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Jack Spicer and the Phenomenology of Meaning

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April 21, 2008

Speak softly; definition is deep
 But words are deeper,
 Unmoving hungry surfaces
 Lying like icebergs, half-submerged
 Waiting to feed, to chew the ships and spew
 The half-digested sailors from their maw
 Back into history.

– Jack Spicer, “To the Semanticists”

“See what I have collected from the American language. Look at my butterflies, my stamps, my old shoes!” What does one do with all this crap?

– Jack Spicer, from *After Lorca*

Every reader interacts with text, with poetry, on a physical level. The eyes scan the page. Hands flip pages. Some poems only demand this kind of bodily engagement, and it all stays below the threshold of awareness. The entire poetic process is intellectualized—heady and ethereal. These poems range everywhere from oh-how-pleasant love poetry and pastorals (“O my love is like a red, red rose”) to erudite high modernist pieces (as in “The Waste Land,” T.S. Eliot’s bucket of annotation). Some poems, however, affect the body to a much greater degree. These poems do not have meaning divorced from their reading process. The phenomenology of their reading is as important to the experience, the understanding, as detached aesthetic judgments.

Jack Spicer is a poet of the body.

Jack Spicer was also a poet of many things, and his more flamboyant ideas sometimes overshadow the body in his poetry. He was a gay poet, and the center of a group of poets in San Francisco that took few straight applicants. Many of his poems deal with this aspect of his identity politics. He was a magic poet. He believed words had supernatural power, and was unashamed to propose the idea, even going so far as to begin a workshop titled “Poetry as

Magic,” and claimed in one of his lectures that “I think that it is certainly possible that the objective universe can be affected by the poet. [...] It's like telekinesis” (Gizzi, 11). He was a linguist. The training is especially apparent in his later work, but present to some degree in most of his books, and his concerns with the technical machinations of language sometimes threaten to form a poetry that can be read entirely as thought experiments and language games.

He was a believer in dictation. In the Vancouver Lectures, a series delivered in the home of a University of British Columbia professor, and friend, Warren Tallman, just before his death, Spicer lays out his idea of poetry as coming from the “Outside” most plainly. Depending on whether you catch him referring to the Outside as a generic not-within-the-poet force, or as Martians using radio waves, Spicer sounds more or less insane, but he finds himself in good company. He points towards earlier poets such as Yeats and Blake who believed in an outside force that shaped what they wrote. He also makes the broad claim that every living poet he respects gives some credence to the idea that poetry is not an entirely internal process. Either way, he is clear in his belief that all good poetry does not come from the desire or conscious thoughts of the poet transcribing it. The poet only affects the finished work in that he provides the “furniture in the room” to be moved around by the writer-spooks.

All of these aspects of Spicer exist, some more in his biography, some more in his poetry. And while they cannot be ignored in an exhaustive look at his work, none explain why Spicer's poetry has such an immediacy and affective presence. What Spicer has is the body. Each one of his poems is a text that consists not only of the words on the page and their referents, but the performance of the words through the response generated in the body of the reader. Further, they often involve the reader in their meaning by generating a negative response. Spicer's poems can be extremely unpleasant to read, for one reason or another, but the displeasure in reading

Spicer's poetry is a constructive displeasure. Because the poems resist providing sites of escapist beauty, the reader cannot help but think to, or feel the unpleasantness of, her own body. When one is frustrating to read, the reader becomes aware of herself sitting in the chair trying to decrypt its message, or glean some kind of importance from the text. The poems are mirrors of the human form as grotesque. They deploy obscenity as oral cues which force the reader to hear the word in her own mouth, and hearing the word in the mouth is to feel the word's violence come from herself, and internalize that feeling.

With each of these devices, the reader is the one who enacts the performance of the language. The reader, not the poet, holds responsibility, or culpability, for how they are used. In this relationship, the displeasure or other engagement of the body becomes constructive. The phenomenology of coming to one of Spicer's poems is as important as the words on the page, and more important than the thoughts that Spicer had (or disavowed having) when he wrote them. Spicer's poetry may be hostile to its readers, but through its motions of hostility—distorting mirrors, obscenity, and frustration—it enlists the reader on the level of bodily experience, and allows that relationship to become expansive and generative.

We find the body difficult to speak,
 The face too hard to hear through,
 We find that eyes in kissing stammer
 And that heaving groins babble like idiots.

– Jack Spicer, “We find the body difficult to speak”

Spicer's imagery often begins with the most basic physiological functions: eating, bleeding, vomiting, and, borrowing Spicer's word, “fucking.” None of his books stays away from this obsession with physicality, but *Admonitions* is the most densely populated example.

The book begins with a letter in which Spicer describes his relationship with the muses as that of a lover. They ask him to bed, and he is happy to oblige. As a result, the poems come out as “Rorschach ink blots or whores,” Spicer’s examples of objects that are “all things to all men” (55). The whore’s connection to sex is obvious, but the metaphor goes further. These Rorschach blots are the more concrete result of the sexual tryst. The words on the page making up the poem are spent semen globbing into an infinitely interpretable spot. The metaphor glides especially well when Spicer’s omnipresent homosexuality informs the image. The productive force of the sperm cannot realize itself in pregnancy, so the poems are the result of the night with the muses, rather than children, and they take on the bodily existence that these unrealized children cannot.

Having established the poems as bodies in their own right, the preface letter ends talking about mirrors. The body of the poem reflects the body of the reader. He is careful to make the distinction between a work written “to” someone (as the letter is), and a work written “for” someone (as the poems are). The poems are mirrors *for*. They reflect the body of the reader, but with distortive spin. Answering the supposed question, “Are [the poems] anything better than a kind of mirror?” Spicer says,

In themselves, no. Each one of them is a mirror, dedicated to the person that I particularly want to look into it. But mirrors can be arranged. The frightening hall of mirrors in a gun house is universal beyond each particular reflection.

