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**Community, Time, and the Art of Self-Destruction
in the Books of Jack Spicer**

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Abstract

Jack Spicer's life and work was intimately bound up with a sense of community. His poetry workshop in 1957, his poetic companionship with Robin Blaser and Robert Duncan, and his involvement with young poets in the Bay Area, all point to a conception of poetry as community. It is, however, his relationship to past poets and the "tradition" of modern poetry that this thesis mainly focuses on. From the beginning to the end of my thesis, the problematic meaning of this tradition is explored. My thesis is that Spicer's poetry does not create a vision, or conception of community, but creates an *instance* of community. Time figures into Spicer's sense of community because it is by bringing the past to bear on the present that communities survive into the future, but also because an "experience of time" is shared and passed on by his poetry. This experience of time is, however, problematic for the self and its sense of identity. Time undermines the self-sameness of identity, and thus an art that exposes the self to time would be an "art of self-destruction." In a sense, the poet outlives his/her identity. The art of self-destruction, as I conceive it, is an art of survival, not an ode to suicide.

Abbreviations in Citations

- AT* Adorno, T.W. *Aesthetic Theory*.
- ND* — *Negative Dialectics*.
- B* Baudelaire, Charles. *Baudelaire: Selected Verse*.
- ChB* Benjamin, Walter. *Charles Baudelaire: Lyric Poet of the Era of High Capitalism*.
- I* — *Illuminations*.
- UC* Blanchot. *The Unavowable Community*.
- TO* Levinas. *Time and the Other*.
- IC* Nancy. *The Inoperative Community*.
- TN III* Ricoeur. *Time and Narrative Vol. III*.
- CB* Spicer. *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*.

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Introduction: Outside Granada

During the writing of *After Lorca*, Jack Spicer realized that he “was writing a book instead of a series of poems” (*Collected Books* 60), and he would write only “books” of poems for the rest of his life. The main point of this new style of writing was that “poems should echo and re-echo each other. They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can” (CB 61). At one point Spicer “had advised Charles Olson to read *After Lorca* as though it were a novel” (Ellingham and Killian 129). However, *After Lorca* is a very special form of narrative. This book is more like a community of poems than a novel, for each poem is a poem in its own right, but each also “communicates” with those that come before and after it. Thus *After Lorca* is less a sequence of poems than a kind of gathering where different voices speak, but where the poems also develop a special vocabulary among them. In some sense the narrative of *After Lorca* is the story of this poetic vocabulary.

Spicer rarely used the concept of community explicitly in his poetry, yet what I will be arguing is that his poetry and poetics articulate an experience of community that he shares with the poets he reads, and also with readers he writes to. Spicer’s poetry is not *about* community: rather, it is a moment *of* community. The minimal definition of community is sharing something in common with others, and in *After Lorca* this “something that is shared” is shared through “translation.” Translation, as Spicer understands it, is made possible through the correspondence of one person’s experience with another’s. Time is involved in this not just because all human

relationships occur in time, but because a profound experience of time is what Spicer shares with Lorca. This temporal experience undermines the self's identity, and for this reason their work can be called an art of self-destruction.

But I want to leave to later chapters definitions of the *concepts* of community, time, and the art of self-destruction in order to explore, in this introduction, how they appear in experiential terms in *After Lorca*. *After Lorca* is the best place to begin not just because this is the first of his "books," but also because in this book Spicer articulates his poetics in letters to Lorca. The unique character of these poems as "translations" privileges the Other (Lorca), and yet, as we shall see, Spicer takes Lorca's poetry up in a way that is not simple translation. Also, in these poems there is a relationship to the actual poet Garcia Lorca that is more than an engagement with "text." Lorca does not function as an instance of Barthes' "death of the author" who disappears into the text, but rather Lorca exceeds the text. Lorca signs the fictional Introduction to *After Lorca* from "Outside Granada, October 1957" to emphasize his problematic "presence" beyond the text. To compound this sense of Lorca's presence, Spicer writes a series of letters to Lorca that he places at intervals between the poems.

"After," in the book's title, means both to be writing "after" Lorca in the sense of "in the manner of," but also to be coming at a later point in time. In the Introduction Lorca/Spicer admits that

these poems are not translations. In even the most literal of them Mr. Spicer seems to derive pleasure in inserting or substituting one or two words which completely change the mood and often the meaning of the poem as I had written

it ... Finally there are an almost equal number of poems I did not write at all (one supposes that they must be his) executed in a somewhat fanciful imitation of my early style...and I have further complicated the problem (with malice aforethought I must admit) by sending Mr. Spicer several poems written after my death which he has also translated and included here. Even the most faithful student of my work will be hard put to decide what is and what is not Garcia Lorca as, indeed, he would if he were to look into my present resting place. The analogy is impolite, but I fear the impoliteness is deserved. (CB 11)

Why is the impoliteness deserved? This grotesque image exposes readers to the fact that they are involved in reading the works of a dead man. Lorca/Spicer suspects that the reader's tendency is to deny this aspect of the poetry. Spicer makes such avoidance impossible by incarnating the voice of Lorca, and pointing to where that voice is coming from. Spicer, in this black comedic way, is reminding the reader that the act of reading is not the simple reading of a "text," but that the poem is a trace of a life that is no more. Translation performs this play between the absence of Lorca in death and the persistence of his voice creating a heightened awareness of the temporality of reading.

This intimacy with mortality is folded in a complex way into the book, for not only is the mortal absence of Lorca an image that haunts the entire book, but Lorca's poetry itself expresses an extreme awareness of finitude as a source of mystery. In the 1979 preface to *Time and the Other*, Levinas expresses the relationship of death to mystery: "Then there is what is said of death: not a pure nothingness but an unassumable mystery and, in this sense, the

eventuality of the event at the point of making an irruption within the Sameness of immanence, of interrupting the monotony of the tick-tock of solitary instants – the eventuality of the *wholly other*, of the future, the temporality of time where diachrony precisely describes the relationship with what remains absolutely outside” (*Time and the Other* 35). Lorca is the intimate presence of this mystery that is “wholly outside.” The grim image of Lorca’s resting place is a metaphor for the way death, or alterity, is “mixed” into language. Spicer captures this play of alterity and representation by giving Lorca an impossible voice. Levinas indicates how death resists representation: “Before death that will be mystery and not necessarily nothingness, the absorption of one term by another does not come about” (*TO* 41). By so graphically presenting Lorca’s death, Spicer prevents the reader from absorbing Lorca into the “text.” The “presence” of Lorca is the presence of unassumable mystery in the book, for the readers do not take the mystery on themselves, but rather the problematic presence of Lorca exposes them to it; the mystery comes to them from outside.

Lorca speaking from “outside Granada” creates a difficult moment for the reader. It is a moment of return to the death of Lorca, or a face to face with death. Blanchot in his *The Unavowable Community* quotes Bataille: “A man alive who sees a fellow man die, can survive only *beside himself*” (*UC* 9). What this means is that the death of the Other not only exposes one to the alterity of the Other, but also to the otherness of one’s self. This intimacy with death, or the “wholly other,” is the precondition of what I am calling the “art of self-destruction,” for in this experience the self experiences non-being as its future – a future that is both intimate and other.

In his 1933 lecture “Play and Theory of Duende”, Lorca establishes this relationship of death to mystery and alterity. The entire lecture is a poetic definition of the *duende*, which is an ancient Spanish folk concept. The *duende* Lorca explains is “a power, not a work. It is a struggle, not a thought.” He quotes “an old maestro of the guitar” who says “the *duende* is not in the throat; the *duende* climbs up inside you, from the soles of the feet” (*In Search of Duende* 49).

Lorca contrasts *duende* with “the other powers” of poetry by saying that, “with idea, sound, or gesture, the *duende* enjoys fighting the creator at the very rim of the well. Angel and muse escape with violin, meter, and compass; the duende wounds. In the healing of that wound, which never closes, lies the strange, invented qualities of a man’s work” (*ISD* 58). The wound “which never closes” is an image of the self perpetually exposed to the outside. “The magical property of a poem is to remain possessed by *duende* that can baptize in dark water all who look at it, for with *duende* it is easier to love and to understand, and one can be sure of being loved and understood. In poetry this struggle for expression and communication is sometimes fatal” (*ISD* 58). The idea that one can be “baptized” by *duende* through a poem evokes a sense of initiation into poetic community, but Lorca also indicates a certain danger to the self that is involved in crossing this threshold. When Lorca says “the *duende* does not come at all unless he sees that death is possible,” he means both real death and a metaphoric death. The metaphoric death is fatal to the self because once one has been initiated by the “dark waters” the self can never return to what it was – neither to the fantasy of its permanence, nor to the certainty of its discourse: “there are neither maps nor exercises to help us find the *duende*. We know only that he

burns the blood like a poultice of broken glass, that he exhausts and rejects all the sweet geometry we have learned, that he smashes styles, that he leans on human pain with no consolation” (*ISD* 51).

This concept of being without consolation is very important because it allows for a distinction between poetic discourse and forms of discourse that create reasons and explanations for the state of things. From the point of view of the self, can there be a good reason for death? The unconsolable is the limit of discourse, but is not, for all that, silent. The *duende* sings from the wound that doesn’t close; the poet sings from a condition of exposure to the inconsolable reality of finitude. This exposure to death is without the consolations of tradition, or religion, or any discourse: “the poem either poses a deep emotional question with no answer, or solves it with death, which is the question of questions” (*ISD* 12).

Wound, mystery and time are evoked in the first poem in *After Lorca* which begins “In the white endlessness / Snow seaweed and salt / He lost his imagination” (*CB* 13). Lorca’s “infinito” is translated by Spicer as “endlessness,” and the word seems to reach into both infinite space and infinite time. This thought is too vast for the self, and the imagination becomes lost in it. But later in the poem the experience of the infinite reverses: “in the white endlessness / How pure and big a wound / His imagination left” (13). The imagination now tears itself away from the white endlessness, and leaves Lorca’s ever present wound behind. Spicer makes a small but profound change in the last two lines of the poem. The original reads, “En el blanco infinito. / Nieve. Nardo. Salina,” which is literally “In the white infinity / Snow. Spikenard. Salt.” Spicer translates this as “Snow, seaweed and salt. Now / In the white endlessness” (13). He has

changed spikenard to seaweed, which does little to change the sense of the poem since both are green plants that stand out from the overwhelming whiteness. However, his addition of “now” gives the poem definite timing. The flash of green of the seaweed is the image of the “now” that stands out against the white of snow and salt that blend into the endlessness. The poem itself is surrounded by the white of the page and by the endlessness that preceded and antedates its reading. But, for the time (now) that the poem lasts, it is not one with the white endlessness. The poem, or poet, is a singular interruption of the infinite; singularity appears as a wound in the infinite.

