS

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John Frederick Granger
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NAME: John Frederick GRANGER

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EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

Chairman: Prof. Michael Steig

Prof. Robin Blaser,
Senior Supervisor,
Professor of English

Prof. Robert Dunham,
Associate Professor of English

Prof. Warren Tallman,
External Examiner,
Professor of English, U.B.C.

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THE IDEA OF THE ALIEN IN JACK SPICER'S DICTATED BOOKS

Author:

(signature)

J. F. GRANGER

(name)

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(date)

Abstract

The darkness of Jack Spicer's writing covers an illumination which, as if invisible, infrared light, makes apparent a second realm of meanings. Concentrated darkness (the idea of the alien) disturbs the realm of meanings with which we are familiar: God, love, and so forth. One must first distinguish that which darkens from that which illumines the material of Jack Spicer's dictated books.

The idea of the alien suggests a poetics of alien or outside source, and thus a poetics of dictation. Spicer develops from dictation-theory a complicated series of failures. First is the 'failure' of the poet, whose absence at the point of composition keeps origin in mystery. One eventually gets Spicer's gnostic sense of failure: the failure to know, the failure to name God.

Jack Spicer does not shy away from the cosmology he implies, and his readers are run through Creation from first flash to last matters. Among the special features of Spicer's creation is its constant division between contrary orders, both of world and of mind. Something bent on freedom crosses something sure of form. The strange, hybrid population of Jack Spicer's dictated books issue forth from their coupling.

The large, parrying structure of what Spicer called the real in turn informs the poems. Individual poems carry complicated, half-coded messages, from which we then piece together a sophisticated theory of language, a hermeneutics, and a theology.

Certain images are invested with such meaning that they come to perform as symbols. Spicer's use of the symbolic carries his work behind division, where contraries are bound and composition starts. Flowing backwards, the symbolic order structures the poems, determines the poetics, and so completes the circling of language and the real.

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"The real nature of the marvelous
is that man is without doubt the least amazed"

--Louis Aragon

Chapter One

So much becomes apparent, we are drawn instead to that which disappears. Reading around, we are soon familiar with the absences that interrupt discourse today--no God, no public joy, no concord. Ever since Parmenides, men have said that something is missing, and something, or nothing, still is. But actual disappearance is the ordinary practise of poets, for whom language is first invisibility; and among poets, the poet nonpareil of disappearance, Jack Spicer:

> There is no excuse for bad ghosts
> Or bad thoughts.
> 6X/10 equals 150
> And electric socket with a plug in it
> Or a hole in your eyeball:
> It is bad
> And everyone says, "What?" X
> -4X/10 equals 150.[1]

X equals $2\frac{1}{2}$, then negative 5--but what (as everyone says: "What?") does Jack Spicer mean? Spicer seems to propose nothing more certain than changeable X, a hole at the center of vision, and equation to negative value. In a sense, he means nothing at all. Yet we feel that his is language packed with meaning, as Ezra Pound decrees true of all poetic writing.

Jack Spicer's writing is packed with the meaning of disappearance, and no less, with the disappearance of meaning. I intend to follow these separate developments in Spicer's work as the play of a single element, which I will call, with some discomfort, the idea of the alien. The idea of the alien is

present as X in the lines already cited; its work is apparent in the bad thoughts and ghosts, in the troubling hole, and in the absence of answers ("What?"). X acts as "a shorthand to admit the unknown" (FN 162), as Spicer says of metaphor--we might pause here to note that figure brings in from outside a name not before spoken; and X, or the alien, is invested in Spicer's books until "as common as rats or seaweed" (HG 209), and thus as plentiful as the grails (HG 199: "Grails here, grails there, grails tomorrow") of the second of Spicer's four dictated books.

Although Spicer's poetics of dictation is apparent from the start,[2] the method does not suggest complete commitment nor does it affirm itself in major work until The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether (1960-1961). From there, The Holy Grail, and then the great book Language. Book of Magazine Verse was published in 1966, following Spicer's death, August 17, 1965. Thus ends the series of the four dictated books. I have chosen two among them, the first two in that the four comprise a narrative, because Spicer's dictation theory prepares for composition from which the author disappears. That which speaks in his place comes in from outside: thus the idea of the alien is central to the poetics, and remains to be shown at the center of the poems.

The disappearance of the poet in the practise of dictation is but one of several disappearances that constitute the problem of Spicer's work. We have already noted the disappearance of meaning, and there is not a line in all of Spicer that does not show it. But third after these is a disappearance not well enough investigated--Spicer stresses that no one is

listening to poets today.

So few read Jack Spicer we may well consider Fredric Jameson's question: "To whom can one present a writer whose principal subject is the disappearance of the public?"[3] Noted throughout Spicer's work (L 217: "No one listens to poetry"), the disappearance of the public has a place of privilege among Spicerian thematics. With disquieting insistence, it closes his work: the context of the series of poems that comprise Spicer's last book is their rejection by magazines. Spicer's message is typically salient. There is no public place for at least one species of contemporary poem, circa 1964; nor does the literary scene prepare itself for new strains in the laboratory of meaning;[4] and Spicer, for whom time is active mystery, and in whose text time tears from the eternal what language then restores,[5] resented such fixture of and in the past:

> Hold to the future. With firm hands. The future of each afterlife, of each ghost, of each word that is about to be mentioned.
>
> Don't say put beauty in here for the past, on account of the past. On account of the past nothing has happened.
>
> Stick to the new. With glue, paste it there continually what God and man has created. Your fingers catch at the edge of what you are pasteing.
>
> You have left the boys' club where the past matters. The future of your words matters. The future is continually in the past.
>
> That pathology leads to new paths and pathfinding. All the ways down past the future. The words go swimming past you as if they were blue fish. (TP 179)

In the place of present day and future-tending poems, Spicer submits his own and the claim of cultural closure rests questionably upon the evidence of their rejection. The journals were receptive to other poets' poems, providing some of Spicer's jokes (Lament for the Makers pirates its copyright[6] and acknowledgments page from Robert Duncan's The Opening of the Field). But the Magazine Verse rejections comprise a highly controlled occasion. Most of the poems were not submitted. Those sent courted the editorial disfavour they required. And so the Magazine Verse poems achieved the context that most memorably settled upon Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain," which was more of a urinal. Denied exhibition, Duchamp's "Fountain" stands as an elegant critique of the best period convictions:

> Marcel Duchamp resigned as an officer of the Society of Indepedent Artists over the issue of the society's refusal to exhibit the urinal titled "Fountain" by "Mr. R. Mutt." Testing the Americans' capacity to tolerate extremism, Duchamp quickly exposed the fallacy of the open exhibition; for, although all entries submitted were to be shown, Duchamp's found object was rejected, revealing that tacit considerations of taste and decorum still colored judgements.[7]

In this Spicer succeeds Duchamp. His poems increase in value upon rejection for they are then the critique of the most forward thought of his day. Among editors,[8] for whom the dictates of content were a rule excluding all convention, 'taste and decorum still colored judgements.' But what specific rules had Spicer broken? What was so indecorous about his work?

For one thing, Duchamp's urinal-fountain is surprisingly like Spicer's teacup-grail (HG 201: "This teacup Christ bled into") and like much else in Spicer, such as X: no matter how

lax the rule of exclusion, they do not belong, and yet there they are. These alien articles make plain the decorum that limits every system. They remain alien to even the most alienated systems: thus amid the sustained disturbance of some contemporary art--which itself suggests a kind of decorum--the alien looks more like the grail these days and they teach Artaud in schools.

It is not the alien, which may be embraced, but the idea of the alien, which remains always opposite. The idea of the alien disturbs every system, including Spicer's own; hence the poetics of dictation, and the alien who speaks in his place. The Magazine Verse rejections partly compose the meaning or message that Spicer's last books carry, which in turn composes what Spicer called the real. The rejections continue and amplify an enduring Spicerian figure: the poet opposes himself, opposing his creation as much as it opposes him (among his last words: "My vocabulary did this to me"). Spicer's doctrine of dictation provides the mise-en-scène for such stance against oneself. At first it seems simple: the poet receives and copies messages, knowing neither the place nor the purpose of transmission. But in the transaction (between whom?) the poet is devalued (C12: "I don't think the messages are for the poet any more than a radio program is for the radio set") until damaged by invisible agency:

> I just don't think that whatever the source of energy is gives very much of a damn about you. It wants to keep you in good condition, just like the farmer wants to keep the cow in good condition--or the butcher, or the rancher

and then the butcher, wants to keep the steer in good condition until it's butchered.[9] (VL|C12 181)

Faust . . . generally got messed up by (the sources of poetry). You'd have to be much more gentle, otherwise they destroy you . . . but in the meantime though, you do get some poems when you have a non-aggression pact with whatever it is . . . I mean the philosophy about it is fine. Making lovely statements or writing essays doesn't hurt anybody, but the closer you mess to it the worse off you get and the more it eats into you . . . It's pretty powerful ju-ju. Better not mess with it too long. (VL|C12 203)

The trouble with comparing a poet with a radio is that radios
don't develop scar-tissue. The tubes burn out, or with a transistor, which most souls are, the battery or diagram burns out replaceable or not replaceable, but not like that punchdrunk fighter in the bar. The poet
Takes too many messages. (L 218)

I hope to show that the poetics of dictation alters the representation of writing in order to restore to language certain lost powers and properties (pace Jacques Derrida) and to remove from the poet some customary privilege. Under the program of dictation, the muse and her variants submit to threefold revision. Dictation resituates the poet, hence we pursue the idea of the poet and not the poet himself (Emily Dickinson: "Biography first convinces us of the fleeing of the Biographied--").[10] The practise of dictation breaks all alignment with and within language, hence these loosebearings. And above all, it discloses a system of oppositions more deeply placed in language than we have normal reach, hence our immersion already in the flow of mysterion through words.

But back to the disappearance of the public. In a 1949 symposium, Spicer proposed the absence of the public as the most interesting problem in writing poetry. His opening remarks hold

special interest in that they set apart the problem of the public from those very 'problems' with which it was to become inextricably bound: "Here we are, holding a ghostly symposium--five poets holding forth on their peculiar problems. One will say magic; one will say God; one will say form. When my turn comes I can only ask an embarrassing question--'Why is nobody here? Who is listening to us?'" (ONS 90) To which the standard reply--"Modern poetry does not make sense . . . nobody reads it because nobody understands it." Thus Spicer:

> That is just not true. If a lack of intelligibility makes a work unpopular with the public, why is it that there is always at least one song with nonsense lyrics near the top of the Hit Parade? "Chickery Chick" was far less capable of prose analysis than Finnegans Wake and no one can claim that its bare, monotonous tune was responsible for its popular favor.
>
> The truth is that pure poetry bores everybody. It is even a bore to the poet. The only real contribution of the New Critics is that they have demonstrated this so well. They have taken poetry (already removed from its main source of interest--the human voice) and have completed the job of denuding it of any remaining connection with person, place and time. What is left is proudly exhibited in their essays --the dull horror of naked, pure poetry.
>
> Live poetry is a kind of singing. It differs from prose as song does, in its complexity of stress and intonation. Poetry demands a human voice to sing it and demands an audience to hear it. Without these it is naked, pure, and incomplete--a bore.
>
> It affects the nature of poetry too. There was a time in the middle ages when music was mainly written and not sung. It was a time when crab canons were composed, complicated puzzles made of notes that no ear would think of hearing. Poetry, when it is removed from a living audience, loses its living form, becomes puzzling. It becomes blind like the salamanders that live in dark caves. It atrophies.
>
> (ONS 90-91)

In 1949, Spicer had yet to step through the looking-glass of his late poetics. The practise of the poetics of dictation begins with After Lorca (1957) and is not developed fully until The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether (1960-61). Most of the symposium argument becomes a kind of mirror writing in which we can read Spicer's late thought reversed. First, "Chickery Chick" is indeed no crab canon; it reduces nonsense to norm, thereby removing from language its play against meaning. The song's mode of conformity is metric, harmonic, and chromatic; it makes no sense, but it does conform to simple certitude (no 'complexity of stress and intonation') and hence its popularity. If absurd "it is absurd in the way that absurdity has always been in solidarity with metaphysical meaning."[11]

More complex is the separation of magic, God and form from one another and their separation together from the problem of the public. For God and magic require disciplined arrangements within language (liturgy, incantation) reaching to what Spicer called the real. They are powers to be restored to language within the program of dictation; and where present their powers play against complacency and so against the crowd--thus Spicer will situate the problem of the public within the problems of magic and God. Magic and God are disturbances within form, or recognitions of form as disturbance (Lacan: "Form is an inmixing of otherness prerequisite to any subject whatever").[12] We follow the movement of magic and God in the breaking of syntax (L 233: "We make up a different language for poetry / And for the heart--ungrammatical") and in the breaking

of the form of the body (Emily Dickinson: "Magic, as it electrifies, also makes decrepit--" ["now it disables my Lips"]).[13] Amid these recognitions, the four symposium problems are later brought together as the single problematic of the dictated books.

But the most telling reversal of the 1949 positions turns within the stance against "pure poetry," perceived then as "dull horror." The perception is true: there is something of dull horror throughout Spicer's late work (L 260: "I am going north looking for the source of the chill in my bones"). His late work hungers for the condition of purity and so seeks the source of the chill. And it is against the cold purity of mind (LM 111: "Chill-dren of the skull") that Spicer proposes only slight human warmth: "30 below in the hand you were clasped by and the hand you were clasping" (MV 252): "Keep us warm while the night grows / Too cold to bear" (HC 147); "There are acres of cold snow" (LJA|C12 162). And yet this slight warmth suffuses the writing like agony, which from agon, suggests both celebration and prize.

In 1949 Spicer saw where his writing was going. He tried to check the movement of his work toward what remained for him the horror of the pure; after all, his was a human voice, deeply flawed. In the admonitory scenario of the symposium, we are given the material future of Spicer's words (TP 179: "The / future of your words matters"), but in retrograde motion--thus the crab canon composes itself despite the forward intentions of youth (Spicer is 24). Spicer moves backwards against a

development within his writing--and within language itself--toward the "naked, pure, and incomplete." His use of familiar poetics is markedly weak. We don't sense Spicer's sight in the general perception that poetry differs from prose in its "complexity of stress and intonation." The system that worked for some poets was not working well for him. If he was to check a tendency toward increasing composition of the pure, he would need a separate poetics. Ironically, his poetics would turn toward the pure and pass the limit of human being.

For Spicer, language is tropic to the world, or to God; it turns from the limit of man as from darkness, like Charles Olson's heliotrope (Olson: "we <u>are</u> darkness").[14] Thus the poetics of dictation filters from language the impurity of one's intention, as we gather from some remarks, 1964:

> I think the second step for the 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 . . . you want to say something about your beloved's eyebrows and the poem says, the eyes should fall out . . . or you're trying to write a poem on Vietnam and you write a poem about skating in Vermont--these things, again, begin to show you just exactly where the road of dictation leads. (<u>VL</u>|<u>C12</u> 177)

At the symposium, poetry "demands" a human voice; poetry "demands" an audience. That symposium verb is tellingly strong. It must cover what Spicer will increasingly note to be absent. Within the practise of dictation there is no (intentional) human voice, at least ideally (<u>VL</u>|<u>C12</u> 178: "It's as if a Martian comes into a room with children's blocks"). Thus no one listens to poetry (<u>Language</u>) for those reasons Mallarmé gave--"impersonified, the volume, as far as we are separated from it as the

author, calls for the approach of no reader."[15] No author, by decree of dictation; and so no audience: poets are not to regain their voices but instead to lose them, and lose ours as well. Dictation theory proposes its work as the moment of silence in which the world sounds (FN 162: "After the breath stops, the words listen"). The silence or absence of audience and self is not unlike their absence together from the moment of astonishment. They disappear in the commotion of what does then become apparent to wide open eyes, both marvel and terror:

> There is a high scream.
> Rain threatens. That moment of terror.
> Strange how all our beliefs
> Disappear. (BM 70)

According to the dictation, there is a high scream or howling at the edge of belief, and at the edge of language (LM 111: "The bitch dog howls / At the absolute boundaries of sentences"). Beyond the boundary of one's words (TP 182: "Extended past / what the words mean and below, God damn it, what the words / are") one has first silence and then the sound of the world--thus "angel-talk howls / At the edge of our beds" (HC 139; my stress). Either silence or howling senselessness, angel-talk is the source of the dictation, bearing the idea of the alien. With some trepidation, we offer our language as a limit--"Strange how all our beliefs / Disappear"--past which the angel-talk begins. Of course, the edge does not promise an angel, and some step back from this unhallowed line:

> I chicken out at the edges of it and what doesn't come through to me at the edges of it isn't as if angels met singing or
> any of that business. (TP 181)

But to meet the singing angels at the edge of the known Spicer says one first must stop talking (AL 16: "Shut your damned mouth") for "human voices put the angels / Pretty far away" (HC 145). Poetry is thus wilfully removed from "its main source of interest--the human voice" that there may be unrestricted play past the limit of oneself.

As if by reversals of Einsteinian time (MV 247: "Present events defy us;" and Mallarmé: "il n'est pas de Présent, non--un présent n'existe pas")[16] Spicer's late preoccupation with the pure is left behind before becoming. The future of his words is charted in the past (TP 179: "The / future of your words matters. The future is continually in the / past")--as sure a mixture of bowsprit and rudder as in Lewis Carroll's The Hunting of the Snark:

> Then the bowsprit got mixed with the rudder sometimes:
> A thing, as the Bellman remarked,
> That frequently happens in tropical climes,
> When a vessel is, so to speak, "snarked."[17]

No vessel becomes so well snarked as Spicer's. Thus for Spicer too were "spooks that bent the ship / Forwards and backwards" (HG 192). The snarked poems Spicer would save others from writing he would come to write himself, but not before the orphic divestments of dictation theory. For in the composition of the pure the poet bears impurity like a body; language incarnates, but is itself disincarnate, invisible and pure. Hence the recognitions of the "ghostly symposium," marking slow

transubstantiation from flesh to ghostly substance as shed before the pure. Spicer's complaint against Galahad is that the divestment of flesh succeeds too well (HG 206: "as he laughed the flesh fell off him"), that Galahad must then be an invention (HG 206: "Galahad was invented by American spies"), an artifice solving the riddle of the body and thus "Casually, ghostlessly / Leaving the story" (HG 208). The riddle of the body remains among the central disturbances of Spicer's work (MV 250: "Could we get / Out of our skins and dance?"). For there is always ghostly residue and therefore failed divestment:

> I saw the ghost of myself and the ghost of yourself dancing
> without music.
> With
> Out
> Skin. (MV 250)

Galahad's is a vertical principle which culminates in the grail. Narrative, or story, proceeds along the horizontal, incarnating a world which the grail then transcends ("casually, ghostlessly leaving"). As Tzvetan Todorov notes, "there cannot be, strictly speaking, a narrative about Galahad. Narrative is a switch-point, the choice of one track rather than another. With Galahad, hesitation and choice no longer have any meaning; the path he takes may divide, but Galahad will always take the 'good' fork."[18] Following the contrary movements of story and grail as movements within language, Spicer both writes toward and writes against the coalescence for which the grail stands. My thesis begins with this blurred division: something has body, and something is free. While itself a unity, language is self-opposite, both structuring and unstructuring what Spicer called

the real. The tearing between the divided tasks of language is apparent at the surface of Spicer's dictation theory. Thus the shifting ground of dictation (L 226: "The ground still squirming. The ground still not fixed as I / though it would be in an adult world"), the narrative of contrary motion, and the old story retold: Orpheus, divided between the opposite claims of opposite gods, already informs Spicer's writing as the intelligence of division itself. His are not syntheses but antitheses of deified intellect and deified sense (as Spicer: "Passion is alien to intellect" [ONS 24; my stress])--Apollo and Dionysus. Dionysus is the idea of the alien at the altar of Apollo; Apollo is alien structure within Dionysian flux. Like Orpheus, Spicer attends unto both. Their separate altars will not reduce to single, syncretic belief--for Spicer, a sure step from Calvin, whose Christian meaning is then left behind (HC 124: "When You Go Away You Don't Come Home"). Bound by these recognitions, Spicer prepares for the appearance of Orpheus in the first section (Homage to Creeley) of the first dictated book.

It will strike some as odd that Spicer once warned others of the dangers of one's poetry becoming puzzling. Once more, the fears of 1949 are to be well fulfilled in his own work, which does hold something of the structure of the crab canon (L 233: "This is the crab-god shiny and bright / who sunned by day and wrote by night / And lived in the house that Jack built"). From The Oxford Dictionary of Music: "Canon Cancrizans is a type (of canon) in which the imitating voice

gives out the melody backwards [Cancrizans from Latin Cancer= crab; but crabs move sideways]." Throughout Spicer, the melody is given backwards. Beauty is in retrograde motion, as in "the gradual lack of the beautiful, the lock of the door before him" (TP 171). Marking such distance from the beautiful, Spicer writes against an entire assumption of beauty and consonance sustained among galleries, magazines and universities. For Spicer, beauty is a spiritual body and so evinces a certain disturbance, according to the double constitution of spirit throughout the dictated books. Beauty is part-terrible, as Artemis to Actaeon, and thus "it is forbidden to look" (HC 144). Moving backwards like beauty through Spicer's words, the end of the sentence might occur in the middle, or more abruptly, midword (FFP 88): "Beauty is so rare a th." Thus astonishment, as "the backward-flowing astonishment"[19] of Robin Blaser's Image-Nations, intersects the poetic line at point of fullest perception: of world, or as here, of God:

> Beauty is so rare a th-
> Sing a new song
> Real
> Music
> A busted flush. A pain in the eyebrows. A
> Visiting card.
> There are rocks on the mountain that will lie there for
> fifty
> years and I only lived with you three months
> Why
> Does
> Your absence seem so real or your presences
> So uninviting?

Few drink at Spicer's fountain (FFP 87: "'Beauty is so rare a thing," Pound sang. / "So few drink at my fountain"). More drink at Pound's, although the terraces of Ecbatan are seen

but once in the Cantos ("the city of Dioce whose terraces are the colour of stars").[20] Spicer's fountain, and the "best streams" of Magazine Verse, refuse the sustenance of beauty "as if their thick water flowing were / refusing us"--but beauty is source itself, replenishing all. Spicer's distance from beauty (TP 182: "the two of them, holding a blowtorch to all / beauty") has the second meaning of his distance from source, or from God. According to Spicer, none are given access to the rich, replenishing substance known to flow like deity through language. Hence Spicer's orphic assumption: language is not for us, nor for the poet. Out of the aberrant movement of words (retrograde, sideways, contrary, unmelodic) we may derive the physical system of Spicer's poems as motion against itself. Self-opposition succeeds self-fulfillment, and even self-sustenance. Nothing true prevents the divestment of self before language, but as the symposium argument shows, the divestment can be deferred. As the practise of dictation proceeds, the poet-self fails to sustain its place. This much is clear, though backwards, by 1949.

Jack Spicer architected what might be called his failure, giving it deep, symbolic meaning. Spicer was largely the poet he saw need to be, the corporeal extension of the metaphors he was given. The mantle of magus fell comfortably enough upon his sloping shoulders; but his orphic stance was first a necessity of the poems, a material insistence amid the visiting then vanishing shapes of language. Of course, at the end of the orphic story, background becomes foreground and there

are the Maenads: bar-life and a broken language move forward, exacting their toll. But in the manner of the opposite gods, the earlier turns of this orphic series both centered and scattered a place and a time.

Among the drifting company of the San Francisco Renaissance, Spicer (and there is immediate extension to the difficult configuration: Spicer, Blaser, Duncan) had anchoring weight. For many, the scene moved around his work and his life, now joined. And yet Spicer has been neglected by authoritative considerations of his time, and in the most focussed and local of accounts.[21]

Again, a problem with the public, but one envisaged by the poet and so brought within the play of his meaning. Spicer knew there would be readers seeking meaning and so the poems acknowledge in advance this second strain of language, exegesis:

> Muses do exist, but I know that they are not afraid to dirty their hands with explication--that they are patient with truth and commentary as long as it doesn't get into the poem, that they whisper (if you let yourself really hear them), "Talk all you want, baby, but then let's go to bed." (Ad 55)

> We do not hate the human beings that listen to it, read it, make comments on it. They are like you. It is as if they or you observed one continual moment of surf breaking against the rocks. A textbook of poetry is created to explain. We do not hate the human beings that listen to it, the moment of surf breaking. (TP 183)

Exegesis is more than subordinate to the poems. Its failure to command poetic material has frequent place amid the comedy of Spicer's writing, as above ("talk all you want, baby, but then let's go to bed"); but the failure of exegesis takes on wider meaning as the dictated message develops through both the poems

and the poet's life.

In the practise of the poetics of dictation, the poet removes himself from the poem. The poems are given (dictated) to him just as in turn they are given to us, and the question of meaning amid mystery presents itself to poet and reader alike. As first reader and first exegete, Spicer precedes us but has no further advantage. The poems' meaning or message is "utterly alien cargo" (IE|CB 338: "never ride it past / the tunnel or look for a conductor to ask questions") opposing both poet and reader by recalling an alien source ("It's as if a Martian comes into a room with children's blocks"). The scholarly investigation that follows upon his work is troubled by Spicer from the start. He is the first for whom exegesis fails, and all of us assume his broken meaning as our advance position before inquiry into the poems.

Spicer reduces the claims of scholarship to tentative readings at best; however, few poets reward so well a reasoned, steady inquiry. One reward is the circumscription of inquiry itself. For in Spicer's books, there are pools of unreason into which reasonable inquiry slips unlamented (the formal meaning of the serial poem is that you move warily). The known has a slippery edge, past which unreason claims all enterprise. The claims of unreason define Spicer's hell, thus "the infernal / Is a slippering wetness out at the horizon" (BM 70)--upon the edge or horizon of meaning, Spicer constitutes both poet and critic who together observe "one continual moment of surf breaking against the rocks" (TP 183: "We do not hate the human beings

that listen to it, the moment of surf breaking"). But there the community ends. At the edge of the known, the poet, by practise of figure, admits mystery (FN 162: "A metaphor is something unexplained--like a place in a map that says that after this is desert. A shorthand to admit the unknown"); but the critic supposes his discourse to extend the mastery of the known over the poet's news.

Theirs are contrary claims upon language, and around their contention language divides. Like the cellular division that precedes and precipitates life, figure and discourse diverge that there may be further adventure of language. In this sense apart, poetic meaning rests irreducably in the domain of figure. The divergence of discourse (TP 183: "A textbook of poetry is created to explain") awaits explication in The Holy Grail, the second of the four dictated books; for figure subsumes discourse (or should) when the poet weaves fabric from sacred and secular threads. Or is the grail discursive system subsuming figure and so breaking itself, like surf, against the real? Either way, the interplay--found throughout Spicer's writing--marks the end of two certitudes: discourse sufficient unto itself, and figure free from meaning.