This letter is *to* you [Joe] because you are my publisher and because the poem I wrote *for* you gives the most distorted reflection in the whole promenade. Mirror makers know the secret – one does not make a mirror to resemble a person, one brings a person to the mirror. (55)

In the same way that mirrors can never be bodies, the poems can never be bodies, but in that, they can reflect *all* bodies, not only the body of the intended audience (Joe, Russ, etc.). Moreover, the poems can exist as bodies only as half of a pair: mirror/mirrored, read

object/reader. In this relationship, the poems themselves, as words on the page, disappear. When looking at a mirror, one does not (cannot) notice the glass in itself. Similarly, when reading a poem one experiences the interaction of reader and poem, not the poem alone.

The construction of bodies begins with basic substructures. “For Ebbe,” the second poem in the book, starts with the beating heart. “Oh there are waves where the heart beats fully/ Where the blood wanders/ Alive like some black sea fish.” You can feel the beat of the heart take over the first line as it progresses. “Oh there are waves where the” makes up two dactyls, but when the heart kicks in, “heart beats full” are three strong beats, which slow the skipping dactyls down to the pace of a heartbeat. The ending “y” of the line hits unstressed, which starts the more characteristic baBUM beat of a heart, continued as “-y/ Where the blood” (˘ - ˘ -) before coming back to the heavy single beats of “wanders.” Taken as a whole, this sequence scans as, - - - - - - - - - - . As the heart enters and leaves, the awareness of it becomes more and less precise. First the dominant beat enters, then the secondary off-beat, and then it fades back to just the dominant beat again.

Scanning “-y/ Where” as an enjambed iamb might be implausible elsewhere, but the first two lines of “For Ebbe” are entirely without punctuation. Lacking the “stop here” metrical clues, words fall into a more regularized, steady rhythm, because leaving pauses or running words together both run the risk of disturbing the sense of the line. Even in the next two lines, when “Alive like some black sea fish” ends the previous thought and “Teach the young to be young” begins the next, there is no period delimiting the change. Apart from maintaining rhythm, the period’s absence keeps the blood in play even as it drops out of the actual words. Without the period, there is no mark for the one idea to finish and another to begin. Blood continues to substrate the less body-oriented middle of the poem.

In this section, the blood is contradictorily both present and absent, but this existence, neither at hand nor completely gone, is justified in the metaphor which stands for blood while also problematizing it. “Alive like some black sea fish” captures the curious sense relationship we have to blood. Blood is absolutely essential to the workings of the body, but (apart from those who have expended considerable effort learning how) it is impossible to control its ebbs and flows. Because of this inability, one experiences blood as an autonomous thing functioning within one’s own body. The heart is an internal symbiotic fish filtering blood through its gills. Spit, semen, and sweat are all much more present at hand because we can associate their emergence with a stimulus, and we encounter them more frequently.

“For Mac” takes the easy step from other-entity-within-the-body blood to belonging-to-another-entity blood. On the level of experience, the two blood types are more or less the same. “For Mac” begins talking about the “five senses,” but blood really only offers itself to sight, as the rest of the poem shows. Semen is felt, sweat smelled, and spit tasted, and through these senses, each person has a unique relationship to his or her own bodily fluids. Blood, however, as a fluid that offers itself only up to the eyes is no different if it comes from the observer or not. The poem describes a death through three colors: “Died [Dyed]/ With blue of heart’s blood, the brown/ Of unknowing/ The purple if unimportance.” The sequence moves through the blue of blood travelling through veins, the brown of dried blood, and the purple of a wound. These three images are not, of course, the usual red associated with healthy blood, but they do encompass the more common actual experiences of blood. When it is in your body, you can only see the blue near the surface of your skin. When it’s out, the scab and bruise both last much longer than the initial bleed itself.

Back at its start, “For Mac” explains some of why the blue, brown, and purple make it into the description, but not the red. “A dead starfish [...] / has five branches / Representing the five senses” is an easy enough set-up to understand, but when Spicer adds, a few lines later, “But let this creature lie / Flat upon our senses,” the statement becomes unclear and illogical. The two statements are separated enough that the paradox is not immediately surprising, but it begs a question—how can the five senses lie flat upon themselves? The answer may come in the “ocean of emotion” that crops up later. This phrase repeats twice over two lines: “All the oceans / Of emotion. All the oceans of emotion.” The rhyme between “ocean” and “emotion,” the immediate repetition, and the line break which cuts the first occurrence in two all lead to a mocking tone. The starfish are implicated in the derision in that they “water” these oceans of emotion, and the oceans are “full of such fish.”

What lie flat on the senses are not the senses themselves exactly, but rather the starfish branches which *represent* the five senses. The representation flattens the reality. So, when we finally get to the blood at the end of the poem, the resurgence of the actual experience of blood, rather than the representative imagery of blood, fights against the flattened “ocean of emotion” starfish-senses. Because blood cannot be experienced viscerally, the poem does not attempt to imagine that feeling, but these ways of seeing blood are much more evocative of a body-reaction than red blood would be. These are the dying bloods, the diseased, the festering. These are the instances of blood that hurt or itch. Spicer asks, “Why / Is this dead [fish] of such importance?” and answers with the description of blood. It is important because the dead fish is present to our senses in a way that the living fish can only flatten them. This judgment comes down because the live fish has such a propensity to stand in as a metaphor, but also because most people only see dead fish (on the plate or on the line), and because, frankly, dead fish smell really bad.

While the two blood poems describe an aspect of the body that is below the observational threshold for most people most of the time, “For Ed” and “For Judson” concern themselves with eating, one of our more pressing daily needs. “For Ed” has a vivid description of the moment just before eating. It begins,

Bewildered
Like the first seagull that ever ate a fish
Everyone’s heart dives and
Stops just before eating. (57)

The diving gull evoked by the first two lines, bewildered in its descent, perfectly mirrors the sensation from the tongue down the throat to the stomach that comes before the first bite of a meal. The “Everyone” sounds at first like an overgeneralization, but the sensation really is so universal, it is difficult to fault its use here. This is not a socially constructed hunger, but rather the salivary glands and throat muscles and stomach lining all working in concert to prepare the body for the intake of food.

