"A whore's answer to a whore": The Prostitution of Jack Spicer

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> Damn it all, Robert Duncan, there is only one bordello.
> A pillow. But one only whores toward what causes poetry
> Their voices high
> Their pricks stiff
> As they meet us.
>
> ***"Dover Beach"***

I

The academic assimilation of contemporary poetry and poets, typically characterized as a symptom of postmodern malaise, has been a sore point among poets (both those with "campus lives"—by which I mean income and/or readers—who themselves may well have some apprehensions about the situation and those who wish for, envy, or simply reject such options) and a number of anxious critics. Too often the rebukes delivered to poets working and poetry written within literature departments have an implicitly moral reproval behind them, though one that keeps the nature of the offence ambiguous. That is, whether it is the alleged mediocrity of such poems or the fact that their authors draw a university salary that is the greater sin stays an unanswered question, as does the question of which is the cause, which the effect. Consider briefly

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as a representative example of this kind of discourse the accusations of Vernon Shetley. “Poetry,” he writes,

> for the most part locked into a self-justifying culture of lyricism in creative writing departments, has suffered an enormous loss of intellectual respectability; the kind of people, both inside and outside the academy, who have an appetite for challenging reading are no longer much attracted to poetry [...] Reconnecting poetry with the intellectual reader is an urgent matter not merely for the health of poetry but also for the health of the intellect. (170–71)

Poetry has lost “respectability,” no longer attracts the correct “kind of people,” is unhealthy, and in short ought to be ashamed of itself. What Shetley insists a poem should be is “difficult”—that is, I would like to note for later reference, not “easy” (Shetley 192)—in order to retain or regain those linked qualities of “respectability” and “health.”[1] Here and in other incarnations, the complaint that poetry has compromised itself or “sold out” is presented in a trope all too like pious invective against sexual permissiveness. Dana Gioia, assuming a gentler, more liberal tone, has more recently addressed the same perceived problem:

> One should not lament that today’s poets have achieved a comfortable economic status from teaching and other professions. A house, medical insurance, and a pension are not bad things for a writer. But one should also not pretend that the contemporary writer’s transformation from bohemian to bourgeois has not changed American literary culture. The personal sacrifices required by bohemia often bestowed a ferocious intellectual independence and flamboyant individuality not easily achieved by writers employed by state institutions like universities. Freedom from institutional employment also permitted certain excesses and vices—especially drugs and alcohol—that destroyed many lives. (122)

No less patronizing than Shetley, Gioia in this “West Coast Elegy” (“one should not lament” but one can elegize) presents a dichotomy of romantic

1 The import of Shetley’s criticism to postwar American poetry should certainly not be overestimated by virtue of his mention here. His book *After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America* not only displays its foregone conclusion in its title but in fact omits from its autopsy mention of many of the poets discussed in this essay: significant members of the San Francisco Renaissance (Helen Adam, Robin Blaser, Robert Duncan, Joanne Kyger, etc.), Denise Levertov, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

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but immoral life in the street ("freedom from institutional employment" is an interesting phrase from a former corporate executive and chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts) and comfortable conformity in the institution (how nice to hear that shelter and health care are "not bad things"). The strangest aspect of this passage is not Gioia's inability to see or conceive of contemporary poets who might challenge these categories—say, a tenured boozer—but that it serves as an introduction to a consideration of Jack Spicer as an exemplar of the "unruly lives of bohemian writers who flourished in the Bay Area" (122). According to Gioia, Spicer's poetry is praised as "accessible," but, rest assured, he "is not by any standard a major poet" (126).[2]

It is precisely this trope—promiscuity remunerated, the "easy" poet making "easy" money, writing and risk, publication and compromise—that Jack Spicer repeatedly employs and investigates when he, a poet with a varying but regular affiliation with academia and an instrumental role in "workshop" sessions between writers, dwells upon the ethics of poetry. Spicer's poetics of what I will call the "whore-text" constitutes not merely a poignant reply to such righteous cavils (even as they continue to be made years after Spicer's death) but also a significant challenge to our understandings of poets and poems as socio-economic functions.