If a discursive system, such as a study of Spicer, functions more smoothly with neither figure nor poet-saboteur (LGM|C12 96: "Martyrdom does not impress machines; chewing gum does"), its yield is modest and its range restricted. When the saboteur is introduced, the machinery seizes and horizon recedes. Each of Spicer's poems consist of this moment of

astonishment stretched over time. Eight such seizures ("Fits") frame the fabulous prey of what Spicer called the greatest metaphysical poem in the language, Lewis Carroll's The Hunting of the Snark. In a sense, Spicer achieves these seizures by the particular poetic practise under study here. He names the quarry of the hunt of hunts, and the object of the quest: snark, or grail. Such names bind the contrary movements of language, both inviting and defeating the effort of the quest.

Like the hunt, the poetics of dictation describes both flight of prey and stratagem of pursuit. Carroll's snark is chosen as the best approximation of Spicer's quarry because it embodies an alien and oppositional summation of all shifting figure. The undertaking is large and accordingly ironic. Laughter leavens the poet's pain, but there are masks behind masks (Blaser: "The Truth is Laughter");[22] and so Spicer's laughter partly deciphers and partly obscures the darker meaning of the hunt.

In his reading of La Fontaine, Michel Serres informs the image of the hunt as the false action of mind after knowledge: "For Plato and a tradition which lasted throughout the Classical age, knowledge is a hunt. To know is to put to death --to kill the lamb, deep in the woods."[23] On another occasion, Serres remarks the subsistence of the form of the hunt through the age of voyage and cartography, infecting the action of mind after knowledge today: "in those days (to know) still meant to appropriate. To know, alas, still means to represent oneself." Thus "the old idea of knowledge, that which still subsists, is

theft. Theft of the earth, theft of knowledge, theft of power--an appalling story."[24] To put to death, to appropriate, to steal: the story also appalled Spicer, for whom the hunt proceeded at breaking pace. Nor does Spicer's hunt seem ever to have been suspended in pursuit of the ordinary, or in the satiety of love (Spicer is unequivocal: "Love cannot exist between people" [HG 196]). Even the daily round distended meaning--Spicer identified the jukebox at Gino and Carlos bar as an intelligence preventing him from talking. Spicer's hunt was so steady an investigation that its elusive object became more and more elusive, according to its nature. Thus became endistanced the summation of meaning to which knowing and hunting are transitive:

> Look at the statues disappearing into the distance. They have space to disappear. Rub your eyes to see them. It is a strategy where we miss what we hit. (FN 167)

The Hunting of the Snark disturbs the formula of pursuit and appropriation, reversing the interplay of hunter and hunted. To meet the snark is to be surprised instead by the boojum, before whose formlessness all "softly and suddenly vanish away"[25] (Spicer: "They have space to disappear"). To meet the boojum is to be put to death, deep in the woods. Thus the "Fool- / Killer in the branches waiting" awaits the questing knight (HG 191); boojum awaits snark hunter; and something formless and foreign awaits the poet in pursuit of meaning, and in turn awaits those in pursuit of him.

Both the ambition of the language he receives and

conclusion to the snark hunt, the death of the poet informs and completes Spicer's work. Spicer rarely checked the transitions from figural to literal form that extended the province of the poems from language to life. His words from the hospital bed are remarkable in that they offer his life as a metaphor informing poetic practice. For in the practise of the poetics of dictation there is the first business of removing the poet from the poems ("He had said early on in conversation with a young poet that one had first to learn to use the I and then to lose it").[26] Only by absenting himself--and he saw in his death this function of language ("my vocabulary did this to me")--could Spicer receive pure language, composing itself.

For what does Spicer hunt? His quarry has a thousand names, for none of them suffices; indeed, the naming appropriates and hence appalls. The task of naming the object of the hunt is among dictated instructions, and yet the naming is impossible:

> Hunt
> The right animals. I can't. The poetry
> Of the absurd comes through San Francisco television.
> Directly
> connected with moon-rockets.
> If this is dictation, it is driving
> Me wild. (MV 265)

Following familiar traditions, Spicer names the substance sought as the meaningful, the real, or God--but reading Spicer, none of these seems quite the right animal. Each is pierced by that which comes above through San Francisco television--the poetry of the absurd, or as suggested here, the idea of the alien. Thus the real receives the unreal, the meaningful the

meaningless--and God (FFP 88: "Why / Does / Your absence seem so real or your presences / So uninviting?"; IE|CB 335: "God is gone. God is gone") is simply dangerous, as along the Charles River, 1955, where "Tall as an ogre / God walks among the rocks" (ONS 69). This strange God is informed by gnostic tradition, which Spicer studied for years. Thus Hans Jonas, upon "the message of the alien God":

> The beginning and end of the paradox that is gnostic religion is the unknown God himself who, unknowable on principle, because the "other" to everything known, is yet the object of a knowledge and even asks to be known. He as much invites as he thwarts the quest for knowing him; in the failure of reason and speech he becomes revealed; and the very account of the failure yields the language for naming him.[27]

In this sense, Spicer names, by failing to name, the figure he pursues ("I can't"). Failing, Spicer protects both his source and his destination ("One keeps unmentionable what one ascends to the real with" [LM 110])--but they are becoming more clear. Once, when pressed, Spicer allowed a single, careful admission: "all of these things I think are perfectly useful explanations of it. I prefer more the unknown" (VL|C12: 179). The discomfort we feel in the vicinity of Spicer's God suggests the stance of the real as contrary to writer and reader. But though opposing (HG 188: "The poem. Opposite. Us."), the meaningful and the real ("the unknown") in Spicer's work is here withheld the alias of the 'other,'as drawn from philosphical practise. Against its general usage, Merleau-Ponty provides lasting, Spicerian counter: "philosophically speaking," he assures, "there is no experience of the other."[28]His meaning

is furthered with point:

> If the other is really the other . . . he must never be so before my eyes; it is necessary that this other For Itself never fall under my look, it is necessary that there be no perception of an other, it is necessary that the other be my negation or my destruction. Every other interpretation, under the pretext of placing us, him and myself, in the same universe of thought, ruins the alterity of the other and hence marks the triumph of a disguised solipsism. Conversely, it is in making the other not only inaccessible but invisible for me that I guarantee his alterity and quit solipsism.[29]

These distinctions amount to a profound mistrust of imago; their philosophical and theological contexts are beyond the scope of this paper. But according to Merleau-Ponty, the other is imageless. The trouble is that self turns everything else into self, even what it perceives to be other. Attending to Spicer's alien, we are as bound by Merleau-Ponty's injunctions. That which we name the alien is not the alien, for by naming, we assimilate alien character. The failure to name yields the language for naming the alien (see Jonas above), just as the failure to see yields the sight of Merleau-Ponty's other. The failure to name the form of the alien yields the idea of the alien. And Merleau-Ponty's corresponding failure yields the idea of the other.

Spicer's failure is thus a careful assumption, bringing forth a set of problems which then require the special exercise of the thought behind the form. But there is a second route around Merleau-Ponty, in the divestment of self that constitutes Spicer's practise. No self, simply, no solipsism: divested of self, language reclaims the imago of the alien, or the gnostic imago Dei. The imago is among powers restored to

language in the practise of dictation. It is not that Spicer's alien stops short of Merleau-Ponty's other, but that Spicer, absenting himself, demonstrates his God. Thus Spicer attributes to the other (or the alien, or God) some of the forbidden properties. First, the group to which God and the other belong becomes visible in Spicer's writing; and precisely by being self's negation or destruction (just read Calvin), the alien is the crown itself of language. Spicer's readers lose themselves among the apparitions of a language thus empowered. Some loss, but theirs is the second divestment of the dictated books FN 159: "Who is there to hear even his song").

Merleau-Ponty suggests the meaning of these losses, and the darker meaning of the alien. In the end, the alien fell under Spicer's look--it might be said he saw his God. If we follow the progression of the dictated books as the unmasking of the real beneath the poet's corrosive attention, we find there has been a parallel unmasking of the the poet (MV 265: "The poem begins to mirror itself. / The identity of the poet gets more obvious"). In a sense, he is the alien he seeks beneath the guise of self.

In an age of writing supposed to be uncompromised generally, Spicer's work shows a special integrity, opposing itself and its public to the point of distinction. I often hear that Spicer's poems alone make no sense, or that none show lyric intelligence (TP 177: "--A human love object is untrue. / Screw you . . . . Imagine this as lyric poetry"). Spicer does prevent easy passage through words. As Roland Barthes says:

"A writer is someone for whom language is a problem, who experiences its profundity, not its instrumentality nor its beauty." [30] Some read Spicer's books as a succession of obstacles, preserving the idea of the alien by occlusion behind words and thus repeating the opacity of things.

But for others, as for Spicer, the alien compels more strongly than the occluding mask of language (or things) dissuades. Spicer's language is for us as language itself is for Spicer, a persistent invitation to the inaccessible place of the alien. The alien God "as much invites as he thwarts the quest for knowing him" (see Jonas above); language too invites and thwarts the quest for knowing Spicer's gnostic God.

Spicer comes to be caught in this play between language and the evasive summation of God or the alien. The tearing between the two is among the meanings of his last words ("my vocabulary did this to me"). Robin Blaser has stressed Merleau-Ponty's conception of the wild-logos as central to the task of reading Spicer:

> The wild-logos
> the reversability of experience and language
> neither experience nor language is a reality that
> will suffice to itself alone
> two aspects of the reversability which is ultimate
> truth
> there is no frontier between language and the
> world. [31]

For the force between words and world binds or severs strongly; as between energy and matter in the Einsteinian formula ($E=MC^2$) there is constant translation between words and the real. In the parlance of physicists, Spicer 'felt' the force between

them. Rilke conceived his separate dictation practise[31] as disincarnation, a movement of things into words ("Earth, is not this what you want: invisibly / to arise in us?").[32] Thus Spicer, in a letter to Lorca, distinguishes between visibility in language and the visibility of things:

> We have both tried to be independent of images . . . to make things visible rather than to make pictures of them (phantasia non imaginari). How easy it is in erotic musings or in the truer imagination of a dream to invent a beautiful boy. How difficult to take a boy in a blue bathing suit that I have watched as casually as a tree and to make him visible in a poem as a tree is visible, not as an image or a picture but as something alive--caught forever in the structure of words. Live moons, live lemons, live boys in bathing suits. The poem is a collage of the real.
>
> But things decay, reason argues. Real things become garbage. The piece of lemon you shellac to the canvas begins to develop a mold, the newspaper tells of incredibly ancient events in forgotten slang, the boy becomes a grandfather. Yes, but the garbage of the real still reaches out into the current world making its objects, in turn, visible --lemon calls to lemon, newspaper to newspaper, boy to boy. As things decay they bring their equivalents into being.
>
> (AL 34)

The transitions between language and the world proceed by equation: experience and language are the two persistent forms of single (wild) logos. As Merleau-Ponty notes, they are thus reversible, a recognition Spicer shares in his interest in words as things (AL 33: "Dear Lorca, I would like to make poems out of real objects"). In a sense, Spicer's proposal of "Thing Language" (Language, sub-title) completes Rilke's seminal work: logos flows both ways, from the world into mind, as in Rilke, and from mind into nature (LJA|C12: "The heads of poets being a part of nature"). The world-mind, or God, is mixed through mind's words, through language. We will later find at their interface the idea of the alien, thanks to the heads of poets.

Spicer's work is distinguished from much contemporaneous writing by its consideration of problems facing other domains of inquiry, and so, for example, we read of the wave/particle problem of quantum mechanics: "Lew, you and I know how love and death matter / Matter as wave and particle--twins / At the same business" (L 234).[33] As René Girard has said, "whether knowledge is written in philosophical, literary, or scientific language it nevertheless articulates a common set of problems that transcends academic disciplines and artificial boundaries."[34] In turn, the most diverse experiments upon the real provide useful tools in an inquiry such as ours. One such experimental tool, the Heisenberg uncertainty relation, has broken modern from classical physics with its troubling claim: the better we are able to place something, the less we know of its movement; and as we learn more of its movement, we know less of its place ("in order to locate an electron, it is inevitable that the electron itself gets knocked out of the way--its motion is disturbed. Thus, if we wish to know the position, we introduce an uncertainty in the motion [momentum] of the particle").[35] So it is with the blurry device (meaning, God, the real, the alien) at the center of Spicer's work:

> Sounded ahead by the trumpets of unreason. Barely accounted for by the senses. He is what he is because he is never
> where he is.
> I cannot proclaim him for he is not mine. Eros, Amor, feely
> love, his body is more abstract than all the messages my body
> sends my brain of him. And he is human. I cannot proclaim starlight for it is never in the same place. (TP 172)

By exposition, we increase our fix upon the meaning of the poems; but by losing the movement of meaning we lose meaning itself, for the meaningful or the real is in flux (Armand Schwerner: "The real changes. The uncertainty principle in art, a function of interchange between phenomena and poet").[36] Conversely, by following only the movement of the real, we renounce its placement in language and so defeat Spicer's purpose (TP 183: "A textbook of poetry is created to explain"). We are left with discourse miming figure and structure lost in flux. Julia Kristeva admits the persuasions of simple flow: "Faced with this poetic language that defies knowledge, many of us are rather tempted to leave our shelter to deal with literature only by miming its meanderings, rather than by positing it as an object of knowledge."[37]

But as if in preparation for readers after flux, Spicer's poetry is posited repeatedly as an object of knowledge ("I know it's beautiful, but what does it mean?"). It is created to explain. And even the most cryptic book (Homage to Creeley / Explanatory Notes) invites inquiry after knowledge (HC 117: "I am the ghost of answering questions"). For Spicer saw the transition of meaning through things as occasion for a kind of worship, proposed angrily in Language:

> "If you don't believe in a god, don't quote him," Valery once said when he was about ready to give up poetry. The purposefull suspension of disbelief has about the chance of a snowball in hell.
> Lamias maybe, or succubi but they are about as real in California as night-crawlers
> Gods or stars or totems are not game-animals. Snark-hunting is
> not like discussing baseball.

> Against wisdom as such. Such
> Tired wisdoms as the game-hunters develop
> Shooting Zeus, Alpha Centauri, wolf with the same toy gun.
> It is deadly hard to worship god, star, and totem.
> Deadly easy
> To use them like worn-out condoms spattered by your own gleeful, crass, and unworshiping
> Wisdom (L 226)

Indeed, god and star and totem are unfashionable still, even more so today; as Walter Strauss has written: "The question is no longer one of reconciling Orpheus and Christ, but one of a world vision that makes the sacred possible at all"[38] (Bloch: "The sacred can come no closer to earth than within the work of art itself").[39] The current deconstructive counter ("such / Tired wisdoms as the game-hunters develop") is here deferred, for god and star and totem have more clear formulation in the second dictated book, The Holy Grail.

Because Spicer proposes meaning ("It is wanting to explain") the propositional language of discourse has place amid the wider play of language in the poems. But discourse checks the movement of poetic figure and so curtails the poetic distentions that alone can encompass the real. Again, the Heisenberg uncertainty principle provides a model for the limits of inquiry. In particle physics, the measuring system alters the system being measured: "if I want to know where a chair is located in a room, I do not bounce cannon balls off the chair and hope to learn something when the cannonballs ricochet back. No measuring apparatus is so delicate that it does not disturb an atomic system."[40] So it is with a discourse probing poetry. Discourse supposes so many relations. It observes unvarying

syntactic order, but "we make up a different language for poetry / And for the heart--ungrammatical" (L 233). The logical form of discourse suggests a kind of causality (Paz: "The difference between 'causality' and 'casuality' lies in the different position of the same u. Knowledge is a disease of language").[41] Thus not without violence does commentary seek out the cause it implants in the poem. By force of relational meaning, commentary disturbs the careful imbalance of poetry:

> When the house falls you wonder
> If there will ever be poetry
> And you shiver in the timbers wondering
> If there will ever be poetry
> When the house falls you shiver
> In the vacant lumber of your poetry. (FFP 89)

For Spicer's poems propose in part an absence of relation, as vacant lumber or alien God (MV 258: "that big, white, round, omnipotent bastard"). Discourse fills in for the vacancies--as of God--that constitute the poems, and thus imposes upon a work that does not explain itself. Of course, some of Spicer's poems do explain themselves, while nicely deflecting the cannon balls of discourse. And so Spicer's explanatory notes further disturb the unsettled meanings of Homage to Creeley.

Spicer's message is that commentary, such as his own explanatory notes, can take on some of the disturbance of the poems. Thus his method spills into our method, or should. But meaning is loosened after the labour of the poet alone, whose effort it has been to believe and to know. In spite of Spicer's invitations, we are stuck this side of sensible writing and watch the show of his poetry as if from an opposite bank. Back

to the contrarium.

Language is the repository of the invisible and inaccessible character of Spicer's real. Linguistic figure receives the idea of the alien as a broken relation. As Pascal wrote: "Figure includes absence and presence, pleasant and unpleasant. Cipher with a double meaning, of which one is clear and says that the meaning is hidden."[42] There are two meanings in Spicer's books, as Pascal prescribes; and one of them is clear: his meaning is hidden. With Pascal's help, we might link figure itself with the idea of the alien. Thus the idea, as it makes itself clear, makes more obscure its object: the alien. The more accurate the sense of the alien, the further it slips from grasp. Figure is the double gate of language through which meaning passes as logos flows, both ways.

In this sense, more than Spicer's meaning is hidden. Meaning itself has withdrawn from the tenure of language, to return in some other form. Clarifying Spicer, we might remove all but two (AL 25: "A really perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary") of the sounds of the poems: the cry of a gull, and surf upon shore. For Spicer, the gull's cry is the voice of solitary being, bearing a central motif:

> The seagull
> Alone on a pier cawing its head off
> Over no fish, no other seagull
> No ocean. As absolutely devoid of meaning
> As a french horn.
> It is not even an orchestra. Concord
> Alone on a pier. The grand concord of what
> Does not stoop to definition. No fish
> No other seagull, no ocean--the true
> Music. (BM 69)

Devoid of meaning, the gull's discordant cry sounds amid the general discord of the meaningless, suggesting a "grand concord" past the lesser concord of meaning--thus some sketchy coalescence beside the absences of 1957 ("No fish / No other seagull, no ocean"). We seek to define the indefinite seagull, or expect the development of the seagull-figure in the narrative of Spicer's books; but we find, after seven years of writing, an almost identical figure in the dictation of Magazine Verse:

> Giving the message like a seagull scwaking about a dead piece
> of bait
> Out there on the pier--it's been there for hours--the cats
> and
> the seagull fight over it.
> The seagull with only one leg, remote
> From identification. (MV 262)

For the seagull is one of the constants of Spicer's work. It is not the alien, but that within the alien which does not change--the idea of the alien or the meaningless itself, again "remote / From identification." Thus again the solitude (MV 262: "The gull alone there on the pier") of those outside the concord of meaning; as Spicer once wrote: "Dear Lorca, Loneliness is necessary for pure poetry" (AL 48).

But there is difference and development from the gull of The Book of Music; the Magazine Verse gull shows its source in dictation--it is no longer "devoid of meaning," "giving the message" instead. The meaningless or the alien thus constitutes a message, according to the dictation. The distinction is slight, yet so much turns upon Spicer's point: the meaningless is an intelligence, sometimes identified with God; it is communicable, in image and idea; the meaningless is somehow bound to

meaning; and like a message, the meaningless is directed--though not, as Spicer's ocean, directed to us:

> This ocean, humiliating in its disguises
> Tougher than anything.
> No one listens to poetry. The ocean
> Does not mean to be listened to. A drop
> Or crash of water. It means
> Nothing. (L 217)

The real constant and precedent sound of Spicer's books is, as just heard, the sound of surf upon shore. Its sound pervades twenty years of writing. It is an eternal outside time. Thus its deafening action is ever-present, sounding over all except the "high scream" of disbelief (BM 70), like the gull's cry, and the howling "angel talk" (HC 139) of dictation. And so surf upon shore carries the indistinct message of the dictated books, as given in The Holy Grail: "meaningless says the beach's ocean / Grail at point 029" (HG 195). But even before the meaningless Spicer has given us right of inquiry as much as it has been given him (TP 183: "We do not hate the human beings that listen to it"). The "grand concord" of meaning and its opposite suggests itself in Spicer's constant invitations. When the sound of surf is once more adjacent to the presence or absence of the grail, the mix is volatile:

> Love cannot exist between people.
> Trial balloons. How fated the whole thing is.
> It is as if there exists a large beach with no one on it.
> Eaches calling each on the paths. Essentially ocean.
> You do know Graham how I love you and you love me
> But nothing can stop the roar of the tide. The grail, not there
> becomes a light which is not able to be there like a lighthouse or spindrift
> No, Graham, neither of us can stop the pulse and beat of it
> The roar. (HG 196)

Such display of the meaningless ("the grail, not / there") sets Spicer's writing apart from all that proposes a grail. In the broken language of dada, there is the well disguised grail of anti-theory and the resolution of images, in eros (Duchamp: "Rrose Sélavy"/ eros c'est la vie) or art. Of course there is no figure for Eros more complex than Duchamp's Large Glass (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even)--more of that later. But Spicer mistrusts eros as a premature disturbance, past which meaning breaks: thus the further mystery of "the moment of surf breaking" (TP 183). The tide's "pulse and beat" ("the roar") replaces the pulsing heart of eros, and so drowns out love: love cannot exist between people. As for art, Spicer sharpened the knife that dada passed to him. If dada severs the cord of art, there remains the unfinished, criminal business of Spicer's own intentions, which we might derive from some early positions (1953):

> The Dada in painting is not Duchamp. The Dada in poetry is not Breton. The Dada in sex is not De Sade. All these men were too obsessed with the mechanism of their subject. A crime against nature must also be a crime against art. A crime against art must also be a crime against nature. All beauty is at continuous war with God. (OCD|CB 343)

Spicer's treatment of dada and surrealism is important enough to stop over a while. For one thing, the surrealists propose a practise quite like dictation, perhaps the best known of systems resembling Spicer's. Their automatic writing "reduces to the utmost the active participation of the person hitherto called the 'author'" (Max Ernst),[43] and yet the automatic texts seem so unlike Spicer's dictated books. One senses a different impulse

directing André Breton, as in the last lines of Poisson soluble, No. 30: "I was about to give the floor to the hollow air . . . but the candle laughed just then and my eyes were only shadow theater."[44] Wonderful, of course. But the floor is not given to the hollow air, and therein lies the difference. Spicer starts with the hollow air of disappearance, while apparitions play upon the shadow theater of Breton's eyes. While Spicer sees nothing (TP 172: "Nothingness is alive in the eyes of the beloved"), Breton sees more than the real (the sur·real)--hence affirmations of laughter and light.

The surrealists devised a system of semi-automatic composition in which several authors each supply one part of a subject-predicate sequence. This procedure, the game of the 'exquisite corpse' ("Cadavre exquis"), is named after its first production: "the exquisite | corpse | shall drink the young wine." There is but one line like it in all of Spicer:

> Sable arrested a fine comb.
> It is not for the ears. Hearing
> Merely prevents progress. Take a step back and view the sentence.
> Sable arrested a fine comb. (L 227)

Indeed "it is not for the ears" ("take a step back and view the sentence"): Spicer asks us to pause and reflect upon the subject-verb-object sequence as in itself non-discursive, or as "a discourse ruled by rational syntax and delirious semantics" (Paz)[45]--thus we see that the dictated message may be directed, as subject to predicate, without making sense ("sable arrested a fine comb"). Spicer's work turns upon the paradox of this most senseless of his sentences. As before, "the ocean

does not mean to be listened to" ("it is not for the ears"), and yet "it" is wanting to explain (TP 180). Spicer's preoccupation differs from that which drives the game of "cadavre exquis," and so again the difference of technique. Surrealist automatism suggests a form of selection, even though the unconscious is at the center of the surrealist design. For example, the three elements that combine and form the first of the surrealist sentences are consciously drawn from a list of improprieties: exquisite | corpse | drinking wine. The authors are after the varied excesses of refinement, death and drunkenness: they load their project with strangeness and thus assure in advance their strange results. The elements of Spicer's sentence show no such selection, as dictation requires Spicer's absence at point of composition. Unlike their surrealist counterparts, these elements are awkward, banal or restrictive: sable | arrested | a comb. Yet the combination is explosive, a language without meaning. By everyday animation, the corpse indeed would drink the wine (note that the surrealist predicate is perfectly sensible), just as the dead drink blood in Homer. But what is sable, or what does sable, if an adjective, describe? And how (or why) arrest a comb? Is it a fine toothed comb? Or is the fine, following the arrest (or following the "hearing"), the sentence, which we then step back and view? Only beneath this complete disorder of meaning do we see clearly the order of language, as an ABC under and structuring a wilderness of image and thought (TP 169: "Or as if all our words without the things above them were meaningless"). Spicer's words

attain a transparency through which we see language, composing itself; surrealist practise is just opaque enough to raise again the barrier of words.

But Spicer's practise is best distinguished from automatic writing in the fundamental variance of where each locates the source of dictation. First Spicer: we do not know the source; its imagery is shifting, distant (L 236: "The / unstable / Universe has distance but not much else") and unstructured. Sometimes the source is the ocean, of which we see and hear only surf (HG 189: "There is never an ocean in all Grail legend"); but we do hear the dictating voice--and nothing else--above the background noise or roar of tide. For Spicer, all images of origin are subsumed in God, of whom we sometimes see Spicer's gnostic Christ: "Christ, the / Logos unbelieved in, where the real edge of it is" (TP 183). Spicer's dictation amounts to theology; as Olson has said, "theology . . . is just naming God."[46]

In that direction, language atrophies; and so Spicer turns from silencing origin to the message itself, and to its point of relay. From the transmission of the signal, then, to the point at which signal becomes sound: the radio is the key figure of the dictation group, as in Jean Cocteau's dictation-piece, Orphée. But Spicer substitutes a crystal-set for the car-radio of Cocteau's dictation sequences, through which Orpheus (Orphée) receives messages "from the other side of death."[47]And so when asked if dictation supposes a universal source, Spicer responded (1965):

> That's just what I don't know. I would guess so offhand . . . . I would guess that there are a number of sources and I have no idea what they are or anything else, and frankly I don't think it's profitable to try to find out. But as far as the radio sets are concerned, it's not a good analogy now, because even the worst transistor is built pretty good. But if you take the first days of radio, I imagine the difference in transmission of signal and static and so forth would have been enormous. And I think that we probably always will be crystal sets, at best. (VL|C12: 185)

A first, quick opposition may be drawn from Antonin Artaud, upon the very point of Spicer's radio. In 1948, Artaud would have had a crystal set in mind:

> Wherever the machine is
> there is always the abyss and void,
> there is a technical intervention that distorts and annihilates what one has done.
> The criticisms of M. and A. A. are unjust but they must have been based on some weakness in the transitions,
> this is why I am through with Radio.[48]

Spicer, though, is after the abyss and void (Breton's "hollow air") of the machine--if a 'technical intervention' annihilates what one has done, one has space for the work of another. Thus the poetics of dictation depends upon a form of interference, and no one quite catches the dictated message as simple, clean transmission.

