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# Imagine This As Lyric Poetry

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# IMAGINE THIS AS LYRIC POETRY

Sarah Ruddy

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*After Spicer: Critical Essays*  
edited by John Emil Vincent.  
Middletown, CT: Wesleyan  
University Press, 2011. Pp. 240.  
\$80.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

For you I would build a  
whole new universe but  
you obviously find it  
cheaper to rent one.  
Eurydice did too.  
She went back to hell  
unsure of  
what other house Orpheus  
would build. "I call it  
death-in-life and life-  
in-death." Shot  
In the back by an arrow  
President Kennedy  
seemed to stiffen for a  
moment  
before he assumed his place  
in history. Eros  
Do that.  
I gave you my imaginary  
hand and you give me  
your imaginary hand  
and we  
walk together (in  
imagination) over the  
earthly ground.  
Jack Spicer, "Love Poems"  
(1963)<sup>1</sup>

"My vocabulary did this to me," the oft-quoted "last words" of Jack Spicer, first reported by Robin Blaser and certainly to some extent apocryphal, is an ending that is also usefully a beginning, posing the problem of defining a poetics *after* Spicer. Even as he wrote "The Practice of Outside" in and around 1975, Blaser seemed to recognize and anticipate the limiting powers his essay would have on future Spicer criticism and named what

the dual and often contradictory strands of that criticism might look like: “At first this essay was short and simple—about Jack. But that became a reduction which every twist and turn of the work denied—a biography without the world the poet earned or a split between the man and the work which drank him up and left him behind” (3). Due in large part to the limited availability—and difficulty—of Spicer’s body of work, criticism of the poet has been mired in lore, and the phrase “my vocabulary did this to me” has come to name that lore. What we have left behind is exactly what Blaser recognized: “the world the poet earned.”

Recent collections like *After Spicer*, edited by John Emil Vincent, have attempted to address the need for a new Spicer criticism. The foregoing verse is quoted in Anita Sokolsky’s essay “Character Assassination in the Poetry of Jack Spicer,” which is included *After Spicer* and which poses and attempts to answer the truly central, even inaugural, questions that the volume seeks to address: “But in the name of what is his work invested in destroying lyric identity? To what end does it appear increasingly to foreground a notion of language as a self-implementing system?” (195). Thus, the “new” era of Spicer criticism that Vincent proposes is the era of the runcible mountain—one in which readers and critics work backward from

Spicer’s language, through the poet’s self-erasure of lyric identity and systems of meaning, to the ever-disappearing word.

Vincent’s introduction sets readers on a path through the three sections of text that make up this collection of critical essays by untangling some of Spicer’s more gnarly personal and poetic knots and then retying others for the reader to solve. The first part of the collection is made up of essays that use newly available archival materials to create a critical space wherein readers can examine the “vexed and opaque” relationship between Spicer’s social and academic commitments and his texts and poetic practices (12). Vincent proposes this as the first necessary step toward a Spicer criticism that attends to his poetics *in language*, since this space opens up for readers a “distance between the poet and the poetry” necessary “in order to let the poetry do its work” (12).

Yet, this reading is still “deeply imbued with the biographical” until Vincent takes the important next step of citing Spicer’s formal contrariness, his devotion to “uncomfortable music” (2). The second group of essays moves forward within the space created by the first to introduce relatively new critical practices to Spicer’s body of work as a whole, approaching his poetics from the “impossible,” “invisible,” and “difficult” orientations of, for example, recent queer

theory. Later, Vincent notes that the poems—the work that critics and readers are led back to—were often “read as explanatory” and “transparent” (4), returning us to what vocabulary did to Spicer. The third grouping of essays investigates works and practices at the inside of that vocabulary in order to rethink authorship, agency, and the complications of using a lyric identity. Turning for support to a 1987 essay by Burton Hatlen, Vincent then addresses the primary concern of the collection: “For a poet whose greatest and strongest commentary was about how ‘language turns against those who use it,’ it is strange that Spicer is so often and so fervently taken as if his directives weren’t also, as Hatlen insists they must be read, *in language*” (9).

*In language* is itself a difficult demand, especially when language so actively resists the will of its users, the self-erasure of the runcible mountain:

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.  
And our city shall stand  
as the lumber rots and  
Runcible mountain  
crumbles, and the ocean,  
eating all of the islands,  
comes to meet us.<sup>2</sup>

“Runcible” is a nonsense word and Spicer’s capitalization of it marks it as a name that is attached to the mountain, a misheard “sense” that pulls the poetic landscape back into its own made-ness. The runcible mountain is the site where language reclaims images and tradition, sweeping them back into a negativity that *after all* we still only have language to tell about—hence, the widespread use of dis-closure as a way of narrating critical activity. This is, of course, what makes writing about Spicer so difficult: this struggle to use the same language that undoes language to come back to language. Blaser was trying to find a way to talk about everything that disappears when both poetry and the poet are unmoored by language from any origins in the image, vision, or intention.