This poem is titled “Juan Ramon Jiminez” after Lorca’s friend and fellow poet, and it is “A Translation for John Ryan,” who was a painter and friend of Spicer’s. The poem is therefore densely peopled, and if we add the reader(s), the poem can be seen as a kind of place where all these people meet. The image of the imagination being torn from infinity creates a sense of singularity that is shared by all these individuals gathered at the edges of the poem. To compound this grouping, the poem is part of a series of poems Lorca wrote called “Three Portraits With Shading.” In this series Lorca creates poem-portraits of Jiminez, Verlaine, and Debussy. Lorca wrote that the poet Verlaine had been a “traveling companion” (*Selected Verse* 312) of his, though Verlaine was dead by the time Lorca began to write poetry, much like Lorca had been dead by the time Spicer began to write poetry. In a diary Lorca wrote, “I am a poor, passionate, silent lad who, almost like the marvelous Verlaine, has within him a lily that is impossible to water.” (*SV* 312). The lily that one cannot water is an eloquent image of both the inaccessibility of the deep interior of the self, and of the mortal nature of that flower. This sense

of self is what Lorca shares with Verlaine. This temporal folding in which the experience of one poet responds to another from his own singular experience, is folded again by Spicer's translation of Lorca's "Verlaine":

A song
Which I shall never sing
Has fallen asleep on my lips
A song which I shall never sing – (CB 24)

This poem is "after Verlaine" in much the same way that Spicer's translations are after Lorca. In the manner of Verlaine's symbolist poetics, the poem is an allegory of itself, for the tale of its absence is the very substance of its presence. This presence is foretold by the lines "At that time / I'll imagine the song / That I shall never sing." Like the "now" of "Juan Ramon Jimenez," "at that time" creates a definite experience of absence located in time. The poem describes this song that will never be sung: "A song full of lips / And far-off washes / A song full of lost / Hours in the shadow." But in the midst of this loss is the image of the "song of a star that's alive / Above enduring day" (CB 24). If we are ever to find a sense of identity that is not pure absence in Lorca, or in Spicer, it is to be found in this image of the star that is "alive" in the daytime sky. The allegory of the poem is the allegory of the self, for the star exists in its invisible brilliance in the duration of time. The full mystery of "alive" is illuminated in this image, for in its being alive the self has duration, it is not nothing, but as the song that will never be sung, and as the star which cannot be seen, the self is intimate with its own absence and invisibility. This intimacy is shared across time by singular beings absent from each other.

The composer Debussy lends his name to the third portrait in this series. Debussy “translated” Mallarmé’s “L’Après Midi D’Un Faun” into music and preserved much of the indeterminate coloring of this poem that is intimately bound up with a sense of time, memory and absence. The image of the shadow that occurs in “Debussy” appears musically, not as sound, but as the melodic appearance of a vanishing image:

My shadow moves silently
Upon the water in the ditch.
Upon my shadow are the frogs
Blocked off from the stars. (CB 16)

These lines create a marvelous spatial distance between the stars, the body of the poet, and the small frogs in the darkness of the ditch. But the poet’s shadow is also a metaphor for the self’s distance from itself. Spicer accentuates this distance by giving the shadow its own intentionality: “The shadow demands from my body / Unmoving images” (24). Spicer has changed the meaning of Lorca’s verse that can be more literally translated as: “The shadow sends my body / The reflection of quiet things” (SV 149). In Spicer’s translation there is an impossible demand for a synchronicity that can never be met. The next lines give a playful, but deadly, image of the danger the shadow/self is in by being out in the world: “My shadow skims the water like a huge / Violet-colored mosquito” (16). The gliding shadow drifts over the ditch like a melody, but as a mosquito, it is in danger of being consumed by the frogs. This sense echoes the “lost hours in the shadow” of “Verlaine,” and the next lines echo the “star that is alive above enduring day”:

A hundred crickets try to mine gold
From the light in the rushes. (CB 17)

As the poet’s shadow is outside him, blocking off the stars, so the sounds of the crickets are

drawing light out of the shadow of the poet: “A light born in my heart / Upon the ditch, reflected” (17). This dialectic of apparition and invisibility is a kind of ontological melody played between the human and the natural, as well as between the presence and absence of the moment. Nature has a presence that is answered by the poet’s sense of absence, and because of the poet the world has a heart, yet the light of that heart is a response to what is outside it. The heart is “composed” of absence, outwardness, and the consciousness of this relationship. The music of this movement is not so much in the sound of the words as in the orchestral play between the night, the stars, the poet, his shadow, the crickets, and frogs. And behind it all stands the absent composer, Debussy.

The unique sense of community between the living poet and the absent composer grows when we realize that this is Spicer’s translation of the absent Lorca. The shadow of this “community of absence” appears in Spicer’s translation of Lorca’s “The Moon and Lady Death,” where “Lady Death, wrinkled, / Goes looking for custom / At the heels of a crowd / Of tenuous phantoms” (*CB* 49). A “tenuous” phantom is a phantom that is not quite a phantom, that is, a phantom on the edge of presence:

Near the dead oak tree
Near the dry river
There is a fair without trumpets
And tents made of shadow. (*CB* 49)

The trumpets and the fair evoke a gathering and a celebration, but this gathering is evoked in its absence. Yet this absence is not just of a gathering that is not there, but one which *was* there, for every gathering eventually disperses. But while finitude seems to have the last word here, it does not, for the last word is the poetic image that is shared. Poetry is also a gathering and poems are “tents made of shadow” (49). The presence of the poem (in its reading) is the very gathering that the poem images in its absence, for the poem is a gathering where those gathered are not present to one another. To recognize the finitude of community in the very longing for community is not the absence of community, but a community of absence. Poet and reader are separated by time, so where they gather is beside a dry river, and where they celebrate is at a fair without trumpets. Lorca’s poems which are dedicated to other poets (and poetic composers like Debussy), and Spicer’s translations all invoke this unique sense of a community of those not only absent, but those who share in the very experience of absence.

If the minimal definition of community is to share something in common, then what this community of poets seems to be sharing is an experience of time as shadow, passing, loss or absence. But the temporal image of the shadow is answered in Lorca’s poetry by the image of bone; the self appears as a dialectic of shadow and solidity. *After Lorca* could almost be described as a genealogy of the self, for it begins with the emergence, in “Juan Ramon Jiminez,” of a singular “He” who “walks / Upon a soundless carpet made / Of pigeon feathers” and is “without eyes or thumbs.” This is barely a self, or a self just torn from the infinite and on the

verge of being returned to it. The next poem – “Ballad of the Little Girl Who Invented the Universe” (CB 14) – begins with more vivid images, but they are no more stable:

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. (CB 14)

The girl and her world are constantly shifting. She becomes “lost on a big dark sidewalk” that echoes the “infinite sidewalk” above which echoes the “white endlessness” of “Juan Ramon Jiminez.” But this is a narrative that devolves to the level of bone. In “Juan Ramon Jiminez,” “he suffers a dream not moving / But the bones quiver” (CB 13), while in this poem:

Between the jasmine and the bull
 Or the hooks of the sleeping people of marble
 In the jasmine, clouds and an elephant –
 The skeleton of a little girl turning. (14)

Images of bones and skeletons occur often in Lorca’s poetry and recur throughout *After Lorca*. In “The Ballad of Escape” Spicer translates:

And there is no one in touching something recently born
 Who can quite forget the motionless skulls of horses
 Because roses always search in the forehead
 For a hard landscape of bone. (CB 45)

Bone is an image of solidity, or of a self/body that is firmly *there*, but bones are also what remains after the self has disappeared in death. In this play of images, the permanent becomes a reminder of the temporary.

The first letter that Spicer writes to Lorca begins with this dialectic:

These letters are to be temporary as our poetry is to be permanent. They will establish the bulk, the wastage that my sour-stomached contemporaries demand to help them swallow and digest the pure word. We will use up our rhetoric here so that it will not appear in the poems. Let it be consumed paragraph by paragraph, day by day, until nothing of it is left in our poetry and nothing of our poetry is left in it. It is precisely because these letters are unnecessary that they must be written" (*CB* 15).

Spicer's struggle for a poetic language appears in this distinction of poetry and prose. Prose digests the pure word, which brings us back to Levinas' sense of alterity/mystery/death being absorbed by representation. The "pure word" is the word that is intimate with alterity. "Prose invents – poetry discloses," (15) Spicer writes. If we read "discourse" for "prose" this discussion becomes very contemporary. Discourse theory claims that discourse creates its own truth and objects¹, while poetry in Spicer's terms, uncovers, reveals, or dis-closes. To disclose is to "expose to view," while to know is to draw the object, or Other, into a discourse that identifies (invents) the object in terms of that discourse. As Levinas writes: "The other is made the property of the ego in the knowledge that assures the marvel of immanence In thought understood as vision, knowledge and intentionality, intelligibility thus signifies the reduction of the other to the Same, ... the gathering of all alterity in presence, and the synchrony of representation. Language is usually understood thus" (*TO* 100). It is precisely the "synchrony of representation" that Spicer is designating as prose.

This prose/discourse/rhetoric forms a tradition that "covers up the nakedness of the

bare word" (CB 15). But for Spicer "tradition means much more than this. It means generations of different poets in different countries patiently telling the same story, writing the same poem" (CB 15). To try and understand what Spicer means by "generations of poets telling the same story, writing the same poem" we must grasp what he means by "the bare word." "When I translate one of your poems I come across words I do not understand. I always guess at their meanings. I am inevitably right. A really perfect poem (no one has written one yet) could be perfectly translated by a person who did not know one word of the language it was written in. A really perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary" (25). Spicer is using rhetoric to confound rhetoric, for a "really perfect poem" would have no words in it. The recurrence of "shadow," "star," "moon," "heart," and other terms in *After Lorca* creates a small, concentrated vocabulary, for the meaning of these words deepens with each poem. This concentration would ideally, for Spicer, lead to the evaporation of words altogether, for there is a sense in which words get in the way of the poem:

We want to transfer the immediate object, the immediate emotion to the poem – and yet the immediate always has hundreds of its own words clinging to it, short-lived and tenacious as barnacles. And it is wrong to scrape them off and substitute others. A poet is a time mechanic not an embalmer. The words around the immediate shrivel and decay like flesh around the body. No mummy sheet of tradition can be used to stop the process. Objects, words must be led across time not preserved against it" (CB 25).

In this poetics Spicer is distinguishing between two kinds of tradition. The first, indicated by the image of the mummy sheet, seeks to preserve the past against time, but Spicer sees this as futile. The other kind of tradition is one that involves a special use of language. The problem of leading the immediate across time cannot be overcome by simply transferring the immediacy of the object or emotion to the poem as it is, for it cannot be preserved in its immediacy as the decaying image of the mummy indicates. To develop a poetics in which objects (or emotions) are “led across time not preserved against it,” Spicer extends his argument to the most radical aspect of his poetics:

I would like to make poems out of real objects. The lemon to be a lemon that the reader could cut or squeeze or taste – a real lemon like newspaper in a collage is a real newspaper. I would like the moon in my poems to be a real moon, one which could be suddenly covered with a cloud that has nothing to do with the poem – a moon utterly independent of images. The imagination pictures the real. I would like to point to the real, disclose it, to make a poem that has no sound in it but the pointing of a finger. (*CB* 33).

