

**“Go Get Me a Big Grave”: Recent Excavations in the
Jack Spicer Papers at the Bancroft Library**

by **Kevin Killian**

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Modern Literary Manuscripts

BUSTER KEATON. No. This is impossible. You have not expressed what I am really afraid of.

The CHILD. Go to the hand that is on the other side of your heart. Go to the heart laughing. Go get me a big grave.

HELEN of TROY (*crying a little*). I am your mother.

BUSTER KEATON's SHADOW. Yes.

BUSTER KEATON. An artist has no children.

[Time explodes in their faces. It is 2:45, then 3:15, then 4:33, then almost any place in time—drunken and uncalculated.]

Jack Spicer, “Buster Keaton’s Shadow”¹

I’ll sketch out briefly the life and career of Jack Spicer for those of you who don’t know his work. He was born in Hollywood in 1925 and died in San Francisco forty years later. At age twenty he came to Berkeley and joined up with fellow poets Robin Blaser and Robert Duncan, who were busy developing Berkeley as the center of a new postwar poetry and, incidentally, pioneering the so-called “serial poem.” At age 30 he moved briefly to New York and Boston where he developed his theories of dictation. With such obvious models as Blake, Yeats, and the “Orpheus” films of

Cocteau, he came to believe that poetry comes from the outside and that the "invisible world" was out there dictating the poetry. Think of the poet as a sort of radio through which transmissions are received. The job of the poet is to try to move to the spot where reception is ideal, and since the ideal frequency is never achieved, we just do the best we can and sometimes our poems are pretty lousy. Spicer's death in 1965 spelled the bust-up of his particular school of poetry, and for ten years after his death only a few books of his stayed in print. In 1975 his executor, Robin Blaser, who had relocated to Vancouver, produced a magnificent volume *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*. Unusual title, *Collected Books* where you might expect *Collected Poems*, but Blaser was following Spicer's pronouncement of 1958, in which he announced his philosophy of composition. No longer would he write only single poems. Why not? Well, "Poems should echo and reecho against each other. They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can."

"Things fit together. Two inconsequential things can combine together to become a consequence. This is true of poems too. A poem is never to be judged by itself alone. A poem is never by itself alone."

Blaser's edition of Spicer's *Collected Books* was a revelation to many. It fit Pound's idea about poetry, that literature (he wrote in the *ABC of Reading*) is news that stays news. While he was alive, Spicer saw only a few books into print. *After*

Lorca, a collection of translations and imitations; and several serial poems including *Billy the Kid*, *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*, *The Holy Grail*, *Lament for the Makers* and *Language*. Another that he had just finished at his death was printed a year later, the *Book of Magazine Verse*. Seven books altogether, five of them quite large. At Spicer's death, he left behind a trunk filled with papers and his family appointed Robin Blaser and the editor Donald Allen as executors. Blaser took the trunk to Canada and edited the *Collected Books* volume out of the trunk—I always picture it as rather like the trunk in the famous "Born in a Trunk" number in Judy Garland's *A STAR IS BORN*. And when the book came out, Robin, working with the papers, was able to add five more books for a total of twelve. And this book has given rise to an impression of great purity and simplicity on Spicer's part., almost as though he were part of the Shakers. Out of such purity a legend has arisen.

So even the merest scrap of paper in Spicer's hand has been treated fetishistically, so that when, in the 1990s, Fran Herndon discovered the manuscript of Spicer's "fix poems" in a file cabinet in her basement, she was able to sell these six pages for an astronomical sum, and also the New York art press Granary Books put them into print in a very luxurious edition with Herndon's period illustrations.

When the Bancroft opened the boxes of Spicer's papers, they perhaps didn't realize all that they had.

Peter Gizzi and I began sifting broadly through the papers. One box documents Blaser's editing of *The Collected Books*. Another box came stuffed with correspondence, in some cases on both sides, because apparently Blaser asked a number of Spicer's friends to send him Spicer's letters after his death.