In “For Judson,” the dominant metaphor does not describe the process of eating. Rather, the little fish become “Little mouths/ That eat anything.” The poem reduces them to their most prominent physical feature. These eating machines become the “skeleton,” or metaphoric framework that “you” (Judson or the reader, depending on where your reading takes you), can “flicker into” (62). The human, which has a tendency to float into transcendence in poetry, reduces to the image of a nipping piranha, defined by hunger. The Spanish of the first line speaks to this movement. “El guardarropa, novedad, dispersar” translates to “Wardrobe, novelty, disperse.” All of the trappings of “wardrobe,” dressed up language, fall away to the earliest experienced sensation—hunger.

The sex poems in *Admonitions*, “For Billy,” and “For Joe,” are grouped in the center of the book, flanking the second letter, addressed this time to Robin Blaser. Each poem treats sex at

its most unadorned physical level, and, appropriately, these two are where the body is most prominent and affecting in the entire book. “For Billy” twice takes “love” and brings it back to the body. The penis is introduced in the first four lines as “That old equalizer/ Called time by some/ Love by others/ Cock by a few” (59). The progression of names is a falling: “time” to “love” to “cock,” contracting down to the physical. “Time” is entirely outside of the human. It operates universally. “Love” is either an emotion between two people, or (capitalized as it is here), the entire abstract noun, which is still based in human interaction. “Cock” is a piece of a body of an individual. It lacks the heady abstract aura of the other two nouns. The sex act, when it inevitably comes up, comes as “Go to fuck and say goodbye to your Mexican whore.” It is neither euphemized nor particularly attractive. The second reference to sex comes as, “I love you, I love you,/ Scream when you come.” This couplet follows the same path as the first eight lines, from lyric aesthetic to stark physicality. The “I love you, I love you” profession of high emotion turns into a reflex response that comes with the orgasm. The sex, with a whore, is entirely physical.

“For Joe” doesn’t bother with the euphemism step, and the act of sex never arrives in the poem, despite discussion of sexuality and sex organs. Here, both men and women are debased on the grounds of their sexual nature. The first line’s anchor image is “faggot vomit,” and the middle of the poem pivots around critiques of female sexuality. It begins with Helen of Troy’s “forgotten thighs” invoking “screams of laughter,” but ends, “The female genital organ is hideous.” The transposition of “female genital organ” for Helen, as stand in for all of womankind forces a myopic view of the body. The eye comes right down to the vagina. The conceptions of beauty that come piggy-backed to Helen and, later in the poem, Ophelia, both give way to the physical presence of the site of the heterosexual sex act.

If these examples are creating the mirrors that Spicer says they are, the bodies they reflect are not very attractive. That is, the body of the reader is not very attractive. And as in most times when there is a threat against body image, this stance makes the reader very body conscious. Spicer cannot say, “The female genital organ is hideous,” without provoking a mixture of disgust, both at the genital and at having participated in the portrayal of the vagina as an object of disgust. Through this reaction, the body of the reader comes into play both in that disgust is a strongly embodied emotion—disgust is always tied to the vomit reflex—and because the look towards the body involves a reflected look back at one’s own body. The disgust goes both ways. Reacting so strongly against the “female genital organ” requires a similar reaction against one’s own genital organs, even if they are not female. This negative highlight of the reader is the exact opposite effect of most poetry. The reader cannot lose herself in escapist lyric, or cover physical presence with a veneer of witty constructivism or emotional extravagance. It’s not pleasuring.

Taken as a whole, these poems do what the letter that began the book said they would. They create mirrors. Or, more precisely, they create *a* mirror. Jed Rasula says in his essay, “Spicer’s Orpheus and the Emancipation of Pronouns”:

The message [in Spicer’s poetry] is known to be in the vicinity of the text: you can smell it. Smell is the proper descriptive sense in this case because, in the completed poem, there is no place such as could be determined by sight or touch where the message of the Other is; it simply pervades the room like a smell of cooking.

Using the language of mirrors, the message comes not with the mirror, but in the creating of the image of the reader in the mirror. It has no true physical presence, but it is phenomenologically similar. As the metaphor shifts, though, the difference becomes that if, in Rasula’s words, the message is the smell, then the poetry must be the food. However, a true parallel to the mirror

metaphor would have the poetry as the pan instead. It is the medium by which the message is created, but neither the message nor the originator of the message itself.

Dear Sir:
 My mouth has meanings
 It had not wanted to argue.

– Jack Spicer, “IV” from *Fifteen False Propositions Against God*

Setting up the poem as a body creates a site of identification. The experience of the body described there in the text is sympathetically doubled as the experience of the reader. (“Sympathetically” here of course does not elide to “compassionately” or “pleasantly,” but only serves to say that the experience which occurs in the reader is a reaction with, rather than reaction to, the experience described in the poem.) However, “sympathetically” is not the only way to create a bodily experience in a reader. If creating bodies as mirrors is the primary way that *Admonitions* engages the reader on a bodily level, “For Joe” points towards the other, which is through pushing violently against the reader. This push can manifest in different ways, and does come up in different ways even in this one short poem, but one is through the use of obscenity.