But the lasting surrealist contention is its doctrine of the unconscious as the source of the dictated message. Spicer often cast the scene of dictation as a kind of spiritism in which the control, often Little Eva (VL|C12: 185), speaks through the poet-medium. Again, André Breton:

> If the various examples of mediumistic automatic writing which have here and there been brought to our attention are not nearly as interesting as the drawings, the fault must be ascribed to the very poor spiritualistic doctrine which, for the most part, has contaminated these writings from the beginning. We know that this doctrine has tried to proclaim the exogeneity of the dictating principle or, in other words, the existence of 'spirits'--respect for clarity impels us to use this nauseating terminology.
>
> We are aware that the term 'automatic writing' as used in surrealism, lends itself to disputation. If I may be held partly responsible for this impropriety, it is because 'automatic' writing . . . has always seemed to me the limit towards which the surrealist poet must tend, but without losing sight of the fact that, contrary to what spiritualism proposes--that is, the dissociation of the subject's psychological personality--surrealism proposes nothing less than the unification of that personality. For us, obviously, the question of the externality of the 'voice' (to repeat for the sake of simplification) could not even be raised.[49]

Spicer's dictation theory is in sharpest focus amid these judgements. One chooses one's central images in agreement with either inward or outward design. Spicer's design evinces the outward without limit, showing even quasars, at the outward edge of space and time, as galaxies exploding "just to say something to us" (VL|C12: 176). In Robin Blaser's careful summation, Spicer's is "the practice of outside" (CB 269). The exogeneity of the dictating principle is thus a central tenet of Spicer's thought, following upon what seems at first the simple perception "essentially that there is an outside to the poet" (VL|C12: 176). For Spicer, it is not so much that inside and outside are distinct, but that there is no inside at all (thus the "dissociation of the subject's psychological personality" [Breton]). Distance instead is inside the body, "like the long / telesexual route to the brain or the even longer teleerotic / route to the

heart" (L 237). And the innermost is farthest (VL|C12 176: "whether it's an id down in the cortex--which you can't reach anyway, it's just as far outside as Mars").

The telesexual, teleerotic route to heart and mind was strikingly traced by the young Sigmund Freud of the Fliess correspondence, 1895; my inclusion of Freud's sketch, and of Frank Sulloway's informed interpretation, is meant to convey a language and a structure which in turn informs Spicer:

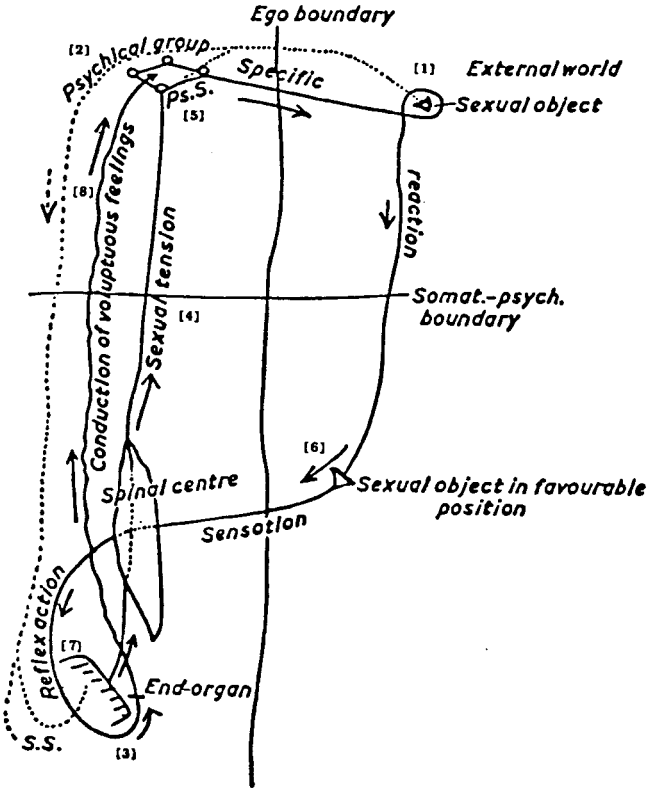


Figure 1

Freud's Schematic Picture of (Tele-)Sexuality

Mr. Sulloway's explanatory note shows a rich sense of poetic sequence, replete with the strange transitions of the serial poem. It is as if poetry, as a directed message, is of hidden relation to the direction of science. Thus, like poetry ("sable arrested a fine comb"), the science of pleasure is stitched together "in some mocking kind of order" (L 247):

> Briefly interpreted, (Freud's) schematic picture of sexuality depicts the organism's initial perception of a sexual object as alerting (via the dotted line) the psychical group. The psychical group becomes in turn, a source of nervous conductivity leading (via the continuing dotted line) across the somatic-psychical boundary to the genital end organ. There somatic sexual excitation is released. After passing through the spinal cord, somatic sexual excitation contributes to a heightening of erotic tension, which having traversed the somatic-psychical boundary once again, arouses the psychical sexual group to its peak potential for sexual receptivity. At this point a totally uninhibited organism would take steps through vigorous motor activity to place the sexual object in a favorable position. If successful, orgasmic reflex action discharges the accumulated tension in the end organ, thus triggering the simultaneous sensation of voluptuous feelings in the psychical sexual group.[50]

In this play of sequences and border crossings, Freud at once suggests Duchamp, whose The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even most capably tracks the long telesexual route to the brain. Of its motor-complex and path of action, I have chosen a very small part, explained by Octavio Paz:

> The magnifying glass throws the ray onto the combat marble. Struck by its luminous energy, the marble jumps up and hits the first summit. In this way it sets in motion the clockwork mechanism of the Boxing Match. The first fall of the rams that hold up the bride's garment makes the Juggler of Gravity give a little jerk. The ball attacks again, "very hard": the rams fall again, the first one is unfastened, and the Juggler pirouettes. Attack number three, a "direct" attack this time: the second ram is unfastened; the Juggler jumps up like the spring he is, and lifts his tray up to the "solid flame" in which the Bride's desire is manifest. . . . .[51]

Like Duchamp's, Spicer's is "a vision / of sex in the distance. / Overseer of the real" (LM 112). Inside, one has the usual delirious semantics (Paz) forced along such strange somatic sequences as Freud's or Duchamp's above. It is not so much that one gets lost in a labyrinth of self, but that self is a closed circuit, or an order of words despite the disorder of meanings ("sable arrested a fine comb"). Spicer's poetics of dictation is meant to short this circuitry of self, leading always to pleasure (see Freud) or disappointment (see Duchamp). "The voice in his poetry had, he said, to be something more than his desire and disappointment" (Blaser, CB 385).

Emboldened by such inversion of inside and outside, we might further link the source of dictation, of Breton's "dictating principle," with the idea of the alien. After all, Spicer links the idea of Mars to the cortex. One's experience of the alien is constant, if neglected. The alien might be said to be somatic, much like physis, or Spicer's pounding heart (HG 196: "neither of us can stop the pulse and beat of it"). But the idea of the alien is experienced only in reversals of language, notably reversals of figure. The idea of the alien reaches the body only once, as at the end of Spicer's life ("my vocabulary did this to me")--thus we might differentiate Spicer's from surrealist practise in his dissatisfaction with the alien itself. Something further than the alien suggests itself in Spicer's light treatment of those theories of the alien with which he was familiar. Thus the idea of the alien replaces the manifest alien of surrealism;

but we are not yet near what Spicer called God.

But Breton is right. The "very poor spiritualistic doctrine" does contaminate the general doctrine of outside source. The mediumistic tradition is an inseparable mix of charlatans and magi (HT 179: "John Dee with his absolutely fake medium E. K." [Edmund Kelley]), such that Spicer does not draw much from it. Together with glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, mediumistic writing suggests a form of dictation again distinct from Spicer's. We might further define Spicer's practise as it differs from spiritism. Too many digressions? No doubt. But you must somehow lose the ABCD of meaning to get to the d@ñ¢e of the poem.

Although some form of glossolalia crosses all cultures, and though there is a philosophical treatment of the gods' unintelligible speech as far back as Clement of Alexandria, Spicer picks up the tradition as it shapes itself in America, after the Great Awakening of the 1730's. Calvin is still in the background. But a couple of examples will show that the tradition does not change much:

The Archangel Gabriel, to John Dee (1659):

> Arney vah nol gadeth adney ox vals, nath gemseh ah orza vall gemma, oh gedvam on zembah hohhad vomfah oldru anpha note admancha nonsah vamfas orned, alphol andax, orzadah vos ausch hansab von adma wha notma goth vamsed adges ouseple oudemax orzan, unfa onmah undabra gouseh gole nahad na.[52]

(?), to Pastor Jonathon Paul, Lutheran (1907):

> Schua ea, schua ea
> O tschi brio ti ra pea
> Akki lungo tari fugo . . .[53]

We see at once that these productions are not like Spicer's poems. But Spicer did once speak, as if in tongues, "in Martian," transcribed here from the "Vancouver Lectures" (C12: 182):

> y yumbekionshtyk' un yk shutd ick mudit taek unponslya?
> Ish ne patronia temp? Ga. Kushinee pat ta.

The character of Spicer's martian speech in part derives from the best known dictation-sequence of modern spiritism, Hélène Smith's "écriture martienne." Henri Ellenberg cites Théodore Flournoy's analysis of the "écriture martienne" (From India to the Planet Mars; 1899) as a key text in "the discovery of the unconscious," arguably preceding Janet, Fliess and Freud.[54] Thus Flournoy deciphered Mme. Smith's dictation as subliminal fantasy worked upon unconscious material--her mother's native Hungarian, her own forgotten sanskrit.

The best books on spiritism tend to simplify spirit-dictation as a display of the medium's unconscious knowledge, normally of languages. I think Spicer had this simplification in mind when he observed that "language is part of the furniture in the room . . . five languages just makes the room structure more difficult and also possibly, more usable" (VL| C12 179). "It's impossible for the source of energy to come to you in Martian or North Korean or Tamil or any language you don't know . . . it's as if a Martian comes into a room with building blocks--with ABCDE, which are in English--and he tries to convey a message" (C12 178; and Lacan: "here in Baltimore, it would seem that the other is naturally English-speaking").[55]

Once more, Spicer: "The more languages you know . . . the more building blocks the Martians have to play with." Thus Spicer again refutes the idea of inside source, or of origin in the unconscious. The Martian comes in from outside, as if into a room; he has no relation to the contents he arranges or disturbs; he is the motor of the alien, but not its body. His body is language, the building-block messages he then leaves behind. Language arrests the moment of his disappearance as it arrests the moment of astonishment--thus "the continual moment of surf breaking" (TP 183) is sustained by arrangement of children's blocks. Again, the idea of the alien is a kind of spillage from language. The trick image of the Martian's entrances thus covers his departure from words.

Spicer's Martian speech is doubly bound to the idea of the alien. Mme. Smith's Martian writing is more than meaningless in itself. It might be said to display the absence of meaning as a property of language normally masked. Roland Barthes' impromptu reflections upon doodling (Figure 3, next page) provide his own Martian-like scrawl with this kind of linguistic meaning. First, Hélène Smith's "écriture martienne" ("fankincense inscribed in little scratches" [ONS 1]):

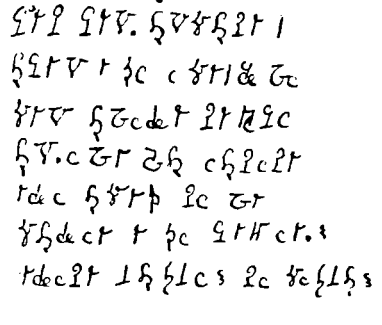


Figure 2

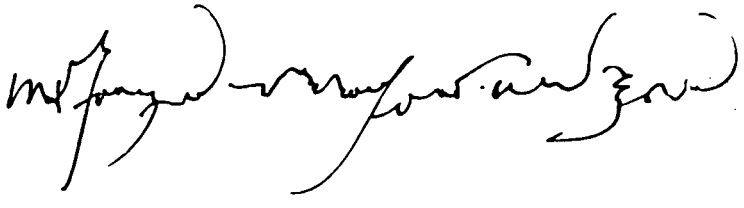
Hélène Smith's Martian Writing,

from David Christie-Murray's

Voices from the Gods

(London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978; permission to reprint)

Doodling . . .



or the signifier without the signified

Figure 3

The Signifier without the Signified, by Roland Barthes

from Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes

Richard Howard, translator

(N. Y.: Hill & Wang, 1977)

Writing such as Mme. Smith's, and speech such as Spicer's Martian, are informed by Barthes' thoughtful remarks: "doodling . . . or the signifier without the signified."[56] Thus the link between Spicer's glossolaic Martian and the ABCDE ("which are in English") of the dictated poems. Martian language reminds us that no assured meaning rests under words. "God" signifies God's absence as much as God's presence throughout Spicer's books. If we see in the signified the sustenance of signifiers, we miss Spicer's meaning, or miss the meaningless message (HG 195: "meaningless says the beach's ocean"). For Spicer, the link between signifier and signified is an unsound linguistic theory, and as a professional linguist, his sight into language was especially clear. Thus in the place of the spirits, the Martians and the unconscious, there remains for Spicer the absence of meaning itself, apparent in language and structured like a message.

Sustenance is so lightly distributed through Spicer's writing that hunger motivates many of the late poems, as some passages from Magazine Verse show: "It's beaches we're starved on. Or loved on." (MV 266); "You seemed then / more like a sparrow / Eating the last grains they can find in the snow" (MV 252). In the formal arrangement of the poems, Spicer's last line is telling: "People are starving." But the meaning of hunger has its best exposition among the poems for Tish:

You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink.
Telemachus sad
Over his father's shortcomings. By now
None of the islands exist where he visited
The horse, lead or not lead to water is still there.
Refusing
Bare sustenance.
Each of us has inside of him that horse-animal
Refusing the best streams or as if their thick water flowing were
refusing us
. . . . . (MV 252)

Both refused and refusing sustenance, exegesis undergoes looking-glass reversal, at least under Spicer's direction (FN 167: "It is a / strategy where we miss what we hit"). Following an orphic procedure, one's discourse opposes itself so as to engage the self-opposite language of poetry. Cocteau has said that exegesis is a Muse.[57] The poem is self-opposite for wanting to explain ("A textbook of poetry is created to explain"). Spicer refuses the sustenance of figure or discourse as separate orders and so unopposed; he is not found ensnared at the level of their contention. In this, Spicer parts from one master, Artaud, for whom discourse imprisons. Nor can we follow Spicer back to Calvin, for whom figure is untrue. Calvin and Artaud are unlikely conceptual companions, but Spicer has thrown them together before ("The Unvert Manifesto," article 19: "Nonsense, Mertz, Dada, and God all go to the same nightclubs" [CB 342]). But upon this Calvin and Artaud agree: figure and discourse are properly apart--the two gods of poetry do not meet but to annihilate.

Spicer suspected a deeper coherence between discourse and figure. Brought up a Calvinist, he had been taught a

convergence of sorts in Calvin's God: scriptural figure is true. But noting together the absence and presence of God, Spicer found Calvinian faith untenable. Among elements suspended in Calvinian solution, the coherence of figure and discourse alone survives the alembic of Spicer's writing. Like wave and particle, figure and discourse are "twins / At the same business" (L 234). Their twinship, placed deeply in language (as are wave and particle in things) gives Spicer's writing almost scriptural texture, thought by some to mark Calvinian or or more general Christian belief. But Spicer's meaning is subsumed within an unfamiliar God.

In the opposition of the poetic and the discursive, poetry can be said, rhetorically, to be impossible today. Spicer's "failure" is thus clarified in Jean-François Lyotard's polemic:

> If there is a profound failure, an impossibility, of poetry today, it is not because we live in a troubled time and Being has drawn itself away from us. This talk of profound reasons bores the hell out of us in accordance with its religiosity. Nothing has been withdrawn, we have not 'forgotten' anything. The archaic Greeks, Heraclitus, in between faith and knowledge, are no closer to the origin than Janis Joplin. The failure of poetry is simply the impossibility of anti-theory; the figure must not be opposed to the discourse as the locus of intensities to the realm of identities. There is no such thing as the intense genre . . . the strictest theoretical articulation may give rise to dizzy spells.[58]

For Spicer, figure does not oppose discourse in the ultimate sense Lyotard here forbids. "A textbook of poetry is created to explain." Neither discourse nor figure in itself suffices as solitary purveyor of the real. If poetry is impossible today, discourse is impossible too; and as one such impossible

discursive procedure, exegesis fails. Murray Krieger: "The critic . . . alone takes upon himself the futile, self-defeating task of using propositional discourse in order to reveal its limitations, to shame it before the poetic, exposing its utter inadequacy to the experience it claims to talk about" ("The critic must fail").[59] And yet in the double failure of poet and critic there is ironic investiture of meaning. Failing to grasp, both as a poetic act and as commentary, allows meaning its extraordinary flight.

The exegetical task thus becomes clear: to observe without encysting the intrusive alien of Spicer's work (TP 176: "It does not have to fit together"); by the same observance, the poet imposes no meaning upon the real. But commentary cannot much improve upon the example of the police in Cocteau's Orphée: "The police arrive at the house of Orpheus and wish to detain Heurtebise. But Heurtebise is undetainable, irreal in his real presence; the drama cannot be seized by the mind; nothing is true; all investigation of reason is condemned to failure."[60]

This seems a lot of volume to slide under the rubric of Chapter One. The condemnation to failure, by divergence of discourse from figure; the disappearance of both poet and reader in the composition of the pure; disappearance itself, with which we began; the hunt, and the putting to death; the double play of language against meaning, and the tearing between two gods. These are the leitmotifs that recur and so compose Spicer's books, the discourse suspended in figure. So well suffused through figure as to be past extraction, Spicerian discourse

holds only its procedural form: the poetics of dictation, from which we in turn derive a parallel form of inquiry. From each is removed an intention toward the fixture of meaning, for meaning is fluid. And yet the slight architecture of Spicer's poetics provides the structure of Spicer's real as fully as it could be given. Self-opposite and self-questioning, Spicer's stance suggests the garden which draws one from the purity and unity of the grail-castle. Klingsor's garden (Parzival) falls or rises as we have inclination to solve or endure its enchantment. Spicer gives figure, as enchantment, and discourse-solution at once, reducing neither to the order of the other. His readers are caught in the same play of language.

Footnotes

[1]Jack Spicer, Admonitions, Robin Blaser, ed., with a commentary, The Collected Books of Jack Spicer (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1975), p. 64. Passages from Spicer's books are drawn from this edition and identified in my text by abbreviated book title, as follows:

AL, After Lorca
Ad, Admonitions
BM, A Book of Music
BK, Billy the Kid
FFP, Fifteen False Propositions Against God
SNR, Apollo Sends Seven Nursery Rhymes to James Alexander
RW, A Red Wheelbarrow
LM, Lament for the Makers
HT, The Heads of the Town up to the Aether, consisting of:
    HC, Homage To Creeley
    FN, A Fake Novel About the Life of Arthur Rimbaud
    TP, A Textbook of Poetry
HG, The Holy Grail
L, Language
MV, Book of Magazine Verse

Page numbers cited correspond to those of Blaser's edition. Miscellaneous poems from the "Poems and Documents" section of this edition are identified by the general abbreviation, CB, for Collected Books; among them, the Imaginary Elegies" are abbreviated IE, so that CB|IE refers to Blaser's authoritative text. For convenience, the major collections of the Spicer miscellany are cited in my text by abbreviated title, as follows:

C12, Caterpillar 12, vol. 3, no. 4 (1970), ed. Clayton Eshleman, including:
    VL, "The Vancouver Lectures" (fragments)
    LGM, "Letters to Graham MacKintosh"
    LJA, "Letters to James Alexander"
M10, Manroot 10, "The Jack Spicer Issue'," ed. Paul Mariah (late fall, 1974).
ONS, Jack Spicer: One Night Stand and Other Poems, ed. Donald Allen, with a preface by Robert Duncan (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1980).
CP, Jack Spicer, Collected Poems: 1945, 1946 (Berkely: published by Spicer, 1946; facsimile reprint, Oyez: White Rabbit Press, 1981). Again, page numbers cited correspond to those of these editions.

[2]See ONS 1 ["we Bring These Slender Cylinders of Song"] from as early as [1945]. I think Spicer had Hélène Smith in mind, whose "écriture martienne" remains the best known of recent spirit-dictation sequences. Thus David Christie-Murray, Voices from the Gods: Speaking with Tongues (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 82: "characters appeared on cylinders presented to Hélène by three Martians clearly enough for her to be able to copy them." Spicer identifies the three Martians with the biblical Magi, suggesting a major imagery, or the birth of the center of the work (Christ, dictation):

> We bring these slender cylinders of song
> Instead of opium or frankincense
> Because the latter would not last for long
> Or stay forever in your memory--hence
> We bring you opium of cellulose
> And frankincense inscribed in little scratches
> . . . . . .

The "little scratches," as copied by Mme. Smith, are reproduced in my Fig. 2, p. 46. I would tentatively date the thematic of dictation, though not its practise, from this early poem. The cylinders are also recording cylinders, as the badly scratched Maplesons and Edisons ("we bring you opium of cellulose") of the late nineteenth century; but Spicer tends to complicate his images this way, as if to test the reader's perseverance. Further on, the "fair Geneva" of Spicer's poem again suggests the Martian dictation; Mme. Smith was Swiss, and Geneva the place of the Martian sequences.

[3]Frederic Jameson, Marxism and Form (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 3.

[4]Julia Kristeva, Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, ed. L. S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 145: "Since at least Hölderlin, poetic language has deserted beauty and meaning to become a laboratory where, facing philosophy, knowledge, and the transcendental ego of all signification, the impossibility of a signified or signifying identity is being sustained."

[5]Thus the "ceremonies of spring, sprang, sprung" (my stress; L 222: "Daffodils, ceremomies of spring, sprang, sprung / And it is August / Another century"). See also ONS 68, "Hibernation--after Morris Graves":

> The Future chills the sky above the chamber.
> The Past gnaws through the earth below the bed.
> But here the naked Present lies as warmly
> As if it rested in the lap of God.

The images of Past-earth and Future-sky are more fully developed in the past-present-future sequence of The Heads of the Town up

to the Aether, whose three parts are also hell, purgatory and heaven; in this sense, the past is hell (HC 138: "the cactus needle of the past . . . plays the phonograph record of its record never again"), the present endured, and the future paradise (TP 176: "to magic the whole thing toward what they called God").

[6]Robert Duncan, M10, p. 136, in a preface to Spicer's poems from the magazine J: "At the time of the publication of After Lorca by White Rabbit (Press) in 1957, when both I, as typist of the text, and Joe Dunn, as editor of that series, asked about it, Jack Spicer insisted that there should be no copyright. All poetry, he maintaind, should be communal property at large, as it was written. When I publisht his Billy the Kid in 1959 this was still his persuasion--it was not a matter of neglect but of his stated conditions that there was no copyright. The magazine J, edited by Jack Spicer, likewise with no copyright, must be presumed then to be in the public domain by the editor's intention. Not until The Heads of the Town up to the Aether late in 1962 is any Spicer book issued as private property." Thus upon the copyright page of A Book of Music (San Francisco: White Rabbit Press, 1969), we read: "No Spicer Book was ever © Copyright." Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 96: "In our day the conventional element in literature is elaborately disguised by a law of copyright pretending that every work of art is an invention distincive enough to be patented." By withholding copyright, Spicer may have wished to suggest a tradition and a convention of American writing in which he placed his work. The literary background remains to be sketched in, but Spicer's understanding is an American inheritance, drawing from (among others) Edward Taylor, Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson and Emily Dickinson.

[7]Readings in American Art since 1900, ed. Barbara Rose (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1968), p. 55.

[8]Jack Spicer, Book of Magazine Verse (San Francisco: White Rabbit Press, 1966), acknowledgements page: "None of the poems in this book have been published in magazines. The author wishes to ackowledge the rejection of poems herein by editors Denise Levertov of The Nation and Henry Rago of Poetry Chicago."

[9]Charles Olson upon the Muses: "because they're Zeus's daughters, they can sort of face him--I suppose they sort of have to, sort of. But do you know, when they give the poet or prince his instruction, it's as though they just throw it like meat over the back of themselves" (Poetry and Truth, ed. George Butterick [San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1971], p. 52). Late in life, Spicer spoke of Olson's as a close poetic practise; Olson's Muses do here suggest a poetics of dictation.

[10]Thomas H. Johnson, ed., The Letters of Emily Dickinson, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Bellknap Press, 1958), 3:864.

[11]Jacques Derrida, Positions, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 14: "(absurdity) simply tempts itself, tenders itself, attempts to keep itself at the point of the exhaustion of meaning. To risk meaning nothing is to start to play." Derrida's distinction between the absurd and the meaningless is helpful in that Spicer "risks meaning nothing" (L 217: "It means / Nothing") while denying the absurd (TP 183: "A textbook of poetry is created to explain"). Spicer's notice of Tertullian (MV 253: "Credo / Quia absurdum") has philosophical and theological contexts apart from Spicer's general critique of the absurd, of which only the loose, twentieth century applications are being denounced.

[12]The Structuralist Controversy, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), P. 186.

[13]The Letters of Emily Dickinson, op. cit., 2:650.

[14]Poetry and Truth, op. cit., p.43.

[15]Stéphane Mallarmé, from "Variations on a Subject," Mallarmé: The Poems, ed. and trans. Keith Bosley (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1977), p. 49. Bosley provides the French text: "Impersonnifié, le volume, autant qu'on s'en sépare comme auteur, ne réclame approche de lecteur."

[16]"Quant au livre," Stéphane Mallarmé: Œuvres complètes ed. Henri Mondor (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 372. Blaser's remark that Spicer is the American Mallarmé suggests that beneath Spicer's hip triptych rests the beauty and gravity of Mallarmé's work: the author removed from the work, the mystery of time (FN 167: "The mystery / of why there is a beauty left in any of us") and the composition of the pure.

[17]The Annotated Snark, ed. Martin Gardner (revised edition; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1974), p. 57.

[18]Tzvetan Todorov, The Poetics of Prose, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 140.

[19]Robin Blaser, "Image-Nation 14 (the face" (North Vancouver: Cobblestone Press, 1975). "Spacing is essential to the serial poem" (Blaser).

[20]Ezra Pound, "Canto LXXIV," The Cantos (New York: New Directions Books, 1970), p. 425.