Speaking at the 1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference, Spicer observed that "most people will exploit poets. They'll exploit the older ones for the knowledge they have, and they'll exploit the younger ones for the promise they have" and advises the poet to "stay loose. Stay absolutely loose, and don't accept any offers whatsoever" (*The House That Jack Built* 154). The path on the high ground is short, however, and Spicer relates the poet's position to the peach farmer who is ignorant of the peach market. Abstain as the poet might from taking "any offers whatsoever," nevertheless "you're going to sell out eventually. You have to, just for economic reasons. But when you sell out, know exactly what your peaches cost. Know exactly how many peaches there are on the market. Know exactly what is the price you can sell out for" (*The House That Jack Built* 154). Spicer's ambivalence about the dual imperative to "stay loose" and yet "sell out"—specifically

2 This judgement is delivered immediately after an account of Spicer's death: "After being injured in an automobile crash sometime in the winter of 1962–63, the poet increased his already heavy drinking, which eventually led to his being fired from his [university] research job. In July 1965 Spicer collapsed and fell into a coma. Waking only intermittently, he died three weeks later in the alcoholic ward of the public hospital" (126). The decline of his economic status and his health are clearly parallel for Gioia: the emphasis on squalor serves as evidence of the moral dangers of "bohemia."

in his insistent use of a trope of prostitution—dramatizes questions of integrity, responsibility, and sustenance which face the American poet in the postmodern era of late capitalism.

To posit Spicer as spokesbard for homosexuality or even fraternity is roughly like recognizing Ezra Pound as the ideologue of political harmony.

II

In a study of anthologies of American poetry, Marjorie Perloff notes that one image projected by such volumes is that of "[t]he poet *as boy or girl next door*, cheerfully noneccentric, indeed, willfully ignorant of such things as philosophy or literary criticism" (60). This poet—the denizen of what Perloff calls American poetry's "*côté bon bourgeois*" (60)—stands in marked contrast to Spicer, who, in the argument of Maria Damon, instead resides at "the dark end of the street"; the *côté maudit* made up of "parks, baths, bars, and bathrooms" (Damon 159), the public but shady spaces of covert interactions, where the "poet *as boy or girl next door*" would never be found. Damon contends that Spicer's poetics is (apparently in spite of itself) an articulation of gay identity and community, and although there is a good deal of validity to such a claim it does represent a selective reading, one which treads very lightly over the pungent instances of unease, loathing, and rancour displayed in Spicer's poems. To posit Spicer as spokesbard for homosexuality or even fraternity is roughly like recognizing Ezra Pound as the ideologue of political harmony: it is true if certain insensitive outbursts (which are *not* excisable from the aesthetic as a whole) are overlooked. In a poem-letter to fellow "Martian" Steve Jonas, Spicer spouts an invective against "earthmen"—"White, black, or yellow / They are Jews"—readily reminiscent in both its object and cadences of Pound at his most hateful:

> They disguise themselves as writers, aviators, homosexuals, garage
> mechanics, Irishmen, and paraplegics. Jews!
> They push each other into bed and into gas-ovens trying to make
> distinctions.
> Come friend, let us make distinctions.
> With these creatures there are no distinctions.
> Earthmen, Jewman! Fake noses,
> Circumcized hearts. Puke
> Of the universe. (quoted in Ellingham and Killian 72)

I include these unsavoury lines here not merely as matter prefatory to better lyrics but as a demonstration of Spicer's emphatic use of opposition, fiercer than anything Shetley invokes and I think glossed over by Damon, as well as the poet's willingness to adopt a modernist sensibil-

ity, however crude, at least for experimentation. The lines from Spicer's "Dover Beach" (in *Lament for the Makers*), which I have employed above as epigraph to this essay, are worth considering in this context. "Dover Beach" is largely an exercise in purging, an attempted surgical removal of the "English department in his skull" (*Collected Books* 110) by answering the dangerously influential examples of other poets, largely by conflating them: "Whore Pound / Wondered Homer," Matthew Arnold, Alexander Pope, Lewis Carroll ("All of them weasels alone, seeking the same things," 111). Arnold's injunction to "be true / To one another" and Pound's grudging admiration of Browning are overwritten by the harsh recognition of poetry as but "[a] whore's answer to a whore" (109). The anxiety of influence is indivisible from one of affluence, as each poet/whore scrambles to earn precious cultural capital in the "one bordello."