I’ve already pointed to the ways in which the poem constructs an unattractive mirror of the body, but the poem could do that without using the language it does. The message would be clear without the first line’s “faggot.” However, the inclusion of that word does what all obscenity does, which is to repulse and attract. It moves the poem from making a sociological or aesthetic point to evoking a physical response. At the beginning of *Admonitions*, Spicer writes:

“In these poems the obscene (in word and concept) is not used, as is common, for the sake of intensity, but rather as a kind of rhythm

as the tip-tap of the branches throughout the dream of *Finnegans Wake* or, to make the analogy even more mysterious to you, a cheering section at a particularly exciting football game.” (55)

This statement is useful in viewing the obscenity in Spicer’s poetry, because it doesn’t come in the jaded/celebratory stance that motivates Ginsberg’s “who let themselves be fucked in the ass” in “Howl.” Spicer’s obscenity retains all of its shock and disgust. Moreover, rather than taking one out of a poem with a shared wink for not being bound by societal norms, Spicer’s obscenity grounds the poem. When he says that it provides a “rhythm,” he’s doing more than invoking a sense of periodicity. The obscenity is a base note which gives tone to his poetry, even when it is not immediately present.

The second half of Spicer’s account of obscenity may be “more mysterious,” but it is also an interesting nuancing of the characterization. The cheering section acts in the same way as the base note rhythm in that it stands behind the action and directs the timbre of the event. However, it is different in that the cheering section is organismal. The people in the crowd act as one large beast—the crowd chooses when to cheer, but each individual member has no more control over it than a cell in a body. The obscenity works as a cheering section, but it also works as if on a cheering section. The reader reacts to it as a fan at a game. A good play, a striking obscenity, and the body comes into it. The cheer, the reaction, comes up through the gut and throat, and in much the same way that a spectacular play is only spectacular in that the crowd sees it and cheers for it, the obscenity is only obscene once the reader signs off on being offended by it.

In “A Poem to the Reader of the Poem,” Spicer describes the reader of his poetry showing up in a “wet dream” whose recurring image is an eagle diving into a throat. The poem goes through language of violence, sex, and metapoetics, but does not use any obscenity until the

end of the second stanza. Still addressing the reader, the poem says, “Suppose we had been exploring/ The hills and canyons of hell/ And wrestled/ And fucked/ And—Hell/ Nothing but a spoiled camping trip.” The “fuck” creates a break in the poem. The momentum built up over the lines that precede it comes to a head when the thought overflows the politesse that had constrained the poem. This makes this instant in the poem the most sincere and arresting.

Both of those terms, “sincere,” and “arresting,” deserve explanation.

First, “sincere.” Because most readers of Spicer’s poetry do not know Spicer (at least not now, fifty years after his death), “sincere” as a response to this line in this poem cannot possibly be a rational check of the facts of what he said (“We fucked in a dream.”) against a verifiable reality (“It’s true; we did.”), or against a sense of Spicer’s personal trustworthiness (“He wouldn’t lie, so we must have.”). What does go on is an increased sense of orality of the text. Written text is editable in a way that speech is not. But when the “politesse” I pointed to is broken by the “fucked,” the word sounds spontaneous. It sounds spoken. When profanity appears in writing the written work moves to mimic speech. This perceived spontaneity, the supposed lack of ability or time for self-censure, becomes sincerity because the word has voice. And because the word is voiced, it is heard, rather than seen.

“Arresting” operates in much the same way. Typographically, the dash that follows “fucked” does nothing to slow the poem down. If anything, the eye flows along the horizontal line more easily than the rest of the words that make up the text. It represents a stop in that it is an audible stop. The voice catches on “And” before proceeding to “Hell;” the page doesn’t. “Fucked” and “Hell” (as an interjection rather than a place) both function the same way. They stop the flow of reading not simply because they are bad words, but because they are bad speech.

No word has the shocking force in a dictionary that it does coming off the tongue and lips of a speaking person.

“Fucked” and “hell” are not just arresting because they are spoken, though, the way the dash is. They are offensive. Or, if not personally offensive, they still contain the idea of being offensive to somebody. It’s the aura of offense that makes Ginsberg’s wink come off, and it’s the aura of offense here that trips the rhythm of the poem. The word “fucked” makes visceral the aesthetic of the entire poem. The wet dream is shameful and arousing, repulsive and attractive. The poem opens,

I throw a naked eagle in your throat
I dreamed last night
That I was wrestling with you on the mountainside.

The eagle and the throw are violent, as is, at least on some level, the wrestling. However, the eagle is naked, and its nudity informs the wrestling, as becomes explicit in the second stanza when it turns out:

The eagle was men wrestling naked
Without the hope of men wrestling naked.
The eagle was a wet dream.

A wet dream is ejaculation without a sex act. It is men wrestling naked without the hope of men wrestling naked. The dream of sex without the interpersonal relationship. And therefore shameful. It should not happen. The poem repeats the phrase “wet dream” eleven times, more than any other word or phrase, discounting prepositions or articles. The repetition shows the compulsion of forced confession, and has the same effect—the confessor both purges and relives the experience. Relishes and disavows any connection to it.

you move through the three lines, reading out loud, you can feel that the last is much more physically dynamic than the first. The mouth becomes an integral part of the sentence, grapples with the words bodily.

The sentence is not just phonemes, of course, but the method of production of meaning controls the way the words are expressed. The “Bitch” that stands alone above its lowercase double makes that second instance take on the tone of the first. Hovering on top, it bends the word to retain the pause and enunciation of the lone “Bitch,” aided by the three sharp stresses of “bitch dog howls.” “Bitch” cannot flow into “dog,” because the rhythm of the sentence falls into no regular metrical pattern (such as a dactyl or iamb). Without any unstressed syllable, the word stands alone, and alone, it sounds mean. Angry.

The “wetness in the sand” which precedes the howling dog is not as immediately obscene—there is no profanity equivalent to “bitch”—but it locates the image in two ways, based on two different manifestations of “wetness.” The first wetness derives from waves lapping up against the shore, the second wetness from the dog urinating.