[21]For example, see Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing, ed. Daniel Hoffman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Bellknap Press, 1979), in which Spicer is mentioned but once in passing; other single index entries include Aretha Franklin and Woody Allen. Among texts wholly or partly neglecting Spicer: Robert K. Martin, The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry (Austin: University of Texas, 1979); Literary San Francisco (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).

[22]Capilano Review 18 (1980): 53-59.

[23]Hermes, ed. Josué V. Harari, trans. David F. Bell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

[24]"Jules Verne's Strange Journeys," trans. Maria Malanchuk, Yale French Studies 52 (special issue; 1975): 176.

[25]Gardner, ed., The Annotated Snark, p. 64.

[26]Robin Blaser, "The Practice of Outside," CB 271.

[27]The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity (2nd. edition; Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 288.

[28]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 71. Ross Feld, whose "Lowghost to Lowghost," Parnassus: Poetry in Review (Spring / Summer 1976) is rich in perception, mistakes Blaser's use of Merleau-Ponty, et al, as an overloading of Spicer by "huge Germanic claims." But great art always comprises a complete body of belief and a totality of thought, of which philosophy and theology are subordinate parts. More than "an honest-to-goodness important poet" (Feld), Spicer observes the careful and difficult distinctions of philosophical language. They are, of course, immediate to the poems, but the poems invite a second language ("It is wanting to explain") and whatever capable clarifications may be found among other kinds of writing.

[29]Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p. 79.

[30]Cited in Kristeva, Desire in Language, p. 107.

[31]Merleau-Ponty, trans. Lefort, cited in Robin Blaser, "The Stadium of the Mirror," Image-Nations 1-12 & The Stadium of the Mirror (London: Ferry Press, 1974), p. 55.

[32]Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Ninth Elegy," The Duino Elegies, trans. Stephen Garmey and Jay Wilson (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 67. Princess Marie von Thurn writes that Rilke "had heard a voice calling to him out of the roaring of the wind: 'Wer, wenn ich schriee . . . '"(introduction, p. 5). Coincidentally, Spicer's dictation is repeatedly linked to the roar of surf (HG 196: "nothing can stop the roar of the tide"). The relation between the poems' voices and voiceless noise is among the great recognitions of the last dictated books, and thus best deferred until the earlier books are understood as preparations for the image of surf breaking.

[33]Simply that all matter behaves as both wave and particle, though these two descriptions are mutually exclusive. See J. C. Polkinghorne, The Particle Play (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Co., 1979), in which the yes/no (Spicer's love/death) of the wave and particle contrarium is occasion for religious belief ("the pursuit of science is an aspect of the imago dei," p. 126).

[34]Cited in Hermes, op. cit., p. xi. Robert Duncan: "I draw as much from Dirac and from Schroedinger as I draw from Pound and from Homer" (Tony Stoneburner, ed., A Meeting of Poets and Theologians to Discuss Parable, Myth and Language [Cambridge, Mass.: The Church Society for College Work, 1968], p. 33). For a superb treatment of science as the imago dei, see Rodolphe Gasché on Melville's Cetology, "The Scene of Writing: A Deferred Outset," Glyph 1 (1977): 150-71. Gasché's interprets as a linguistic disorder one of the central disturbances of Spicer's own Fake Novel, Melville's Dead Letter Office: "Bartleby, by not having faced this inevitable destiny of the letters, without destination, is henceforth their ultimate receiver in the Dead Letter Office: he has to die, not having made a covenant with these letters by means of which he would have become one of them himself" (Spicer: "My vocabulary did this to me"). Gasché does not admit "meaningful failure" as ground for a second, scientific language; thus poetry and commentary fail together, or not at all, as in Spicer ("A textbook of poetry is created to explain"). Olson, Poetry and Truth, op. cit., p. 45: "mathematics is a language which has the symbolic ability to show light into the transcendent"; one senses here a part of the motivation for Spicer's late interest in mathematical work.

[35]P. C. W. Davies, The Forces of Nature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 55-56.

[36]Open Poetry, eds. R. Gross and G. Quasha (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 191.

[37]Kristeva, op. cit., p. 145.

[38]Descent and Return: The Orphic Theme in Modern Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p.143.

[39]Marxism and Form, op. cit., p. 147.

[40]Davies, op. cit., p. 55.

[41]Octavio Paz, Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare, trans. Rachel Phillips and Donald Gardner (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), p. 108.

[42]Pascal Pensées, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 109.

[43]Surrealists on Art, ed. Lucy R. Lippard (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 208.

[44]Cited in Joseph Halpern, "Describing the Surreal," Yale French Studies 61 (Summer, 1980): 98. Halpern's point is that Breton here shows "the assertion of authorial control." Poisson soluble and Les champs magnétiques (Breton and Philippe Soupault) are the central automatic texts of surrealist practise. Max Ernst's collage-novels (The Hundred-Headless Woman; A Week of Kindness) are much more like Spicer's books, showing a serial structure in which the image-element linking the sequence also changes. Change is thus the underlying linkage ("ceremonies of spring, sprang, sprung") of the dictated books.

[45]Paz, op. cit., p. 108.

[46]Poetry and Truth, op. cit., p. 46.

[47]Orphée (the play), cited in Professional Secrets: An Autobiography of Jean Cocteau Drawn from his Lifetime Writings, ed. Robert Phelps, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 262.

[48]Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1976), p. 584.

[49]André Breton, "The Automatic Message," trans. Guy Ducornet, What is Surrealism? Selected Writings, ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Monad Press, 1978), pp. 104-5.

[50]Frank J. Sulloway, Freud: Biologist of the Mind: Beyond the Psychoanalytic Legend (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1979), p. 104. Figure references have been removed from Sulloway's text. Sulloway interprets Freud's as an understanding of the strangeness of the body, not the mind. In Spicer, the body is uncomfortably alien (HG 192: "This armor / Fooled / Alive in its / Self"; ONS 60: "as I / Run through the water I can hear the sound / Of running echoed back and forth again across the beach-- / My flesh"); that leaves, as the enduring action of mind, the idea of the alien.

[51]Paz, op. cit., pp. 58-59.

[52]David Christie-Murray, Voices from the Gods: Speaking with Tongues (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 63-64.

[53]Ibid., p. 99.

[54]Henri F. Ellenberger, The Discovery of the Unconscious (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1970), pp. 315-18. See also Christie-Murray, op. cit., pp. 80-85.

[55]Lacan, op. cit., p. 186.

[56]Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 187.

[57]Preface to "The Testament of Orpheus," Jean Cocteau: Two Screenplays, trans. Carol Martin-Sperry (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 73.

[58]"For a Pseudo-Theory," Yale French Studies 52 (1975): 125.

[59]Cited in Frank Lentricchia, After the New Criticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 233.

[60]René Gilson, Jean Cocteau, trans. Ciba Vaughan (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1969), p. 81.

"To all appearances, the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing."

--Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act"

Chapter Two

In "The Vancouver Lectures," Jack Spicer set the three books of Heads of the Town beside the three cantica of Dante's Divine Comedy. As the earlier imagery is recast, the Christian figurations of paradise, purgatory and hell become conventional divisions of writing: the poetic in the Textbook, the prosaic in the Fake Novel, and the anti-convention of language itself in Homage to Creeley. And yet how far from Spicer does this formal reading veer? Dantescan tiering constrains poetic movement and suggests another kind of writing. Spicer's writing is aberrant of form, moving with urgent, less divisible purpose. "If there's any triunity about this book, it is in the stripped-down annexing of poetry, poetry, and poetry--divined, discovered, and defined--and nothing else."[1] But Spicer's thought is at once corrosive of classical structure and evenly structured itself. If a formal reading veers from the predatory leanness of Spicer's work, the distancing has value. First, it wisely observes the admonition with which Homage to Creeley begins: "I am the ghost of answering questions. Beware me. Keep / me at a distance as I keep you at a distance." And distancing allows for informed return. A parallel procedure of willed distancing has been given by Coleridge: "The artist must first eloign himself from nature in order to return to her with full effect . . . . . He merely absents himself for a season from her, that his own spirit . . . may learn her unspoken language in its main radicals"[2](or Spicer:

"To describe the real world. / Even in a poem / One forgets the real world" [FFP 89]). Such is the task of commentary, as directed by Spicer, and by Coleridge before him: to discover the main radicals of the unspoken language, the "infinitely small vocabulary" of the "really perfect poem" (AL 25).

A special tropology carries the message of the dictated books, and in Heads of the Town, the tripartition of language, prose and poetry exhibits its rough shape. Language suggests a structure and a narrative, as Spicer observes of linguinstics--"Linguistics is divided like Graves' mythology of / mythology, a triple goddess--morphology, phonology, and / syntax" (L 237). Like Dante, Spicer sees a structured world, and seeks the structure beneath the structure above. The structure of structure, like the "mythology of mythology," turns out to be the structure of language: morphology, phonology and syntax. As we have seen, the structure of language remains even as the structure of meaning dissolves ("Sable arrested a fine comb"). Lacan has said that one discovers in the unconscious "the whole structure of language."[3] Thus the Martian's arrangement of children's blocks structures the idea of the alien.

From textbook linguistics to theories of rhetoric, language is the hive of Spicer's swarming attention. There are poems about syntax, poems about words, poems about poems. Bound morphemes and geminated consonants are spliced into a sequence of real lemons and real seagulls, which in turn are brought back into language (AL 23: "Two words called seagull are peacefully floating out where the waves are"). Reading Spicer, we are first

compelled by the eventful language of the poems; we seem to catch each word just as it is caught itself in the out-flowing tide of what Spicer called the real ("out there where the waves are"). But Spicer exhibits a second order of language, full of concrete morphemes and cantilevered syllables (L 235), as if to locate the mystery of his work in language itself. Admitting the forum of "thing language," Todorov defines figure as "a use of language in which the latter more or less ceases to fulfill its signifying function and takes on an opaque character."[4] And so language itself attains material place at the source of Spicer's writing (HT 175: "Where we are is in a sentence"). Heidegger too argues the materiality of poetic writing, as clarified here by Vycinas:

> The material for making an implement disappears or gets lost in the suitability of an implement for its usage, whereas in an artwork such materials stand out and are really brought forward into the world. Marble is not revealed as marble in native rock; it becomes marble in the full sense of the word when placed in a wall or pillar of a Greek temple. Gold is truly gold in the spear of Athene; but the iron in a hatchet is not truly iron: it is overshadowed by the usefulness of the hatchet. A Greek temple, unlike an implement, does not stand out obtrusively and clearly itself; rather it allows the materials to stand out forward in the full light of the world, while it itself recedes into the background.[5]

Spicer's words are rarely overshadowed by their usefulness ("Sable arrested a fine comb"), thus words come forward as something deeper than their useful meanings (ONS 2 [1946]: "To the Semanticists": "Speak softly; definition is deep / But words are deeper")--so do the poems reveal language itself, as the temple reveals marble: "Where one is is in a temple that sometimes makes us forget / that we are in it. Where we are is in a sentence" (HT 175). Spicer's writing stands apart in storied

willingness to so invert language over meaning. Spicer's language seems less to posit truth than to posit itself in the place of truth. Both the bearer and the being of mystery, language, dissolving (disappearing in its usage), discloses language again. Our second, lasting look falls upon "the diamond in back of the diamond" (HC 142; BK 83: "Like a diamond / Has at the center of it a diamond"), and notes the self-repeating snare (see Duchamp and Freud above). But Robin Blaser has noticed the key disclosure of After Lorca: "The universe falls apart and discloses a diamond" (AL 23). Blaser has said of Spicer's diamond that one world ("universe") reveals at its center two worlds (dia·mond)--thus perfect, pure crystal appears at the place of division, which we might suppose to be language (TP 176: "They are angry at their differences--the dead and the living, the ghosts and the angels, the green parrot and the dog I have just invented. All things that use separate words. They want to inhabit the city" [the City of God]). But the diamond in back of the diamond, like the structure of structure and the mythology of mythology, leads Spicer back to a point of composition at which two worlds assemble. Language is the assembly of those oppositions which as two worlds divide all intelligence; thus orphic song binds the two orphic gods.

There is no movement out of language but only movement more deeply embedded in the disabling play of words. Emily Dickinson has linked magic and speech as a kind of cross-disturbance: "Magic, as it electrifies also makes decrepit" ("now it disables my lips").[6] As "bone answers bone in the arm /

Or shadow sees shadow" (BK 83), it is as if Spicer responds:

> Tough lips that cannot quite make the sounds of love
> The language
> Has so misshaped them.
> Malicious afterthought. None of you bastards
> Knows how Charlie Parker died. (L 237)
>
> ("My vocabulary did this to me")

Years before the unison of discord comprising most of post-structuralist thought, Spicer writes from well within the prison-house of language (Frederic Jameson): where we are is in a sentence. In a sense, Spicer predicted Derrida. He prepared a kind of self-deconstructive poetry to stand against deconstructive Derridean rigor, while at the same time proposing such easy targets as God, the grail, and the pure. Derrida's argument is simply, as Spicer said, that we are always in a sentence. Robin Blaser has long said that one's order is the order of one's words, an American perception going back as least as far as Melville; yet certain translations from the French have strangely made this a commonplace. Spicer saw the prison house of language as the problem upon the horizon, and entered an invisible fray of which he seemed to fight all sides. Like the opening Fake Novel door, the fight was in the future (FN 149: "'You can't close the door. It is in the future'"). The invisible, battling ghosts of the poems seem real enough today. But according to Spicer, we are both in a sentence and in a temple; the sentence is a temple, and language, for Spicer, thus orients toward God.

If we have become distant from the old vocabulary of God and hell and paradise, it has been to return to the sentences

in which they appeared (Paz: "Language now occupies the place once occupied by the gods"); or perhaps it has been to return to vocabulary itself, toward which Spicer directs an alchemical project (AL 25: "A really perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary") and a troubling accusation ("My vocabulary did this to me"). The poetics of dictation plays itself out in accordance with the transition from theophany to words. But it hardly matters if it is the invisibility of words or the invisibility of God that transubstantiating, makes visible the real.

Following such mixture of language and deity, a catalogue description of Homage to Creeley might read like this: modelled upon Williams' Kora in Hell, with poems above a bar, and though providing no explanation, "Explanatory Notes" beneath; full of Cocteau's film Orphée, and so divided in three parts among Cegeste, the Princess, and Heurtebise; written above the bar in the spare style of Robert Creeley (not parody, not homage); providing more nonsense than Spicer's other books, but importantly, less than there seems to be, for many poems show careful construction. For example, "Wrong Turn" seems remote enough, proposing the nonsensical in the place of meaning:

> What I knew
> Wasn't true
> Or oh no
> Your face
> Was made of fleece
> Stepping up to poetry
> Demands
> Hands. (HC 121)

The explanatory note appears to disturb further an already insensible message (Blaser, CB 307: "[Spicer] was accused of

being more interested in truth than in poetry and replied, 'I'm more interested in messages'"):

> Jacob's coat was made of virgin wool. Virgin wool is defined as wool made from the coat of any sheep that can run faster than the sheepherder.
> There are steps on the stairs too, which are awfully steep.

Solemn interpretation comes up against an ordinary, popular joke ("virgin wool") and falters as if (it is) against itself. None can mistake Spicer's for the private, empyrean voice of a poet above men. Yet Spicer repeatedly points to an order above men; as interpretation falters, there is more of Jacob in the poem. Street language receives the quiet, classical infusion of the poet's enduring perception. Stepping up to poetry demands hands. Why hands? The image develops in the tray of the explanatory notes, but the chemicals are not quite right and the darkroom door is opened early. Still, we have this much: "There are steps on the stairs too, which are awfully steep." The image of the stairs is transforming in serial sequence. The staircase steepens, rising to the vertical (the steps now "awfully" steep) until hands grasp ladder's rungs. We see a kind of ladder in the short-lined poem upon the page, which by reading we descend, into the "hell of meanings" (Blaser) of the "Explanatory Notes." Needless to say, this is no ordinary ladder, though as Robert Duncan notes, any household ladder may be the "wonder manifest in the poem."[7] But Spicer's is the ladder of transfiguration, theophany, and grace; it is Jacob's ladder, connecting two worlds.

The special meaning here carried by Jacob's ladder seems

to be drawn from Pico, whose "On the Dignity of Man" is found in one of Spicer's favourite books, The Renaissance Philosophy of Man. Pico, then, on Jacob's dream:

> Let us consult the patriarch Jacob, whose form gleams carved on the throne of glory. Sleeping in the lower world but keeping watch in the upper, the wisest of fathers will advise us. But he will advise us through a figure (in this way everything was wont to come to those men) that there is a ladder extending from the lowest earth to the highest heaven, divided in a series of many steps, with the Lord seated at the top, and angels in contemplation ascending and descending over them alternately by turns.
>
> If this is what we must practice in our aspiration to the angelic way of life, I ask: 'Who will touch the ladder of the Lord either with fouled foot or with unclean hands?' As the sacred mysteries have it, it is impious for the impure to touch the pure. But what are these feet? What these hands? Surely the foot of the soul is that most contemptible part by which the soul rests on matter as on the soil of the earth, I mean the nourishing and feeding power, the tinder of lust, and the teacher of pleasurable weakness. Why should we not call the hands of the soul its irascible power, which struggles on its behalf as the champion of desire and as plunderer seizes in the dust and sun what desire will devour slumbering in the shade?
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Yet this will not be enough if we wish to be companions of the angels going up and down on Jacob's ladder, unless we have first been well fitted and instructed to be promoted duly from step to step, to stray nowhere from the stairway, and to engage in the alternate comings and goings. Once we have achieved this by the art of discourse or reasoning, then, inspired by the Cherubic spirit, using philosophy through the steps of the ladder, that is, of nature, and penetrating all things from center to center, we shall sometimes descend, with titanic force rending the unity like Osiris into many parts, and we shall sometimes ascend, with the force of Phoebus collecting the parts like the limbs of Osiris into a unity, until, resting at last in the bosom of the Father who is above the ladder, we shall be made perfect with the felicity of theology.[8]

Jacob's ladder works visibly through "Wrong Turn," binding the double agency of thought that works invisibly through the dictated books. We are advised through figure ("in this way everything was wont to come to those men") of the place of

discourse in our passage between lower and upper worlds. Hence the insistence upon hands (stepping up to poetry "demands" hands): the material has place in the general motion toward spirit, just as discourse, while impure, has place amid the play of language toward the real (TP 169: "The surrealism of the poet could not write the words"). As I have suggested before, the impurity of discourse rests in its intention toward simple forms of meaning. But the meaning of the real (TP 178: "Whatever that is") is in flight from such fixture, as fast as the very fleet sheep of "Wrong Turn."

And so discourse charts its laboured ascent to the figure above the ladder. Pico's orderly program observes the due promotions and step by step progressions of a ghost-text Spicer meant to stand companion to the poems; the invisible textbook of poetry remained a kind of dream, and an instruction to those who will explain Spicer. But is the holy grail or "a monstrous anti-grail" (HG 212) found above Jacob's ladder? HG 205: "Carefully now will there be a Grail or a Bomb which tears the heart out of things?" Or do "Alcohol and the Virgin Mary" dance before "The Big Cat Up There" (AL 43-44)? Or is all above just mindless clouds of Spicer's virgin wool? For Spicer, there is no summation above the ladder and thus no consummation below. The grail would suggest a conventional theology, thought impossible today; the "monstrous anti-grail" is just the tired wisdom that game-hunters develop (L 226); either would bring to an end the multiple, illusory summations of the magician's act, which for Spicer is an unfinishing performance:

> The Indian rope trick. And a little boy climbs up it. And the Jungians and Freudians and the Social Reformers all leave satisfied. Knowing how the trick was played.
> There is nothing to stop the top of the rope though. There is nothing to argue. People in the audience have seen the boy dancing and it is not hypnosis.
> It is the definition of the rope that ought to interest everyone who wants to climb the rope. The rope dance. Reading the poem.
> Reading the poem that does not appear when the magician starts or when the magician finishes. A climbing in-between. Real. (TP 173)

TP 172 begins mid-elision: "Descends to the real. By a rope ladder." Typically, what descends is not named, just as by vague corollary "One keeps unmentionable / What one ascends to the real with" (LM 110); but "The soul also goes there. Solely --not love, beyond the thought of God." The partial vacancy of this Textbook image suggests its completion elsewhere, perhaps as the mediating image of the serial sequence, Jacob's ladder: rope ladder: Indian rope trick. The underpinning of this fluid image series is descent itself. Thus for Pico, even angels descending Jacob's ladder rend unity "like Osiris into many parts." Mircea Eliade documents a near-identical dismemberment in the sequences of the Indian rope trick: "The famous rope trick of the fakirs creates the illusion that a rope rises very high into the sky; the master makes a young disciple climb it until he disappears from view. The fakir then throws his knife into the air, and the lad's limbs fall to the ground one after the other."[9]

Why this movement from the assembly of the real above Jacob's ladder to the dispersion of the real through magic?

First, Jacob's ladder and the Indian rope trick are implicit in the practise of dictation; thus we see Jacob's ladder (like Spicer's grail [HG 194]: "no visible means of support") and what seem to be several risen Indian ropes in Max Ernst's "Lesson in Automatic Writing,"

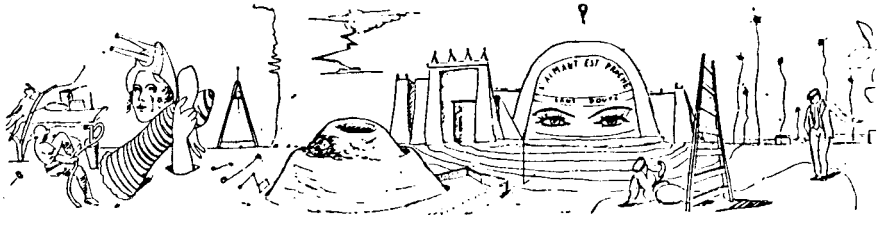


Figure 4

Max Ernst, "Lesson in Automatic Writing," 1924

Ernst too shows that the vertical has fallen out of religion into magic, in turn suggesting automatic scripture. For dictation is directed, as from order to disorder, or from knowledge to mystery; sometimes (rarely) it flows the other way, as to order from disturbance, or from mystery to God (TP 178: "This was supposed also to be the story of the creation of the universe. The pieces of the explosion coming afterwards together breathless"). But the typical sequences move, as by entropy, from more to less organized states; and so in Language one begins with Sandy, the comic-strip dog, and ends up with Cerberus--"'Arf,' says Sandy'": "Sandy growls like a wolf": "Throw him a honey-cake" (L 226; "Hell has been proved to be a series of /

image").

All these descents and dismemberments show that discourse is to become a ceaseless sequence of rupture and recomposition. There is unsolvable turbulence above the ladder, as if someone threw a knife into the air. Accordingly, analysis brings to false conclusion our "climbing in-between" opposite orders. The Jungians, Freudians, and Social Reformers all leave satisfied. But for Spicer, the real does not conclude within analytic grasp. Again, Heurtebise slips from police detention. "The drama cannot be seized by the mind; nothing is true; all investigation of reason is condemned to failure" (Gilson, on Cocteau).

Reason fails, interpretation falters; but Heurtebise is free. His would-be captors climb between the two Piconian worlds (MV 254: "Mechanicly we move / In God's Universe, Unable to do / Without the grace or hatred of Him"), and nothing stops the top of the rope. Indeed, "nothing" ("nothing is true") does stop the play at the top of the rope, as a "blackness alive with itself":

> The blackness remains. It remains even after the rich man
> has done what he can do to protect home and mother. It is
> there like the sun.
> Not lost battles or even defeated people
> But blackness alive with itself
> At the side of our fires.
> At home with us
> And a monstrous anti-grail none of those knights could have met or invented
> As real as tommorrow
> Not the threat of death. They could have conquered that. Not even bad magic.
> It is a simple hole running from one thing to another.
> . . . . . (HG 212)

But division between two worlds suggests double meaning; absence ("nothing") is being becoming; and into this "simple hole" the poet vanishes. The manifest world of Spicer's books is drawn ex nihilo, from the blackness at the side of the fire. These are among the magician's unfinishing act, which Spicer links to the practise of dictation.

Spicer shows that disturbance is as necessary to discourse as a theological order is to poetry. For that reason, there is contrary movement upon the steps of Jacob's ladder. Acknowledging figure as the meaningful in flux, we descend to the real , rending the unity of discourse like Osiris into many parts (TP 176: "It does not have to fit together"). Each of these two movements supposes the other as its corrective. Thus we shall sometimes ascend "collecting the parts like the limbs of Osiris into a unity." And so at the end of the Indian rope trick "our friend then took the lad's limbs, laid them together in their places, and gave a kick, when, presto! there was the boy, who got up and stood before us!"[10] Jonas extends this binary action to a more general gnostic tradition, of which Pico is part: "Dispersal and gathering, ontological categories of total reality, are at the same time action-patterns of each soul's potential experience, and unification within is union with the One. Thus emerges the Neoplatonic scheme of the inner ascent from the Many to the One that is ethical on the first rungs of the ladder, then theoretical, and at the culminating stage mystical."[11]

This double action, both tearing apart and recomposing

discourse, divides and binds the substance of Spicer's writing. Coleridge charts the interplay of convergence and disturbance as promissory of all intelligence--"Grant me a nature having two contrary forces, the one of which tends to expand infinitely while the other strives to apprehend or find itself in this infinity, and I will cause the world of intelligences with the whole system of their representations to rise up before you."[12] In Eureka, Poe extends the recognition from mind to world: "attraction and repulsion (are) indeniably the sole properties by which matter is manifested to mind."[13]

This wide arc from Pico to Poe cannot help but overload the slight, improvisatory structure of "Wrong Turn." But Spicer invites these self-contorting postures of discourse. I think back to Edward Taylor for work which turns so persistently to God and meaning, and in this, Spicer revives an American tradition of devotional writing. Outside the tradition, poets naming God anger Spicer:

> 'If you don't believe in a god, don't quote him,' Valery once said when he was about ready to give up poetry.
> . . . . . .
> It is deadly hard to worship god, star, and totem. Deadly easy
> To use them like worn-out condoms spattered by your own gleeful, crass, and unworshiping
> Wisdom. (L 226)
>
> Get those words out of your mouth and into your heart. If there isn't
> A God don't believe in Him. (MV 253)

The immediate suggests a context of the distant and the infinite; time suggests the eternal, though "One can only worship / These cold eternals for their support of / What is absolutely

temporary" (IE|CB 333). In Spicer's work little depends upon the local red wheelbarrow (RW 105: "Love ate the red wheelbarrow"). Spicer tends to write against the precision, clarity and placedness that distinguishes much American writing today. Spicer's writing partakes of generality and reflection, keeping well within the maze of Plato and just off Creeley's compositional field. A seagull at once suggests the species (BM 72: "The old seagull died. There is a whole army of seagulls / Waiting in the wings / A whole army of seagulls"). The blond boy at the Red Lizard suggests the sun (IE|CB 333: "It's just that I won't see him when I open my eyes / And I will see the sun").