What staggered us was the amount of new material. After all, we had approached this task just hoping against hope that there might be one or two "new" poems that we could add to our edition of poems. Instead we found dozens. It soon became clear that what we had found would change our ideas about the way Spicer wrote. Instead of a relatively small corpus of 12 books, with long periods of silence between each poetic project, it now seems as though Spicer were writing every day. People asked him, "What happens if, when you're writing a serial poem, the voices no longer come?"

We also found what you might call "out takes," or with the DVD revolution perhaps "deleted scenes," from every one of Spicer's published works. We had thought that he wrote thirty poems for his sequence "Homage to Creeley." No, he probably wrote thirty-five and excised some of them out of the book. Or forgot them, or misplaced them. It's hard to say, and we would argue among ourselves whether or not this made much of a difference. You can imagine our surprise when we found the manuscript for "Homage to Creeley." Can you imagine, it was an ordinary ream of typing paper, the old fashioned kind that came gummed at the top?

And among the poems there we found one called "Blood and Sand." Instantly we could tell why Spicer had left this poem out of the collection when he printed it at the Pomo Indian reservation in 1959—it was simply too long, a poem that got out of hand and escaped the gnomic, haiku-based restrictions of his work in "Homage to Creeley." But in some cases, the answers aren't clear.

There's more of *After Lorca*, more of *Billy the Kid*, more *Admonitions*, there's twice as much of *A Book of Music*, more of *The Red Wheelbarrow*, of *Fifteen False Propositions Against God*, even the seemingly finite manuscripts of *Holy Grail and Language* have these additional poems that we have come to associate with the books that anchor the projects in question.

We found the manuscripts to Spicer's greatest and longest work, which he published in 1962 as THE HEADS OF THE TOWN UP TO THE AETHER. It was a trilogy, or tetralogy, composed of three books, "Homage to Creeley," now revised with a set of footnotes that Spicer wrote as a book of its own quasi-independent status, a Textbook of Poetry, and A Fake Novel about the Life of Arthur Rimbaud. Another notebook, of exactly the same shape and size, called "Helen A Revision," indicates that Helen might once have been intended as another part of The Heads of the Town. We'd like to publish HELEN some day, as a book of its own. Spicer's friend, Robert Duncan, was working on a book about the modernist poet HD at the time, and he was passing along to Spicer the chapters of

this material as he went along, for Spicer to comment on, and maybe there was a link here, for Spicer’s HELEN is directly indebted to HD’s poem Helen in Egypt, which Duncan had a copy of in manuscript.

There are poems dedicated to Steve Jonas and to Bob Kaufman, and in general the work of these two seminal black poets of the 1950s reveals itself as much more influential on Spicer than we had previously thought. We have known, of course, that Spicer, a white man, worked shoulder to shoulder with Hayward King, a black artist, for the two of them were two of the “Six” who began the famous 6 Gallery, but how did that work out in practice, on a day to day basis? Much scholarly work has been done in recent years on Frank O’Hara as a poet intensely concerned with race issues in the 1950s, and once these Spicer papers become more generally known I can envision a sort of parallel development in our thinking of Spicer as a poet of civil rights, African nationalism, and racial alterity.

More and more I’m drawn to a long serial poem which we have called “The Clocks,” written during the early period of AFTER LORCA and taking the Surrealist impulses of Lorca and Dali to an extreme. The Clocks is a strange, languid, modernist affair, like nothing previously associated with Spicer. You know those paintings by Dali of the clock faces melting on rocks? Even in 1956 I imagine these clock faces must have been a cliché of modernism, their melting contours the objective correlative for a wide range of associations from the “Persistence of

Memory” to the Dali-inspired fantasies of psychoanalysis in Hitchcock’s “Spellbound.” It’s to Spicer’s credit that he manages to reinvent all these clock imagery and make it almost new again. He has flocks of clocks flying like clouds of locusts. There’s Oedipus as the original sphinx as the four-sided clock. Black numbers float through a Melvillean whiteness. There’s everything but the flying toasters going on in this poem, it’s insane. We can see so easily how Spicer might easily have become a poet of hallucination, of the hallucinogenic, like our friend Philip Lamantia. When White Rabbit Press published *After Lorca*, Spicer had a copy sent to Dali at his New York dealer, the Bignou Gallery. (He was always sending away copies of his books to the most unlikely people.) But “The Clocks” was not published as part of *After Lorca* and none of it has yet been seen.