The wetness from the ocean puts the sentence in a border space. This area between the beach and the ocean is not only liminal, but dynamic. The shore is where the water is in movement, and it is itself in movement. As the tide comes and goes, the actual location of where the sand is not quite beach and not quite ocean shifts. In place in the poem, this dynamic border-space is where the innocuous “Dogs” becomes the gendered obscenity, “Bitch.”

The second interpretation provides some kind of narrative structure for why the shift occurs. The speaker begins to describe dogs, one urinates in the sand, and then she’s a “bitch,” and the speaker proceeds to complain about her howling as well. The justification for this reading is thin, but only because the passage is not asking to mold itself into a story structure.

Whether or not one posits a dog-owning narrator, the scent of urine is in the air. The scatological undertone sours the lines differently than the “bitch” does alone. The reaction to a sexualized obscenity or gender slur, such as “bitch,” is an abstract reaction. One balks against the word because it holds social taboo, or a level of malice. The reaction to a scatological image is more deeply rooted in the physical vomit-response to the situation. The urine implicates poor hygiene and disease. Animal urine is especially offensive. It’s more strongly scented and it is used as a marker. Its very purpose is to ward away anybody who might come near. The dog urinating in the sand pushes the reader away gagging just as well as it would keep away a rival dog.

The other locating bracket to the obscenity, “Bitch,” is the phrase that ends the sentence: “At the absolute boundaries of sentences.” In this ending, the obscenity of the “bitch” changes into an abstract poetics, and the meter shifts from one dominated by sharp stresses (“bitch dog howls”) to one governed by dactyls— “absolute” “boundaries” and “sentences” are each three-syllable dactyls, and the filler words, “at,” “the,” and “of” are all unstressed. The contrast goes far to exemplify what the sentence itself is saying. Howling is extra-linguistic. It occurs at the boundaries of sentences. It is a volume, or a timbre rather than an idea. Words themselves, as phonetic units, can only ever be at the boundaries of sentences, because sentences are ultimately expressed ideas, and not just a series of phonemes. In this way, the changing meter of the sentence is at the sentence’s boundary. As the meaning rarefies, the sentence loses physical immediacy. However, this loss of physicality cannot take place in the sentence as such, which only exists at its completion, but rather in the boundary-space, in the performance of the sentence.

This idea harkens back to an earlier scene of the obscene in the poem:

[...] But one only whores toward what causes poetry
 Their voices high

Their pricks stiff
 As they meet us.
 And this is rhetoric. The warning mine
 Not theirs.

As the whoring toward stiff-pricked clients becomes rhetoric, the passage makes the same move from obscenity to a poetics. One of the key differences between these two sections is the use of “rhetoric” here, rather than the later “sentences.” “Rhetoric” contrasts against both a more general “language” and the entirely different “writing.” Rhetoric is always performed language. It is attached to a mouth. And in that it is language performed for the purpose of oral argument, it is always more about the performance of the language than the language being performed. Rhetoric describes style, not substance.

The “this” of “And this is rhetoric” has no single-word antecedent; it stands for the entire preceding sentence. The “this” is not the “pricks” or the “they,” it’s the meeting. Rhetoric is the interface space between the horny muse and the whoring poet. Spicer talks about this interface more at the beginning of his Vancouver lecture series, when he criticizes Yeats’ conception of the encounter with the muse. He rephrases Yeats’ “We have come to give you metaphors for poetry” to “Well, you have such nice poetry, Mr. Yeats, and we spooks have come down from above to give you metaphors to hang it on to” (Gizzi, 5). “Spooks” as a choice for the outside force here evokes an image of childhood ghosts floating around with their [u]-vowel “boo.” That, with the unnecessary “Mr.” on “Yeats,” as well as the general context, gives the sentence an unmistakable mocking tone. For Spicer, the muse does not serve the poet like that. The muse uses the poet, not the other way around.

In the reversal of the poet/muse relationship, it not only has shifted agency, it is also obscene. Spicer’s Yeats has an epistolary exchange with the spooks. Everything is cordial. In the passage from “Dover Beach,” however, the meeting is sexualized and crude. The spooks do not

jot down a list of metaphors to go along with a poem. The exchange oralized by “rhetoric” is oral sex. The means of exchange is ejaculate, not letters. The players are not equals who have an intellectual back-and-forth. The muses are masturbating by means of the poet.

The oral sex implied in this passage is explicit a few lines earlier, when the poem confides:

One keeps unmentionable
 What one ascends to the real with
 The lie
 The cock in the other person’s mouth
 The real defined out of nothing. [...]

However, here the second half of the “obscenity =” equation is not a sentence, or rhetoric, or any other language-related term. The last three lines here are all in parallel. The lie = the cock = the real, which is defined out of nothing and which one uses to ascend to the real. This convoluted and contradictory sequence is more revealing than it appears. Ultimately, the real, nothing, and lies are in a relationship that is either undecipherable or meaningless, but either way the term around which they all find definition is “cock.” “Cock” functions partly as “prick” does in the whoring-toward-poetry passage, but also as more generalized synecdoche for the body. It puns with the next line. The “real” defined out of “nothing” is the cock in the empty space of the mouth.

This idea of the “real defined out of nothing” is more than a cheap joke, however. The concept is philosophically important. Beginning with the metaphor at hand, the sexual act described is a lived experience, but arises from the interface between the cock and the mouth, rather than any concrete thing itself. The “real” of the fellatio is from “nothing,” but is no less real for the lack. In the same way, the poem, a real, comes from nothing in that it did not exist before the spooks dictated it to the page. Viewed another way, the poem’s “real” is located in the

meeting space between poet and reader, just as the blowjob's "real" is located in the meeting space between cock and mouth. The nothing between poem and reader becomes the real of the experience.