The formulation of poet as whore is an unsteady one in Spicer's work and should not be understood as mere metonymy. In 1965 Spicer made a clear distinction between these social roles when he confided to Gary Snyder, "The trouble with poets today is that too many of 'em are whores, not poets" (quoted in Ellingham and Killian 412, n2). Presumably there is some palpable integrity retained by the poet and surrendered by the whore, but at what point or with what gesture the "sell out" occurs is a slippery problem central to Spicer's poetic ideas as he moves from the mode of isolated and occasional verse, which he tellingly terms "one night stands," to the book as serial poem and the compositional practice of dictation. Michael Davidson, who has written with sensitivity on Spicer and fellow poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, discerns in Spicer a "negative theology." By this term, Davidson refers to a "rejection of immanent or essentialist ideologies in favor of an utter dualism of subject and object, word and thing, human and God. This view, radically Protestant in impulse, emphasizes learning through opposition and confrontation" (Davidson 151). Although this is a valuable characterization for many of Spicer's concerns, it is in many ways too abstract a framework for a discussion of the inevitable (by definition material) peach sale, or what I propose to consider here as the currently necessary prostitution of poetry. However, this appreciation of "utter dualism" sheds light on Spicer's slippery application of the "whore" label (is he one himself or isn't he?) and his parry of the Procrustean mandates of identity politics.

Contrary to what many critical advocates of Spicer suggest, it is not a comfort with his own sexual identity that drives or supports his aesthetic principles but, rather, its opposite. In the 1956 document, "The Unvert Manifesto," Spicer argues for an "attempt to make the sexual act as rare

as a rosepetal" to be made by the "unvert" who "must not be homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, or autosexual. He must be metasexual. He must enjoy going to bed with his own tears" (*Collected Books* 341). This image of the despairing, solitary poet is jocular but puzzling: what does it mean to be "metasexual"? How do the hairs split between transcendence and denial?

Desire, the pulse of subjectivity, is ever a source of poetic ambivalence for Spicer, in part because it is so readily commodified in a postwar capitalist society. Asked about Allen Ginsberg's claim that "Love is a political stance" during the same University of California Berkeley conference at which he said "You're going to sell out eventually," Spicer showed a marked uneasiness with such a bold proposition. According to the version of this story offered by his biographers, Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian, Spicer gave the hesitant reply: "Well, I guess Allen can make it that way, but I've never been able to" (quoted in Ellingham and Killian 348). In his diligent transcriptions of the lecture series, however, Peter Gizzi presents a notably different reply: "Well, if you can make it that way. [Laughter] Could I have another question?" (*The House That Jack Built* 159). The first version of the response is, I think, representative of a tendency I am kicking against here: the sentimentalization of Spicer's image and, in turn, of his poetics. The differences between these two reported replies are significant. The first "Spicer" is conflicted but improbably deferential to, of all fellow American poets, Ginsberg. Such courtesy seems at odds with Spicer's distrust of Ginsberg's combination of *overt* homosexuality and fame, a distrust which governs Spicer's parody in his poem "The Fix":

> I have seen the best poets and baseball players of our
> generation caught in the complete and contempt
> whoredom of capitalist society
>
> ("The Fix," quoted in Ellingham and Killian 243)

Drawn together in a vortex of betrayal of principles, the "fix" of the World Series, the "sell out" of poets, and the example of Ginsberg's controversial "Howl" are symptoms of a "complete and contemptible / whoredom," the imminence of which haunts Spicer throughout his writing career.

Attributing to Spicer the confessional remark "I've never been able to" gives the poet the romantic allure of failure, something along the lines of Keats's awkward bow. Gizzi's version of "Spicer," rather than making any suggestion of a vain struggle to conceptualize a political value of "love," is only too eager to change the subject: "Could I have another question?"

Ginsberg (both as poet and public figure) represents a problem for Spicer, who seeks to reject "political poems" outright. Spicer contends that Ginsberg "is not a political poet" but one who is "working for love, which is an entirely different kind of thing" (*The House That Jack Built* 158–59).

Determining the ethics of "working for love" is obviously a murky affair. In a letter to Robin Blaser written the same year as "The Unvert Manifesto," Robert Duncan considered the "agonies" of Spicer's love life and

> the natural irruptions of pleading, hurt, violence, and the patronizing which the cultivations of unjust desire give rise to. He avoids the stages of reciprocity, of passion ... I know Spicer will always be bound to be the guide. What if Dante had led Virgil (invented Virgil in order to lead him) thru Hell? Hell has a guise for such enamourd spirits. But for Purgatory or Heaven one must give oneself up to the first guide—to the Beloved, to Beatrice. (quoted in Ellingham and Killian 80)

One could perhaps describe the fundamental difference between Duncan's notion of the "serial poem" and Spicer's as that between giving oneself up to a "Beloved" (contingent to *agápē*) and "going to bed with [one's] own tears" (*eros* collapsing).[3] Four years after this letter was written, in Spicer's most polyphonic and perhaps schizophrenic book of serial poetry, *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*, he would effectively provide a direct response to Duncan by calling into question specifically the myth of Beatrice and, more generally, the compulsion to be guided in a poem called "Sheep Trails Are Fateful to Strangers":