This silent poem is the image of language effacing itself before the experience of the object. Spicer is aware of the power that words have to “invent” objects and by creating this sense of an infinitely small vocabulary, he has forced us to imagine a process in which language discloses the object rather than imposes meaning upon it. The impossible suggestion that real objects can inhabit the poem is not just wishful thinking, but points to an alterity that traditions with systems of representation assimilate, erase, or bind up in mummy sheets. It may not be

possible to bring the real object into the poem, but it is possible to translate the experience of the “otherness” of the objects into the poem. For this experience to carry (like an echo) into the future, it must find a point in the future, that is, it must find an Other whose experience corresponds.

Spicer explains how this shared sense of alterity is possible:

the poem is a collage of the real. But things decay, reason argues. Real things become garbage. The piece of lemon you shellac to the canvas begins to develop a mold Yes, but the garbage of the real reaches out into the current world making *its* objects, in turn, visible.... As things decay they bring their equivalents into being... that tree you saw in Spain is a tree I could never have seen in California, that lemon has a different smell and a different taste, BUT the answer is this – every place and every time has a real object to *correspond* with your real object... one does not need to imagine that lemon; one needs to discover it. (CB 34)

Discovering the lemon means to experience the corresponding alterity, and this experience creates the lastingness of poetry. Thus, the possibility of poetry lasting depends upon the Other’s experience, for, in Spicer’s view, it is only as the poet’s experience of alterity corresponds to another’s that poems can be reawakened into being.

Spicer is therefore challenging the power of discourse not just at the site of the poem, but at the moment of experience, for poetry initiates the reader not only into the world of poetry, but into this profound sense of alterity. Poetry, which would seem to be the art most

involved in language is, in Spicer's view, the one most resistant to language's power. Spicer ends the letter by drawing an analogy between the letter he is writing and the lemon: "Even these letters. They correspond to something (I don't know what) that you have written (perhaps as unapparently as that lemon corresponds to this piece of seaweed) and, in turn, some future poet will write something which *corresponds* to them. That is how we dead men write to each other" (CB 34). This sense of finitude is essential to the sharing of experience, for what is lasting is correspondence itself, or the sharing of this experience of "outside." This sharing of experience is enacted across time with an absent other, and to the extent that the reader's experience corresponds to this poetics of alterity, the reader is drawn into this tradition of "dead men" writing to each other.

Reading, in Spicer's sense, is a translation of one person's experience into another's. "Translation" thus leaves its purely linguistic function and takes on the character of a correspondence of experience. This capacity to be "as if I were you" is not a process in which one "becomes" the other, but it is a co-response which becomes correspondence. The condition of this correspondence, as Spicer makes clear, is temporal. Poems are time machines, he says. What is not there *was* there. To perceive the "pastness" of the past is to perceive the alterity of the past, and correspondingly, the alterity of the present, for the present, in becoming past, is becoming other than itself. This is what "dead men writing to each other" means, for the act of writing involves a direct awareness of the temporal distance between the writer and the reader, and this temporal distance makes the writer "a dead man" in the sense that he is giving himself

freely to the future by becoming the past. The poet is the past of the poem as the reader is the future of the poem.

What I would argue is that Spicer's sense of generations of poets all writing the same poem is what Levinas calls the "intrigue of alterity" that is "knotted prior to knowledge" (Levinas "Diachrony and Representation" 106). One responds to the Other before one knows the Other, or gathers them into a representation. Spicer ends a letter to Lorca with "Even the subconscious is not patient enough for poetry. You are dead and the dead are very patient" (*CB* 15). Spicer's poetics is infused with a kind of passivity, or patience, a 'letting the Other appear,' whether it is a lemon or the absent poet. He has, in a sense, learned patience from the dead. The patience of the dead is the patience of time, or the patience of alterity, for time and alterity are always there. The fictional appearance of Lorca in this book is the appearance of absence, or an image of time that exists at the very edge of experience. The trace of Lorca that appears to the future in his poetry points to the alterity of Lorca for he is not *of* that future present. In a strange sense, his absence is always there, and Spicer's text patiently traces this absence that will not go away.

Community follows in the wake of this response to the absent Other, for it is because of other poets that one becomes a poet; it is through response to other poets' work that poetry becomes a calling. This is not to say that individuals don't have special talents for poetry, or that one cannot decide to be a poet, but without having already responded to poetry, there could be no intention to become a poet. It is in this sense that Lorca can speak of poetry as a baptism by

the dark waters of *duende*, for that baptism is a kind of initiation the self had not intended for itself, and it is fatal in the sense that the self now knows that it is not its own origin.

Reading exhibits a passivity that lets the Other speak, but as one “holds onto” the response it becomes a kind of responsibility for the Other. As Levinas writes, “*from the first*, the ego answers gratuitously, without worrying about reciprocity. This is the gratuitousness of the *for-the-other*, the response of responsibility” (“Diachrony and Representation” 106). This gratuitousness is very important for my thesis, for it indicates a mode of sociality that is prior to the intentionality of the self and founded in the sheer response to the Other. One may intend to read a poem, but one cannot intend the response, for that response is elicited by the poem. By Spicer translating Lorca, he creates an Other to whom he “owes” each poem, but it is a debt that cannot be repaid. Lorca gives gratuitously, and Spicer gives to the reader gratuitously, and out of this Spicer foresees a tradition in which this chain of translation will continue. The sub-text of Spicer’s poetics is that response to others apart from intentionality is a very rare thing, and poetry is perhaps one of the last refuges of this mode of human relationship.

This poetics is perhaps one of the most radical arguments against solipsism in modern literature. And it is also an argument for a certain kind of tradition, for Spicer is creating a poetics which is based upon the sharing of this very experience *across* time. *After Lorca* makes recovery of tradition a tradition because Spicer de-fetishizes tradition by making it a relationship between singular human beings. The paradox of this tradition is that what is “saved” is “something alive – caught forever in the structure of words” (CB 34). It is not the “eternal”

aspect of the Other that is saved, but the temporal, living aspect. This “living” is what humans most share, and yet it is also what they cannot exchange.

The complexity of this self exposed to the outside, yet never escaping itself, is played out in “Narcissus.” The danger of narcissism is clear from the beginning: “Child, / How you keep falling into rivers” (*CB* 39). The child is drawn to his image in the river but, “At the bottom there’s a rose / And in that rose there’s another river.” This surreal image creates an infinite regress as the self sees the rose of itself but within the rose is the river that reflects it. The self, in this sense, is both the rose and what reflects it. However, self-absorption is suddenly interrupted by the vivid image of the world outside: “Look at that bird. Look, / That yellow bird” (39). But the bird is also a mere reflection, for in looking at it “My eyes have fallen down / Into the water.” The child has now become the self of the poet who experiences the crisis of narcissism:

My god
How they’re slipping! Youngster!
—And I’m in the rose myself.
When I was lost in water I
Understood but won’t tell you. (*CB* 39)

To be in the rose is not to be reflected; from inside the rose one does not see the river. The poet has fallen through the reflection and in being lost there he obtains knowledge that he will not disclose. But is the poem itself not a disclosure? The poem is communicating the incommunicable by giving the image of the self falling into its own image. In that simple gesture (refusing to tell) the poem opens an unbridgeable distance between the reader and the poet. The truth of narcissism that is communicated by not being told is the very limit of

narcissism. Witnessing the Other become lost in the rose of itself is the opposite of narcissism, for to see the Other's self-being is not to see them as a reflection of yourself. To have the Other's narcissism exposed is to have your own exposed. For the poet to *tell* the reader would join the reader and poet in a discourse of narcissism in which the concept of narcissism would be exchanged, but the self would remain unexposed. The poem exposes the reader to what cannot be shared. What *is* shared is the impossibility of sharing it.

In "Ode to Walt Whitman," the dialectic of the Other and the Same is played out in a very complex way, but this time in the historical world. Again the poem is titled after another poet, and the sense of a shared experience among Whitman, Lorca and Spicer is clear. Lorca's visit to New York in 1929 – he was standing on Wall Street the day the market crashed – resulted in a book of poems, *Poet in New York*. "Ode to Walt Whitman," taken from this book, expresses a tremendous sense of the momentum of the city and the hold that the capitalist economy has over its inhabitants: "kids were wrestling with industry...A limit of needles will fence in your memory / And there will be coffins to carry out your unemployed" (CB 28).

Whitman is not borne away by the momentum of the city and its economy, and this separates him from the other inhabitants: "None of them would stay / No one wanted to be a cloud" (CB 28). But between these two poets (Lorca and Spicer) and Whitman there is an affective connection:

Not for one moment, beautiful old Walt Whitman
Have I stopped seeing your beard full of butterflies
... Or your voice like a column of ashes
Ancient and beautiful as the fog. (CB 29).

These poets, all distant in time, have more in common with each other than they do with their contemporaries. This absence of commonality with contemporaries becomes the central issue of the poem. Whitman's homosexuality should have given him common cause with the other homosexuals in the city who were "counting on you" (*CB* 29). But "you were not looking for...the frozen spit / Or the wounded curves like a toad's paunch / Which the cocksuckers wear in bars and night-clubs / While the moon beats them along the corners of terror / You were looking for a naked man who would be like a river" (*CB* 30). The poets find common cause, not with the Same, but with those who do not conform to the heartless momentum of the city:

That is why I do not cry out, old Walt Whitman,
 Against the little boy who writes
 A girl's name on his pillow,
 ...But against the rest of you, cocksuckers of cities
 Hard-up and dirty brained
 Mothers of mud, harpies, dreamless enemies
 Of the Love that distributes crowns of gladness. (*CB* 30)

To the degree that the "cocksuckers" seek heartless, self-serving pleasures, they are the "dreamless enemies of love." Love involves the Other, while "dirty brained" promiscuity uses the Other as an instrument of its pleasure just as industry uses workers as instruments for its production. Whitman's poetry, and the others it calls to, resist this instrumentality: "your tongue evoking / Comrades to keep vigil over your gazelle without body./ Sleep, there is nothing left there. (*CB* 31). The image of the poet asleep to his contemporaries, but existing like a river and making sounds that evoke comrades to keep vigil over him, is the image of a community of poets. Whitman is a "gazelle without body" – a dream image of rare beauty that serves to

demarcate the poet and his comrades from an “America [that] drowns itself in machines and weeping” (*CB* 31).

The poem ends, not with a solidarity with what is the Same, but with a solidarity with what is Other. Against the hegemony of industry and the systemic inequality Lorca saw in Harlem, the last lines of the poem have “a little black boy announce to the white men of gold / The arrival of the reign of the ear of wheat” (*CB* 31). What kind of sovereignty would be “the reign of an ear of wheat?” To what kind of politics is it pointing? It would be the reign of what has no legitimate place in the urban landscape. The power of the powerless and the reign of the natural (“no one wanted to be a river”) creates a sovereignty that is beyond the reach of the city and its progressive momentum. This sovereignty forms a power that negates power and is shared by those who have been excluded.