Looking beyond two-item relationships, the "real" out of "nothing" also plays in the experience of obscenity. Despite the time spent on the phonetics of "bitch," nothing of the actual physical experience of an obscenity is really what makes it obscene. "Pitch," which differs from "bitch" on the level of sound only in that the initial consonant is unvoiced, elicits none of the same responses. "Doe," which differs in denotative meaning from "bitch" only in that it describes a female deer instead of dog, has none of its venom. The evocative power of an obscenity comes from the social construction of the word. It is obscene because it is agreed to be obscene. Obscenities are undeniably physical, "real" in that they are present to the body in a way that most words are not, but their definition as obscenity comes from nothing.

"This isn't shit it is poetry."
 – Spicer, "Love Poems"

Looking at bodies and obscenity in Spicer's poetry suggests that his body of work is exciting and dynamic. This is true. However, it is also true that Spicer's poems are often extremely difficult to read. When a poem is "difficult," the difficulty can come from a lack of recognition of the furniture that makes up the poem. Either the vocabulary or allusions are unfamiliar. The block is only a problem in that it requires a trip to a dictionary or endnotes. However, a poem can also be "difficult" in that it frustrates a reading despite each individual block of the poem being entirely decipherable. This frustration ultimately comes from a failure of the poetry to meet expectations of flow and closure.

A Red Wheelbarrow is a short book (three pages) that consists of nine poems, “A Red Wheelbarrow,” and then “Love I” through “Love 8.” Each of the first eight poems follows conventions of poetic unity. Their images are discrete. They each explore an idea, whether that be artistic significance, death, love, music, God, or eternity. All of the concepts that art always has talked about, and always will talk about. “Love 8,” which ends *A Red Wheelbarrow*, is a delightful short poem, but breaks this rule. It reads:

Love 8

Love ate the red wheelbarrow.

That line is the entirety of the poem, and as end to the book, stands in a site of ultimate (literally, final) significance. However, as moral to the book, the message is lacking. It’s a cheap joke, and by avoiding the big ideas raised earlier, it provides no closure.

As the reader comes to this last poem, what has been primarily an intellectual or aesthetic experience becomes an embodied displeasure. The initial amusement at the pun fades to a cocktail of associated feelings as what should have been closure, an ending of a sequence which creates a whole out of parts, turns out to be a closing off, an expulsion of the reader. The shove does what any shove would. It provokes irritation or anger, a shove back. The free flow between reader and poem stops, and there is an emotional clog that comes out as pressure and tension. As the reader is prevented from shifting her perceptual control to the poem, she becomes aware of her body in itself.

Language, Spicer’s penultimate book, is full of sites of frustration. It ends with a series of three poems, “Morphemics,” “Phonemics,” and “Graphemics,” which in their titles themselves announce that they will be frustrating to read. Spicer was trained in linguistics, but most of his readers are not. The three technical concepts do not promise a rewarding reading experience, but

this general expected difficulty is nuanced differently in the actual lines of text. The fourth section of “Morphemics” begins: “The loss of innocence, Andy.” The phrase makes sense, both grammatically and with regards to the poetic tradition. Loss of innocence is a familiar topic in poetry. Moreover, the form is familiar. The direct address poses some referential difficulty (who is Andy?), but it more importantly establishes that the poem is operating as confessional lyric. The vocative implies an “I” and a “you,” even if the first and second person pronouns never actually appear, and the first name implies a level of familiarity with the person addressed which aligns the implied “I” with the poet. However, the section continues:

The morpheme—cence is regular as to Rule IIc, IIa, and IIb
 [cents] and [sense] being more regular. The [inn-]
 With its geminated consonant
 Is not the inn in which the Christ Child was born. The root is
 nocere and innocence, I guess, means not hurtful. [...]

Suddenly the comfortable ground of form and content is gone. The confessional direct address becomes a cold textbook account of etymology. The “loss of innocence” seems to be now as much the loss of the character combination “-cence” to the “more regular” “-cents” and “-sense” as any taste of the knowledge of good and evil. Without the kind of technical expertise that goes along with a degree in linguistics, the passage is entirely opaque.

Just as when “Love 8” comes in to *A Red Wheelbarrow* to disrupt its closure, this incursion is frustrating because it violates certain poetic conventions. “The loss of innocence, Andy,” demands a poem that continues with a disclosure of the inner life of the poet which leads to a revelation of some aspect of himself, his relationship with “Andy,” or the nature of innocence. The reader is not looking for a discussion of the phonetic doubling of the [n] in “innocence”. However, in this case, because the frustration does not come at the end of the poem, the expectations are not dropped entirely; they are deferred. As the poem continues, the

constant re-deferral always promises the continuance of the original lyric form while also always frustrating that expectation. The exploration of “innocence” becomes a reading model for the rest of the passage. Instead of a narrative or argument, the poem offers terms and references which explode their own meanings. Each leads out of the poem, but to nowhere.

This passage continues (finishing the line):

[...] Innocents

The beasts would talk to them (Alice in the woods with the
faun). While to Orpheus
They would only listen. Innocuous
Comes from the same root. The trees
Of some dark forest where we wander amazed at the selves of
ourselves. Stumbling. Roots
Stay. You cannot lose your innocence, Andy
Nor could Alice. Nor could anyone
Given the right woods

“Innocence” continues to spiral out, continuing the free play of association past the etymology to homonyms and associations, producing “inn,” “innocents,” and “innocuous” before returning to “innocence.” During this play, other terms, “Alice,” “woods,” “faun,” and “Orpheus” (among, of course, others), come up and without explication in the text, explode in the reader. Alice reaches out to the original Lewis Carroll stories, but also Spicer’s White Rabbit Press which published *Language*, mirrors, because the scene is from *Through the Looking Glass*, childhood, fantasy, nonsense, and language games. The other terms sprawl out in similar ways. Each tendril becomes a loop, to much the same effect as the false closure of *A Red Wheelbarrow*. Each time the referent returns to the poem without having fulfilled the expectations established in the first line, the frustration builds on itself, and the same pushing back on the body feeds the senses of irritation, anxiety, tension, and distance.