And so beneath the particulars of "Wrong Turn" moves material so general as to englobe Pico and carry his thought forward, through Cocteau, into the laboratory of meaning. Yet by prescription, form proceeds from content in a natural homage to Creeley. The meanings we draw from Pico appear upon the page as formal properties specific to Spicer's writing. Nonsense, with which we began this reading of "Wrong Turn," is a formal arrangement; more closely, it is form in contrived disarray. We do not need Pico to see in Spicer's unstructuring of form the tearing apart of the god Osiris; nor is Spicer innocent of cyclical myth as he collects the scattered parts of discourse. With content thus incarnate in form, Jacob is as present as the poem has need of him--almost not at all (HC 144: "He refers to Persephone as vaguely as she could be seen there").

Still, Jacob's ladder is like the clue the detective is meant to miss, though this slight evidence beside the broken body of discourse leads inquiry astray. To stray, as from the idea of the alien, is but to take the "Wrong Turn" and by error interrupt the simple line of discourse.

Throughout Homage to Creeley, Spicer describes sideways, straying movement. Crabs (or crawdads, locally crayfish) "move in their random fashion back and forth" (HC 147; The Oxford Dictionary of Music: "But crabs move sideways"); the bus that crashed with all the bus team "was going to and coming from an athletic event" (HC 143). We have seen that the horizontal tends to lift or fall, be it coiled (Indian) rope or unsupported ladder; thus the bus falls ninety days to hell, one-tenth the speed of falling angels. In "Car Song," another of Spicer's stairways is caught in tension between these axes:

> We pin our puns to our backs and cross in a car
> The intersections where lovers are.
> The wheel and the road turn into a stair
> The pun at our backs is a yellow star. (HC 119)

The "Explanatory Notes" loosen further the shifting image of road and stair: "The stair is what extends back and forth for Heurtebise and Cegeste and the Princess always to march on." But just as Spicer posits the intersection of vertical and horizontal axes ("the intersections where lovers are"), he flattens the ascendant ("stairs") and moves the project of dictation--Heurtebise, Cegeste, the Princess--"back and forth" across hell. The pinned yellow star is both a political terror (" 'Yellow stars' are what the Jews wore") and a complete loss

of the vertical. However much opens above Spicer's writing ("There is nothing to stop the top of the rope"), his imagery holds a lateral, straying propensity, directed toward the real. Thus the vertical order of God and hell turns sideways in the ordering symbol of Spicer's books, the horizontal line of surf; but that is the business of the next chapter.

The poetics of dictation proceeds by conscious misdirection. To arrive upon the shifting ground of Spicer's real, we need to "stray" in six of Webster's seven senses; together they read like a found manifesto: 1) to wander from company, restraint, or proper limit; 2) to roam about without fixed direction or purpose; 3) to move without voluntary control; 4) to become distracted from an argument or chain of thought; 5) to wander accidentally from a fixed or chosen route; 6) to err. Against company, fixture, limitation, and the chain of thought, Spicer proposes solitude, loosening, transgression, and the serial poem. Against the expected, Spicer argues accident. And above all, against volition (Webster's "voluntary control"), Spicer proposes direction from outside, and so proposes the poetics of dictation.

"It is important to keep changing the subject" (Norman O. Brown).[14] But the subject is always the same: the hunt. Yet for all this straying pursuit through forests of Pico, Breton and Duchamp, we may chart the entire movement of Homage to Creeley as a movement within the sentence. Back where we began.

If the poetics of dictation opposes volition, there should be some disturbance around the speaking subject ("I")

from whom volition has been removed. So there is. Spicer's "I" neither binds (HC 118: "Two loves I had"), nor knows (HC 121: "What I knew / Wasn't true"), nor discerns (HC 124: "What is, I guess, is big"). Thus one question in Homage to Creeley suggests misplaced trust in the speaker of the poems: "Stranger, strange, do you believe me?" (HC 132). Strangeness displaces certitude, removing from self its control over words. From this point on, alien hands arrange the children's blocks of Spicer's vocabulary. Eventually, we hear the "I" of these poems as another's voice.

Much recent American poetry tends toward a maximal appreciation of self. Obviously, there are Olson's Maximus Poems ("my wife my car my color and myself");[15] less apparent is the egoism of studied self-effacement suffusing poems in misguided homage to Creeley. For Spicer, self is minimal, little more than a witness at the scene of the poem. Few poems lose the "I" so well among pronouns as does Spicer's "Hisperica Famina," closing with its post-Schoenbergian (but pre-Derridean) tone row: "I, they, him, it, her / I, they, him, it, ourselves, her" (HC 137). But the minimizing of self is a strategy quite like its maximizing opposite (Serres: "The existence of the 'I,' 'I am,' 'I exist' is clearly uncovered by a minimum-maximum move: it is the minimal remainder of a maximized strategy or ruse").[16] When Spicer said his work was close to Olson's, he linked their different dispositions toward self. As much as Olson fills, Spicer empties; they are bound by extremity. In a sense our task remains to sever them all the more.

As Spicer's "I" is weakened, we readers are withheld

from the poems. Had he spoken with authority, we could derive from his own a fixed position within Homage to Creeley. If the poems' aberrations were thus made relational to subject and reader (or to some invisible extension of both, as hell has relation to God), the problem of the hunt would be solved: no straying, no snark. But like the poet, we are placeless amid the aberrant movement of words; more than straying, we are lost:

> Surrealism is the business of poets who cannot benefit by surrealism. It was the first appearance of the Logos that said, "The public be damned," . . .
> . . . . . .
> To be lost in a crowd. Of images, of metaphors (whatever they were), of words; this is a better surrender. Of the poet who is lost in the crowd of them. Finally. (TP 169)

As the surreal enters and alters the real, there is increasing anarchy within groups. Spicer's "Surrealism" catches the transition--

> Whatever belongs in the circle is in the circle
> They
> Raise hands.
> Death-defying trapeze artists on one zodiac, the Queen of Spades, the Ace of Hearts, the nine of Diamonds, the whole deck of cards. (HC 141)

Three cards fail to prevent transformation toward all cards ("the whole deck"). Because self has been weakened, its limiting program fails to check the encompassing growth of the real. Whatever belongs in the circle is in the circle (HT 173: "On the outside of it is what everybody talks about"); apparently, nothing suffers false exclusion, and so the surreal, like all the extra cards, moves within the real. We are posed as precariously as trapeze artists above open space. Like Jacob's ladder, the trapeze bar "demands hands," and might be seen to be a

separate ladder rung. We ("they") "raise hands," and with the bravura of circus acts fall from the platform of unsurrendered self. Importantly, no net below secures this performance (these artists are "death-defying"). In the prologue to Cocteau's play Orphée, Orphée links the missing net to the dream-work of dictation: "Ladies and gentlemen, this prologue is not by the author and I expect he would be surprised to hear it . . . . . We are playing at a great height, and without a safety net. The slightest untimely noise and the lives of my comrades and my own may be imperiled. [Exit" (my stress).[17]

Like Heurtebise, Orpheus leaves before his meaning is made clear. In the practise of dictation, the poet arrests his images in flight from meaning, and then lets go. At first, they seem distant enough (FN 167: "Look at the statues disappearing into the distance") but they recede further ("They have space to disappear"). The materials of the poem draw away:

> The marshmallows on the banks of the magnificent river draw away. Who is there to even hear his song. The coaches draw away.
> There is left a universe of letters and numbers and what I have told you. For Jim.

The dispersion of images, as of coaches and marshmallows here, is a part of the general dispersion of self, and so part of the project of dictation. Yet as the ordering subject of the poems diminishes, residues of self persist. The "what I have told," and its intention ("For Jim"), are carried throughout Spicer's writing as the place of the play of language. But as much as it can, self dissolves; so do we: "Who is there to hear even his song?" As self dissolves, the mixed up assembly of Spicer's

real comes forward: a whole deck of cards, "a universe of letters and numbers." Language itself spreads across a space ("a universe") once filled by God. The moment is beneficent. Proliferation and provision of plenty ("a universe of letters and numbers") masks an absence behind the stars, and behind language. So begins the theme of God's absence. The poetics of dictation, proposing no author, suggests a universe of numbers, proposing no God.

By sustained assault upon the serious, Spicer deflects the cultural weight of his themes. God's absence evokes wonder and terror by turns, but never solemnity. He is the opposite of all human seriousness; for Spicer, God is laughter which we do not join. Those riding serious cars are accordingly damned,

> Damn them
> All of them,
> That wear beards on the soles of their feet
> That ride cars
> That aren't
> Funny.
> It comes with a rush
> And a gush
> Of feeling
> Everything is in the street
> Then they meet
> It with their automobiles. (HC 146)

Those riding cars "that aren't / funny" suppose a serious purpose within the movement of the real, here staged as hell. Like Cocteau's police, these residues of self would order the straying play of language around them, keeping clear a street of possible, orderly progress. As before, the task proves impossible: "everything" strays over the street, just as the deck of cards had spread itself beneath a universe of numbers. Hence

the polite collision of "Dash." The repeated attempt to exclude the real ("everything") is repeatedly met and wrecked. "Dash" receives this explanatory note:

> Cegeste comes back to a big meeting with his personal fate. He lacks knowledge of the driver's seat as did Cegeste, Creeley, and all of us. He intends to spend his fortune in banks, on the banks of some rivers. He will wreck their cars if he can have to. He.

Be it filled by one's self or one's God, the driver's seat is emptied of both here. If we had knowledge of the driver's seat, we could sustain the "I" as the effective will within "all of us" and so share with the poet a place of command over words. But the poetics of dictation proposes will from without. None of us has the driver's knowledge, not even (or especially) the poet--neither Cegeste, nor Creeley, nor Spicer.

Who does have knowledge of the driver's seat? Only the chauffeur: Heurtebise, the driver who comes in from outside. But he is the one we cannot detain. Heurtebise is free. His meaning is in circulation, passing from hand to hand (HG 212: "It is a simple hole running from one thing to another"); snark-like, he is never found where sought, and never known. Better to move backwards, away from him (hence Spicer's recession from us), if he is ever to be met--he is distance itself.

Since drivers lack knowledge of the driver's seat, Homage to Creeley observes several accidents. "Madmen" drive cars into the distances of dying (HC 137); and the whole bus crashes with all the bus team (HC 143). If "violations are rare" (HC 133), it's through no lack of deviance but because of an absence of law throughout the book. Hence "Dillinger"

(HC 133), and earlier, Billy the Kid: for Yeats wrote of the crime-haunted threshold of sanctity,[18] and as much as Spicer proposes God (MV 253: "Credo Quia absurdum") we can call this that edge: "Close to the edge. The ocean (the habit of seeing) Christ, the / Logos unbelieved in, where the real edge of it is" (TP 183). Whatever beckons past edge or threshold draws all enterprise toward it (TP 173: "On the outside of it is what everybody talks about"). Grail, or monstrous anti-grail? As it compels, language hardens. Self might dissolve, but not words. "Words / Turn mysteriously against those who use them" (HC 125), both bearing and barring the invisible. According to Spicer, "we are born across" language (TP 169; VL|C12: "These poems are largely using Jesus as a metaphor for poetry. Metaphor, you know, means 'bearing across'" [201]). Being thus borne and thus being born (again), one fulfills "the fate of the ride," laid by inscription over art ("To Be Inscribed upon a Painting"):

> The fate of the car
> And the fate of the ride
> Is only a bridegroom
> Without a bride

So far, we have traced the discomfiture of Spicer's writing toward an opposition deeply placed in language. The opposition is still unclear, for whenever grasped it changes shape (TP 173: "Once you try to embrace an absolute geometric circle the / naked loss stays with you like a picture echoing"). As Spicer admits, "I cannot proclaim starlight" (TP 172), though "it is I that proclaims these mysteries" (FN 167). In order to display the shifting division beneath his words, Spicer works to

clear away the false oppositions at which so much writing stops: science against art, discourse against figure, hunter against prey. Because these oppositions are not true, nor are their traditional solutions. It follows that the model of the lovers will not resolve division. To illustrate, Spicer repeatedly posits a "bridegroom without a bride" (HG 196: "Love cannot exist between people")--Orpheus without Eurydice, Dante without Beatrice. As Kristeva has said succinctly: "Romeo and Juliet? They are dissonant."[19]

Therefore, in "The Territory is Not the Map," we find "Orpheus and Eurydice . . . in their last nuptial embrace" (HC 122). They embrace in the meeting of territory and map that the poem's title negates. Orpheus and Eurydice in lasting embrace would suggest a harmonic series, eventually linking territory to map and so binding the real to the representative. Again, the whole deck of cards, the universe of numbers: given the inclusive character of Spicer's real, there can be no exclusive harmony (HG 212: "The wrong notes, the wrong notes, Merlin told / me, were going to kill me"). Maps are but approximations of territory, elisions over detail; they reduce three dimensions to two, much as boojum is reduced to snark in the preconception of the snark hunt; distance cannot be drawn to scale (L 227: "Which explains poetry. Distance / Impossible to be measured or walked over"); above all, maps fix representation and so misrepresent territorial flux (LGM|C12 106: "This is an insane world where islands emerge and disappear"). Cartography too has its uncertainty principle. (Un)certainly, the territory is not

Figure 5

Map, for the Hunting of the Snark

(The Territory is the Map)

the map:

> Truth is a map of it, oily eyes said
> Half-truth is half of a map instead
> Which you will squint at until you are dead
> Putting to sea with the truth. (HC 122)

Truth is a treasure map; the territory is treasure island sans treasure (sans 'truth'). X marks the spot as both a disclosure and a negation; it is the disclosure of negation. What is missing from the map? Just that: what is missing is what is missing: absence itself, X, negation; the idea of the alien. "It is a simple hole running from one thing to another" (HG 212); and from time to time Spicer locates this unrepresentable nothing beside representation itself.

Serres writes that "every set includes an empty sub-set . . . . this blank message, this black box is quite precisely the unknown of the narrative."[20] Spicer so pursues the unknown of his narrative that every poem articulates such a black box. Thus, all of Spicer's poems are alike and unlike any other's. It is as if, holding an object in hand, he set out to describe it, every time a different way--for each attempt fails. But the object is always the same ("It is important to keep changing the subject"): black box, blank message, the unknown, the alien, X. As it approaches X, language distorts to bear the blank message, thus "we make up a different language for poetry / And for the heart--ungrammatical" (L 233). This second, distorted language exhibits the unfamiliar powers of the meaningless, as we had loosely considered last chapter:

Sable arrested a fine comb.
It is not for the ears. Hearing
Merely prevents progress. Take a step back and view the sentence.
Sable arrested a fine comb. On the road to Big Sur (1945) the
fuses blew every time we braked. Lights out, every kind of
action. A deer
Hit us once (1945) and walked sulkily into the bushes as we braked into silence.
No big white, lightless automobiles for him. If he's hit, let them
show him.
Sable arrested a last stop . . . I think it was in Watsonville (1945 sable arrested fine comb a)
Past danger into the fog we
Used the last fuse. (L 227)

By the poetics of dictation, Spicer achieves a necessary darkness of language ("Lights out, every kind of action") within which one loses one's self, one's voice--one "vanishes away" as hunter before snark. As lightless as this Language automobile, Spicer's dictation-vehicle veers out of the known. Minimum light, maximum mystery. A single circuit breaker ("we used the last fuse") protects the circuitry of language as language bears the blank message. But the system overloads at point of braking. The breaking-point of language is the point of arrested motion, of fixture: "the fuses blew every time we braked." For the unknown of Spicer's narrative must always move, and must change. It is movement and change itself, flux and dispersion. Coaches and marshmallows draw away (FN 159); the real changes, as fingers into udders: "A man counts his fingers in these situations. Whether there are / five or ten of them or udders as we might go sea-bathing in / dream. / But dream is not enough. We waking hear the call of the / In- / Visible world" (L 223). Thus "there

is left a universe of letters and numbers."

Throughout Spicer, that which draws away and changes is no less than the occasion for language, so that Language naturally follows The Holy Grail in the sequence of the dictated books. For language draws into the visible an invisible ("In- / Visible") order and appoints to the nameless a name. How easy to forget the Textbook wisdom: "I can write a poem about him a hundred times but he is not / there. The mere numbers prevent his appearance as the names / (Eros, Amor, feely love, starlight) for his fame of / What. I have not the words for him" (TP 172). The secret names of angels and demons empowered the language of renaissance magicians with strange potentialities of invocation, conjuration, and charm. Spicer restores to language a similar power of naming ("Eros, Amor, feely love, Starlight") by removing from language the dominant, nameless "I." Thus by naming thanatos ("Name Him") thanatos "slinks away" (ONS 71). Thanatos is death, therefore change, therefore time, a series well apparent to ordinary mortal sight; however, his name outlasts him, for language suggests an absent but eternal realm from which thanatos slinks. Death is not among archenemies as the dictated books develop, thus the mild "threat of death" (HG 212: "They could have conquered that") in "The Book of the Death of Arthur."

One might say of the visible, lower-case real, that all of it is flux, until informed by language. The materials of languages ("a universe of letters") alone persist amid Heraclitean fire. Heraclitean fire plus language is equal to the upper-case real, of Spicer's disordered devotion (CB 271: "'Fragments of what,' the man asked, 'what?' / A disordered devotion to the

real"). While the visible changes, from fingers to udders, or from Sandy to Cerberus, the invisible endures. The endurance of an invisible order suggests either God's continuance, or in God's absence, an order of words: sable arrested a fine comb. In this sense, language is opposite nature, and opposite God. Never in nature shall sable arrest a fine comb. The opposition to God is clear enough among the arguments of "Excerpts from Oliver Charming's Diary" (Christmas Eve, 1953): "A crime against nature must also be a crime against art. A crime against art must also be a crime against nature. All beauty is at continuous war with God" (CB 343). The enmity between beauty, whose loose group envelops art, and God or truth is a part of dictation practices preceding Spicer's. Thus William Blake: "The practice of art is Anti-christ."[21] Or Rilke: "Art, as I conceive it, is a movement contrary to nature. No doubt God never foresaw that any one of us would turn inwards upon himself in this way, which can only be permitted to the Saint because he seeks to beseige his God by attacking him from this unexpected and badly defended quarter."[22]

In psychoanalytic theory, language derives from absence, and so from that which draws away or changes: the general departure of marshmallows, coaches and grails leaves behind a universe of letters. Simply, "ball" designates the ball the child loses and not the ball in hand. Spicer says that language is the call of the invisible world. Language is the name of the invisible, and so the name keeps changing ("Eros, Amor, feely love, Starlight"). The complication is that Spicer names by failing to name an invisible order structuring visible flux (see

Jonas above on the naming of God). Spicer takes us back to raw material, to "a universe of letters and numbers" not yet organized into discourse, or even into words. At this archaic place of composition, language composes itself.

In its self-composition ("sable arrested a fine comb"), language displays the invisible idea of the alien, to which we have attributed an order of words and a direction. In Spicer's work, the idea of the alien assumes several native forms: "A simple hole running from one thing to another" (HG 212); the "inland sea," and "Africa in all continents" to which (all) "Things have passage" (FN 160). Of inherited forms, Spicer selects several: the Dead Letter Officer (FN), informed by Melville's Bartleby; Cocteau's Heurtebise (Orphée); Carroll's snark; the holy grail. To Orpheus, the alien is Eurydice. When Eurydice dies, she becomes the empty sub-set in the orphic series. She is the blank message standing opposite and directed to Orpheus (HC 127: "The definition of warning has been given constantly. The / fact, alone, that Eurydice's head was missing should have warned him"). Thus standing opposite Dante, Beatrice:

> Dante would have blamed Beatrice
> If she turned up alive in a local bordello
> Or Newton gravity
> If apples fell upward
> What I mean is words
> Turn mysteriously against those who use them
> Hello says the apple
> Both of us were object.

> There is a universal here that is dimly recognized. I mean everybody says some kinds of love are horseshit. Or invents a Beatrice to prove that they are.
> What Beatrice did did not become her own business. Dante saw to that. Sawed away the last plank anyone he loved could stand on. (HC 125)

Against the discipline of his time (William Carlos Williams: "Say it, no idea but in things"), Spicer admits this sprawling universal: words turn mysteriously against those who use them. Spicer often turned from focus to dim recognition. Recalling Williams' lines upon failing sight (FFP 91: "Trees. Those fuzzy things?") and the possible clarity of perception, Spicer responded: "I do not remember the poem well but I know that beauty / Will always become fuzzy / And the fact of death itself fuzzy." Beauty, love and death in focus bespeak light treatment of weighty themes. In the jargon of optics, they are said to be resolved, an untenable position to Spicer for whom beauty, love and death provide steady disturbance (LM 112: "As we define / Them they disappear"). Words turn against those who fix or focus too well (Artaud: "Clear ideas are dead ideas").[23] We have seen that propositional writing attains resolution at the expense of fluid meaning, an uncertainty principle embedded in language itself. Deep within the contrarium of two gods, two worlds and two meanings (Pascal), Spicer's figure blurs. But indefiniton is Spicer's special clarity, as in "Improvisations On A Sentence By Poe" (BM 69): "'Indefiniteness is an element of the true music.' / The grand concord of what / Does not stoop to definition." For Spicer's is what Michel Serres calls "The Logic of the Fuzzy:"

> The Devil or the Good Lord? Exclusion, inclusion? Thesis or antithesis? The answer is a spectrum, a band, a continuum. We will no longer answer with a simple yes or no to such questions of sides. Inside or outside? Between yes and no, between zero and one, an infinite number of values appear, and thus an infinite number of answers. Mathematicians call this new rigor "fuzzy": fuzzy subsets, fuzzy topology. They should be thanked: we have needed this fuzziness for centuries. While waiting for it, we seemed to be playing the piano with boxing gloves on, in our world of stiff logic with our broad concepts. Our methods can now be fine-tuned and in the process, increased in number. Henceforth, my book is rigorously fuzzy. Geometry has made its peace with finesse.[24]

We might simply cite Derrida's experience in composing a critique of logocentrism within the logocentric tradition of writing-down-truth. As Eugenio Donato has asked: "Can philosophy or more exactly the idiom of philosophy master its own tropology?" ("The specificity of its idiom resides precisely in an attempt to erase the play, the residue, the displacements introduced by its passage through language").[25] Derrida's method proceeds by nimble play of erasure and substitution, for even his carefully qualified words turn against him (Spicer's universal). The word that best bore the critique soon settles, uncritically, among illusions it had itself laid bare. Jameson notes that Derrida is "condemned to the impossible situation . . . of denouncing the metaphysic of presence with words and terminology which, no sooner used, themselves solidify and become instruments in the perpetuation of that illusion of presence which they were initially designed to dispel."[26] Thus Derrida's "trace" is first crossed through ("~~trace~~") and then discarded for once bearing the blank message. Like Poe's purloined letter, the blank message is in circulation (HG 212: "It is a simple hole running from one

thing to another"), moving from word to word. As one of Derrida's translators admits, "it is all too tempting to focus on certain 'key' terms and to compile them into a static lexicon: supplément, differance, pharmakon, hymen, etc., but Derrida's text is constructed as a moving chain or network; Derrida's writing mimes the movement of desire."[27] Key terms change; and for the same reason, Spicer changes spooks--"Pretty soon, after a few sessions, (the medium will) get to know what Little Eva is going to say and start saying it for her. Then it is no longer a séance but fakery and time to change spooks" (VL|C12 179). Regrettably, one cannot change completely the medium of one's self (VL|C12 179: "mediums always have the accents they are born with"):

> Now, if you have a cleft palate and are trying to speak with the tongue of men and angels, you're gonna still speak through a cleft palate. And things which are in you, the poem comes distorted through. Your tongue is exactly the kind of tongue that you're born with, and the source of energy, whatever it is, can take advantage of your tongue, can make it do things you didn't think it could--but your tongue will want to return to the same normal position of ordinary cleft palate speech of your own dialect, and this is the kind of thing you have to avoid. (VL|C12 178)

Again, the trouble of imposing one's intention toward meaning before meaning is able to stretch; such (im)position is the "normal position of ordinary cleft palate speech," to which all but a few tongues return. You think you know what Little Eva is going to say and start to say it for her (VL|C12 208: "When Blake was really sure that the angels were speaking to him, they stopped speaking"). "The future of your words"--and who does know what theirs will be?--thus becomes plotted from backward facing vantage (TP 179: "The future is continually in

the | Past").

Words also turn against Spicer, thus another moving chain: Martian (VL|C12 204: "Martian is just a word for X"), snark, ghost, grail, Eurydice, Dead Letter Office. Spicer's writing too can be seen to follow the serial movement of desire, though desire itself then becomes the key term of a static lexicon. Desire is just another word for X, the idea of the alien--better to follow Spicer's preference ("I prefer more the unknown"). In this sense, spooks are changed like currency; their abstract value (X) alone recurs. Inescapable human intention fills the negative shell of grail or ghost or snark with false, positive substance. Furthering the work of the 1949 symposium, Spicer's writing can be read as a general corrective addressed to colleagues. In most compositional practise poets choose what the word is to say, much as medium will speak for Little Eva. All poetry seeks a word or name for X, but the name is ironically rich in meaning and thus fails to bear the blank message ("meaningless says the beach's oceans / Grail at point 029").

Spicer's dictation theory attempts to solve this impasse in two ways. First, it proposes careful and constant emptying of those names that bear, by failing to name, the completely blank message of the dictated books. We will follow the emptying of the grail in The Holy Grail correspondent to the poet's withdrawal from the poem: both perform upon the premise of dictation. Second, dictation theory disallows one's choice of words, let alone what one chooses the word to say. The words of the poem are given to the poet. Their purpose (if any) is alien to and

likely opposite his (VL|C12 166: "our poems write for each other, being full of their own purposes, no doubt no more mysterious in their universe than ours in ours"). It is thus no slight moment when Spicer submits "what the words choose to say" among painful perceptions (FN 166: "Rimbaud. A cry in the night. An offer. What the words choose to say. An offer of something. A peace."). Only Humpty Dumpty is so empty a negative shell to be to our purpose here, and then only from the other side of the looking-glass:

> "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, "it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less."
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master--that's all."[28]

But Alice can't master the meaning of words. Only Humpty Dumpty can climb the Indian rope out of language, though it rises before everyone. Alice is "condemned to meaning" (Merleau-Ponty)[29] just where Humpty Dumpty, like Heurtebise, is free. Words turn against Alice, as they had turned against Dante and Newton. When Dante names Beatrice he names the living shape of light and love, but thus naming X, his name turns against him. Beatrice embodies the nameless and the alien within Dante's conception of God (MV 253: "Dante / Was the first writer of science-fiction. Beatrice / Shimmering in infinite space"). Beatrice is one more word for X, and thus but passing member along the moving chain ("Eros, Amor, feely love, Starlight").