Blaser printed a few pages of a manifesto in his edition of Spicer, “The Unvert Manifesto,” and some pages of a diary called “The Journal of Oliver Charming.” Peter and I were thrilled to find out that these extracts were just scratching the surface of a project that occupied Spicer for months, and that the Oliver Charming material was apparently planned as a sort of Surrealist novel, sort of a combination of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Young and Evil* by Parker Tyler and Charles Henri Ford, perhaps something of Breton’s “*Nadja*.” It’s super French, and anticipates the craziest of Raymond Queneau’s novels. It’s also insanely, obscenely homosexual, a book in which Spicer shrugs off the heterosexual

imperative he struggled with in ordinary life, for most of the action takes place in gay bars. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the poet who befriended Emily Dickinson, appears as an angel in this novel, and introduces Oliver Charming to such legendary figures as Orpheus, Andre Gide, and Lizzie Borden. Wallace Stevens is acclaimed as the true Dada poet for he is the poet hiding the largest number of “secret vices.”

In fact we were very pleased to find enough prose fiction among these papers to produce a beautiful volume of Spicer’s writing. The young poet Aaron Kunin is now working on an edition of Spicer’s plays. One full-length play, “Troilus,” appears in these papers, and a number of one acts, including a loose adaptation by Spicer of Hawthorne’s famous tale of the witches Sabbath, “:Young Goodman Brown.” We acted out these plays over the past year or two and found them remarkably stage-worthy. It’s funny to think that none of these plays were ever performed during Spicer’s lifetime but have found a new life today.

In general our take is that Spicer led a considerably messier writing life than we could ever believe possible. Abandoned and neglected projects are everywhere. Is all of it good? No, but then again not everything Spicer published during his lifetime was “good.” The truth is, the way of the serial poem is littered with danger. It’s a high risk occupation staying up on that tightrope. And now we have a new serial poem by Spicer, called “For Major General Abner Doubleday, Inventor of Baseball and First American President of the Theosophical Society.”

We have the “Birthday Poem for James (and Jim) Alexander,” in nine sections; we have “Dignity,” in five. We have a vast number of previously unknown hokku, enough to make up a whole book, which added to the miscellaneous poems that Spicer published in his short-lived 1959 magazine “J,” form a more unified and cohesive whole. What was great is that, we had known for many years, from a list that Spicer had included in a letter to Donald Allen way back when, he gave Don a list of his own favorite poems, and he named some titles for which no corresponding texts survived. Can you believe it, these boxes yielded up every missing poem!

I suppose it’s kind of crazy that I, a fellow who works as a secretary downtown in San Francisco, without any real training as an archivist, is going through these papers and in fact, appearing on this panel. From all over the country, for the last two years, other Spicer fans have been asking me, well, what happened, who made you the luckiest son of a gun in the Valley? The truth is that when he and Holt Spicer made this bequest to the Bancroft, they made some sort of provision that would allow me, and Peter Gizzi, we who are editing this new edition of Spicer’s work, an unlimited access to the papers, so you guys were kind of saddled with me from the beginning. You had to let me in, but certainly what I didn’t expect was that we worked out such an amenable arrangement all the way around. I would have paid the Bancroft for the kind of access I got, but instead I wound up hired by the Bancroft as a sort of consultant and got, I don’t know, ten

dollars an hour to do this one thing in the world I find better than sex. It's an unconventional even a Bohemian agreement, I guess, and one that I expect wouldn't be countenanced at the Widener or the Beinecke, but I propose that you keep doing it for your other collections too. Look at the Lamantia papers! Get someone in who knows about them, give him or her a few dollars, and you'll be surprised how quickly they get sorted out.