Opacity in the language and style mirrors this subject-driven frustration, here and elsewhere. The sixth of the “Love Poems,” which make up the second section of *Language*, shies away from referencing technical linguistic vocabulary, but its narrative meaning is difficult to unpack:

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. [...]

The poem is clear on what is necessary to engage with it. Step back. Look at the language of the poetry, rather than the sense behind the language. However, the effect of this instruction is not to open the poem to an aesthetic appreciation of form. | Sable arrested a fine comb | as visual art has no meaning, and is aesthetically neither pleasing nor displeasing. Because the instruction is in the poem, the reader cannot help but follow it, but it goes nowhere. It taunts.

The rest of the poem describes a problematic drive to Big Sur in a more conversational tone. The recollection is littered with first person plurals, and it repeats three times, parenthetically, that it was 1945. It creates an in group of the poet and whoever else was there for the drive. They are the ones who get it. They understand the story, its significance, why it explains the opening sentence. Now, along with the frustration over not understanding “Sable arrested a fine comb,” the reader also feels embarrassment and exclusion. The problem is only worse when the parentheses with last repetition of the exclusive “1945” also contains “sable arrested fine comb a.” This is the fourth repetition over seven lines of some form of “Sable arrested a fine comb,” but it is also the least comprehensible. Grieving for the loss of control, the reader goes through the five stages: Denial. The sentence doesn’t mean anything. Anger. How

dare you keep the meaning from me. Bargaining. Well, maybe this is how it fits. Depression. I'll never understand.

And then acceptance. This stage distinguishes the frustration here from frustration in other poetry. In acceptance, the reader reaches a break point with the poem, takes a step back, and views the sentence. The understanding that comes is that this process of rejection is part of the meaning production process of the poem. It intends to push out the reader, and the pushing is a connection through bodied reaction. The tension, the rejection, the irritation, and all the associated reactions all inform the reading. The car ride described in the lines that follow what I've quoted is not a leisurely excursion, but a drive in a car that is rapidly failing and which includes a crash with a deer. It's stressful. And now, because it was hostile to the reader from the outset, the reader feels that stress in a way that the narrative itself could not have conveyed. But even more than create a connection between the reader and the author at time of writing, or author at the time of the memory, the frustration creates this connection by emphasizing the disconnect between the reader and author, reader and subject, reader and poem. The one thing that is unique about the poem, about any poem, every time it is read is the situation of the reader, and by frustrating identification and expectations about progression or ending, the poem shifts the reader's attention from itself to her own reading experience. The uncomfortable chair. The book in the hand.

This always-outside relationship to poetry comes out in the beginning of *Language* as the opening lines to "Thing Language" speak on the relationship of an observer to the ocean. For Spicer, the ocean is not consuming, or attractive. It is always distancing in its sublime expansiveness. It is the great inhuman, that which will never offer itself wholly to the interpretive enterprises of its viewers. "The ocean," the poem says, "Does not mean to be

listened to [...] It means/ Nothing.” The ocean, poetry, is that which intrinsically cannot be fully digested by its observer. However, this is not to say that the observer cannot experience it, but rather that it is the experience, rather than the thing, that is important. The ocean may not mean to be listened to, but we still listen to it. Frustration does not prevent the production of meaning; it only shifts its site from the thing in itself to the thing in relation to the interpreter of the thing.

Looking back to the shore that the howling bitch found herself on in “Dover Beach,” the ocean may be infinite and distancing, but the shore, the liminal space, is dynamic. As “Thing Language” progresses, “Aimlessly/ [the ocean] pounds the shore.” The short sentence characterizes the ocean in three important ways. First, it is aimless. As before, the ocean has no intent in its actions, and the anthropomorphization that any observer may be prone to is inaccurate. Second, it interacts with the shore, which is neither ocean nor not ocean. Despite the distance that comes automatically from the ocean, it does approach the observer. Third, it pounds the shore. The relationship is violent. However, this is not a destructive violence. Without the pounding against the shore, the shore would not exist. The ocean defines the shore and physically deposits the sand that creates it. Bringing the metaphor back to poetry, the violence in the relationship between the poem and the reader is a necessary component of defining the relationship of the reader to the poem, and makes that relationship stronger here, where the body becomes an integral part of the interface, than in other, more gentle or cordial relationships.

“And *expansive*.”
– Bruce Andrews

Spicer’s poetry is a poetry of bodily experience. It mirrors, it offends, it frustrates. However, establishing that this poetry engages the body does little to explain why effecting meaning through the body is valuable. For this, I’d like to turn to an essay by Bruce Andrews,

titled “Body and Language.” However, before moving on in this line of thought, it’s important to say how Andrews and Spicer do not interact. Bruce Andrews, who co-edited *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, the influential journal of poetry and poetics that ran from 1978 to 1981, clearly did not affect Spicer’s thought. He was seventeen when Spicer died, and did not publish a book until eight years later. Claiming that Jack’s work argues for the same underlying points, phono/logo/phallogocentric deconstruction for one, would be disingenuous on some scale. The same problems come up when claiming that he is a precursor for *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poetry *in that* he makes the same arguments in much the same ways. He *is* a precursor, but for entirely different reasons. He is a precursor in the way that Dickinson is and Whitman is not. He forms a link in the chain of literary history that *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* situates itself in.

In this way, through genealogical connections, Spicer’s poetry and *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poetry have affinities, and the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* writers made explicit many of the poetics which are at play implicitly in Spicer’s work. A key word which Andrews uses in this piece, which I’ve avoided so far in this paper, is “materiality” in language: its “literal body” (3). This idea provides form in many ways to the methods of bodily engagement that Spicer employs in his own writing. When I say that his writing is frustratingly opaque, I’m saying his words have body. When I say that obscenities force an orality, I’m saying his words have body. When I say that his words mirror bodies, I’m saying (as you’ll guess) his words have body.