In the last letter in the book, Spicer admits that “it is over, this intimate communion with the ghost of Garcia Lorca, and I wonder now how it was ever able to happen” (*CB* 51). The concept of communion that arises here will become crucial for the concept of community that I will be discussing in the next chapter. I will argue that communion absorbs otherness and destroys the possibility of community. In this letter, Spicer is walking a very fine line between community and communion. “Yet it was there,” Spicer goes on, “the poems are there, the memory not of a vision but a kind of casual friendship with an undramatic ghost who occasionally looked through my eyes and whispered to me, not really more important than my friends, but now achieving a different level of reality by being missing. Today, alone by myself, it is like having lost a pair of eyes and a lover”(*CB* 51). The human capacity to be “as if I were

you” is a metaphoric capacity, for it depends upon the “as if.” Through this capacity Spicer created his book, for he wrote the Introduction as if he were Lorca, and his sense of “translation” as correspondence depends upon the “as if.” However, communion erases the “as if” because communion posits a “becoming the Other” that is actual, not metaphoric. By having Lorca live behind his eyes, Spicer posits a communion that overcomes the finality, or alterity, of death. But Spicer goes on to say, “it is October now. Summer is over. Almost every trace of the months that produced these poems have been obliterated” (*CB* 51). Significantly, it is an acute awareness of time that sets the stage for the return of alterity. This communion is itself finite: “Saying goodbye to a ghost is more final than saying goodbye to a lover. Even the dead return, but a ghost, once loved, departing will never return” (*CB* 51). As Levinas writes, “A work conceived radically is a movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same” (“The Trace of the Other” 348). Lorca’s strange fictional appearance in this book leads to an even more final disappearance.

The surrender of Lorca’s ghost to finitude gives the last word to alterity, but also to a sense of time as “what remains.” Lorca’s ghost will never return, but in that acknowledgment Lorca endures, for Lorca has not become absorbed into Spicer’s work, but remains Other as a trace that cannot be gathered into representation. In the wake of this experience of the irreversible, a very radical sense of alterity appears in the last poem in the book:

No one exactly knows
 Exactly how clouds look in the sky
 Or the shape of mountains below them
 Or the direction in which fish swim.
 The eye is jealous of whatever moves

And the heart
Is too buried in the sand
To tell. (CB 52)

The self cannot find an absolute position in the world position from which to determine what the clouds *exactly* look like or which way the fish are swimming. The heart is the image of the substantiality of the self that is distant from this indeterminate world. The heart is what of the self is identical with itself, and it is against this self-identity that there can be alterity for without an inside there can be no outside. The eye that “is jealous of whatever moves” is an image of the self’s desire to merge with what is outside of it, or of a self that wants to *be* the world . The longing in *After Lorca* is a longing for an impossible fusion with the world, or the Other (Lorca), and sorrow is the remains of this longing:

I crawled into bed with sorrow that night
Couldn’t touch his fingers. See the splash
Of the water
The noisy movement of cloud
The push of the humpbacked mountains
Deep at the sand’s edge. (CB 52)

The heart, in Spicer’s sense, is composed of the impossible desire to fuse with the world as *impossibility*, not as the hope for its overcoming. Spicer does not name the “heart” that is deep at the sand’s edge because it *is* this not-world, or not-the-Other. But the heart is not only what endures; the heart is a duration that feels, and it is out of an awareness of time that these feelings emerge, for it is the absence of the Other which brings sorrow. The heart is that part of the self that feels time, but it is also what remains after time’s passage. This “remainder” (the feeling of time) makes correspondence between separate beings possible, for feelings that are

not absolutely lost to time can be objectified and shared. “Deep at the sand’s edge” expresses both the uncrossable distance between hearts, but also the existence of the heart at the edge of the world and the Other. In a sense, what is shared in this book of poetry is this distance, for it is because of this distance that we experience the Other as other.

What I have sought to establish in this Introduction is Spicer’s radical experience of the Other as the precondition of his sense of community for, as I will argue in the next chapter, a community is “a community of others.” Spicer’s relinquishing of Lorca’s ghost is important for showing that Spicer was not using Lorca for his own ends, either for his poetry or his own needs to overcome time and death. Death is the boundary to instrumentality. To *not* use others instrumentally depends on recognizing them as Other, and Spicer’s “poetics of alterity” consistently creates an experience of the not-I. *After Lorca* appears as an answer to Levinas’ question “does there exist a signifyingness of signification which would not be equivalent to the transmutation of the other into the same?” (“Trace” 348). Spicer’s patient poetics of alterity privileges the Other without liquidating the self, thus creating a human relationship that I am calling community.

In the next chapter I will fill out more fully this concept of community before going on to a close reading of Spicer’s “Textbook of Poetry” in the following chapter. “Textbook of Poetry” expresses a very explicit sense of community as well as an acute awareness of time and mortality as the very condition of community. This second chapter will provide a transition to the “Poetics of Time” (Chapter III) in which I will distinguish between the temporality of modernity and the tradition of modern poetry, and then locate Spicer in this tradition. The last chapter (Chapter

IV) will explore the “cost” of this poetics, and try to distinguish between the *logic* of self-destruction in modernity’s compulsion towards the new, and the *art* of self-destruction as modern poetry’s means of survival in the midst of this dissolution in time.

Notes

1. “One of the most productive ways of thinking about discourse is not as a group of signs or a stretch of text, but as ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault *Archeology of Knowledge* 49)’. In this sense a discourse is something that produces something else (an utterance, a concept, an effect)” (Mills 17).

Chapter I.

“A community of those who have no community”

In *After Lorca*, the single poem is involved in a complex web of relationships. It is related to the other poems, but each poem is also related through translation to Lorca, to the one whom the translation is for, and an undetermined future reader. Spicer's translations of Lorca function as both from-another and for-another, thus creating a communicative circuit in which the aesthetic object, the poem, is not a pure being-in-itself, but is open to the past (Lorca or the poems which preceded it) and the future (the reader and the poems that follow). Thus this community of poems, with each resonating against another, corresponds to the community of poets and readers. The reader is exposed to time in this poetics because the poem was written in the past, but also because the very content of Lorca/Spicer's poetry expresses naked temporal awareness. The awareness of death, or the passing of time, which often figures as the central issue or image in the poem, creates a sense of mystery which is unrepresentable, but which is evoked metaphorically. Imaging the unrepresentable *as* unrepresentable distinguishes this poetic discourse from other modes of discourse. “The song which I shall never sing” (CB 24), and the knowledge that was gained from the self falling into the rose of itself but left untold, are both instances of this uttering of the unutterable. Spicer's letters were often an argument against the power of prose/discourse to “digest the pure word” (CB 15). The “pure word” for Spicer is that mode of language which discloses the real, or that resists digesting the otherness of the Other. The poem is the occasion for gathering around and sharing this experience of alterity or, in other words, as an instance of community. Spicer's translations create this sense of a gathering because the poems bring together

Lorca, other poets like Whitman or Verlaine, Spicer, the one whom the translation is for, and the undetermined reader. The poem is thus not so much an expression of community, but the site where community takes place. But unlike other human gatherings which occur face-to-face, the gathering around a poem takes place across time making the face-to-face a metaphoric relationship, or facing the absent Other.

Spicer does not speak explicitly of community in *After Lorca*, but he does invoke a strong sense of tradition with “generations of different poets in different countries patiently telling the same story” (CB 15). This sense of a shared expression presupposes a “community of poets” that are somehow together in their temporal diversity. In his book, *The Inoperative Community*, J.L. Nancy does speak explicitly of community. Through Nancy, and other communitarian writers, I want to develop a concept of community which is appropriate to Spicer’s sense of a community, but also appropriate to the condition of community in the modern age.

Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community* is after Bataille and Blanchot in much the same way that Spicer’s *After Lorca* is after Lorca. Nancy delves into the difficult regions of human relationship in the manner of Bataille and Blanchot, and he also comes after them in time. Nancy shares in the “thinking of community” that Bataille and Blanchot had shared for years, and a short while after Nancy’s book came out, Blanchot responded with a book of his own (*The Unavowable Community*). Blanchot’s book thus comes after Nancy, and this in itself shows the interchange of a plurality of voices that make up a communitarian thinking. Nancy quotes Bataille: “‘There can be no knowledge without a community of researchers....Communication is a fact that is not in any way added onto human reality, but rather constitutes it’” (IC 21). But a difficulty presents itself from the outset, for by creating a concept of community around communication we risk having community

absorbed by discourse:

Perhaps we should not speak a word or concept for it, but rather recognize in the thought of community a theoretical excess (or more precisely an excess in relation to the theoretical) that would oblige us to adopt another *praxis* of discourse and community. But we should at least try to say this, because ‘language alone indicates, at the limit, the sovereign moment where it is no longer current.’... An ethics and a politics of discourse and writing are evidently implied here. (*IC* 25).

Bataille’s statement that is quoted in this passage corresponds to Spicer’s sense of an “infinitely small vocabulary,” or a language that effaces itself before the object/Other. Spicer, in one of his letters to Lorca, writes, “Words are what sticks to the real. We use them to push the real, to drag the real into the poem. They are what we hold on with, nothing else. They are as valuable in themselves as rope with nothing to be tied to” (*CB* 25). This is an image of language that opens onto what lies outside it. As Adorno writes, “insight into the constitutive character of the nonconceptual in the concept would end the compulsive identification which the concept brings unless halted by such reflection” (*Negative Dialectics* 12). Nancy’s work, following Bataille, seeks to preserve the nonconceptual (community) from the compulsion to identify it. This counter-discourse establishes an ethics of discourse that maintains a relationship to the otherness of the Other that discourse tends too often to gather into the “synchrony of representation” (Levinas “Diachrony and Representation” 100). The communication of community, in this sense, is not the transmission of a concept of community, but *is* community, for the thought of community, where that thought preserves the nonconceptual, is being shared at the very limit of discourse. The great pain that Nancy and Spicer take to indicate the limits of language/discourse/rhetoric/prose is a

sovereign act of language relinquishing its currency.

Nancy, commenting on Blanchot's response to his book, writes, "many other names should be added to those just mentioned. Their presence must be inferred, or rather what has been written under their names, intercalated here – a community *unavowable* because too numerous but also because it does not even know itself, and does no need to know itself – shared texts, like all texts, offering what belongs to no one and returns to everyone: the community of writing, the writing of community " (42). For Nancy one does not *belong* to a community. Only in the act of sharing is there community. Community is therefore not an ideal but a mode of relationship, or "as what maintains itself only as the place – the non-place – where nothing is owned" (UC 19). Spicer's books partake of this unavowable community because they are "a writing of community" in the way they share a sense of the Other that cannot be reduced to instrumentality.

To take seriously Bataille's statement – "the community of those who have no community" (UC 24) – means that community in the modern age is signaled by its absence. This has two related meanings. The first is that "the gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world, the one that possibly involves all other testimonies to which this epoch must answer...is the testimony of the dissolution, the dislocation, or the conflagration of community" (IC 1). But, secondly, it also means that communicating the absence of community is the modern condition of community, for sharing in its absence brings community into being. In the modern world, its lack of a place is its place. Its lack of a place is due not only to the power of those States of the modern age that have decimated communities around the world, but also to the discourses of those same States that define community in their own terms. This process will become clear in Nancy's discussion of the "lost community" that I will analyze shortly.