> 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. (*Collected Books* 125)

Beneath the horizontal line of division, the "explanatory note" to these lines admits that "everybody says some kinds of love are horseshit. Or

3 It is worth noting how this last phrase of Spicer's, so redolent of sentimentality, partly accounts for the critical sentimentalization of Spicer: the "metasexual" pose serves as a flipside to the vituperative persona which calls Jews "Puke / Of the universe."

invents a Beatrice to prove they are" (*Collected Books* 125). Both idealizing and sexualizing the muse or locus of inspiration are for Spicer erroneous poetics because these acts constitute a reification of the self rather than Eliot's "continual surrender" and "continual self-sacrifice" of the poet (Eliot 40).[4] There is a significant difference between a Beatrice or Mnemosyne and the selectively broadcasting "Martians," the latter Spicer's preferred metonym for the otherworldly, ungraspable, and even fictional "origin" of his poetry. Unlike the Martians of Craig Raine, which serve as simple metaphorical justification for defamiliarization of things perceived—that is, the Martian viewpoint is smoothly translated and familiarized—Spicer's Martians transmit messages that the poet, as radio receiver, embodies and enacts. The otherness of these Martians is inescapable but so too is the otherness of the effect their transmissions have on the self that tries to accommodate them, and it is interesting to consider how readily this arrangement can be likened to the way that desire can seem to originate from somewhere outside of or beyond (what we like to think of as) our conscious identities.

Sexualizing the poet, the poem, or the poem's object are somewhat different matters than sexualizing inspiration, for language is inherently sexualized (or perhaps simply sexual). In the last poem of his 1964 book *Language*, Spicer writes: "Love is not mocked whatever use you put to it. Words are also not mocked" (*Collected Books* 243). Words and loves, bound together in the final line of the poem, can be used, or even made to be "object" (noun); yet they need not be understood as constant or faithful (note the adjective in the above poem's title is "Fateful" rather than "Faithful") to the users and may in turn "object" (verb)[5] and "[t]urn

4 Eliot, it is worth observing, has his own fascination with prostitutes, and his widely declaimed objective poetic position may not be unconnected with his sexual anxieties and interest in the oldest profession. These well-known lines from "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" actually have an almost Spicerian ring:

> Half-past one,
> The street-lamp sputtered,
> The street-lamp muttered,
> The street-lamp said, "Regard that woman
> Who hesitates toward you in the light of the door
> Which opens on her like a grin." (26)

5 In this, at least, Spicer is in no dispute with Olson, who in his well-known 1950 essay (which Spicer almost certainly would have read), "Projective Verse," writes of

> getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which

mysteriously against those who use them." In this context it is difficult not to think of Blaser's account of Spicer's last words: "My vocabulary did this to me" (*Collected Books* 325). Language, the "object," the material furniture rearranged by forces of inspiration, ultimately and maybe inevitably betrays the poet.

The poet as "whore" effectively has no subjective desire, since he or she is in the business of satisfying the desire of others.

In his contribution to a 1999 special Jack Spicer issue of *Jacket* magazine, Christopher W. Alexander remarks, "[I]f Spicer's is a willing refusal of the personal, his duplicity in so refusing is to invoke the pain—the impossibility—of being human. Spicer himself is 'not himself'; he exercises a subjective freedom in the negation of the self." This technique is a streetwise sort of negative capability, a displacement strategy which, besides indicating an uneasiness with desire (of which more shortly), is strangely akin to a defensive attitude adopted by the acclimatized victim of either objectification or abuse. For Spicer, function supersedes and ultimately overwrites identity in the poet. In a 1959 letter to Blaser, Duncan wryly observed, "You can never satisfy Jack's requirements: it's for Jack to satisfy yours" (quoted in Ellingham and Killian 162). Whatever personal grudge this assessment may display—Duncan and Spicer were always in competition with one another—it also serves as an interesting vantage point from which to study Spicer's "metasexual" identity. The poet as "whore" effectively has no subjective desire, since he or she is in the business of satisfying the desire of others. "I don't know what I want myself," Spicer stymied members of his Vancouver lecture audience by saying, "and if I did know what I want, it would be the wrong thing to want" (*The House That Jack Built* 133). Of course this position is not without its costs and perils. In the first of his Vancouver lectures, Spicer conflates the writing of a poem with "trying to seduce somebody," an attempt which "will make the person run five miles away screaming," but the poet has as much cause for anxiety about this arrangement, since the poem (the *performative act*, the seduction) is both necessary and frightening:

