

Pressure Put on Poems

By Stephan Delbos

Book Review:

*My Vocabulary Did This to Me:
The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*
Edited by Peter Gizzi & Kevin Killian
Wesleyan University Press, 2009.



Jack Spicer published seven books between 1957 and 1965, prefiguring the avant-garde movement in American poetics by more than a decade. Spicer's work has grown steadily more popular since his death, at age 40, in 1965. Two previous volumes, *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* (Black Sparrow Press, 1975) and *One Night Stand & Other Poems* (Grey Fox Press, 1980), gathered Spicer's mature and early work into separate publications. *My Vocabulary Did This to Me* presents all of Spicer's published and unpublished poems in a single, chronological collection. Editors Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian, both of whom have done biographical and critical work on Spicer, contribute insightful notes and an introduction.

Spicer would later ridicule his early poems as "one night stands," and distance himself from the idea of a single, perfectly crafted poem in favor of purely inspired, or "dictated" book-length poems. Nevertheless, the best of these early poems carry the seeds of a style that would eventually flourish. The poem "Any fool can get into an ocean," for example, employs the admonitory tone and mythic imagery that would become mainstays of Spicer's work:

Any fool can get into an ocean
But it takes a Goddess
To get out of one.
What's true of oceans is true, of course,
Of labyrinths and poems. When you start swimming
Through rip-tide of rhythms and the metaphor's seaweed
You need to be a good swimmer . . .

Typically, Spicer stitches disparate concepts and imagery into a patchwork of linguistics, myth, poetics and sport, yet he masks this expansive erudition with a straight-talking tone. The poem's first three lines pun on Robert Frost's statement, "Any fool can get into a poem, but it takes a poet to get out of one." This reference lends depth to the implied Venus myth, while substantiating the metaphor of poetry as an ocean. The act of secreting knowledge within colloquial language becomes a constant gesture in Spicer's work.

Spicer's first mature poetry came with the publication of *After Lorca* in 1957. The book is a collection of "translations" from Lorca, though Spicer admitted to knowing virtually no Spanish. Instead, he claimed that Lorca had dictated the poems to him. The poetry in *After Lorca* is startlingly free of rhetoric and cumbersome narrative. Employing simple language, Spicer presents surreal images effortlessly, and this seeming ease only adds to the uncanny atmosphere the poems create. The poems of *After Lorca* are spaces open for interpretation, spaces that cannot be replicated in paraphrase. "Ballad of the Little Girl Who Invented the Universe" is one such example:

Jasmine flower and a bull with his throat slashed.
 Infinite sidewalk. Map. Room. Harp. Sunrise.
 A little girl pretends a bull made of jasmine
 And the bull is a bloody twilight that bellows . . .

But the sky is an elephant
 And the jasmines are water without blood
 And the little girl is a bouquet of night flowers
 Lost on a big dark sidewalk . . .

Though the best of his later work can be equally startling, Spicer never again achieved such radiant imagery. Reading chronologically through *My Vocabulary Did This to Me*, one witnesses Spicer's craft giving way to voice. Setting, imagery, coherent metaphor and almost all evidence of design disappear from the poems as they dissolve into pure utterance. In his weaker work, this dissolution leads to obscure rhetoric, which does not much reward the intense

study comprehension requires. Spicer's most successful later poems open to a sea of uncertainty and unsoundable depth.

His work culminated with the 1965 publication of *Language*, a book of compassionate poetry that associates sports, biography, astrology and history to address both idiosyncratic and humanitarian concerns.

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Newspapers

Left in my house.

My house is Aquarius. I don't believe

The water-bearer

Has equal weight on his shoulders.

The lines never do.

We give equal

Space to everything in our lives. Eich—

Mann proved that false in killing like you raise wildflowers . . .

Through violent, linear, and conceptual enjambments, Spicer put pressure on his language, wrenching puns and multiple associations from syllables. Every statement contains both literal and implied meanings that defy absolute interpretation. The poems in *Language* show Spicer's loyal engagement with words, society and the imagination.

Spicer created a poetry of deceptive lightness and depth that stands at odds with even his closest contemporaries in the schools and theories of mid-century American poetics. *My Vocabulary Did This to Me* will allow Spicer's work to continue resonating within the American canon and within the minds of readers.