When Andrews talks about the materiality of his own language, he puts it in terms of political emancipation: “For (meeting the reproduction requirements of) the freedom of the readerly body, a prescription [of how to write *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poetry] would involve preventing the *imperialism* of the text” (5, emphasis added). He sees the domination of the

author over a text, and therefore over the reader of a text, as a conquest. The position becomes especially clear when he says, “And here (surprise, surprise) the argument pulls back the curtain to reveal the original source of some of the distinctions I’m making: U.S. foreign policy strategy in the Cold War” (7). It’s over this point that Spicer’s poetics differs most drastically from Andrews’. For the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, theirs is always a battle of Marxism vs. Capitalism. In traditional poetics, the author controls all of the poetic capital. In theirs, the readers control the means of meaning production.

Over this second point, Spicer’s poetics comes back to Andrews’. While he does not take up the same characters in his drama, his poetry does give the means of meaning production over to its readers. If we ignore Andrews’ political language, his basic argument rings true. When he talks about the types of writing that L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E fights against, he says their pages are “bodiless, as window[s],” their language “decorative ornamentation,” and expressions “soothing” and “convincing” (3). Spicer’s poetry is certainly not soothing, convincing, bodiless, or “decorative ornamentation.”

More than just sharing common enemies, though, Spicer and Andrews agree on this major point: the poet is not very important to the final meaning of the poem. Although Andrews might not use Spicer’s metaphor, I would imagine he’d agree that all a poet does (or, perhaps, all a poet should do) is provide the furniture in the room. Spicer talks about the Outside rearranging the furniture to create the poem, but ultimately, it doesn’t matter if the couch is leather or cloth, against the wall, or in the middle of the room. What matters is who sits on it. When the reader comes to the poem, the real process of meaning production can start. And for Spicer, this process takes place as a series of physical reactions in the body. His poetry sometimes *is* bodies,

sometimes offends bodies, sometimes pushes them away, but always interacts with them, always employs the body to realize meaning. Spicer's poetry is always a poetry of the body.

As one might expect, Andrews' own poetry offers itself in interesting ways to reading through the body. Exploring it with any kind of fairness would involve a full second paper on the subject, but, quickly, his poem, "Species Means Guilt" is syntactically difficult to follow, denotatively opaque, and littered with obscenity. The fourth stanza begins:

Suds down the dick in the outfield –
To get to the top, step on yourself. They blindfold you & toys come out:
unquote
worming comma incest dunce, my coherence chained to the grass:

While the passage does not give much semantically, it does perform interesting meanings somatically. In the first line, all the first phonemes are voiced ([d], [z], [n], [ð], and vowels). The constant involvement of the vocal chords makes the velar plosive [k] more striking. The "dick" catches in your throat and throws off the flow of the sentence. The click against the soft palate involves the same mouth movements as the gag reflex. Miming a gag over the vocalization of "dick" pushes the sentence even lewder than it originally appears, and suggests that, perhaps, that is what is required in stepping on one's self to get to the top.

Andrews focuses on the writing process in his essay, but the advantage of establishing a reader-based poetics is that the interpretive methodology can be applied to a poem even if the poet did not intend to write a poem that anti-imperialistically requires the reader to step in as meaning producer. I started this paper by saying that every reader has a body, but the corollary to that is every text has a bodied reader, whether or not it has a radical leftist author. William Blake was not postmodern, Marxist, a post-Saussurian linguist, or a body-conscious gay poet from North Beach, but comparing the first lines of the introductions to *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs*

of Experience shows poems that are intimately involved with the body. The first couplets of each are:

Piping down the valleys wild
Piping songs of pleasant glee

and

Hear the voice of the Bard!
Who Present, Past, & Future sees

The first, innocent, is full of bright notes and strong iambs. The second, experienced, is darker and has looser adherence to the form. The innocent introduction also keeps the mouth much tighter, and by the ending [i], forces the reader to speak the lines with a smile. The “of Experience” couplet also ends with the tight-lipped [i], but continues it into the [s], which warps the smile into a sneer. The repetition of “piping” in the first also gives a songbird aesthetic which the second counters with wide-mouthed oracular grandstanding. Apart from phonetics, the body comes in to both in terms of hearing and speaking. “Piping” implies a directionless outpouring of emotion, and reads as such. The “Hear” of the second couplet, however, requires a specific audience. The directed speech, and especially the exclamation mark, implies an inflated style which passes the sense of self-importance, and the associated bodily signs of both (raised voice, exaggerated hand gestures, and so on), to the speaker, the reader. Even if she does not find herself gesturing at an imaginary audience, the impulse to the act is coded in the line.

In Spicer’s poetry, an ending, a closure, is always a beginning, an opening, so by way of closing this, I’d like to return to the epigraph which started this section. “And *expansive*.” This sentiment, in all its fragmentary glory, captures something of Spicer’s poetics that is difficult to talk about without crippling it with an overabundance of words. His poems begin in displeasure, but they end in expansion. They end in the body, but the body here is not a confine. It does not

imprison meaning with the reader. In the body, the poems explode and flower and flow and react. In a reversal, meaning in Spicer begins as the soiled bed sheets, on the page, outside the self, but ends off the page, inside, the physical experience—it ends as the sex. This dynamic bodily shoreline was with Spicer's poetry in the beginning, and stays with it in the end. In "Ten Poems for Downbeat," the last section of Spicer's last book, he gives this command. "Only, for Christ's sake, surf." I can think of no better advice for encountering his poetry. The ocean, in its sublime opacity, sex, in its grotesque/arousing push and pull, and language, especially, in its forced rumba with the body, all threaten, at times, to close off Spicer's poetry. But, (for Christ's sake), surf. Get in there; feel it. Spicer's poetry opens up in the body in ways that it never does on the page, and meaning comes out in the encounter between the reader and the poetry that could never come without that shifting, ugly, arousing dance.

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