The meaning of the unavowable community can be read in these words of Bataille's quoted and commented on by Blanchot: "These notes link me like Ariadne's thread to my fellow creatures and the rest seems vanity to me. However, I cannot give them to any of my friends to read.' For that would mean personal reading by personal friends. Thus the anonymity of the book does not address anybody and which, through its relationship with the unknown, initiates what George Bataille (at least once) will call 'the negative community: the community of those who have no community'" (UC 24). Poetry addresses this anonymous someone who is always a singular being, but who is unknown to the author. Against the compulsion to identify, poetic discourse shares with the unidentifiable someone. So it is not just its erasure by Imperial States, or even its endurance through the acknowledgment of its absence that makes this "community of absence" possible, but in its literary form community is a relationship between people absent from each other and yet together across time. It is a community of absence because the absence of community is shared among those absent from each other.

What emerges from Nancy's text is a firm distinction between the mode of social relationship "in society," and the mode of relationship in community. Nancy writes that "society was not built on the ruins of a community...so that community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is *what happens to us...in the wake of society*" (IC 11). In modern society, we pass in and out of community the way we pass in and out of other relationships. We move from home, to highway, to job, to supermarket, back home, then to TV, and these movements all involve us in social relationships which are defined and determined by the social roles we play. These roles make us the same as others who perform the same role. In a very real sense it is the same clerk, the same commuter, or the same policeman that we encounter, and the face we show

them is the one that is appropriate to the role that has been prescribed for that moment. We move through representations by representing ourselves. Where a moment of human relationship which is not role playing breaks through, such a moment is inessential to the social transaction taking place. Community is the non-identity of society not because it is an image of what society could be and is not, but of what society can never be. What distinguishes community relationships from relationships “in society” is not simply a certain structure of relationship or mode of behavior but an experience of the Other prior to, or in excess of, representation and instrumentality.

In liberal society a person is said to “value participating [in social activity], only insofar as he considers its costs necessary to attain some valued end” (Gauthier 151). This social vision sees society as “based on cooperation for mutual advantage” (Avineri and de-Shalit 5). Each relationship, in this view, is only the means to a particular aim: the man pumping your gas, the teller giving you your money, the teacher dispensing a grade – all serve your aims and you, in turn, serve their aims. Michael Taylor defines community as “each individual acting in a system of reciprocity ... characterized by a combination of what one might call short-term altruism and long-term interest: I help you out now in the ... expectation that you will help me out in the future” (Qtd. in Corlett 19-20). In this view, the individual’s interests are prior to its relationships, and the “short term altruism” only comes into being as a prelude to an already determined long-term interest. But sharing is not a sub-species of exchange where one shares in order to get something in return later; rather, sharing is a “radical generosity of the same who in the work goes unto the other...a putting out of funds at a loss” (“The Trace of the Other” 350). In an exchange, mine becomes yours and yours becomes mine, but in sharing, what is shared remains ours. As Spicer writes, “We is an intimate / pronoun which shifts its context almost as the I blinks” (CB 232).

Spicer's "poetics of alterity" struggles explicitly against the exchange principle: "The seagulls, the greenness of the ocean, the fish – they become things to be traded for a smile or the sound of conversation – counters rather than objects. Nothing matters except the great lie of the personal – the lie in which these objects do not believe" (CB 48).

The "great lie of the personal" refers to the reduction of all experience and relationship to what can be exchanged for something that will serve the private self. Spicer's poetics resists the law of equivalence: "It was not my anger or frustration that got in the way of my poetry but the fact that I viewed every anger and frustration as unique – something to be converted into poetry as one would exchange foreign money" (CB 61). The "serial poem" in which "a poem is never by itself alone" creates a poetics in which individual poems gain their meaning from the "vocabulary" that is "inherited" from preceding poems, but which in turn "give" meaning to those that follow.

I chose to give a close reading of Spicer's *After Lorca* before defining the main concept of my thesis because, as Nancy writes, "community does not arise from the domain of *work*. One does not produce it, one experiences or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude" (IC 31). *After Lorca* embodies this experience of finitude through a relationship to Lorca who is "outside Granada." It is this response to Lorca through translation that forms the basis of Spicer's sense of community. Nancy speaks of priorities: "I am trying to indicate, at its limit, an experience – not, perhaps, an experience that we have, *but an experience that makes us be*. To say that community has not yet been thought is to say that it tries our thinking" (IC 26). Liberal ideology sees the self as its own origin through its determination and pursuit of its own aims and interests, while in this communitarian view experience of the Other is that which "makes us be."

The contemporary debate¹ between communitarian and liberal theorists revolves around this liberal concept of the self as antecedent to, or as having priority over, community. According

to Charles Taylor, “one cannot be a self on one’s own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of the languages of self-understanding” (*Sources of the Self* 36). Nancy also centers his discussion of community upon a critique of the concept of the *priority* of the individual:

some see in its [the individual’s] invention and in the culture, if not the cult built around the individual, Europe’s incontrovertible merit of having shown the world the sole path to emancipation from tyranny, and the norm by which to measure all our collective or communitarian undertakings. But the individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community (*IC* 3).

This dense historical characterization argues that the highest value of European culture – the autonomous individual – is the product not of a historical movement which created a superior conception of human being, but of a process of isolation in the wake of the destruction of communities. The very term “individual” comes from “indivisible” which, as Nancy points out, is “the result of a decomposition” (*IC* 3). When community is taken away, what is left is the individual, and thus all value comes to be measured by what is good for the individual. As Hobbes wrote, “whatsoever is the object of any man’s desire...that is it which he for his part calleth good” (qtd in Taylor “Atomism” 39). The value of the “good” is reduced to the private desires of individuals irrespective of any shared sense of what is good, and this, according to MacIntyre, reflects “the general modern inability to perceive...that all humans goods derive from a network of overlapping communal practices and traditions” (qtd. in Mulhall and Smith 94).

The ideology of self-interest that ascended to dominance in the 18th century between Mandeville and Adam Smith reflected the growing dominance, not simply of a discourse of self-

interest, but of the pursuit of self-interest as a mode of social being. The marketplace, as the meeting of private producers and consumers, came to be the dominant mode of social relationship. Social relationships, according to Smith, are founded in the recognition of the other's interests: "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard for their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages" (qtd. in Nisbet 188). Smith's self-love is Descartes' *cogito* as social law; the self-communion that Descartes posits as the origin of all philosophic certainty Adam Smith posits as the foundation of social life. While this self-centeredness may seem like a theory of individuals who are distinct from each other, it actually posits a fundamental sameness for in this theory everyone is the same in the pursuit of their own interests. To see another is to see the same pursuit of self-interest or, what Nancy calls, "the continuous identity of atoms" (*IC* 12). This is a concept of the self that believes itself absolutely immanent to itself, or as Nancy characterizes it: "a detached being-for self taken as origin and certainty" (*IC* 3). The concept of the autonomous individual pursuing its own interests creates a vision in which "individuals are...primary and society secondary, and the identification of individual interests is prior to, and independent of, the construction of any moral or social bonds between them" (MacIntyre 232-3). This concept of the individual whose interests are prior to its social matrix, and who freely pursues "its own" interests, is the foundation of the liberal, or the modern self's identity. However, as Charles Taylor points out, the very concept of the "autonomous individual...is an identity, a way of understanding themselves, which men are not born with....The free individual of the West is only what he is by virtue of the whole society and civilization which brought him up" ("Atomism" 44-45).

There is, therefore, a self-blindness in the liberal ideology that affirms the antecedence of

the “free” and autonomous individual over its social context. As Adorno writes “identity is the primal form of ideology. We relish it as adequacy to the thing it suppresses” (148). In liberal ideology what is suppressed is what is non-identical to this concept of the individual, both within the self and outside the self. What is suppressed is a response to the Other that is prior to intentionality or self-interest. As Levinas says “alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship” (*TO* 83), for we do not give the Other his otherness and the Other does not give it back to us; alterity cannot be exchanged, only shared. The process of identification “grasps” the Other and makes it an instrument of the individual’s intentions or interests, thus suppressing the otherness of the Other. And the self “grasps” itself in the process of social identification and suppresses what does not fit that identity. This dialectic of identity and nonidentity has, Adorno asserts, a special character in the aesthetic process:

Every work of art spontaneously aims at being identical with itself, just as in the world outside a fake identity is everywhere forcibly imposed on objects by the insatiable subject. Aesthetic identity is different, however, in one important respect: it is meant to assist the non-identical in its struggle against the repressive identification compulsion that rules the outside world. (*Aesthetic Theory* 6).

Spicer’s struggle not to convert objects into poetry, but to disclose the alterity of the object/Other articulates this struggle against the “identification compulsion.” The poem is what it is, but what it is is an opening onto what it is not and this opening, Adorno and Spicer claim, is integral to it; an opening *is* what the poem is. As an opening onto the Other, the poem becomes the place (non-place) of this shared communication between others, and thus an instance of community at the very margins of a social discourse that values self-interest above all else. Community is that mode of social relationship not based on the principle of identification, but on an experience of the Other

as other.

In Nancy's terms this struggle against the "identification compulsion" takes the form of a critique of the concept of immanence. "It is precisely the immanence of man to man, or it is *man*, taken absolutely, considered as the immanent being par excellence, that constitutes the block to a thinking of community" (IC 3). Nancy goes so far as to say

what we have called "totalitarianism", might better be called "immanentism," as long as we do not restrict the term to designating certain types of societies or regimes but rather see in it the general horizon of our time, encompassing both democracies and their fragile juridical parapets. (IC 3)

Descartes' *cogito*, Smith's self-love, or the general liberal concept of the autonomous individual antecedent to its social relationships, would be concepts of the self immanent to itself, or of the "absolutely detached being for-self, taken as origin and certainty." However, as Nancy asserts, this self is "certain of nothing but its own death" (IC 3). The atomised individual finds a naked relationship to its own finitude because beyond the "I think therefore I am" is the finitude of this same "I." Thinking, self-love, or pursuing one's own interest does not stop time. Time exceeds the self, while the self cannot do without time: "death irremediably exceeds the resources of the metaphysics of the subject" (IC 14). It is in this context that the vision of the "lost community" appears. The lost community is the image of a social body which the self can merge with and escape the naked exposure to its own finitude:

This is why all those political or collective enterprises dominated by a will to absolute immanence have as their truth the truth of death. Immanence, communal fusion, contains no other logic than that of the suicide of the community that is governed by it. Thus the logic of Nazi Germany was not only that extermination of

the other, of the subhuman deemed exterior to the communion of blood and soil, but also, effectively, the logic of sacrifice aimed at all those in the 'Aryan' community who did not satisfy the criterion of pure immanence. (*IC* 12).

Death is the truth of those collective enterprises because it is only in death that one can become "pure immanence." The logic of this sacrifice of the self to pure immanence involves, Nancy argues, *forgetting* "what makes [death] always irreducibly singular" (*IC* 12).