> western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves a humilitas sufficient to make him of use. ("Projective Verse" 247)

> I think the poet ought always to bring the poems, read the poems, to an audience, simply because often he can find things from the audience's reaction that he didn't understand the poem said, which tell him something about it. I mean, it's just as important to be able to understand your own poetry as someone else's. And most poets I know, including some that I admire, don't read their own poems. I mean, they read them aloud to audiences, but they very seldom read them back to see what the things are that would scare them about them.
>
> (*The House That Jack Built* 16)

What most scares Spicer in his reading of his poems, I would like to conjecture, is the possibility of *lovelessness* in poetry. The idea of a "pure poetry" which Spicer longs for in *After Lorca* requires the same ascetic and ultimately impossible loneliness of the unvert: "When someone intrudes into the poet's life (and any sudden personal contact, whether in bed or in the heart, is an intrusion) he loses his balance for a moment, slips into being who he is, uses his poetry as one would use money or sympathy" (*Collected Books* 48).

Spicer's intertextual relations with other poems and poets are themselves seductions of a kind, though often fumbling and uncertain of their own intentions and expectations, and *After Lorca* in this regard seems a remembrance of a past affair.[6] Lori Chamberlain offers an interesting defence of "Song of the Poor," a poem subtitled "*A Translation*" from *After Lorca*:

> The lover by definition *lacks*, a condition Lorca alludes to in the first stanza ["Ay qué trabajo me cuesta / quererte como te quiero!" (*Collected Books* 27)]. Leaving this stanza untranslated, Spicer has nonetheless "translated" its central feature in the title. [Clayton] Eshleman's assertion that the rest of the so-called translation is a "mess" refers undoubtedly to the awkward and/or erroneous choices Spicer makes, as well as to the additions; but it is a "failure" only by the criterion of "fidelity." (Chamberlain 431)

Lacking is perhaps the strongest sensation of *After Lorca*. A turning point for Spicer's poetics from his "one night stands," *After Lorca* is a multi-layered expression of what is missing, what is needed from poetry.

6 For other examples of this seduction scenario, consider how Spicer's "fake novel" may be read as a protracted attempt by both "I" and "we" (*Collected Books* 159) to kiss Rimbaud and *A Red Wheelbarrow* tries to consume William Carlos Williams: "Love ate the red wheelbarrow" (*Collected Books* 105).

Eshleman points out that Lorca's poem's title "Es Verdad" ("It is True") in no way connects with Spicer's "translated" title, "Song of the Poor."[7] This fact, Chamberlain rightly argues, ought to direct the reader to realize that "Song of the Poor" is quite literally *untrue* to the original Spanish. Spicer's essentially necrophilic relationship with Lorca has little to do with "fidelity": as "Lorca" writes in his introduction to *After Lorca*, "The dead are notoriously hard to satisfy" (*Collected Books* 12). "Song of the Poor" leaves untranslated the repeated lines, "Ay qué trabajo me cuesta / quererte como te quiero!" (*Collected Books* 27), a lament at the cost of love. By centralizing the economic strife represented in the poem with such a title, Spicer stresses the bond between agonized desire and penury. Spicer asks Lorca a question whose phrasing reveals its anxious nature: "When you had finished a poem what did it want you to do with it?" (*Collected Books* 38). Lorca gives no answer, but we can see that what scares Spicer is the very notion of offering up his poetry to an audience, a commercial market, and what the poem may expect from such a market.

III

Reading from *The Holy Grail* in his second Vancouver lecture, Spicer persistently characterizes Gwenivere as "a real bitch" (*The House That Jack Built* 57), which prompts some interesting discussion afterward:

> Q[uestion from the audience]: Gwenivere's about the clearest book of them all.
> J[ack] S[picer]: It's the easiest, yes.
> Q: Yeah.
> JS: She's a bitch.
> ELLEN TALLMAN: I don't know why you keep saying that.
> Q: She's kind of seductive.
> JS: Well, I ... yeah.
> ET: No, I mean in terms of the poem.
> DOROTHY LIVESAY: I don't think that's in the poem. I agree with you. She isn't a bitch in the poem.
> JS: Well, she doesn't want to find the Grail. She'd rather sleep with Lancelot, which is reasonable enough.
>
> (*The House That Jack Built* 59–60)

7 In one of his letters to Lorca, Spicer writes that the poet can only translate "real objects" by virtue of the understanding that "Things do not connect; they correspond" (*Collected Books* 34).