Because of the imminent retrofitting of the Bancroft, Peter and I, aided by a volunteer team of interns, poets and graduate students who helped us enter nearly every scrap of paper into the computer, we had a deadline. Everything had to be finished by, was it June 1st? Well, not everything, but the bulk of the material had to be sorted by the time summer began.

This part won't interest anyone but the librarians. But all the time I've been here I've been wondering about the so-called sanctity of the collections. Case in point, I'd been working in the Bancroft's already quite extensive Spicer collections for many years, and published an edition of a "Dialogue of Eastern versus Western Poetry," a rare collaboration between Spicer, Duncan, and Blaser which was written entirely on index cards in pencil, I don't know how many cards there were, fifty or sixty I guess, and the Bancroft has had them since 1973 or 1974. When Peter and I were sifting through the masses of papers in the new collection, a single index card dropped to the floor and I knew right away, this was really part of the so called

“cards” project. “Let’s just go over to the “cards” file and put it in its rightful place,” I announced to Tanya Hollis, of the Bancroft. Aghast she protested, no, it does not belong there. She was speaking as an archivist, I as an editor, nay, a poet. I’m like, put it in its rightful place; I even used the ultimate line of the amateur: “Who’ll know?”

We were making the Finding Aid for the Spicer papers. Everything was going into those acid-free folders that will last a thousand years. Spicer worked on any kind of paper he could get his hands on, index cards, typing paper, but most often spiral notebooks and steno pads. In time he came to practice a sort of field composition, in which the poem was limited by the size of the page and when he came to the bottom line, the poem ended, so that the poems in his last books often resemble each other at least spatially. What was great dealing with this vast number of original manuscripts was discovering, one day, under the frantic pressure of trying to get out of the way of the bulldozers, that “Oh look, look at that single page there—the one that seems torn out of a notebook, and look at this page, they’re the same.” All of a sudden we were figuring out all sorts of sequencing and probable chronologies. You’d open a notebook and you’d see on the inside binding what looked like thirteen pages ripped out, you could count the fringe. Then over there in another box you’d find the thirteen pages. Thus we discovered that Spicer had paused work on, say, *Language* in order to translate a poem by Mao Tse-Tung; thus

we found out that the Abner Doubleday manuscript was written at the same time as his poem for Aleister Crowley. Our last days at the Bancroft were marked by a flurry of revision, pile tumbling, discovery and chronological shocks. The famous poem that begins "Language," the poem that begins, "This ocean, humiliating in its disguises," and ends, "No one listens to poetry," which we have all thought of as Spicer's grand summation of his career, turns out to have been written much, much earlier, in the preceding decade. We found a big folder filled with pages copied from road maps, the kind you'd stash in your glove compartment, and because Spicer didn't drive we wondered about that for awhile, then put aside this folder. On another day we unearthed a sheaf of poems with strange titles—titles with three digits, like "257," etc, these beautiful, late poems about California geography. I don't know how it happens but one of us had this amazing Eureka moment and put together the two folders, thus discovering that Spicer had written these poems in direct response to the different map pages. It wasn't that he, Spicer, had never written ekphrastically before: the man who wrote "The Card Players" (in *A Book Of Music*) knew his Cezanne well. But somehow all of a sudden our picture of the poet who drank himself into a state of pure Orphic inspiration and woke himself up at 3 a.m. to write the perfect poem seemed suddenly obsolete in the face of these maps.

¹“Buster Keaton’s Shadow,” Jack Spicer, from an unpublished notebook from the After Lorca period; Jack Spicer papers, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley Special Collections