In his dismantling of the concept of immanence, Nancy finds the process of communion within it. The many forms of modern communion Nancy traces to "the communion...that takes place at the heart of the mystical body of Christ" which becomes the model for "the thought of a human being penetrating into pure immanence" (*IC* 12). Exposure to finitude is overcome in communion, for the self seeks to commune with an absolute and immortal presence. In this context, Nancy sees "the true consciousness of the loss of community as Christian." The "nostalgia for a lost community" is a desire for communion, but "what this community has 'lost' – the immanence of the intimacy of a communion – is lost only in the sense that such a 'loss' is constitutive of 'community' itself" (*IC* 12). Nancy is here disengaging community from the concept of communion and the "lost community." Against the nostalgia for a lost community, Nancy posits community as "what undoes...the autarchy of immanence" (*IC* 4). In this brilliant reversal, Nancy indicates how the nostalgia for a lost community negates the possibility of community. Community, as a concept, is used by various political and social ideologies as a goal or hope that can unite its members in a movement towards an ideal communion. What Nancy is arguing is that death is the real result of this pursuit of the lost community. The patriotic wars of the twentieth century are examples in which patriots (who are immanent to the nation) die for their country. More recently, and more graphically, is the "sinister collective suicide in Guyana" (*UC* 7)

that Blanchot points out. However these graphic examples partially miss the point, for it is not the blatant sacrifice that is the issue, but the “resorption of death” that is “the fulfillment of an immanent life” (*IC* 13). It is because an absolutely immanent *life* is impossible that sacrifice is necessary:

Generations of citizens and militants, of workers and servants of the

States have imagined their death reabsorbed or sublated in a community, yet to

come, that would attain immanence...In truth, death is not sublated. The

communion to come does not grow distant, it is not deferred: it was never to

come; it would be incapable of coming about or forming a future. What forms a

future, and consequently what truly comes about, is always the singular death. (*IC*

13).

Modern social life isolates subjects into “autonomous atoms” thus exposing them to the certainty of their own death, and then promises to redeem them from this exposure by reabsorbing them into a communion that purges the thought of death. In communion, the self seeks not to lose its identity but to exchange it for Absolute Identity. In sacrifice, the distance between the self and this Absolute Identity, or communal body, is erased and the ungraspable meaning of death is erased. The momentum of modern political movements is derived from the impossibility of a communion that must be compulsively pursued, but never attained.

Against this process of communion, Nancy argues that community “is not a communion that fuses the *egos* into an *Ego* or a higher *We*. It is the community of *others*. The genuine community of mortal beings, or death as community, establishes their impossible communion” (*IC* 15). If death is what the individual is able to forget in the pursuit of communion, then exposure to mortality makes community possible. The one who dies cannot be immanent to

itself because its death exposes the self to its non-being, and a community of mortals cannot be immanent to each other for there is no supra-mortal being with which they can fuse. Community is only possible as a relationship between finite beings.

Nancy counters the concept of the modern self caught between atomism and an impossible communion with the concept of singularity. Singularity contains both the sense of being one's self and not another, but also being exposed to the outside and thus not absolutely immanent to itself. Nancy indicates the difficulty of defining singularity by explaining what singularity is not: "Singularity does not proceed from anything. It is not a work resulting from an operation. There is no process of 'singularization'" (*IC* 27). Thus there is no singularism as there is individualism. The ideal of the individual in modern culture is not a concept of the absolutely unique one, but rather an assemblage of characteristics. Role models abound. One can measure up to, or one can fail to live up to, what it means to be an individual. While it appears as if individualism would lead to uniqueness, it actually leads to an aporia: how to *conform* to individuality? While the ideal of individuality proceeds from a host of values (personal initiative, ambition, realizing your potential/inherent talents etc.) singularity does not "proceed from something" because singularity is that irreplaceable "being-there" from which all other aspects of your life proceed. Singularity is thus not a quality of the self, but the very appearance of the self in its finitude. The concept of singularity is the concept of the "indissoluble something" that cannot be brought into the concept; it is a concept that points beyond itself, rather than gathering into itself.

In his *Fake Novel About the Life of Rimbaud*, Spicer expresses this sense of singularity: "imagine, those of us who are poets, a good poet. Name to yourselves his possible attributes. He would have to be mmmmm, and nnnnn, and ooooo, and ppppp, but he would have to exist. It is a necessary attribute of the good to exist" (*CB* 161). Levinas also describes this existence that

precedes essence when he writes, “one can exchange everything between human beings except existing” (*TO* 42). Spicer sees Rimbaud’s singularity as the utter limit of discourse: “If they call him up into being by their logic he does not exist” (*CB* 161). Spicer consistently preserves the integrity of the object or the person against a logic, or discourse, that would subsume their being.

Nancy distinguishes singularity from the concept of the subject, or the individual, not just because it is prior to social immanence, but because it is *exposed*:

Sharing comes down to this: what community reveals to me, in presenting to me my birth and my death, is my existence outside myself. Which does not mean my existence reinvested in by community, as if community were another subject that would sublate me, in a dialectical or communal way. *Community does not sublate the finitude it exposes. Community itself, in sum, is nothing but this exposition.*(26)

Birth is the image of singularity because birth is the very appearance of finitude. But your birth is not “yours” because you were not really present at it, but you became present through it. Birth is the image of a being who *was* not, and the moment of birth is always exposed to death for the infant is the most vulnerable of beings; the infant’s life is absolutely dependant on those present at its birth. Those others gave you your birth, or shared life with you. As Blanchot writes “there could not be a community without the sharing of that first and last event” (*UC* 9). Yet those others who were prior to your existence do not have an absolute priority, for they owe their births to others. Birth is the image of the self which cannot give birth to itself, or which is not the origin of itself. The self cannot remember and did not intend its birth. The very existence of the self is a consequence of its being amongst others, not of its being-for-itself. The self owes the community its very being, but it is a debt that cannot be repaid for there is no equivalent: the self that is born

is irreplaceable in its singularity, and the life that it comes into has been generously shared with it.

Birth is, therefore, the appearance of the singular being before intentionality or self-interest, and community is the sharing of this appearance: “A singular being *appears*, as finitude itself, at the end (or at the beginning), with the contact with the skin (or the heart) of another singular being, at the confines of the *same* singularity that is, as such, always *other*, always shared, always exposed” (IC 28). We can extend this sense of singularity into a concept of community then, for “community means, consequently, that there is no singular being without another singular being, and that there is what might be called, an originary or ontological ‘sociality,’ that in its principle extends far beyond the simple theme of man as a social being” (IC 28). It is not a “social essence” lodged in individuals that makes community possible, but rather, community is made possible by the appearance of singular beings to each other and the sharing of this appearance.

Nancy places communication in the context of this “originary sociality,” for “in place of ... communion, there is communication. Which is to say, in very precise terms, that finitude itself *is* nothing; it is neither a ground, nor an essence, nor a substance. But it appears, it presents itself, it exposes itself, and thus it *exists* as communication” (IC 28). According to this view the basic condition of communication is not the play of signs, but the exposure of finite beings to each other. In this sense, each person sees others not as signs of themselves, or as dispensers of signs, but as finite beings, as Others. “Communication consists before all else in this sharing and in this compearance of finitude” (IC 29). “Compearance”, or co-appearance, is an “exposing-sharing” that *After Lorca* expresses itself in almost every line. The non-appearing appearance of Lorca in the “Introduction” creates a sense of finitude that is unavoidable. This “compearance,” Nancy writes, “is of a more originary order than that of the bond ... It consists in the appearance of the *between* as such: you and I (between us) – a formula in which the *and* does not imply

the singular beings are exposed ... I experience the other's alterity, or I experience alterity in the other together with the alteration that 'in me' sets my singularity outside me and infinitely delimits it. Community is that singular ontological order in which the other and the same are alike; that is to say, the sharing of identity. (*IC* 33).

In developing this concept of community I have been maneuvering through a number of dangerous tendencies. The foremost danger is the tendency of the concept of community to absorb the singular experience of the Other that makes community possible. This experience of the Other (alterity) stands against the representations of others into social roles or identities. The concept of community is often used by social or political discourses as a model for what society could or should be, or what society has lost, or even what society should not be. In this process the radical distinction between society and community is erased, and community becomes nothing but another moment in the totalizing discourses of modern society.

In maneuvering around this tendency two other dangerous tendencies begin to surface. The first tendency is that in the effort to combat "identity's claim to be total" (*ND* 163) nonidentity takes on the character of identity. Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* resists this tendency by *not* making "nonidentity, facticity and entity" into a "first philosophy," for that "would be hypostatizing the concept of nonconceptuality and thus acting counter to its meaning" (*ND* 136). The concept of alterity is in the same danger, for there is a tendency to say that everything is Other, or that there is a "*logical priority* of non-identity over identity" (Dews 17). It is because of this tendency that we cannot abandon the concept of identity, and Nancy's formulation cited above indicates the way in which identity can be preserved. But Nancy's position involves a problematic view of identity, for identity is not original to the self but is a "sharing of singularity."

Identity, in this sense, is inherently related to the non-identical or Other, which is to say identity is a moment of what it is not. The response to the Other which precedes intentionality and self-interest and which exposes the self to its own finitude makes the self intimate not just with the unknown, but the unknowable. The Other can never be fully known because the Other is not knowledge, but itself, always Other, always beyond. In being known (subsumed under its social identity or representations) the Other becomes an instrument of the self's needs, desires, or own self-understanding. Thus the essential distinction I am making between community and society comes down to a distinction between instrumental relationships (society) and non-instrumental or sharing relationships (community).

As the Other cannot be known in its alterity, so the future cannot be known and death is the very image of that future which does not belong to us but to which we are irredeemably related. Identity, in its temporality or finitude, is necessarily problematic, for it can never be finally what it is. The self is always behind or ahead of itself, and yet we are still ourselves and no other. As I argued in the Introduction, Lorca and Spicer use the image/symbol/metaphor of the "heart" to designate this sense of the self which cannot be another but which is inherently mortal. In a later poem from *Book of Magazine Verse*, Spicer writes,

The poem begins to mirror itself.
 The identity of the poet gets more obvious.
 Why can't we sing songs like nightingales? Because we're not
 nightingales and can never become them. The poet has an
 arid parch of his reality and the others.
 Things desert him. I thought of you as a butterfly tonight with
 clipped wings. (CB 265)

The poet's identity is an image of what it cannot be. It cannot be a nightingale, and this nugatory pronouncement is related to Nancy's definition of community as the impossibility of communion. What the poet "has" is an "arid parch" of reality which he shares with "the others." The pun on

“desert” brings together an image of the movement of things away from the poet (of things he cannot fully possess because they have their own being), but also as the arid desert as an image of isolation or an unrecuperable distance between himself and others. The last image is also complex, for beyond the sentimental image of the butterfly is the ambiguity of whether it is the poet or the “you” who is a butterfly with clipped wings. The poet and the Other are alike in an image that is not identical with itself, for the butterfly is de-formed, making the butterfly an image of what the poet, and the Other, cannot be.

The other dangerous tendency that I have been succumbing to is the tendency to make the communitarian camp sound all of one voice. In my critique of the liberal concept of the self I mixed together different strains of communitarian thinking, and it is time now to distinguish them. The Anglo-American communitarian critique of liberal society and its concept of the person is useful for exposing the illusion of the autonomous individual by pointing out its ultimate “constitution” by its social context. However, as Marilyn Friedman argues, this type of communitarian thought “invoke(s) a model of community which...harbors social roles and structures which have been highly oppressive to women” (“Feminism and Modern Friendship: Dislocating the Community” 105). We could add many others, such as natives and homosexuals, to this list of those who have been oppressed by certain “social roles and structures.” Spicer’s homosexuality must be seen in this context, for he was openly gay in a difficult era, and his strong sense of community cannot be seen apart from the gay community in and around the Bay Area in the fifties and sixties. The deep chasm between society and community is related both to his “difference” and to the others he banded together with as poets, friends, or in political struggle². However, his sense of the deep divide between community and society cannot be reduced to his “homosexual condition” for, as we saw with “Ode to Walt Whitman,” one does not always share

something with those who are “the same.” And the difference between the self and its milieu cannot be reduced to a difference in kind or type, but to an irreducible alterity.