Gwenivere, whom Spicer hesitantly affirms is "kind of seductive," narrates the book that is literally central to *The Holy Grail*, flanked by the books of Lancelot and Merlin (both characters in Arthurian myth undone by women). Misogyny in Spicer's work can be both brutal and direct—as it is in one of *Admonitions*, "The female genital organ is hideous" (*Collected Books* 62), the 1957 reading of which Spicer deliberately aimed at an appalled Denise Levertov—but the case of Gwenivere, accusations of "bitch" notwithstanding, is a complex one. There is a desperation in her voice ("All your heros are so polite / They would make a cat scream" [*Collected Books* 201]), and a suggestion of a troubled interaction with inscrutable forces:

> Naked
> I lie in this bed. The spooks
> Around me animate themselves.
> Boo! Hello!
> Lance, the cup is heavy. Drop the cup!
> (*Collected Books* 200)

"The spooks" are of the same metaphorical value as the Martians, and the naked recumbent Gwenivere is as prone a conduit to their messages—"Boo! Hello!"—as any self-proclaimed poet. But American slang provides another meaning for "spooks," namely spies and CIA agents. There is, then, more than just misogyny in this portrait. The clamour of McCarthyism obliquely resounds in Spicer's poetry (it is worth recalling that Spicer would have been an impressionable and slowly sexually awakening thirteen year old in 1938, when Orson Welles put the fear of a red planet into America with his *War of the Worlds* radio broadcasts), and Gwenivere's status as an active lover and actual "queen" (and narrator, to set Vernon Shetley to shuddering, of the "easiest" book) is the cause of considerable ambivalence in *The Holy Grail*.

The "bad magic" of Gwenivere the self-confessed "witch" and medium for the "spooks" is, in typical assessments of the Arthurian cycles, Camelot's undoing. Spicer's "Death of Arthur" is both in tone and construction altogether unTennysonian:

> It is a simple hole of running one thing to another. No
> kingdom will be saved.
> No rest-
> Titution. (*Collected Books* 212)

The line break here is suggestive: the "simple hole" (the grail; the "anti-grail"; the ellipsis; the vagina; the anus; all of these?) will have no "rest" from its "running one thing to another" but perhaps it may have another kind of "itution." To *prostitute* is, etymologically, to set or place before the public and in this regard is little different from the word *publish*, to make public. It is this sordid association that most troubles Spicer and informs his materialist ideas of a dialectical relationship between poetry and prostitution—"A whore's answer to a whore," as he puts it in "Dover Beach" (*Collected Books* 109).

Duncan wrote to LeRoi Jones in 1963: "Spicer has accused me of 'whoring'—by which he means reading at universities, printing in Poetry magazine and The Nation, and, further then, writing in order for such markets" (quoted in Ellingham and Killian 261). To weigh this accusation fairly, one should add to the scales Spicer's uncertain interests in precisely the same "whoring." Psychoanalyst Dr Harry Z. Coren recalls Spicer wondering about "selling himself out" in 1965: "'Should he go to bed with a woman for his analyst?'—that thought occurred to him. It was right in connection with that Spicer [wondered] whether he should send his poetry to *The Nation*" ([sic], quoted in Ellingham and Killian 297). Sex without desire, sex for another's entertainment, and mainstream publication are practically synonymous opportunities for Spicer, the poet reluctant to pimp himself. There is in his second poem written "for" *The Nation* (Spicer understood that neither of them would be accepted for publication by the mainstream magazine) a prevailing sense of menace:

> 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.
>
> (*Collected Books* 247)

The monolithic "company / In which there is no vice-president" is composed of machines in motion and absurd militaristic hierarchies ("The road-captains, heartless and fast-moving" [247]) and may well include the editors of *The Nation* and the poets printed in its pages. The hitchhiker makes no serious alliance with these oversized vehicles, though s/he may be "sometimes" able and willing to take a ride.