Reading Spicer, we come again and again upon a sense of language as circuitry. None can arrest the double circulation of light and desire through language, no more than Heurtebise can

be detained by police interrogation. As Dante arrests desire in the name of Beatrice, the circuitry of language overloads. Circuits break. Beatrice ("Lights out. Every kind of action") turns up in a local bordello. The Beatrice Dante names is the Beatrice absent from all bordellos, the flower absent from all bouquets (Mallarmé);[30] hers is the laughable chair "in the symphony of God" that sings "a little song about the people that will never be sitting on it" (BM 74). Thus Spicer's critique: "What Beatrice did did not become her own business. Dante saw to that. Sawed away the last plank anyone he loved could stand on." Like the apple of Spicer's poem (p. 88 above) Beatrice "fell upward"; her mock transcendence masks the real transcendence of an invisible order above visible trials, such as "the long walk down somebody's half-dream. Terrible" (HG 207). Forcing transcendence, Dante denies Beatrice "the last plank," the principle of horizon, the "bordello" of incarnation. Like Spicer's apple, the orphic, dictating horse in Cocteau's play Orphée says "hello," but spelling the word with its hoof, spells "hell" and then pauses to mark the orphic condition. The last letter--"o"--placed first, becomes, in Cocteau's play, the initials of a dictated sentence "from the other side of death": Orpheus Hunts Eurydice's Lost Life.

As Spicer arranges them, Dante and Beatrice stand opposite Orpheus and Eurydice, for while Orpheus hunts in hell his word (Eurydice) for X, Dante erases his in heaven (Beatrice). As Poe and Coleridge before him, Spicer divides all movement of intelligence between their different strategies. Spicer's Dante

performs upon the moving chain of the coalescent, the convergent, and the pure. Orpheus is advanced along an opposite series: dismemberment, disturbance, and art. They meet in a purity of mind, and in the purity of language. One may divide Orpheus from Dante as figure from discourse, but not as before. Each is figure to the discourse of the other. They are given together, much as wave and particle, love and death (they are "twins at the same business"). Thus the orphic design of Spicer's books admits some evidence of paradise. The "city of chittering human beings" (TP 177) suggests the Civitas Dei, caught in transitive or serial form (HG 200): "Salt Lake City, New York, Jerusalem, Hell, the Celestial City / Winking and changing like a light in some dark harbour." Spicer again--"The city that we create in our bartalk or in our fuss and fury is in an utterly mixed and mirrored way / an image of the city" (TP 176). The mixed, mirrored image of the city winks and changes like light in some dark harbour; there is light and then none, meaning then blank message ("lights out"). "The grail, not there, / becomes a light which is not able to be there like a / lighthouse" (HG 196). However much of paradise Spicer's books come to bear, there is an alternating sequence of darkness and light. "Robin Blaser once said in talking about a serial poem that it's as if you go into a room, a dark room, the light is turned on for a minute, then it's turned off again, and then you go into a different room where a light is turned on and turned off."[31] The serial poem is in part a narrative of darkness and light, of hell ("lights out") and paradise. Thus paradise and then dark harbour: world and underworld. The underworld

of Homage to Creeley (Blaser: "a hell of meanings") darkens language as if in preparation for a light not yet turned on. Spicer follows the orphic procedure of dictation, rising downward as apples fall upwards (after all, Newton was an alchemist). According to Spicer, one "descends to the real" (TP 172), or ascends, by descending, to light.

Each of Spicer's poems covers most of what constitutes dictation theory. In a sense, Spicer writes the same poem again and again--some poems are even repeated word for word, for they are given (dictated) twice. One could abstract most of the rules of dictation practise from any single poem, or more carefully, from any book (Ad 61: "There is really no single poem"). Our sense of Spicer's varied purpose is a measure of how varied those materials are that relay the dictated signal (C12: "And it is almost impossible to list the random places from which they will deliver their letters. A box of shredded wheat, a drunken comment, a big piece of paper, a shadow meaningless except as a threat or a communication, a throat"). Multiple forms reduce to a few messages, affecting exegesis--hence these repetitions of the central motifs of dictation, leading always to the imprecision at the center of Spicer's books. In a figure sustained through Spicer's writing, the poem is a radio signal, the poet a relay station:

> The poet is a radio. L 218
>
> There's of course a loss in intensity and amplification and all of the other things where you have a relay station. VL|C12 208

> Finally the messages penetrate
> There is a corpse of an image--they penetrate
> The corpse of a radio. Cocteau used a car radio on account of NO SPEED LIMIT. In any case the messages penetrate the radio and render it (and the radio) ultimately useless.
> (L 220)

> If you take the first days of radio, I imagine the difference in transmission of signals and static and so forth would have been enormous. And I would think that we probably always will be crystal sets, at best. (VL|C12 185)

The message is no less scrambled as we receive it, for dictation theory forbids the poet's uncoding intercession. In perfect practise, the poet never speaks for Little Eva. His is but a point of relay, past which the message is just more faint. Little Eva tells of division, uncertainty, and disturbance. Her message is placed among the generalities that structure Spicer's work--God, love, death, dictation. The dictated message is blurred by the indefinition it bears (FFP 91: "Beauty / Will always become fuzzy / And love fuzzy / And the fact of death itself fuzzy"), and by generality. Spicer knows the value of imprecision. By imprecision (HC 124: "What is, I guess, is big") Spicer evades the snare of the precise. Precision is fixture, but Heurtebise is free. It divides neatly enough, as I began by saying: one part is free, one part restrictive; one snark and one hunter. By mastery over imprecision, Spicer attains this large, parrying structure. Laughter attends Spicer's admission of metaphysical speech ("And what isn't, bigger / Metaphysically speaking"), but the range of his ambition (TP 178: "This was supposed also to be the story of the creation of the universe") is matched by correspondent exercise of language. For that reason, there are no imitations of Spicer, or no good ones. As

Robin Blaser has said, "stlye is the distance you have moved in language"[32]--a superb definition, and useful here in that dictation theory might be the point of relation from which we measure Spicer's reach. Spicer's writing is marked by distance in the several senses developed through language (L 227: "Which explains poetry. Distances / Impossible to be measured or walked over"). Last chapter we considered the long telesexual and longer teleerotic routes to brain and heart in the half light of Duchamp's Bride. Duchamp's work half illumines the special contrarium of the distant and proximate, and thus of the two orphic gods: "The body of the bride--the body of reality (its appearance) --'is the result of two forces: attraction in space and distraction in extension."[33]Spicer's distance is a rough rehearsal for infinity, just as Duchamp's Bride rehearses meaning; in this sense, Spicer's time is the straining of intelligence after eternity, or God. Thus the exercise of past and future exceeds the limited exercise of the present ("Present events defy us"); and "long distance calls" (L 237), like "the sea- / coast of Bohemia," are the summation of the visible, in which udders and fingers freely interchange. The summation of the visible is the insufficient dream (L223: "Dream is not enough") of Language, from which "waking" we hear the (long distance) "call of the In- / Visible World" (L 223).

It is commonly thought that Spicer's writing is distant from supposedly proximate writing--thus Spicer's revision of composition theory and his solitary place apart from other poets. "Distance, Einstein said, goes around in circles. This / Is the

opposite of a party or a social gathering" (L 227). Like all the king's men, the best of company above cannot restrain the next, descending step:

> What I am, I want, asks everything of everyone, is by degrees a ghost. Steps down to the first metaphor they invented
> in the underworld (pure and clear like a river) the in-sight. As a
> place to step further.
> It was the first metaphor they invented when they were too tired to invent a universe. The steps. The way down. The source of a river.
> The dead are not like the past. Do not like to be passed. Hold
> to their fingers by their thumbs. A gesture at once forgiving and
> forgotten.
> The eye in the weeds (I am, I was, I will be, I am not). The eyes of the ghosts have seeing. Our eyes. A trial of strength between what they believe and we. (TP 182)

Each of Spicer's poem admits its identity ("What I am"), its intention ("I want") and its binding relation to general conditions of thought ("asks everything of everyone"). Every poem admits ("by degrees") its black box, or ghost. The work of dictation is everywhere evident, and the consequence of self is in most poems diminished: "The eye in the weeds (I am, I was, I will be, I am not)." Dictating voices ("they") contest our own and in each of Spicer's poems win out, repeating a first conflict upon which dictation theory rests:

> On the mere physical level
> There is a conflict between what is and what isn't
> What is, I guess, is big
> And what isn't, bigger
> Metaphysically speaking
> What aren't casts no shadow
> And what are is bigger that the moon, I guess
> Bigger than that boy's pants. (HC 124)

Spicer's work turns toward either an absence ("what isn't") or an opening ("a place to step further"), proposing both against closure--hence the obvious, recurring failure admitted in the explanatory note ("An obvious attempt of The Poet to bring The Poem to a close. Its failure is obvious"), and renewed insistence upon the serial poem. Like fixture, closure is another point at which the movement of meaning stops. But the Textbook notices absence or opening from closure, and thus from a closed up language: "From top to bottom there is a universe. Extended past / what the words mean and below, God damn it, what the words / are" (TP 182). The "absolute geometric circle" (TP 173) encloses only the known ("On the outside of it is what everybody talks about"). In turn, the unknown (Eurydice, Heurtebise, X) invades and undoes an array of closed forms throughout the Textbook. Spicer posits a love beyond heat (174) and "horny deeps below finding." "Sheer presence" moves "Beyond the word 'Beauty'" (182) just as the soul passes "beyond the thought of God" (172). Ultimate perimeter ("God") yields to further extension of the real. After-life (171) and underworld (182) extend ordinary domain. Even the imaginary attains strange, surplus value, measured in the indefinite amount of the sky: "a blue surcharge for / Tchad" ("This is an imaginary African kingdom"); "A red wheelbarrow or a blue image of the unknown" (180). Thus the work of "real" poetry takes place past human limit ("The real poetry is beyond us, beyond them, / breaking like glue" [183]).

As the poems move past what the words mean and below what the words are (182), the word becomes a kind of residue or shell.

Words yield meaning (TP 180: "All the words they use for poetry are meaningless") that they may instead carry absence and opening. Words thus emptied (HG 199: "depths and shadows are beside all of this") assume the unsolvable character of the "door, by no human hand / open" and the "thrown open" window of The Holy Grail, and in Homage to Creeley, the "knot unknotted by something other than our hands." Having yielded meaning, words may carry messages originating outside the geometric circle of the known. The meaningless sounds within the word-shell, but only under the world: "Us. Who walk through hell's fire without moving (quickly) listening to seashells while in our ears there is its real roar" (TP 181). Again, the real roars forth by something other than our device. It sounds from outside by outside agency, by what Blaser, in careful summation, called "The Practice of Outside" (CB 269). Not our hands, nor even human hands, open the door between knowledge and mystery ("between what they believe and we" ["There is a conflict between what is and what isn't"]). The door is opened by conjunction of human and inhuman wills, as are the twice-locked gates of a hermetic tradition Spicer would have known through Arthur Waite's The Holy Grail:

> It is true also that the gates are not opened easily by which the King of Glory comes in: yet we know that the King comes. The key of these gates is called Voluntas inflammata. This will works on the hither side, but there is another which works on the farther, and this is named Beneplacitum termino carens. When the gates open by the concurrence of these two powers, the King of Salem comes forth carrying Bread and Wine.[34]

The extravagance of this occult and Christian binding is of course out of place in the secular context of Spicer's work. But again

the two gods, and the contrarium of opposite wills. In Spicer, everything calls forth its opposite, so that the living call up the dead:

> The ghost of it defined as a blob
> of ecto-plasm--an anti-image.
> An anti-image as if merely by being dead it could make the motions of what it was to be apparent.
> An argument between the dead and the living. (TP 171)

The grail invokes "a monstrous anti-grail." One's will is directly opposed, and so self confronts another who then speaks in its place; hence the poetics of dictation. So far we have sought the Voluntas inflammata (inflamed will) of Spicer's work as the non-volition of his method. Spicer's refusal of the voluntas sets in motion a study of the second will, which works on the further side: Beneplacitum termino carens (made-up Latin, 'Grace without end' or something like that, say my Classics Department sources). The sacred falls like snow over a language so disemburdened of self:

> The flags
> Of another country.
> Flags hover in the breeze
> Mary Baker Eddy alone in her attempt
> To slake Thursdays. Sereda
> Oh, how chill the hill
> Is with the snow on it
> What a semblance of
> Flags. (HG 205)

Sereda is drawn from James Cabell's Jurgen, where as an earth goddess, Mother Sereda presides over Wednesdays. She is the principle of median and steals away the colours from the world. Thus the reds and blacks and greens that so vividly colour The Holy Grail resolve into a whiteness suggesting the sacred. The flags "of another country" are white; their purity is an emblem

or flag of another country from which Grace falls. An imagery of flawed international movement (HG 207: "Damned Australians marching into Greece on a fool's errand") is nicely reversed in Spicer's neglect of homeland in the interest of the other country.

Still, nothing much is undertaken. The grail-ship is "becalmed in some impossible harbor" (HG 192). It is not that we venture, but that we are ventured. Rilke (again) on nature: "It ventures us. / Except that we, more eager than plant or beast, / go with this venture, will it, adventurous / more sometimes than Life itself is, more daring / by a breath."[35]Charles Olson talks of a 'divine Inert' (Causal Mythology) and an inactive Zeus (Poetry and Truth) that entrust the Muses, who in turn entrust us, with the "further results of creation."[36]Thus Hölderlin's "Mnemosyne": "The heavenly powers | Cannot do all things. It is the mortals | Who reach sooner into the abyss."[37]

"Something other than us" opens doors, throws open windows and unknots knots. The poetics of dictation entrusts unto these alien hands the creative action of language itself. The task of dictation is to empty one's words of oneself, and thereby reach into the abyss of no-self. For that reason, the dictating voice ("I am the ghost of answering questions") is always heard "from the other side of death," after Cocteau. Signs or words thus emptied suggest the entire empty signature of magic (LGM|C12 109: "NONSENSE IS A FORM OF MAGIC"): abracadabra; Recabustira, Cabustira, Bustira, Tira, Ra, A.[38]Such emptied language is also the preoccupation of poets ("All the words they use for poetry are meaningless")--sable arrested a fine comb. Speaking through

Spicer, the dictating voices conquer in signs that have lost significance, and thus in the name of linguistic-sign itself (TP 183: "That they have lost the significance of a name is unimportant. In hoc signo vincit"). Instead, the sign has value by losing value; it is an advantage this poetry carefully claims. The dictating intelligence finds a designation for X among the poet's emptied words. Claude Lévi-Strauss has said somewhere that the shaman similarly offers "an empty constellation of pure signifiers in which the free-floating unexpressed and inexpressible affectivity of the patient can suddenly articulate itself and find release." Have we now the language for free-floating Heurtebise? Not at all, for in the stretched out abracadabra of Spicer's writing, "a textbook of poetry is created to explain." Yet X gives its name only as we fail to name, and fail to explain. We detect the presence of such as Heurtebise by absence, as upon the blank sheet that snark-hunters know to be maps (fig. 5):

Chapter VII
The Hunting Of The Snark

> Whoever shares in the chase deserves the prize. Each wagon edges towards the clearing where the fire has already been lighted by neighbours.
> These animals distinguish us by our smells. This one has a red smell, this a green, this a purple. They are all alive. They
> have no ambition to destroy us.
> We sit around the campfire and sing songs of snark-hunting. One of us has been to Africa and knows the dangers of what we seek. Our colors and our smells glisten in the smoke toward the waiting flock.
> What we have said or sung or tearfully remembered can disappear in the waiting fire. We are snark-hunters. Brave, as we disappear into the clearing. (FN 165)

Though Spicer's writing is thought to bear a hermetic, reclusive character, his readers are often implicated in the hunting of the snark. We do all have the blank map (fig. 5) or tabula rasa of mind:

> Tabula rasa
> A clean table
> On which is set food
> . . . . . .
> The mind clean like that
> Prepared
> With proper provisions
> For its journey into. (LM 109)

The mind's general preparation suggests a community of thought and journey, at least at the outset. Whoever shares in the chase deserves the prize in this unmistakably democratic art. Real reclusiveness infects some contemporary practise, but not Spicer's; one wonders, after Blaser, why his is not the most public language.[39] It is more rhetorical than true to find more of Dryden than Duncan in Spicer ("It is wanting to explain"), but Spicer himself found "more of Orpheus in Sophie Tucker than in R. P. Blackmur" (ONS 92).

The fire of Spicer's informative art "has already been lighted by neighbours," by the "great companions" (Blaser): Dante, Artaud, Lorca; and by companion poets, Blaser and Duncan first among them. Warmth and light fall like benediction (Beneplacitum termino carens) over those around the fire of "The Hunting of the Snark." As night falls, language darkens. Story-teller and poet allow X its nightly access. Nightly figure follows daily reason. The sleep of reason produces monsters or animals, but dreams nonetheless ("They have no ambition to destroy us"). Metaphors "admit the unknown" (FN 162) preparing "as a place to step

further" the clearing or tabula rasa of mind. According to Spicer, fire awaits us. The mind is fire. The poet's words provide provision "for journey into": into the purifying fire of mind, awaiting those who hunt the snark (Rilke: "Earth! invisible! / What do you charge us with if not transformation?").[40] Thus the alien transmutes to pure idea, the idea of the alien. And so toward the clearing Spicer's project edges, there to witness the central divestment of the dictated poems.

All absences, gaps, suspensions and holes reduce to the clearing of (Spicer's) "The Hunting of the Snark." Conversely, the clearing is the much cited "simple hole running from one thing to another" of The Holy Grail. The alien is multiple, but each time a single disturbance: one ghost disturbs one poem, one Martian another. What runs from one to another is of the alien the idea itself, which the mind provides for "journey into"--but journey into what? Into the clearing, as in "The Hunting of the Snark?" Or, in Language, does mind provide for journey into nothing, X, "not," or Alpha (L 238: "Alpha being chosen as the queen of the alphabet because she / meant 'not.' / Punched / IBM cards follow this custom")? One could say all of these at once, and more, or is more of nothing less? For we might commit to the clearing the disappearances with which we began, as of the public, and of the poet in the practise of dictation.

The clearing is in part an erasure of self, so that "what we have said or sung or tearfully remembered can disappear into the waiting fire." In a fundamental sense, the clearing is always of one's past and future:

> We shall clear the trees back, the lumber of our pasts and
> futures back, because we are on a diamond, because it is
> our
> diamond
> Pushed forward from. (MV 259)

Be it by diamond or fire, by language or mind, one thus becomes the alien one seeks outside the clearing. Identity shifts. The whole project of Spicer's writing might be said to unseat identity, erasing past and future. It seems as if outside becomes inside, winding into self the unstructuring action of mind. As we have seen, the orphic device of contrary motion sustains such self-opposite action in the image-motor of Spicer's books; but equally evident is a massive influx, as of Martians into rooms. Just prior to another influx, Spicer holds a tension along the line around the clearing in "The Hunting of the Snark"; and we have elsewhere identified the line around the clearing with the circle of the known.

On the outside (TP 173: "On the outside of it is what everybody talks about") are animals we do not see, though they "distinguish us." Theirs is the order or disorder of the night. They are carnivores, while only one among us knows "the dangers of what we seek"; but the animals "have no ambition to destroy us," as is always said of inevitable victors.

The tension along the edge of the clearing is that the animals remain in their realm, and as long as they do, we remain safe, if in need of reassurance, in ours. The idea of the alien circulates among the animals outside the circle of the known. One among them is perhaps a snark, but even the least elicits the movement and strategy of the night. We sing songs around a fire

that lights the clearing and keeps the animals away. But is this tension real, or have animals crossed already? Do animals observe the line around the clearing? If the fire in the clearing is the fires of language and art and thus the transformative fire of mind, would not predator and prey ceaselessly change into one another? For language brings in from outside the idea of the alien, into the clearing or tabula rasa of mind where then "the real changes." Predator and prey do change so that one becomes the other, until governed by a single verb: "Our colors and our smells glisten in the smoke toward the waiting flock."

First, we are prey, "our colors and our smells" apparent to distinguishing animals outside the circle of the known. Then the verb, of which the sheen ("glistens") covers the poem's key transition: our smells glisten "toward the waiting flock." We are now the distinguishing animal looking in from outside the clearing, as foreshadowed by earlier animal perceptions ("this one has a red smell, this a green, this a purple"). It is the others now awaiting, and we are now aggressors; or are we still the waiting "flock," a kind of passive species, which those outside the circle stalk?

We are both predator and prey, both the distinguishing animal outside the circle and the animal within, thus both seeker and sought. We are the mystery we seek to solve, an interchange of inside and outside--no line of tension divides inside from outside, for they interpenetrate, trade identities, and cross the border in one another's guise.

There are so many balls in the air, they may as well all drop at once. The confusion at the edge of the clearing, like Sibyl's floating hair in Vergil, signifies the presence of one among the gods of the poems, in this instance, one of two foundation-symbols: the clearing itself. The lesser exercise of X through all from ghosts to Martians falls under the meaning of the clearing, which in turn is linked in several ways to the idea of the alien. Of these several links, two seem prominent. One clears amid the dense collection of the known a space in which the alien, or the unknown, might then appear, as upon the tabula rasa of mind. And the alien acts to clear away personality, as in the poetics of dictation, and the hunting of the snark ("You will softly and suddenly vanish away").

The second foundation-symbol perfects and in a sense completes the first. And we can derive this second symbol from the first, as much as Spicer derives udders from fingers and Cerberus from Orphan Annie's dog. If we reconstruct the line around the clearing, and suppose again a division of alien night from a safely inhabited circle, we can solve some of the confusion of cross-boundary identity shifts. Without the shifting agency of mind, there is only night and fire. Next, break the circle, and draw the line out until miles long. Instead of night, suppose the ocean on one side, as that which now bears the idea of the alien; on the other side, an empty beach (HG 196: "It is as if there exists a large beach with no one on it"). The second symbol of Spicer's books is the line itself between them, the line of surf breaking; and its deafening roar is the most

compelling problem of the dictated books. Here drop the rest of the balls. The idea of the alien supposes a counter-theme not yet well enough treated. Even beneath unity there is division, and we don't get Spicer's complete picture until the picture thus far splits in two. Toward that end tends Chapter 3. For now, all so far can disappear into the waiting fire, so that we have at least the clearing. Thus, brave, we disappear into it.

Footnotes

[1]Ross Feld, "Lowghost to Lowghost," Parnassus: Poetry in Review (Spring / Summer, 1976): 16-17. Feld's distinctions between divination, discovery and definition need not efface themselves so. One could show the entire structure of Dante in Feld's sense of sequence from magical to rational processes of thought, and in the suggestion that definition (Spicer's 'explanation') follows an experience of the divine.

[2]"On Poesy or Art," English Romantic Writers, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1967), p. 494.

[3]Jacques Lacan, Écrits, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1977), p. 147.

[4]Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov, Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language, trans. Catherine Porter (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 275.

[5]Vincent Vycinas, Earth and the Gods (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961).

[6]Thomas H. Johnson, ed., The Letters of Emily Dickinson, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Bellknap Press, 1958), 2:622.

[7]Robert Duncan, The Truth and Life of Myth (Fremont, Michigan: Sumac Press, 1968), p. 35.

[8]"Oration on the Dignity of Man," The Renaissance Philosophy of Man, ed. Ernst Cassirer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 229-30.

[9]Mircea Eliade, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstacy, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series LXXVI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 428.

[10]Ibid., p. 429.

[11]Hans Jonas, The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity (2nd. edition; Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), p. 61.

[12]Cited in Owen Barfield, What Coleridge Thought (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), p. 28.

[13]"Eureka," The Science Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1976), p. 305.

[14]"Daphne, or Metamorphosis," Open Poetry, ed. R. Gross and George Quasha (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 31.

[15]The Maximus Poems: Volume Three, eds. Charles Boer and George Butterick (New York: Viking Press, 1975), p. 229.

[16]"Knowledge in the Classical Age: La Fontaine and Descartes," Hermes, ed. Josué V. Harari, trans. David F. Bell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 26.

[17]Cocteau: Five Plays, trans. Carl Wildman (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 9.

[18]Memoirs, ed. Denis Donoghue (London: MacMillan London Ltd., 1972), p. 233: "I feel in Hamlet, as always in Shakespeare, that I am in the presence of a soul lingering on the storm-beaten threshold of sanctity. Has not the threshold always been terrible, even crime-haunted?"

[19]Julia Kristeva, Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, ed. L. S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 198.

[20]"Jules Verne's Strange Journeys," trans. Maria Malanchuk, Yale French Studies 52 (special issue; 1975): 181-82.

[21]Cited in Robert Creeley, A Quick Graph (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1970), p. 51. Creeley does not identify his source and I have not yet found the context in Erdman's Blake. Though Creeley cites an unusual use of the Antichrist in Blake, it is too useful to mistrust. According to S. Foster Damon, A Blake Dictionary (Boulder: Shambhala, 1979), Blake's Antichrist is science, war, judgement, and (outward) ceremony.

[22]The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature, eds. Ellman and Feidelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 24.

[23]Cited in Tzvetan Todorov, The Poetics of Prose, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 217.

[24]The Parasite, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 57.

[25]"The Idioms of the Text: Notes on the Language of Philosophy and the Fictions of Literature," Glyph 2 (1977): 2.

[26]Fredric Jameson, The Prison-House of Language (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 174. "Thus Derrida's thought denies itself the facile illusion of having passed beyond the metaphysics of which it stands as a critique; of having emerged from the old models into some unexplored country whose existence such a critique had implied, if only by the negation of a negation. Instead, his philosophic language feels its way gropingly along the walls of its own conceptual prison, describing it from the inside" (p. 186). Spicer's work denies the same facile illusion, so that both his doubt and his belief imprison his thought. Thus the jail-grail rhyme of "The Book of Merlin" (HG 204: "A jail-castle / Was built on these grounds"). "Thes grounds" are the much explored country of a metaphysics as old as Tertullian ("Credo quia absurdum").

[27]Barbara Johnson, "Translator's Introduction, " Jacques Derrida, Dissemination (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. xvi.

[28]Lewis Carroll, Alice Through the Looking Glass (New York: New American Library, 1960), p. 186.

[29]"What is Phenomenology?," Phenomenology, ed. Joseph J. Kockelmans (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., Anchor Books, 1967), p. 372.

[30]"Variations sur un sujet," Mallarmé: Œuvres complètes, ed. Henri Mondor (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 368: "Je dis: une fleur! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets."

[31]"Excerpts from the Vancouver Lectures," The Poetics of the New American Poetry, eds. D. M. Allen and Warren Tallman (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1973), p. 233. See also Robin Blaser's comments in "The Practice of Outside," CB 278.

[32]"The Metaphysics of Light," Capilano Review 6 (Fall 1974): 37.