For Taylor, Sandel, and MacIntyre the self is immanent to its social context, and the self’s identity is constituted through its inherence in that social context. MacIntyre writes,

We all approach our circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity...I belong to this tribe, that clan, this nation. Hence what is good for me has to be what is good for one who inhabits these roles. As such I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These contribute the givens of life, my moral starting point. This in part is what gives my life its moral particularity (*After Virtue* 204-5).

Friedman’s response to this is that “the problem is not simply to appreciate community *per se* but, rather, to reconcile the conflicting claims, demands and identity-defining influences of the variety of communities of which one is a part” (108). For these Anglo-American communitarians, identity itself is not a problem, but only the liberal identity that is blind to its embeddedness in a society and a tradition, and more importantly, blind to the value of social relationships beyond their instrumental value. For Sandel the concept of community describes “*not a relationship they choose (as in a voluntary association) but an attachment they discover*, not merely an attribute but a constituent of their identity’” (qtd. in Friedman 110). The problem comes when one does not completely identify with the identity that one has grown into as part of a social matrix. Sandel’s view of identity elides the non-identical, and tends to create a one-dimensional view of identity that is constituted by community.

For these Anglo-American communitarians the terms “society” and “community” are almost interchangeable. The concept of community that I am seeking to create makes a profound

distinction between society and community as two different, even antagonistic, modes of human relationship. William Corlett finds the collapsing of the meaning of community and society in the words of Michael Taylor:

There is much talk, among both admirers and detractors of community, of communitarian relations being ‘loving’ or ‘emotional’ or ‘intense.’ If it were stipulatively required of ‘community’ that a person’s relations with most or many of the other members of the community were of this sort, then very few communities would qualify and those which did would be short-lived. (qtd. in Corlett 20).

My point is that very few communities do qualify and community is, in the modern age, rare and short-lived. Blanchot writes of the surrealist community that formed between the wars:

Something had taken place which, for a few moments and due to the misunderstandings peculiar to singular existences, gave permission to recognize the possibility of a community established though at the same time already posthumous: nothing of it would remain, which saddened the heart while also exalting it, like the very ordeal that the effacement of writing demands. (UC 21)

After Lorca also creates a sense of community out of a relationship that is “already posthumous.” Spicer’s career involved a range of relationships to past poets, to the reader, to his friends and to those enrolled in his poetry workshops that involved both a sharing and a sense of the “short-lived” nature of those relationships. In the last letter in *After Lorca*, Spicer wrote that his relationship to Lorca was like “a casual friendship,” and in a previous letter he had named two friends as part of his audience. These two friends, Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser, were also fellow poets and together they attracted other poets and formed what became later known as “The

San Francisco Renaissance.” This constellation of relationships composed of friendship, a literary “school,” past poets, contemporary and future readers, is an image of community gathered around the very transient moment of reading and writing poetry.

In the *Unavowable Community*, Blanchot draws a correspondence between readers and friends when he writes how a journal of Bataille’s “opens up another form of community, when a small number of friends, each one singular and with no forced relationships between them, form it in secret through a silent reading they share” (UC 20). The mode of relationship I am trying to characterize as essentially communitarian lies in the phrase “no forced relationships between them.” The absence of coercion in sharing makes it possible to say that friendship corresponds to community. One cannot be coerced into a friendship, though coercion often plays a large part in the ending of friendships. The problem with the MacIntyre-Taylor-Sandel concept of community is that “embeddedness can mean being stuck” (Rosenblum qtd. in Corlett 28). The most common definition of community (and the one the dictionary lists first) is of a group of people all living in the same locale. But if the society of this locale demands of the self an identification that it cannot, or will not, participate in, then, I would argue, we cannot call this a community. It is in this context that aesthetic works “assist the non-identical in its struggle against repressive identification,” and provide a kind of social solidarity amongst those who do not identify with their identity, or a community of absence as a resistance to the absence of community. This crisscrossing of friendship with the relationship between poet and reader is expressed beautifully by René Char (a comrade of Blanchot and Bataille’s): “I await you, friends to come. Already I can sense you beyond the horizon dark. My hearth is never without hope for your houses” (Char 189).

As Friedman writes, “friendship is more likely than many other relationships, such as those of family and neighborhood, to be grounded and sustained by shared interests and values, mutual

affection, and possibilities for generating mutual respect and honesty” (Friedman 115). Sharing something in common seems to be the ground zero of community, but in this concept of community that I am developing, there must also be free consent, or an absence of coercion. In this context Blanchot, speaks of a distinction “between traditional community and elective community. The first is imposed upon us...the other...is elective in the sense that it exists only through a decision that gathers its members around a choice without which it could not have taken place” (*UC* 46-7). Friendship, the reading and writing of literary works, and community correspond in this “decision that gathers its members.” The poet is not compelled to write, and his writing is a profound sharing with the unknown Other. The reader chooses to read, and where this is a free choice – and not something compelled by the educational system, or perhaps, in spite of the educational system – the readers can be said to elect themselves to this community. The distinction between the liberal and the communitarian response to the imposition of traditional community on the self is that the liberal seeks greater personal autonomy from that community, while the communitarian seeks other modes of relationship such as friendship or the reading and writing of poetry. In a sense, the communitarian escapes traditional community through community or, as Friedman writes, “communities of choice foster not so much the constitution of subjects but their reconstitution” (Friedman 118).

Friedman’s concept of “reconstitution,” however, is a little glib, for it too ignores the problem of identity and makes it sound as if there is a smooth transition from one identity to another. But even if we admit a difficult transition from one sense of identity to another, the concept of identity is still left unchallenged. What distinguishes the poetic community from the traditional community of writers like MacIntyre, and from Friedman’s sense of finding communities “to help us discern who we really are” (Friedman 1180), is that in modern poetry identity itself is

thrown back into its relation to the non-identical. Do we ever find out “who we really are?” The inherently problematic being of identity – or of being an identity – is often the very content of modern poetry. What Spicer calls “the human crisis” (CB 223) is not simply the private crisis of living in an alienated society, but the crisis of being human.

The self is no longer real
It is not like loneliness
This big huge loneness. Sacrificing
All of the person with it.
Bigger people
I’m sure have mastered it. (CB 87)

Poetry is, in Spicer’s poetics, a shared expression of unmastered life.

If, as Nancy argues, the basis of community is the “co-appearance” of singular beings, then this co-appearance is already involved in a disappearance because appearance is finite. In Levinas’ terms, the face of the Other exposes both the finitude of the Other and the self: “The face of the Other...is just as much *pure expression*, an extradition without defense or cover, precisely the extreme rectitude of a *facing*, which in this nudity is an exposure unto death: nudity, destitution, passivity, and pure vulnerability. Such is the face as the very *mortality* of the other person” (TO 107). The poem, in these terms, is a metaphoric face, or an exposure of the very singularity of the Other in its “nudity, destitution, passivity, and vulnerability.” I have been arguing that modern poetry is one of the last refuges of this elementary form of sociality beyond, or in excess of, the play of signs and the hegemony of discourse. As Blanchot writes,

a being does not want to be recognized, it wants to be contested: in order to exist it goes towards the other, which contests and at times negates it, so as to start being only in that privation that makes it conscious (here lies the origin of consciousness) of the impossibility of being itself, of subsisting as its *ipse*. (UC 6).

Sharing this “impossibility of being itself” is the sharing of singularity, or what Levinas calls the “intrigue of alterity” (“Diachrony and Representation” 106). Singularity, as it is exposed to the Other and its own finitude, is not a substitute concept for the concept of identity, but throws identity back into its problematic being. If being a separate being depends on the Other being equally separate, then, in Nancy’s sense, we share identity. Identity does not come from within, but inheres in the exposure to an outside that is a not-I. Rather than providing a place where identities are constituted, the poetic community is where identity is contested, and where “lyric speech becomes the voice of human beings between whom the barriers have fallen” (Adorno *Notes to Literature* 54) .

Notes

1. The debate I am referring to arose from the communitarian critique of John Rawls' book *Theory of Justice* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971) which is a presentation of the liberal theory of justice. Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) "initiated the debate" (Mulhal and Smith 40) with a detailed reading and critique of Rawls' liberal position. MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, which actually appeared a year before Sandel's book and which contains a critique of Rawls, does not focus exclusively on Rawls but takes on the entire tradition of liberalism from the Enlightenment on. Charles Taylor's critique of liberalism is similar to Sandel and MacIntyre in that his definition of human beings as "self- interpreting animals" means that "the languages needed for such self-interpretations are essentially social phenomena," so that "community is a structural precondition of human agency" (Mulhal and Smith 161).

The debate is centered upon the liberal conception of the person "as antecedently individuated or unencumbered" of the concept of "asocial individualism," the universalism of the liberal concepts of the person, and the supposed "neutrality" of the liberal State. Mulhal and Smith in their book *Liberals and Communitarians* sort out the complexity of the debate and provide a good overview of the whole issue. Other books like *Communitarianism and Individualism* edited by Avineri and de-Shalit bring together some seminal essays of the communitarian critique with liberal answers to them. I have used essays by Gauthier and Friedman in this context both to define the liberal view and to delve more deeply into the problems of the communitarian position.

2. Spicer's political activism was not extensive. He preferred, as he wrote in a letter to Graham MacIntosh, a form of "Schweikism," where "if an orange behaves like a piece of chewing

gum while going through the juicer, the machine is likely to stop. If enough oranges behave this way the machine is likely to break down. This is the only kind of anarchism that makes sense. Martyrdom does not impress machines; chewing gum does" (*Caterpillar* 12 55). However, he did participate in an early form of the gay rights movement called the "Mattachine Society" which, along with his Trotskyism, were "dangerous enterprises in the Cold War climate of the early 1950s" (Ellingham and Killian 46). He also identified with his father's supposed membership in the Wobblies and this inheritance links him to a kind of communitarian populism that has been a strain of American social life since its beginnings. Spicer was not political in a theoretical way, but rather he saw politics as a way in which people live together and his resistance to power does not show up as political activism as much as it does as an aspect of his poetry. This "poetic politics" involves itself in a confrontation with power in direct ways (the Viet Nam War), and indirect ways (as the struggle to articulate modes of human relationship which form apart from power relationships). The political direction of his poetry actually increases in his later work, perhaps due to the Viet Nam War, or to a growing pessimism about the state of American social life, but he always brings politics back to a direct relationship to the Other:

What we kill them with or they kill us with (maybe a squirrel
rifle) isn't important.
What is important is what we don't kill each other with
And a loving hand reaches a loving hand.
The rest of it is
Power, guns, and bullets. (*CB* 267)

Chapter II.