In these lines and elsewhere, Spicer is assessing his own complicity in publishing processes in which he may not believe. A pronounced concern about the commercial uses of poetry is behind his hostility toward the idea of copyright (see Ellingham and Killian 235–36) and his overt antagonism of Lawrence Ferlinghetti "for making money off poetry, and the strict rule was that one must never make a penny off poetry" (Dora FitzGerald, quoted in Ellingham and Killian 258). "I really honestly don't feel that I own my poems," Spicer admitted in his first Vancouver lecture, "and I don't feel proud of them" (*The House That Jack Built* 15). There may be not only a lack of pride but a note of shame in this declaration, for Spicer knows that he cannot attain a "pure" poetry and that every consumer-ready publication is a form of compromise. In one of his letters to Lorca, Spicer worries about how

The Latinate pun in "meretricious" (from *meretrix*: harlot or whore) is worth noting here, for it somewhat disarms the adjective of its harshness.

> Some poems are easily laid. They will give themselves to anybody and anybody physically capable can receive them. They may be beautiful (we have both written some that were) but they are meretricious. From the moment of their conception they inform us in a dulcet voice that, thank you, they can take care of themselves. I swear that if one of them were hidden beneath my carpet, it would shout out and seduce somebody. The quiet poems are what I worry about—the ones that must be seduced. They could travel about with me for years and no one would notice them. And yet, properly wed, they are more beautiful than their whorish cousins. (*Collected Books* 38)

The Latinate pun in "meretricious" (from *meretrix*: harlot or whore) is worth noting here, for it somewhat disarms the adjective of its harshness. Some poems are to be "properly wed" but some "can take care of themselves": in either case the poem has a proclivity, even a mandate, for seduction.

However, the rules of engagement for poem-reader seductions are not clear-cut. In considering "what poetry is for" (*The House* 86) during his second Vancouver lecture, Spicer expresses a mode of reading apparently contrary to Barthes's quest for jouissance by suggesting that "pleasure" is little else but incidental in the experience of poetry.

> I can't imagine anything less pleasurable than the later Beethoven quartets. But at the same time, they're compelling. I mean, if someone wanted to play the fifteenth to me when I wanted just to relax and have a good time … I mean, I could

be forced to have that pleasure but it would be almost a kind
of rape. (*The House* 87)

In the case of poetry, the phrase *faire violence au texte* assumes not so much new meaning as new ambiguity: who or what is the victim, who or what the perpetrator in this "kind of rape"? The agency of the whore-text, "compelling" as it may the passing reader or customer (or "John," as Spicer originally identified himself in his writings), is a troubling open question. Here the expression "whore-text" can be read as related to the *hors-texte* in the same way that Spicer's "low ghost" is to the *logos*: it is officially beneath notice among "the heads of the town" and yet cannot escape being read, perhaps even wants to be. "Keep me at a distance as I keep you at a distance," says one of Spicer's explanatory notes: the words on the page may offer themselves for our pleasure but with a warning that they will remain outside our consummate understanding. In *Le plaisir du texte*—and it is worth pausing to note how that very title encompasses this ambiguity—Barthes delivers a startling imperative: "Le texte que vous écrivez doit me donner la preuve qu'il me désire. Cette preuve existe: c'est l'écriture" (Barthes 13–14: "The text which you write must give me proof that it desires me. This proof exists: it's writing"). Literature in this formulation is entirely object, a receptacle for any pleasure-seeking reader. Spicer, by contrast, lends the text active agency, while both the poet and reader, both strangers to themselves, have only some nominal power over their inevitably sexual encounters with one purchased text or another. Just as the poet will eventually "sell out," so too will the reader "buy in" to the seduction.

If there is shame to be had in this tawdry arrangement—and here Spicer approximates Baudelaire's "Au Lecteur" chastisement when he writes of "A Poem to the Reader of the Poem" as "a wet dream" (*Collected Books* 349–51)—we as readers have our share to accept.

IV

My conclusion is, for better or worse, non-apocalyptic. American poetry may be going to Harvard in a handbasket, but complaints about this situation seldom suggest an economically feasible alternative for living poets and the poetry market, possibly merely because it seems uncouth to mention money when discussing poetry. I have pointed out how the disapproval of American poetry's "easy" manner within the morally dubious universities can (bizarrely, I admit) be seen as repressive in almost explicitly sexual terms, but I should like to add that the same register of critique has another offensive air to it. Poets are addressed and categorized

as a *social class*, rebuked for their labour and on occasion their work ethic, without consideration of their financial income, or their modes of resistance to an overarching economic system with which they may disagree.