Kevin Killian’s “Spicer and the Mattachine” begins to consider the question of how “we” have found ourselves in Spicer’s near-total textualization. Using newly available documents from the Mattachine Society’s archive, Killian traces Spicer’s “counterintuitive” involvement with direct political action during the spring and summer of 1953 (16). In materials as quotidian as meeting minutes and memos, we see Spicer recording the ways that self, community, and the political being exist in language, first by becoming language objects and then by being tied (Spicer would later use the term *fix* here, and not

happily) to opposing radical notions of gay identity (18–19). Killian also addresses Spicer’s attempt to give the group an alternative name; the work that the poet put into proposing “Tercellan” shows him engaged in the process of using language to separate name from meaning, a gesture that would later figure prominently in his poetics, most notably in major works like *Heads of the Town Up to the Aether* (1962): “We may read Tercellan as a name that might signify nearly everything (to the observant) or nothing (to the police); it’s a name emblematic of its era, of bad faith, of slippery cold-war second guessing” (20). How Killian gently reorients readers from documents back to intentional texts suggests that Spicer, in his application of language to the Mattachine’s activities during his months of involvement, was looking to this language not as a way to represent “gay identity,” but as a way to reconstruct the category of identity itself. So while it may at first seem odd to leave the question of the effect of Spicer’s involvement with the Mattachine on his poetry until the end of the essay, the result is that Killian requires the reader to perform the most difficult work of the essay herself. That is, we must come face to face with the knot Spicer tied around the lyric self without recourse to the tempting abstraction of Spicer’s opposed notions of “nationalism” and “localism” or “regionalism” (31–32).

“No human being should have to be a lightning rod,” writes Maria Damon in her essay “Jack Spicer’s Ghost Forms,” a piece that similarly addresses the complications of a self that resides in language by considering this existence in terms of the double consciousness of “gay identity,” both “empowered by community and embarrassed to be taking up space” (148). There is here, as in Killian’s piece, no simple one-to-one correspondence between Spicer’s sexuality and his poetics. Damon connects the way Spicer situates himself within his “historical circumstance” to “the notion of vestige, whose derivation from *vestigium*—footprint—implies a negative space which asserts an absent presence, something or someone who has come and gone, leaving a trace of writing” (138). Spicer designates the coexistence of different ways of being through a series of present contingent linguistic disclosures correspondent to the absence and vestigial reappearance of the lyric self in his poems. Damon revisits her own work on Spicer over the course of a decade to question the “problematic and ahistorical . . . belief that it is noble or even possible to escape into the freedom of pure language” (147). All of this seems to enact Michael Davidson’s thoughts on the “ontology of absence” in Spicer’s poetics, and in the end Damon’s essay brings us back to its own, now ghostly and doubled,

uncanny, opening pages: “It—the ghost, vestigial form, the evidence that has been dragged off the scene leaving its tracks and lines in the surface dirt of cultural history . . . [I]t is the body of already available poetry on which any poet’s work feeds—that is, it is The Tradition or Traditions—which both exist and do not” (139). Catherine Imbroglia, in “‘Impossible Audiences’: Camp, the Orphic, and Art as Entertainment in Jack Spicer’s Poetry,” calls this the “principal Orphic paradox” in Spicer’s work: “[T]hat it is through language that we represent the way the world eludes us in language” (121). Camp acts within the tyranny of systems as an agent of negativity and “incessant rearticulation” (102).

The ontology of absence seems also to haunt Norman Finkelstein’s essay, which directly follows Damon’s. In “Spicer’s Reason to ‘Be-/Leave,’” Finkelstein looks to Spicer’s antinomianism as the expression of “the dialectical tension between poetry and religious faith that unfolds in his writing” (157). At the same time that Spicer’s antinomianism places him in a tradition of American poetics that privileges the immediacy of revelation, his commitment to the irredeemable *fallenness* of a world created by language makes every poetic act “an intolerable act of bad faith” (160). Finkelstein seems to lead readers ever back to the contradiction that an act of bad faith is still

always first an act of faith, and it is in this profane illumination, this radically negative moment of insufficiency, that we can begin to detect the contours of Spicer’s “outside.” It is in this absence that the poet must “be like God” and “*consume himself through poetry*” in such a way that living true to poetry becomes a kind of grace (163): “In our search for God, however, all we have is language” (166). The essay strives, finally, to truly come *after* Spicer, not trying to anticipate his tricks or second guess the intentions of some kind of hidden “I” within his language. The intolerable act and the insufficiency of language provide only “a conclusion at which Spicer could never arrive” (172).