[33]Octavio Paz, Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare, trans. Rachel Phillips and Donald Gardner (New York: Viking Press, 1978), p. 176. Duchamp sought "attraction in space" and so suggested the purity and concentration of Spicer's "infinitely small vocabulary" (AL 25); thus, among the "Notes and Projects for the Large Glass" (the Bride), these "Conditions of a Language: The search for 'Prime / Words' / ('divisible' only / by themselves and / by unity)." Duchamp, in America, a Prophecy, eds. George Quasha and Jerome Rothenberg (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1974), p. 93.

[34]A. E. Waite, The Holy Grail: Its Legends and Symbolism (London: Rider and Co., 1933), p. 528.

[35]Cited in Martin Heidegger, "What are Poets For?," Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1971), p. 99.

[36]Charles Olson, Poetry and Truth, ed. George Butterick (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1971), p. 52.

[37]Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, p. 92.

[38]From "Spell for the Manufacture and Use of a Magic Carpet," in Gustav Davidson, A Dictionary of Angels Including the Fallen Angels (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 359. The spell-instruction begins: "Let a virgin girl weave a carpet of white and new wool"; from there, symbolic acts and secret names continue the virgin's work. But how do you forget Spicer's running shepherd? "Abracadabra" in fact has the Hebraic meaning "habracah dabarah" ("speak the blessing" / "I bless the dead")--but in popular usage, it is magical because meaningless.

[39]See "The Stadium of the Mirror," Image-Nations 1-12 and The Stadium of the Mirror (London: The Ferry Press, 1974), pp. 55-56, where "fragmentation and lack of syntax" suggest an edge of thought and feeling, to which the "whole culture" brings the poet. Blaser cites Hugo: "He is free to go or not to go onto that terrifying promontory of thought from which darkness is perceived--if he goes on that peak he is caught. The profound waves of the marvelous have appeared to him." Thus Blaser: "But just now he is not free not to go there. The whole culture has brought him there at the edge of himself. It seems odd to me that it is not the most public language." Blaser tells of Olson telling him he had no syntax, to which Blaser answers nicely, though some sixteen years later: "As if the world had spoke a sentence and I had not caught it." Blaser's neglected response is among the best hidden definitions of syntax, and imperative to an understanding of Spicer's work. Syntax is symbolic of world-order, which if broken, in turn breaks syntax. Spicer's broken order (and Blaser's, circa 1973) is simply the view from the promontory, at which syntax is broken by waves of the marvelous. Syntax once seemed to be the point of divergence of Spicer (and Blaser) from Olson, but we now know there was a deeper fusion. Today, Blaser's writing proceeds under the title Syntax, these several languages still evolving.

[40]Rainer Maria Rilke, The Duino Elegies, trans. Stephen Garmey and Jay Wilson (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 67.

"Now his wars on God begin;
At stroke of midnight God shall win."

W. B. Yeats

Chapter Three

At first the clearing does not seem so treacherous. The second of the four books to formally propose and practise the poetics of dictation reverses the procedure of poetic disturbance and takes for its subject a conventional symbol of convergence, order, and truth. Spicer does mark the movement from one book to the other in terms of reversal: Heads of the Town had considered the divine in relation to the human; The Holy Grail will consider the human in relation to the divine ("The Vancouver Lectures"). Of course the subject of both books is the same: the relation itself, between the two great tropes of being. Sameness, then, and simultaneous reversal both continue and contradict the narrative of the four last books.

And so a great figure of reversal dominates this next book, for in everyone's telling, the grail, upon its accomplishment, reverses at once into another order. But perfected and endistanced, the grail leaves its trace amid the gestures of the secular: we inherit a critique of poetry. The tone is polite, or, as is much of The Holy Grail, clinical, in the dispassionate manner of Cocteau's Orphée (Cocteau: "The closer one comes to the mystery, the more important it is to be realistic"); but the message of this book is severe--poetry is at war with God (CB 343: "All beauty is at continual war with God"). And what better poetry than Spicer's to select as its subject the inimical

grail? Little poetry is so sure of poetic method and so knowing of poetic flaw, so proud of its own warring and erring skill.

The issue of war between poetry and God has been clarified by theologians. In The Holy Grail we are given the poet's clarification, toward which we begin a circuitous movement. Ernst Bloch writes that "art is a pluralism which in its mode of presentation . . . follows the indirect and multivocal movement of the allegorical; while centralistic religion, in spite of its use of transparent poetic modes, aims at taking a single direction, and at accomplishing a convergence of symbols."[1] Such convergence remained enormously attractive to Spicer throughout his life (AL 25: "A really perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary"). He had been taught the convergence of symbols in the Calvinian God, but the Calvinian God was endistanced; small wonder that Spicer, for whom distance was a sign of disordered relation, would question Calvinian belief. Spicer found the dictating voice of his books at the extremity of another distance, an originary place "as far away as Mars" (VL|C12 176). Such distancing is actual and evidenced by a continual disturbance in Spicer's work, a constant influx of ghosts and strangers. Their endistanced voices penetrate the dictated books and remark a disorder that both encloses and re-opens a theology of orderly stasis. Calvinian deity did not partake of the disorder at that edge, but instead retained the fixedness of the here and now. Settled relations of men and God (predestination, preelection) belie stifling nearness. In turn, the Calvinian trope of profound distance resembles more the false extensions that drove

Spicer wild. Once more, MV 265:

> I can't stand to see them shimmering in the impossible music
> of the Star Spangled Banner. No
> One accepts this system better than poets. Their hurts
> healed
> for a few dollars.
> Hunt
> The right animals. I can't. The poetry
> Of the absurd comes through San Francisco television.
> Directly
> connected with moon-rockets.
> If this is dictation, it is driving
> Me wild.

Spicer couldn't stand to see the astronauts shimmering in the impossible music of the Star Spangled Banner, for NASA's American moon was still the left eye of Horus, or that by whose light Actaeon watches Artemis bathe. Spicer's Magazine Verse moon illumines less the hunting of the snark ("Hunt / The right animals") than the hunting of Actaeon by Artemis, or by the Latin Diana. Paz retrieves from the stories of the goddesses the modern meanings of Duchamp's Bride (Large Glass) with which we have identified the troubled circuitry of Spicer's work. Thus the nine blind men (Duchamp's "Oculist Witnesses") who watch the Bride stripped bare are as those who seek the grail or bomb (HG 205) at the center of Spicer's work, and as Actaeon torn by Diana's dogs:

> The most remarkable similarity with the Large Glass occurs in the fourth dialogue of Part Two of (Giordano Bruno's) Eroici Furori. The hero, the furious lover--the Actaeon who sees the deer he is hunting disappear at the horizon, where the moon, who is hunting him, appears--is multiplied into nine blind men. Each of the nine recites a poem in which he defines the type of blindness with which he is afflicted. The nine blind men represent nine of the lover's physical and psychological limitations; at the same time they are an allegory of negative theology: "We see more when we close our eyes than when we open them."

. . . . . .

> Negative theology: in order to see we must close our eyes. In the darkness, Diana surprised in the bath: ultrarapid exposure. A new concordance: all the Neoplatonic texts, beginning with Plotinus, say that the vision never arrives slowly, it is a sudden illumination. A flash. Instantaneous passage. The similarity with carnal copulation has been pointed out a thousand times, and I have already mentioned León Hebreo's energetic expression: visual copulation of the intellect with its object. Likewise all the texts affirm that union is imperfect. Imperfection is built into man's capacity to know and to see. Creatures of the third dimension, we live in penumbra and exist among appearances. Bruno says that this defect must not discourage the heroic lover: "It is enough to see divine beauty on the limits of one's own horizon."[2]

All of them are blinded by a "sudden illumination," an astonishment at the limit of their own horizon. Negative theology restores the gods to darkness (L 227: "Lights out, every kind of / action"). Theirs is the site of mystery, which from the Greek myein means to close the eyes, and further back (Skeats), to close the lips (L 237: "Tough lips that cannot quite make the sounds of love / The language / Has so misshaped them"; TP 172: "I have not the words for him"). Imperfection is built into man's capacity to know and to see (Paz, Bruno), thus the several orphic failures of Spicer's books, the failing eyesight of the False Propositions, and a general subscription to the logic of the fuzzy. That leaves an appearance at the limit of Spicer's horizon, far drawn though that is. But first, some summations.

Nothing disturbed Spicer more than such careless assumption of distance as space program moon-rockets. "It is remarkable how even science fiction has developed no new attitudes toward sex. The vacant interstellar spaces are filled with exactly the same bedrooms the rocketships left behind" (CB 343). Real extension leads to new bedrooms, and real gods. For Spicer, there could be

no convergence of symbols in a God of false extension. In Language, distance describes not a relation between things, but a broken relation and a solitude:

> Love cannot exist between people
> Trial balloons. How fated the whole thing is.
> It is as if there exists a large beach with no one on it.
> Eaches calling to each on the paths. (HG 196)

Spicer's paths are discontinuous, his distances "impossible to be measured or walked over" (L 227; "Which explains poetry"). Breaking relation itself, distance assumes the conventional meaning of death. Against death and distance, Spicer posits his love poems, the simple convergence of body and body. But the physics of love call back the metaphysics of the poems, and thus one's body is the body of the alien (MV 250: "The moment's rest. And the bodies entangled and yet not / entangled in sleeping. Could we get / Out of our skins and dance?"). The present binds eternal meanings ("The moment's rest"), hence one contention: symbols, for Spicer, will converge (if at all) in the warmth and nearness of the secular, while binding the appearance at the limit or horizon of the poems.

The quarrel between religion and poetry is staged here with a privilege; these are, after all, books of poems. And yet the bias corrects itself in Spicer's constant mistrust of those poems opposing convergence. In Language, speaking to poets, Spicer hardens: "It is deadly hard to worship god, star, and totem. Deadly easy / To use them like worn-out condoms spattered by your own / gleeful, crass, and unworshipping Wisdom" (226). Opposing convergence, "the multivocal movement of the allegorical" (Bloch)

resembles the steady proliferation of discourse. Michel Foucault sees discourse as "a language no longer able to halt itself, because, never being enclosed in a definitive statement, it can express its truth only in some future discourse."[3] Poetic and discursive meanings are strange company in one trap: both engender an infinitely large vocabulary.

The poetic admission is familiar: a word has many meanings, perhaps any meaning at all. According to Paul Ricouer, "a language without polysemy would violate the principle of economy, for it would extend its vocabulary infinitely."[4] The polysemous word should mark the double place of poetry in thought: first, to delimit all but necessary names (AL 25: "A really perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary") and so attempt convergence, and second, to check the false convergences and falsely fixed meanings of explanatory discourse. So it does. But Spicer's directive to poets suggests that the argument against explanation has been well enough performed; there now occurs the business of convergence, and obeisance to the second god.

Poetry and thought together exhibit the twofold activity of all interior life; but the duplicity is present in each alone. There is disturbance in both, and convergence. Both tend toward meaning and toward a disturbance within meaning. Beauty wages continual war with God. For Spicer, such enmity ensures the proper irresolution of the dialectic that binds them together forever. The culminant form of meaning, God, is inseparable from the culminant form of the senseless and sensual, from beauty. Spicer's clarification is luminous and laughable: nonsense, Merz, dada and

God go to the same clubs, just as Alcohol and the Virgin Mary dance upon a page of After Lorca. These warring companions of all dialectic share the tenancy of Spicer's dictated books, validating the double claims of meaning and its opposite.

We have seen that Spicer's persistent claim upon meaning ("A textbook of poetry is created to explain") engenders the opposite claim of the meaningless. Such generation suggests the Paracelsian theory of ghosts: for Paracelsus, ghosts and all similar forms of spiritual disturbance are the procreation of the seed men spill without women--enough to unsettle any gay poet. This ghost-spawning absence of ova in Paracelsus' genealogy of spirits resembles both recent and classical figuration. The psychoanalytic absence of Woman engenders the half-real content of dreams. Derrida defines writing as a dissemination. And the lost Eurydice of Spicer's work is the amnion of ghosts and strangers. Hence the tie between meaningful and meaningless elements in Spicer's writing. Spicer inseminates his work with the possibility of meaning, admitting not attainment but intention ("It is wanting to explain"). But there is no receiving or completing part, no predication--in its place is a predicate absence, or absence itself. Thus the "monstrous anti-grail," or the "simple hole": in their absence, X and negation ("A death note") inhabit the real of the poet's devotion:

With fifteen cents and that I could get a
subway ride in New York. My heart
Is completely broken. Only an enemy
Could pick up the pieces.
"Fragments of what," the man asked, "what?"
A disordered devotion towards the real
A death note. With fifteen cents and real
Estate I could ride a subway in New York. No
Poet starved. They died of it. (CB 271; 1964)

From the spilled seed of the ghost-progenitor, absence grows beside meaning. Visible absence, ghost-like and meaningless, touches meaning itself, which then lightly recoils. Their interplay is one occasion for The Holy Grail. The endangering play ("No poet starved. They died of it") between meaning and its opposite is suggestive of rich intertextuality. Spicer carefully deflected the anthologising attention of scholars, even fellow poets; his absence from most contemporary anthologies is one measure of his success. Anthos, flower; logia, gathering: Spicer is the flower absent from (almost) all bouquets (Mallarmé). But while the constant, comic obfuscations of the living poet blurred the exactness of his place among poets and thinkers before and beside him, we are given now, in clear delineation, a deeply considered poetics and a poetry of such massive intelligence we have scarcely begun to decipher. We have seen that Coleridge charted the cross-play of convergence and disturbance as promissory of all intelligence, and that so long before quantum mechanics, Poe observed that matter itself was intelligence split two ways. The argument of multivocal poet against monadic God in The Holy Grail repeats an older, ancestral battle. In this long preoccupation of western thought (Plato: "Unity itself is distributed by being and is necessarily many")[5] we might place

Spicer's writing as representative of this place and time.

All matter and all intelligence occur between the conflicting claims of convergent form and the formless divergent, between the logocentric and the unstructuring functions of what Spicer called the real. Spicer's real is composed of a severance. Mind seeks its own disembodiment (L 250: "Could we get out of our skins and dance?"); matter is "uncoded, uncyphered," an opacity of "sheer presences" (TP 182). Only the transference of interrogation (TP 178: "To draw forth answers answers deep from the caverns of objects") wins (tentative) bridging: "In this poem was a bridge between love and the idea of love. Tentative, rustling" (HC 129). Other bridging is ironic and painfully felt, mocking the proximate twinship of body and mind and body and heart--thus the "Long / Distance calls" of Language ("The numbers dialed badly, the / connection faint"), and again, the long telesexual and longer teleerotic routes to brain or heart. Collecting the themes which bind Spicer's books as a living intelligence and a cosmology, we are sure to arrive upon one of Spicer's bridgeless shores (MV 266: "Its beaches we've starved on"; MV 263: "There is nothing but ocean beyond us") where the fake and the real is a composite order binding, by imagination, territory to map:

> We do not hate the human beings that listen to it, read it, make comments on it. They are like you. It is as if they or you observed one continual moment of surf breaking against the rocks. A textbook of poetry is created to explain. We do not hate the human beings that listen to it, the moment of surf breaking.

> It is fake. The real poetry is beyond us, beyond them, breaking like glue. And the rocks were not there and the real birds, they seemed like seagulls, were nesting on the real rocks. Close to the edge. The ocean (the habit of seeing) Christ, the Logos unbelieved in, where the real edge of it is.
> A private language. Carried about us, them. Ununderstanding. TP 183

Private language fails to encompass the extensive real of the poet's devotion (TP 182: "From the top to bottom there is a universe. Extended past / what the words mean and below, God damn it, what the words / are"). Language itself ("sable arrested fine comb a"), divested of privacy in the practise of dictation, does partake of the play at that far perimeter and edge. According to Bruno, it is enough to see divine beauty at the edge of one's horizon. So too Spicer strings out his message along the edge of language, past which meaning falls like ships before Columbus.

The serial movement so far suggests a progression from the clearing to the clearing's edge. Spicer's four last books comprise a kind of narrative. Heads of the Town completes the clearing into which the grail is then submitted. We divine new laws from what happens next, over the seven books of seven poems that comprise The Holy Grail. Those laws then constitute the great books, Language and Magazine Verse--or is theirs the order of the lawless (MV 258: "As the game follows rules he makes them")? Even lawless desire observes "some mocking kind of order":

These big trucks drive and in each one
There is a captain of poetry or a captain of love or a captain of
sex. A company
In which there is no vice-president.
You see them first as a kid when you're hitch-hiking and they were not as big or as final. They sometimes stopped for a hitch-hiker although you had to run.
Now they move down the freeway in some mocking kind of order. The
First truck is going to be passed by the seventh. The distance
Between where they are going and where you are standing cannot be measured.
The road captains, heartless and fast-moving
Know

L 247

Or, in Spicer's "Sex" (FN 154):

> There is a zoo of pleasures to Rabelais. To Rimbaud--but I am too old to remember. It would be wrong to say that the zoo was a jungle, but the animals did not seem to have cages.
> . . . . . .
> He thought that poetry didn't have to do with cages (which it didn't) and that it was in a jungle (which it isn't).

Once more, the balance is between the confining (cages) and the free; "just enough chaos and just enough order," as Spicer says of chess (LGM|C12 92), and again the two orphic gods "in some mocking kind of order" on either side of the line around the clearing.

We have thus far attended the clearing alone, and subsequent influx of X, or the alien. Given that X flows like current through all things ("It is a simple hole running from one thing to another. No / Kingdom will be saved"), why has Spicer chosen the grail as the object under study in the clearing? It is almost caked in mystery, from the simple to the sublime. Such conventional locus of X does not read like Spicer, who elsewhere finds the shell and center of mystery in ordinary lemon rind and lemon flesh. Language 248: "The lemon tree / Could branch off

into real magic." Indeed it branches spendidly, through "Six Poems for Poetry Chicago." But we see the lemon branch into magic; and so ordinary lemon becomes the "wonder manifest in the poem" (Duncan). The grail is too often the rigid wonder of an accomplished magic, which neither grows nor branches. For that reason, The Holy Grail is thought to be the weakest of the four dictated books.

It is not. The grail can be said to be chosen for its peculiar tropology, reflecting certain historical transitions in language and thought. Spicer needed the grail's context. In Kristeva's summation, "the second half of the Middle Ages (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries) was a period of transition for European culture: thought based on the sign replaced that based on the symbol."[6] Her argument provides the context Spicer sought:

> From the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, the symbol was both challenged and weakened, but it did not completely disappear. Rather, during this period, its passage (its assimilation) into the sign was assured. The transcendental unity supporting the symbol--its otherworldly casing, its transmitting focus--was put into question.
> . . . . . .
> The serenity of the symbol was replaced by the strained ambivalence of the sign's connection, which lays claim to resemblance and identification of the elements it holds together, while first postulating their radical difference. Whence the obsessive insistence on the theme of dialogue between two irreducible but similar elements . . . in this transitional period. For example, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries abound in dialogues between God and the human soul.[7]

Spicer spoke of The Holy Grail as a dialogue between two such irreducible elements, the human and the divine. The transcendental unity that supports the grail-symbol is in question throughout Spicer's writing (MV 258: "that big, white, round,

omnipotent bastard"). Thus the transition from serene grail-symbol to the "strained ambivalence" of the grail-sign (HG 201: "This teacup Christ bled into"). Yet "that they have lost the significance of a name is unimpor- / tant. In hoc signo vincit" (TP 183). Spicer is drawn to the grail for it partakes of two distinct linguistic orders; it inhabits two worlds, as if upon Jacob's ladder ("Wrong Turn"); and of its two meanings, one again is clear and says that the meaning is hidden (Pascal). The grail is convergence and disturbance at once, both clarity and mystery, light ("like a lighthouse" [HG 196]) then dark harbour. Thus the holy grail proposes both resemblance and "radical difference" between human and divine meanings, bound in the composition of the dictated books. As upon the moving chain of desire (Eurydice, X, dark harbour) Gwenivere's grail-sign advances along the signifying chain: "Not Christ, but a substitute for Christ as Christ was a / substitute" (HG 199).

No transcendental unity resolves the play of signification; no communion of sign and signified occurs, for the grail-sign would then be grail-symbol (Coleridge again: symbol "always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible")[8] Gwenivere only sees the monotonous moving chain of signifier signifying signifier:

> The dumb old king
> Awaits
> The scourge, the vinegar, the lance, for the umptiumpth time
> Not Christ, but a substitute for Christ as Christ was a
> substitute.
> . . . . . .

The cup that keeps the blood shed, bled into
Is a hoax, a hole
I see it dis-
Appear.

Spicer does keep the grail-sign in circulation, for the transcendental unity that supports the grail-symbol has fallen. Thus in "The Book of Galahad," "the Grail is as common as rats or seaweed / Not lost but misplaced. / Someone searching for a letter that he knows is around the / house / And finding it, no better for the letter" (HG 209). Signs proliferate, like rats or seaweed (Derrida: "The absence of the the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification ad infinitum").[9] We are no better for having the grail, for the grail is soon misplaced again. As upon the moving chain of desire (eurydice, X) the grail advances along an unstoppable signifying series. The grail undergoes unceasing self-displacement, present and absent like the pulse of Spicer's wave and particle.

Spicer's misplaced letter resembles Poe's familiar stolen letter (The Purloined Letter) in that it might well remain in circulation, bar the invention of a Galahad. In Poe's tale, an incriminating letter, stolen from the Queen, is stolen from the thief by Poe's detective Dupin--but the letter, returned to the Queen, seems still in circulation, for in the process of detection Dupin has cast a complicated figure of truth as a letter in flight. Derrida's and Lacan's convoluted readings of Poe's The Purloined Letter thus bear upon the matter of Spicer's misplaced letter-grail (grail-sign?). Lacan sees in the purloined letter's passages the "repetition automatism" ("the scourge, the vinegar,

the lance, for the unptiumth time"), derived from the "insistence of the signifying chain."[10] The series of substitutions that comprises the signifying chain is openended, as Spicer nicely catches: "Not Christ, but a substitute for Christ as Christ was a / substitute." Thus nothing happens until substitutions cease --or is God himself a substitute? Lacan sees in the return to the Queen of the letter a return to origin. The series accordingly closes ("a letter always arrives at its destination"; but Spicer: "A dead letter is there because / it has no longer real addresses" [FN 162]; "Inside every Rimbaud was a ready-made dead-letter / officer. Who really mailed the letter? Who stole the signs?" [FN 164]). One senses Lacan's accomplished meaning, wrought by sophisticated psychoanalytic structures: the analytic triad of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real.[11]

By risky and at times indecipherable embellishment, Derrida sharpens Lacan's meaning: "The moment one believes one can get hold of the letter by drawing triangles and circles and manipulating the opposition imaginary|symbolic, the moment one reconstitutes truth, self-adequation, the "purloined letter" escapes by a too self-evident opening."[12] Derrida's sense of too-evident opening is double. First, the letter escapes through the narrator, or analyst (or exegete), and so through "The Purveyor of the Truth" (Derrida's title)--this is precisely the route of Heurtebise out of police detention ("nothing is true"), and Spicer's general passage from grasp here. Second, there is the much-cited matter of the "simple hole running from one thing to another" (L 212). Derrida determines the hole to be part of the

letter's structure: "Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but part of its structure is that it is always capable of not arriving there. And without this danger . . . the circuit of the letter would never have even begun."[13]

The subversion of truth under Derrida's deconstructive program does not seem so radical beside Spicer's writing, or indeed, beside the deeper deconstruction of art. One line of Dante tells more of God's absence, or presence, than the library of post-structuralist thought. Derrida's subversion is but the clearing away past which Spicer's work commences. All art starts after propositions stop. Derrida's critics have noted a paradox at the center of Derrida's work, as Lyotard here: "We are unable to believe that deconstruction is a better guarantee of intensities than construction. It is only the negative of the negative, it remains in the same sphere, it nourishes the same terrorist claim to the truth."[14]But it is as Fredric Jameson says, that "Derrida's thought denies itself the facile illusion of having passed beyond the metaphysics of which it stands as a critique."[15]Lyotard's polemic would be better directed to those (they are many) who work the Derrida system as a machine for negating meanings (Cocteau said "The Testament of Orpheus is simply a machine for creating meanings";[16]for Spicer, the poem is "a machine for creating ghosts").

Derrida corrects this persistent misreading in a much overlooked colloquium remark: "First of all, I didn't say that there was no center, that we could get along without the center. I believe that the center is a function, not a being--a reality,

but a function. And this function is absolutely indispensable. I don't destroy the subject; I situate it."[17] We see at once the meeting of Spicer and Olson in this situation of self, which outside their separate disciplines tends to sprawl.

We might recognize some of the work of dictation in Derrida's self-defense. The author withdraws from the dictated work (Spicer, after Mallarmé) but subject and self do persist, measured thus: an eye (an "I") in the weeds: "(I am, I was, I will be, I am not)." Theirs is of the order of imagination which binds the double composition of Spicer's real (Arendt: "There are not two worlds because metaphor unites them").[18] Hence the oppositions that structure "The Book of Gawain" ("The grail is the opposite of poetry"; "The poem. Opposite. Us."; "Poetry and magic see the world from opposite ends" [HG 188-89]); and so too the oppositions that structure The Holy Grail, those of poetry and God--we should be there soon enough.

Spicer's God, as Derrida's center, is not a being but a function of the real, and Spicer's God is indispensable. God or King or center as simply absent is the "easy answer" with which "The Book of Gawain" begins: "No king / No riddle." We might continue Spicer's invective: it is deadly hard to worship god or star or totem or king. In a sense, the mystery stops ("No riddle") just where there is no center, for the center is the play of imagination within uninformed flux. For Spicer, center or structure is the chef d'œuvre of all informing thought. The real we describe as chaos requires only free-fall and babble of description (Kristeva, reprise: "Faced with this poetic language

that defies knowledge, many of us are rather tempted to leave our shelter to deal with literature only by miming its meanderings, rather than be positing it as an object of knowledge"); but the chaotic-real is not complete. Physicists have found chaos beyond description at the constitutive ground of nature; but Spicer broadens nature (Olson's "further nature," Maximus 2) until it assimilates "the heads of poets." LJA|C12 166: "It is not the monotony of nature but the poem's beyond nature that call to each other above the poets' heads. The heads of poets being a part of nature. It is not for us to make the lines of nature precise. It is for the poems to make the lines of nature precise. Because of their fatal attraction for the lines of nature, for our heads." Thus Blaser's enduring recognition: (unclosed) poetic language is not an addition to the real, but composes it, as it here composes Spicer's (and Olson's) further nature.[19] The center (King or God) composes a further nature apparent to poets. Nature plus the heads of the poets is equal to the real itself.