The more recent case of language poetry's relationship with the academy is worth considering here, both because Spicer is readily seen as a precursor to and important source of liberation for such poets as Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, and Bob Perelman, and because this relationship has, over the past three decades, become fraught with reversals and contradictions. The concern with linguistic use and value that is at the heart of the language poetry movement marks its deliberate conflation of poetics with economics. As I have suggested, the discomfort at considering the poet's economic position is persistent in America, and although for many years language poetry was beyond the pale for most literary scholarship, its gradual acceptance raises questions about whether its proponents, too, have "sold out" or somehow "compromised" their critical impetus by becoming part of the system. Bernstein's career is an instructive example: where he could once plausibly position himself outside of an "official verse culture," his subsequent academic success and republication in Norton anthologies have perversely made him the "official" representative of and advocate for "difficult" poetry.[8] Again, the unease readers may have about Bernstein (or any poet on campus) in this regard is conspicuously like the typical bourgeois hypocrisy seen in consideration of prostitutes.

Jack Spicer accepts and adopts and retains the outsider's position and explicitly questions the validity of distinctions between poet and whore in a "sell out" world. Maria Damon notes how in reading Spicer "the word 'vernacular' suggests itself, connoting oppression through its etymological origins in the Latin *verna*, a homeborn slave—the Other within the state's boundaries" (Damon 161). This claim goes too far—slavery is a grossly ahistorical metaphor here—and leaves Spicer a victim given no credit for his own manoeuvres against the "complete and contemptible / whoredom of capitalist society." (Prostitution, after all, represents a very different subjectivity than slavery.) "Other" though he may be, Spicer is not a slave but rather the reluctant but self-fashioned hooker in the *polis* of Olson, Pound, and the "bosses" of poetry; he is the streetwalker to their urban planners, the irritant to Plato and the imperial state. In *Human Universe*, Olson writes that

8 The significant but seldom-declared relativity of such terms as "easy" and "difficult" is underscored here by the recognition that Shetley's notion of "difficult" probably has little similarity to Bernstein's.

> KNOWLEDGE either goes for the CENTER or it's inevitably a State Whore—which American and Western education generally is, has been, since its beginning. (I am flatly taking Socrates as the progenitor, his methodology still the RULE: "I'll stick my logic up, and classify, boy, classify you right out of existence.")
>
> (Olson, "The Gate and the Center" 168)

Socrates raised not a few Athenian eyebrows for corrupting the minds and morals of adoring young male students, and if the comparison with Spicer, the workshop mentor of many young poets, seems plausible, it is because Olson's patriarchal "State" would reject both teachers as "State Whores." (And, it is interesting to note, the threat to "stick my logic up" the addressed "boy" is redolent too of a trite sort of homophobia.)

Writing of John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, and the New York poets, David Lehman comments: "We are so often told that poetry plays a marginal role in our culture that most of us accept this as a fact without ever considering that its position on the periphery may be what gives American poetry the freedom in which it has flourished" (Lehman 15). For Spicer, this periphery is still part of the central commercial *agora*, the public market, and the poet may yet from this position long and struggle for a "city redefined" and a "return from exile" (*Collected Books* 176). However, just as "freedom" can mean startlingly little within a "free market" system, the mean fact of survival demands that the "marginal role" poetry plays in some fashion satisfies the appetites of the city/culture, though therein may lay opportunities for subversion, possibly even revolution.

Peter Gizzi points out in his afterword to *The House That Jack Built* that Spicer's dictation method "created something more than a dialogue or duality of two lovers" and lets poetry "go beyond the narratives of either human or divine love":

> Since human and divine love fail the poet, it is the poet who must provide an erotic and social identity outside of those constructs. When Spicer writes [in "A Textbook of Poetry"] "imagine this as lyric poetry," he is critiquing both the personal content of the lyric and insisting on the empty space that moves from line to line, thereby allowing a larger discursive community to be dictated … The poem is the ground not for private revelation but for a social epiphany. (184–85)

This conclusion seems forced: why can the poem not do both? Love—of which there is so much in Spicer's poetry, in so many guises, though always

The word *whore,* the Old English etymology of which Spicer would have known, is nothing but a debased term for "lover."

troubled—can be reduced to neither exclusively "private" nor "social" phenomenon. The word *whore*, the Old English etymology of which Spicer would have known, is nothing but a debased term for "lover." Coitus can be bought and sold, like the literary reputations Spicer once characterized as shares being traded on a stock exchange (*The House That Jack Built* 227), and his characterization of a poem as a seduction for profit stands as a critique of an overblown consumerist culture in which we buy and sell ideals—poetry, language, knowledge, love—with ready money. In such a milieu, an empowering sort of prostitution is only advisable for the poet who knows "exactly what is the price you can sell out for" and retain for him- or herself the agency to choose the market.

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