Tradition is necessary and intolerable in Sokolsky’s essay, where we see Spicer establishing it in the “subtle violence” of character assassination (197). The essay urges readers to look forward from Spicer’s knotty relationships with both present and absent figures toward the designation as a progenitor of language poetry that would come after. In this context, Sokolsky sets out to trace the “vicissitudes of the figurative structure of character assassination” (196), a course through the integrity and treachery of “the evacuation of meaning” (200), to the initiation of the “dissolution of the ‘thingness’ of . . . political crisis, a process on which the state of poetry seems to depend” (203). The essay is as illuminating as any

written to date on Spicer's poetic practice and the subtle violence of his creation of tradition through erasure; the scope of the argument extends from the level of language's own self-erasure on the very page in the "odd verb form that makes the line 'Eros/Do that' an imperative," through to the total destruction of the poetic personality (206). "For Spicer," Sokolsky writes, "political cataclysm leads to a recalibration of syntax which registers as a renewed mobility of meanings that is itself a mode of tactical aggression" (204). This is assassination in the service of lyric catachresis or otherwise "unimaginable continuance" (11): the imperative "Eros/Do that" that at once falls apart and is also the love that will let you go on. Now, imagine this as language poetry.

Where the essays in this collection occasionally stumble is by trying to overcome Spicer's negativity. In Kelly Holt's "Spicer's Poetic Correspondence: 'A Pun the Letter Reflects,'" for example, I parted ways with the author over her positivization of the idea of tradition, as expressed in Spicer's first letter to Lorca, as "never really losing anything" (50). I found her essay tightly thought and insightful, yet when Spicer states "tradition means much more than that," he is not offering a corrective, or a vision of what tradition should be. He is recognizing the enormous scope of the dead forms that have managed to redefine "invention."

Michael Snediker, in his essay "Jack Spicer's *Billy the Kid*: Beyond the Singular Personal," reads the serial poem as "the pleasures and aggressions (and consolations) of love, stretched across time" (182). Does seriality, as Vincent poses in his introduction, evacuate or recuperate the lyric subject? Or is the opposition not quite that simple? Snediker resituates the serial poem, by way of its affective resonances, in negative relation to the city we create in our bar talk: "Not a single one-night stand, nor a proliferation of one-night stands, but the proliferation of nights (and days) held together by the resonances between them: which is also to say, held together by the angers and frustrations unique to those particular resonances" (183). Vincent's own contribution, "Pinnacle of No Explanation," interrogates Spicer's allegedly unfinished detective novel as materializations of what Spicer famously called "our fuss and fury at each other." The novel's mystery, Vincent proposes, and in so doing provides readers with a fresh critical approach to the poetry that came after, "is this: that a monadic substance—fictionality, story—can split like a blob or mercury, do violence to itself, the settle back into a single substance" (83).

What does it mean, finally, *after* all this, for criticism to come *After Spicer*? Vincent proposes a Spicer criticism freed from the lore of the deathbed and the bars: "His

last words must shed the simple deictics of a death narrative . . . ‘My vocabulary did this to me’—and led you, reader, after his death, to his poems” (12). Yet here, Vincent denies Spicer’s existence *in language* when he ignores the poet’s final directive in favor of a more facile transparency, indeed the simple deictics of a death narrative, to describe Spicer’s poetic practice. Jack Spicer’s actual last words, according to Blaser’s account, were “Your love will let you go on.”

The collection closes with Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop’s collaboratively authored “Spiced Language,” a multivocal but also crucially metapoetic occupation of the runcible mountain. Perhaps what is truly *After Spicer*, what we go on to, through the knots and double crosses and the runcible mountain and the Broadway Tunnel, with our love is the irresistibly unknowable (8)—what Ted Berrigan called “the grace of the

make-believe bed.” As Finkelstein reminds readers, Spicer’s “understanding that ‘The real poetry is beyond us’ . . . can never be put aside or unlearned” (168). It is our own struggle with living in language to which we have gone on.

*Sarah Ruddy received her doctorate from Wayne State University in 2012. Her dissertation focused on the literary fact as the intersection of documentary evidence and experimental forms. Sarah lives in Limestone, Maine, where she teaches at the Maine School of Science and Mathematics, part time at the University of Maine, and works as a consulting producer on documentary film and media projects.*

#### NOTES

1. Jack Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian, Wesleyan Poetry Series (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 386.
2. *Ibid.*, 417.