In "The Book of Gawain," "some kind of knight" engages "an invisible chessplayer" and thus brings forward the invisible king. Their contention upon Spicer's chess board is the unending action of mind, and hence does not conclude:

> George
> Said to me that the only thing he thought was important in chess was killing the other king. I had accused him of lack of
> imagination.
> I talked of fun and imagination but I wondered about the nature of poetry since there was some kind of knight and an invisible chessplayer and they had been playing chess in the Grail Castle. HG 187

"George" gives the easy answer and conclusion of tired wisdom: the important thing is regicide, the king is (or is to be) dead. Thanks to Spicer's foresight, we might derive an up-to-date critical stance from George's hapless remark: the center is artifice and thus not real--there is no king. Spicer's counter suggests a mock-syllogism, complete with trick conclusion: the king is imaginary, the imaginary is real, the king is real--or not. George divides the imaginary from the real, eliciting Spicer's redress ("I had accused him of lack of / imagination"). Without imagination there is indeed no king, and no riddle (HG 187). The riddle of imagination is that there is both center, then none; God's presence and absence ("the other king") cohabit in all of strong perception (FFP 88: "Why / Does / Your absence seem so real or your presences / So uninviting?"); and thus the killing of the king reduces two creative elements to single, smug solution. Spicer selects the grail for these two creative elements war within its double composition as within nothing else. Medieval symbology held in balance belief and disbelief; these now tilt out of balance, so that one reaches into time for such as the grail. The grail is at the center of Spicer's work, and an apparition at its horizon. It is symbol and sign, presence and absence, light and then dark harbour. The message from outside the circle of the known assumes its shape, for a while.

The holy grail literature exhibits the most memorable, or at least the most visible, of the battles between poetry and God. In his discourse upon the quest for the grail, Tzvetan Todorov starts with Albert Pauphilet's definition: "The Grail is the

fictive manifestation of God."[20]Thus Todorov: "when Pauphilet says that 'the Grail is the fictive manifestation of God,' he juxtaposes two apparently irreconcilable terms: God does not manifest Himself in fictions; fictions refer to the realm of the enemy, not to that of God."[21]Accordingly, "the Grail is nothing but the possibility of narrative."[22]And it is in this sense that Kristeva cites the grail stories as the first secular literature.[23]

Spicer's failure, like the crippling, contrary motion of his work, might be said to show the impossibility of narrative as it turns toward God. God is both the darkness to one side of the line around the fire, and the ocean, of which one sees (in Spicer) only the breaking edge (TP 183: "The ocean [the habit of seeing] Christ, the / Logos unbelieved in, where the real edge of it is"). For Spicer, there is irresolvable tension between the edge of meaning, or language, and the depth of meaning, or God. God and poetry are separate orders, each to the other an absence and a mystery, and each profoundly independent--or are they, like wave and particle, "twins at the same business," bound as different states of single (wild) logos (TP 178: "No, now he is the Lowghost when He is pinned down to / words")?

Geoffrey Hartman suggests the range of concern that here troubles Spicer: "To apply hermeneutics to fiction is to treat it as lapsed scripture; just as to apply interpretation to scripture is to consider it a mode, among others, of fiction."[24]Spicer's writing amounts to a theology, in which the idea of the alien is identified with God; accordingly, interpretations fail: "sable arrested a fine comb." Conversely, hermeneutics applies only to

"the Lowghost when He is pinned down to / words," and in so doing, breaks itself against the fictive play of language. If we suppose freedom from meaning, the poems exhibit an order of meaning, such as God; but when we proclaim that order, God disappears among fictions:

> The cup that keeps the blood shed, bled into
> Is a hoax, a hole
> I see it dis-
> Appear. HG 199

To digress: Gilles Deleuze has distinguished between Artaud's writing and Lewis Carroll's ("at no point do their worlds coincide")[25] as between these two tendencies of mind--back to the snark, which seems always just ahead. We have so far determined a general division by two: one part assumes the structure of the known; the other is loosened, or like Heurtebise, free (HG 202: "You do not go to jail"). Artaud sees Carroll's work as a form of trespass between them: "I accuse the author of 'Jabberwocky' of wanting to penetrate a void which did not want to be possessed."[26] Thus does knowledge, says Artaud of Carroll, falsely possess X.

The nonsensical language of Carroll's "Jabberwocky" has some bearing upon Spicer's work. Both might be said to show disturbances of language without obvious admission of anguish. It is as if Orpheus, whose body is in this sense syntax, is dismembered without violence, simply falling apart--thus the idea of Orpheus is ascendant over the body of the man. Against this ascendancy Artaud contends: "It is permissible to invent one's language and to make the language speak with an extra-grammatical meaning, but this meaning must be valid in itself,

that is, it must come out of anguish."[27] Or: "'Jabberwocky' has never seemed to me anything but an artifice of style, because the heart is never in it."[28] First, consider Spicer on the matter of the heart:

> Honesty has had your heart for supper — HC 132
>
> Your heart, and the sky has a hole in it. — L 239
>
> My heart is not here — L 228
>
> And the heart
> Is too far buried in the sand
> To tell. — AL 52
>
> The metallurgical analysis of the stone that was my heart shows
> an alarming percentage of silicon. — L 224

And among the admissions of "The Book of Percival" is this general resemblance to one without a heart--"I look like the Tin Woodsman in the Oz books. / Rusted beyond recognition" (HG 190). The heart is something alien that somehow got inside, like the wolf at the side of the king in Olson's Maximus Poems.[29] The contradiction is let stand through all of Spicer's writing. Thus the grail, present and absent ("not there") by turns, suggests the "pulse and beat" of the heart, until informed as the meaningless noise of surf:

> But nothing can stop the roar of the tide. The grail, not there,
> becomes a light which is not able to be there like a lighthouse or spindrift
> No, Graham, neither of us can stop the pulse and beat of it
> The roar. — HG 196

Grail and heart lead unto the edge of Spicer's work, which is always, as here, an ocean beach. Mystery moves in and out, like tide; language is the sand of countless past immersions we

walk upon along the line of surf breaking:

> On the beach
> With the tide sweeping up
> The whole sand like a carpet
> And throwing it back. Ear full of sea foam. Whore Pound
> Wondered Homer. Help
> Us sleep as men not as barbarians.
> Only in one skull
> Those waves
> They change
> Patterns. The scattered ghosts of what happens
> Is kelp. Whelp
> Of bending and unbending
> Ebbs and flows
> Breaks and does not break. Dogs
> The wetness in the sand LM 111

It may first seem odd that Spicer does not describe the ocean itself (HG 189: "There is never an ocean in all Grail legend"; Ad 58: "There is no Pacific Ocean"). Spicer's point is that the unknown or the alien has no image adequate to its shifting estate; the ocean is neither dark, nor deep nor broad enough, hence the idea of the ocean is projected invisibly from visible surf. We have seen that the idea of the alien is derived from, but then surpasses, each instance of the alien, so that the ghosts come and go.

As though upon wet sand, Spicer stands at the border of two worlds, at the point of division, or dia.mond. To one side, the land from which he has come, to the other, the imageless--these are the divided potentials of mind, the two gods whose bodies touch just here, the abrasion of X against knowledge. Thus no ocean--it is black ("blackness alive with itself"), or invisible, apparent only as it breaks upon Spicer's significant beach. Earlier, we see something of the surface of Spicer's unseen ocean in the darkening carpets of After Lorca. They are visible still,

but occulting already, one unlucky day circa 1957:

Friday, the 13th

> At the base of the throat is a little machine
> Which makes us able to say anything.
> Below it are carpets
> Red, blue, and green-colored.
> I say the flesh is not grass.
> It is an embty house
> In which there is nothing
> But a little machine
> And big, dark carpets. AL 46

This is among the earliest of the dictation-poems; not surprisingly, it is also among the first to make X visible. Dictation and X are conceived together; because the unknown is actual within Spicer's real, it has active form in the compositional method shaping itself here. Thus, being "able to say anything," we might say what we did not intend. Later, Spicer will turn this table for good, recording "what the words choose to say" (FN 166), or past that, submitting the unknown itself ("past what the words mean and below, God damn it, what the words / are" [TP 182]). As early as After Lorca, Spicer clarifies what will become dictation-theory within the scenario of the empty house. We find again an empty house or empty room in the clarity of Spicer's last year:

> It's as if a Martian comes into a room with children's blocks, with A, B, C, D, and E, which are in English, and he tries to convey a message.
>
> Creeley talks about the poem following the dictation of language. It seems to me that's not--it's part of the furniture in the room. Language isn't anything of itself. It's something that is in the mind of the host.

> I think that the first thing of becoming a poet is a kind of spiritual exercise. It's emptying yourself as a vessel, and then the language is one of the pieces of furniture. The language is there and it has to be learned and you really have to know the shadows of the words and all of that eventually, But the first thing, if you're going to build a house and furnish it and set a table, the first thing to make sure you have is a guest.[30]

In the practise of dictation, one empties oneself as a vessel (HG 188: "The grail is the opposite of poetry / Fills us up instead of using us as a cup the dead drink from"). Like the grail or bomb of "The Book of Merlin," poetry "tears the heart out of things" (HG 205).

There is no heart for there is no poet in the formal practise of dictation. Rilke would suggest an exception, as in the opening question of The Duino Elegies--"Who, if I cried, would hear me from the order of Angels?";[31] but as we have seen (Chapter One, footnote 32), an angel is speaking, and Rilke just catches the line above the roaring of the wind. Thus for Blake, "a tear is an Intellectual thing"[32]--again, the idea of Orpheus, but ascendant over whose body (MV 265: "The identity of the poet gets more obvious")? Spicer discerns such convolution and cross-purpose in the territory of the heart, that he removes it from the center of his work. For Spicer, the body is a nightmare (L 237: "None of you bastards / Knows how Charlie Parker died"), as we discover first in Language: "Or all the sorts of skins that we wore, wear (the orgasm), / wanted to wear, or would be wearing. So utterly tangled. / A bad dream" (L 250). It can get as bad as "Torsos stored in a basement" (ONS 83); Spicer could have perfected the horror film. But one early poem best delineates

the problem of the body ("Midnight at Bareass Beach"):

> The surfaces are moving with the sound
> Black water makes. As far as I can see
> Out from each clinging wave, eternity
> Moves back and forth, as black as nothing else.
> Cold to the touch, it oozes at my feet
> And lies protesting like a dog, then sighs
> And slaps again. But what remains out there
> Is motionless without comparison
> Naked and brittle as a wave, as I
> Run through the water I can hear the sound
> Of running echoed back and forth again across the beach--
> My flesh. ONS 60

I would first notice the collection of the imagery: the surfaces of black water ("big, dark carpets"); the dog/surf binding (LM 111: "Dogs / The wetness in the sand / Bitch / Howling all night. The bitch dog howls / At the absolute boundaries of sentences"); the wet sands themselves, cold to the touch; the back and forth movement, as one remembers the crayfish of Homage to Creeley; and eternity, as black as nothing else. This is a sound-poem in which sounds are both descriptive and symbolic; thus the poem's summation is both literal flesh and the figure of the body. Duchamp and Freud have drawn the somatic circuit as a kind of fixed hallucination. According to Spicer, none traverses the "long telesexual route to the brain or the even longer tele-erotic route to the heart," at least not without full distortion (L 237: "Tough lips that cannot quite make the sounds of love / The language / Has so misshaped them"); the body is "an empty house / In which there is nothing / But a little machine / And big, dark carpets." Thus interiority (Coleridge: "Matter has no Inward")[33] is not among the presences of the dictated books, as we might glean from The Holy Grail:

> The land is hollow, he said, it consists of caves and holes so immense that eagles or nightingales could not fly in them
> HG 203

> It is a simple hole running from one thing to another. No kingdom will be saved. HG 212

> Carefully now will there be a Grail or a Bomb which tears the heart out of things? HG 205

The inside atrophies so that one has instead the practice of the outside (Blaser). Personality is one false depth that Spicer blithely wades across, though ironically, it is his lively presence that is so vivid in his friends' recollections. Gilles Deleuze defends Lewis Carroll against Artaud with a similarly false depth in mind. First, upon Alice:

> A strange evolution takes place throughout all of Alice's adventures. One can sum it up as the conquest or discovery of surfaces. At the beginning of Alice in Wonderland, the search for the secret of things and events goes on in the depths of the earth: in deeply dug wells and rabbit holes, as well as in the mixtures of bodies which penetrate each other and co-exist. As one advances in the narrative, however, the sinking and burrowing movements give way to lateral, sliding movements: from left to right and right to left. The animals of the depths become secondary, and are replaced by playing card characters, characters without thickness. One might say that the former depth has spread itself out, has become breadth. Here lies the secret of the stammerer [Carroll]--it no longer consists of sinking into the depths, but in sliding along in such a way that depth is reduced to nothing but the reverse side of the surface. If there is nothing to see behind the curtain, it is because everything visible (or rather, all possible knowledge) is found along the surface of the curtain. It suffices to follow the curtain far enough and closely enough--which is to say superficially enough--in order to turn it inside out so that right becomes left, and vice versa. Consequently, there are no adventures of Alice; there is but one adventure: her rising to the surface, her disavowal of the false depths, and her discovery that everything happens at the borderline. For this reason, Carroll abandoned the first title that he had in mind, "Alice's Adventures Underground."[34]

A marvellous passage, into which Spicer's thought splices itself. We have seen that Spicer's descent gives way to the lateral,

sliding movements of Homage to Creeley (HC 147: "The crabs are crawdads. They move in their random fashion back and forth"; HC 119: "The stair is what extends back and forth for Heurtebise and Cegeste and the Princess always to march on"). Just as there is nothing to see behind the curtain, there is never an ocean in all Grail legend (HG 189). And everything in Spicer also happens at the borderline, at the "boundaries of sentences" (LM 111) or "the circumference of circle that has no point but the / boundary of your desire" (TP 173): we cross the line around the clearing, but cannot cross the line of surf breaking. But we have only touched upon the discovery of surfaces, which becomes for Deleuze the entire intelligence of Alice. We have cited already the "big, dark carpets," and the black water surfaces of eternity (ONS 60). But before Spicer's surface unfolds, Deleuze on Artaud's depth:

> Carroll and Artaud are worlds apart. We may believe that the surface has its monsters (the Snark and the Jabberwock), its terrors and its cruelties which, though not from the depths, nevertheless have claws and can snatch laterally, or even pull us back into the depths whose dangers we thought we had averted. Carroll and Artaud are nonetheless different; at no point do their worlds coincide. Only the commentator can move from one dimension to the other, and that is his great weakness, the sign that he himself inhabits neither. We would not give one page of Antonin Artaud for all of Carroll; Artaud is the only person to have experienced absolute depth in literature, to have discovered a 'vital' body and its prodigious language (through suffering, as he says). He explored the infra-meaning, which today is still unknown. Carroll, on the other hand, remains the master or the surveyor of surfaces we thought we knew so well that we never explored them. Yet it is on these surfaces that the entire logic of meaning is held.[35]

First, Deleuze's explanation of Artaud's depth as distinct from Carroll's (and perhaps too from Spicer's) surface needs some correction, if removed from the context of Deleuze's argument. In his fine book Hades in Manganese, Clayton Eshleman reminds us

of "Artaud's hatred of the depth near the end of his life. All real action, he ranted, was at surface. Beyond--nothing; below and above--nothing."[36] Of course Artaud is an unlikely source of simple meanings, and remains one of the few masters Spicer named. Yet if Artaud is "the only person to have experienced absolute depth in literature," Spicer is one of few to have experienced absolute surface, over which all of meaning stretches. Few have seen, as Spicer, "birds deep in the edge of the thicket" (BM 71). But the edge, or the borderline, is the depth of the dictated poems, and we have followed their lateral, crab-like motion toward the matter of the snark. Spicer's work moves along the shore-line or borderline of the known. It keeps itself always at the point of the exhaustion of meaning (Derrida) rather than bearing the "absolute depth" of the meaningless. Hence the grail, symbolic of complete meaning, is perceived from the border of the meaningless. The riddle ("No king / No riddle") is that one sees both grail and "monstrous anti-grail" at once, on either side of the borderline between them. Which is true? Both? Neither? Does devotion to one disturb one's relation to the other? As Spicer asks, "Carefully now will there be a Grail or a Bomb which tears the heart out of things?"

Spicer approves Cocteau's use of a car radio (Orphée) as poetic source itself "on account of NO SPEED LIMIT" (L 220); yet Spicer slackens pace here to invite our considered response. Reading carefully, we come to his central assurance: there will be both bomb and grail, as there have been two gods, two worlds, and two meanings. All of Spicer's books suggest even distribution

between these conflicting intentions of mind, which are thus as Blake's "contrary states of the human soul."[37] The action of every image falls under one of two headings, never bridging easily grail and bomb. Even the "awkward bridge" of ideation (HC 129: "In this poem was a bridge between love and the idea of love. Tentative, rustling") has only limited success, so that the idea of the alien does not solve but darkens the problem of the dictated books.

Nothing takes place behind the curtain of Spicer's contrarium, for which grail and bomb fill in for now. Spicer turns to the curtain itself, of which one sees only one side. We began with Spicer's notice of the empty space before the curtain--it has been since like the little girl that swallowed the sea (the brothers Grimm?). But we recall that Spicer's poetics supposes no audience. Neither is there play upon the stage behind the curtain, just as there is no ocean implicit in Spicer's surf. Dictation does not represent the mystery raw, but instead, at point of contact. "If there is nothing to see behind the curtain, it is because everything visible (or rather, all possible knowledge) is found along the surface of the curtain" (Deleuze). Deleuze again: "everything happens at the borderline"; thus everything happens at the line between bomb and grail, upon which Spicer casts us as solitary witness (LM 111: "the wetness in the sand"). For that reason, we so often see the long, unpopulated beach in Spicer's last books (HG 196: "It is as if there exists a large beach with no one on it").

If we seek Deleuze's two-dimensional surface as prerequisite to Spicer's one-dimensional (shore) line, we come upon the

many mirrors of Spicer's books, especially in those books proposing the poetics of dictation. In Calvinian figure, the world is a book, or a mirror, or a theatre, displaying God's attributes. But as early as a letter to Jim Alexander (1958), Spicer describes "the death of (the mirror's) surface" as contrary to representative, if regrettable, man: "When you rush bravely against the mirror shouting, 'This is also my universe,' you are likely merely to get a bloody nose" (C12 170). But mid-laughter he has set in motion one among his best investigations, by letter's end in full, Spicerian stride: "Mirror breaker! I simply do not have the patience merely to let the mirror dissolve. I keep tapping my hand on it. Help me!"

By 1961, Spicer's mirror is among the special doctrines of the dictated books, providing helpful distinctions between close dictation-systems: "Cocteau invented mirrors as things to move through. I invent mirrors as obstacles" (HC 126). Spicer's mirror is distinctive enough to risk an occasional fantasia, such as his "imagining, at times, a mirror two sides of which are a mirror" (HC 143). We are close to the curtain-like surface whose two sides, as recto and verso, face opposite worlds. But Spicer is after an accuracy of image amid what Serres calls the logic of the fuzzy. The poem that follows thus corrects within the image of the two-sided mirror an error equated with hell itself: "The edges of the mirror have their own song to sing. The thickness seems alien to The Poet and he equates his own hell with what is between them." True, Spicer is "a child of the mirror, not the door" (his admission, SNR 98); but the edgeless,

two-sided mirror requires special mathematical description: Spicer is after pure surface, and there is nothing like it on earth. Bomb or grail on either side of Spicer's two-faced mirror get reflected back, to mystery and God. The curtain, the mirror, and the beach each have thickness, or edge. None describes the ideal place of meeting, and place of opposition, for something, however slight, comes between these contrary orders of mind: fabric, silvered glass, or shore. What makes of this edge the poet's hell? Just that "It is Forbidden to Look" (HC 144), and yet the poet does look for it is his practise to bind two worlds by what violent means come to hand. Spicer's frustration here is that his use of the mirror as the edgeless point of meeting needs a topology for which he has (there are) no words. Thus, before abandoning the mirror, Spicer locates the wrecking procedure in Lorca (Spicer's translation):

> And the stiff geometric youngster
> Shatters the mirror with an ax. AL 21

Spicer dropped the inaccurate from his work with such unsentimental vigour that the poetic fallout becomes its own eventful show. Each image is tested until normally broken, and then let go. Thus we await the collapse of the much-tested grail with stone-throwing, Christian glee. But a kind of quiet importance attends Spicer's critique of the mirror. His edgeless mirror, or the breaking of the one with the edge, removes the barrier between opponents normally apart (HC 144: "Sheer hell / is where your apartness is your apartness"), yet retains the important distinction: one part has structure, one part is free.

Spicer gives up the mirror for the line, or borderline. The line of surf improves upon the plane of surface (surf·ace) as developed through the mirror, which itself does not continue. As before, there is no ocean, nor corresponding inland realm (HG 206: "If only he could have stopped talking for a minute he could / have understood the prairies of American"); there is just more coast, and the long line of language--if only we could stop talking. Spicer is drawn to Lorca, for Lorca typically shatters such a figure as the mirror, proclaiming the violent line of language as a new and even formal order. For along the line of language, and thus along the borderline, contraries meet that were once divided. Bomb or grail? Neither, reflected back as by the two-sided mirror, dwells within itself as chaos or God. We have neither freedom nor meaning, and thus step warily between opposite worlds.

But for all this strong division between worlds, there remains a fundamental binding beneath. I have said that Spicer's writing bears the scriptural character of a work whose profound disturbances are resolved in a second, invisible order, such as God. Of modern authors, Spicer reads most like Lorca, Yeats and Blake, for each of whom division is the sign of profounder communion. Thus does Spicer's real subsume discourse and figure, particle and wave, love and death. The idea of the alien is itself a unity subsuming division. The idea suggests a structure of thought and an order of relation, as that binding Spicer to Parmenides; but the alien is divisive, disordered, and free. The idea of the alien brings them together, so that one is startled

to receive the structure of the structureless, and the meaning of the free. Thus some rare couplings:

Grail,	or Bomb?
The Idea	of the Alien.
Apollo	Dionysus
surface	depth

and so on.

Beauty and God may wage war continually, but after hours (Yeats: "At stroke of midnight") they are out to clubs together. The idea of the alien is the binding act of mind itself. Spicer's books are clarified until one has only the purity of the mind's informing action. Thus the poet composes a world from the fragments of division. According to Jack Spicer, you see division and then know God.

Footnotes

[1]Fredric Jameson, Marxism and Form (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 147.

[2]Octavio Paz, Marcel Duchamp: Appearance Stripped Bare, trans. Rachel Phillips and Donald Gardner (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), pp. 171-2.

[3]The Order of Things (New York: Random House, Inc., 1970; Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 40-41.

[4]The Rule of Metaphor (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

[5]"Parmenides," trans. Francis Macdonald Cornford, The Collected Dialogues of Plato, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 937.

[6]Julia Kristeva, Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, ed. L. S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 38.

[7]Ibid., pp. 39-40.

[8]English Romantic Writers, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1967), p. 503.

[9]"Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," The Structuralist Controversy, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), p. 249.

[10]"Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, Yale French Studies 48 (1972): 39. Translator's note: "The translation of repetition automatism--rather than compulsion --is indicative of Lacan's speculative effort to reinterpret Freudian 'overdetermination' in terms of the laws of probability (chance is automoton, a 'cause not revealed to human thought,' in Aristotle's Physics). Whence the importance assumed by the Minister's [the thief's] passion for gambling later in Lacan's analysis." The recognition of chance is central to Spicer's dictated books, so that the series Lacan discloses in Poe might be seen to operate in Spicer as well. Spicer and Mallarmé are again bound, by chance; "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard." Once more, quantum mechanics replaces classical physics, in that Spicer proposes discontinuity, uncertainty, and chance.

[11]Concise definitions of these terms are found in The Language of Psycho-Analysis, eds. J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: The Hogarth Press, 1980).

[12]"The Purveyor of Truth," Yale French Studies 52 (1975): 52.

[13]Ibid., p. 66.

[14]Jean-François Lyotard, "For a Pseudo-Theory," Yale French Studies 52 (1975): 124.

[15]Fredric Jameson, The Prison-House of Language (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 186.

[16]Two Screenplays: The Blood of a Poet; The Testament of Orpheus, trans. Carol Martin-Sperry (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 73.

[17]Macksey, ed., The Structuralist Controversy, p. 271.

[18]Hannah Arendt, The Life of the Mind, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanich, 1977), 1:110.

[19]See Robin Blaser's discussion, "The Practice of Outside," CB 277.

[20]Tzvetan Todorov, The Poetics of Prose, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 137.

[21]Ibid., p. 141.

[22]Ibid., p. 139.

[23]Kristeva, Desire in Language, p. 62.

[24]Geoffrey Hartman, The Fate of Reading (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 16-17.

[25]"The Schizophrenic and Language: Surface and Depth in Lewis Carrol and Antonin Artaud," Textual Strategies, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 294.

[26]Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings, ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1976), p. 447.

[27]Ibid., p. 449.

[28]Ibid., p. 447.

[29]The Maximus Poems: Volume Three, eds. Charles Boer and George Butterick (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), p. 31:

On the side
of the King the Father

there sits a wolf
which is not his own will

which comes from outside
it is not true

that the demon
is a poison in the blood

only, he is also
a principle

in creation, and enters unknown
to the being, he is different

it is true
from the angel but only

because he travels even further
to get inside, and is not bearing

light or color, or fruits, not one garden
ever a garden ever a walled place

not anything resembling Paradise.

Olson's notice of that "which comes from outside" again suggests that Spicer's was a close poetic practise.

[30]Warren Tallman and Donald M. Allen, eds., The Poetics of the New American Poetry (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1973), pp. 229-32.

[31]Rainer Maria Rilke, The Duino Elegies, trans. Stephen Garmey and Jay Wilson (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 35.

[32]"Jerusalem," in David V. Erdman, ed., The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, newly revised edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 202.

[33]Cited in Geoffrey Hartman, The Fate of Reading, p. 28.

[34]"The Schizophrenic and Language: Surface and Depth in Lewis Carrol and Antonin Artaud," Textual Strategies, p. 280.

[35]Ibid., pp. 294-5.

[36]Clayton Eshleman, Hades in Manganese (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1981), p. 28. "Yet depth clings to surface" (p. 43). The opposite point is well argued, after Artaud's profound expression, in Rodolphe Gasché, "The Scene of Writing: A Deffered Outset," Glyph 1 (1977), p. 156: "Compared to the abyss, the bottomless bottom of the worlds, the human attempt to banish it into a plane surface remains inadequate, but as the deep is already the movement of eternal dispersion, it defers completeness forever."

[37]"Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul," Erdman, Blake, p. 7. Spicer's poems resemble in texture a mixed compositional group: Blake's songs, Lorca's and Yeats's poems and ballads. In each, elements in (very) evident opposition suggest a deeper communion, which is then left in mystery.

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