Textbook of Poetry:

“The real sound of the dead”

Although Spicer had said that *After Lorca* (1957) should be read like a novel, the narrative quality of the book is overshadowed by the lyrical element. However, with *Billy the Kid* (1958) and subsequent books, the narrative element predominates, and Spicer begins to speak of his work as “‘serial poems’ ...with reference to the serial music of Berea and Boulez and to the movie and radio serials that had entertained him as a teenager in Hollywood” (Ellingham and Killian x). Each poem is singular but exposed to those that come before and after: “the tone of the poem sounds individually, as alone and small as the poet is...but sounded in series, it enters a field” (Blaser CB 278). This special narrative practice achieved its purest expression in *The Heads of the Town in the Aether* (1960-61) which contains three books of poetry: “Homage to Creeley,” “A Fake Novel About the Life of Arthur Rimbaud,” and “Textbook of Poetry.” Each of these books within the larger book is a “serial poem” in its own right, but together they also form a larger narrative that I will explore in the last chapter. In this chapter, however, I shall focus on “Textbook of Poetry” because in it time and community are part of the story being told, and this will provide a good transition from my previous discussion of community to “The Poetics of Time” which is to follow.

The narrative quality of “Textbook of Poetry” is both evident and problematic. As Ricoeur writes, “narrativity is the mode of discourse through which the mode of being we call temporality, or temporal being, is brought to language” (“The Human Experience of Time and Narrative” 99).

But what is this mode of being we call temporality? I will be using the term temporality not so much as another word for time, but as the concept for a “structure of time.” This “structure of time” refers to a relationship between past, present, and future, and where this relationship is consistent “over time,” we can speak of a certain temporality, as in a Medieval, or Modern, or Prehistoric, temporality. Medieval temporality can be characterized as “the constant anticipation of the End of the World on the one hand and the continual deferment on the other,” (Kosselleck 6) while a Modern temporality can be characterized by as the movement into an open ended future. I will discuss temporality in more detail in the next chapter, but for now I want to emphasize the tension between temporality – or the way cultures structure or conceive time – and time itself. “Time itself” must remain indeterminate for when we try to determine what time exactly is we run into great difficulties. If we bring the concept of time (temporality) into relationship with the living present we find that the concept begins to break down: where do we draw the lines between past, present and future? At what point is the present present, the past past and the future future? We live *as if* we know the difference, as if each of these terms (past, present and future) has a definite and discrete meaning, but when we try and fix them we find ourselves in the same situation as Augustine: “What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not” (*Confessions* 195).

I will be arguing that the tension between temporality and time is one of the narrative “kernels” in Spicer’s text. Time may be the nonconceptual within the concept of time, contesting the limits of the concept, but time is not beyond experience. In Spicer’s strange narrative the problematic experience of time is part of what is being narrated. Spicer stretches narrative’s hold on time to the point where it can no longer obtain, or where narrative has to relinquish its claim to

“grasp” time. However, Spicer does not relinquish narrative altogether, but rather his interrogation of narrative in the act of narrating (or time’s interrogation of narrative) allows him to arrive at an “essential sociality.” Narrative is one of the ways that communities persist in time, for in telling their story communities create their own continuity. In “Textbook of Poetry” Spicer creates a narrative appropriate to the condition of a community of absence. If the community of absence is an answer to the absence of community, and if a community must have continuity in order to survive, then the community of absence needs a narrative of itself. Narrative becomes, in this context, more than a representation of the life of the community, or of its history and myths, but the story of the very possibility of community. Spicer’s text exposes narrative to its own temporal underpinnings and re-creates narrative as the sharing of time with the dead.

By calling his book a “textbook,” Spicer is playing with the book’s function which is to teach the reader about poetry. In a sense his textbook is a return to the traditional transmission of knowledge through narrative. “A textbook of poetry is created to explain” (CB 183) Spicer writes, but his mode of explaining dislocates the very process of explanation: “Surrealism is the business of poets who cannot benefit from surrealism” (CB 169). The internal contradiction in the sentence serves to pry the meaning of surrealism from the literary term Surrealism. The use of lower case for Surrealism points to this distinction between the *praxis* of surrealism and the official literary school of Surrealism. In contradistinction to Surrealism as the business of the poet, Spicer tells us that “surrealism was the first appearance of the Logos that said, ‘The public be damned,’ by which he did not mean that they did not matter or he wanted to be crucified by them, but that really he did not have a word to say to them. This was surrealism”(CB 169).

Spicer brings together two cultural icons, Surrealism and Christ, and identifies them in

such a way that upsets the usual meaning of the Logos and of Surrealism. Christ, of course, addressed the public; He made the Word flesh and He gave the Word (his body) to the public. This gift is one of the foundations of Western culture and discourse. But Spicer is prying the meaning of Logos from the heart of the culture when he identifies it with Surrealism. He goes on further to define S(s)urrealism: "But even the business of ignoring the public is the business of the poet and not the surrealism of the poet. The surrealism of the poet could not write words" (169). The poet is the one whose career is a career of words but, Spicer is saying, the surrealist poet is the one most distant from words. It is not just a matter of distancing poetic discourse from public discourse, but of distancing the poet from language itself. This distancing of the poet from words is a story that goes on throughout the book, and the book ends with these words: "To be alive. Like the noises live people wear. Like the word Jim, especially – more than words" (183). The practice of surrealism is "to be lost in a crowd. Of images, of metaphors (whatever they were), of words; this is a better surrender. Of the poet who is lost in the crowd of them. Finally" (169). The practice of surrealism is not an act of self-determination through the writing of words, but a surrender. This surrender corresponds, in some way, to the surrender of Christ who surrendered to becoming human. Words and images are not seen as coming out of the poet, but are external to the poet him/herself. In normal discourse the self is immanent with language while surrealism, Spicer is saying, opens up a problematic distance where the self does not coincide with language.

Like a traditional textbook on poetry, Spicer focuses his attention on metaphor. But he uses metaphor to disrupt the definition of metaphor: "to define a metaphor against the crowd of people that protest against them. This is neither of our businesses" (169). His refusal to define

metaphor is not a simple trick, but points to metaphor as the thing that makes meaning, even human being, possible: “It is as if nothing in the world existed except metaphors – linkings between things” (169). To give metaphor a seminal role in meaning-creation corresponds with much contemporary thinking on metaphor. As Ricoeur writes, “the figure of speech we classify as metaphor would be at the origin of all semantic fields ... To grasp the kinship in any semantic field is the work of the metaphoric process at large” (“Word Polysemy and Metaphor” 81).

But Spicer, as if anticipating where this definition of metaphor could lead, immediately contradicts it: “or as if all our words without the things above them were meaningless,” which is to say that the thing, the referent, is what gives the sign its meaning. This tension between word and thing, or between metaphor and what metaphor is identifying, is a tension that persists throughout the book. In many ways the book is a narrative of this very tension, or of the tendency of language to absorb the world into meaning and rob it of alterity. The thing that is “above” the word is the object/Other that exceeds discourse, and it is this excess, Spicer is saying, that makes discursive meaning possible. This view reverses the contemporary tendency of discourse theory to see language as giving meaning to the world. As Foucault writes, discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (*Archeology of Knowledge* 42). Spicer is not so much disputing the power of discourse as resisting it by affirming the “in excess of words” that discourse speaks of.

Metaphor is in the middle of this resistance for metaphor is an ambiguous sign; metaphor identifies without creating identity, for it says that one thing is “like” another. Ricoeur explains that metaphors are produced out of the “paradoxical structure of sameness in spite of difference”

(“Word, Polysemy and Metaphor” 84). This distinction recalls Bataille’s statement that “being is never me alone, it is always me and those like me” (*IC* 33). The paradoxical power of metaphor goes beyond the strictly linguistic realm for “grasping kinship is the work of the *metaphoric process at large*” (“Word” 84). Language and community both function metaphorically for both use the paradoxical structure of “being the same in spite of difference.” Time is intimately bound up with this metaphoric capacity because metaphor depends upon abstracting oneself from the present and bringing together non-identical things into a virtual contemporaneity. In other words the metaphoric capacity depends upon a temporal capacity. Playing with metaphor is playing with time for, as Ricoeur writes, “a novel metaphor does not merely actualize a potential connotation, it creates it. It is a semantic innovation, an emergent meaning” (“Word, Polysemy, Metaphor” 79). Metaphor, in this sense, temporalizes meaning, or redeems meaning from becoming fixed in semiotic systems. Metaphor is, in a real sense, the life of the semiotic systems with which it plays.

In Spicer’s text, metaphor and narrative become involved in a semantic play in which a narrative of the meaning of metaphor uses narrative itself as a metaphor for time. To the degree humans live “in” time (a spatial metaphor), they live metaphorically. If narrative is the raising of temporal being to language, then this book narrates that movement itself: “And the human witness of this passion is rightly stunned by the incongruity of it. Lifting a human being into a metaphor” (*CB* 173). The paradoxical structure of metaphor corresponds to the paradoxical structure of being-in-common in which “like” is not the same. In Spicer’s text Christ, or the Logos, is the image of this paradox for the ambiguity of sameness is invoked by the ambiguity of Christ as same and different, or as human and divine. The crisis in the gospel story occurs when Christ looks up

and cries “why hast thou forsaken me?” This lament expresses the moment of being non-identical with the Divine and marks Christ off as human, or as a self crying from the *agon* of its own difference. His difference from God is a metaphor for the human difference making us “like” Christ. In his textbook, Spicer continually plays with “Word” and “word” to maintain the ambiguity of the human and divine. He also plays with “Logos” and “Christ,” for Christ is the Logos, but Logos means Meaning and thus Christ’s very being is Meaning. In other words, Christ’s being is identical with Meaning, and yet human being is not absolutely immanent to Meaning, but exists at a distance from Absolute Meaning (Logos or God). Christ is a gift of the Logos, or the gift of Absolute Meaning, but this giving of himself results in becoming human and makes Christ himself nonidentical with Absolute Meaning. In Christ, the Logos is wounded in its essence. If Christ is divine, he cannot be human, and if he is human he cannot be divine. This paradox exists at the very heart of Western culture, and the “telling” of this paradox is part of the story of this textbook. In the semiotic system of Christianity, this paradox becomes a divine mystery – the Incarnation – and its troubling aspects are absorbed into a communion where there is no difference between God, Christ, and humans.

Spicer resists the erasure of this ambiguity when he writes, “The Word was the Word not because he was personified but because he was a personification. As if he were human” (CB 169). In Spicer’s formulation the Word does not stand for Christ, but rather, Christ *is* personification itself. To define Christ Spicer writes “As if he were human” as a complete sentence. Christ is an “as if” while we are human, and it is the divine gift of the “as if” that is the meaning (Logos) and the heart of metaphor. But it also means that the human is not identical with the “as if,” for

humans, in their singularity, cannot be a personification. Spicer's image of the Logos is a poetic expression of the impossibility of communion that Nancy had carried out philosophically, for by going to the very heart of the Western image of communion and creating this nest of ambiguities as the very condition of meaning, Spicer has made communion impossible. Humans cannot commune with Absolute Meaning (Logos), for meaning is always "as if." The "as if" identifies, but it is an identification which is an irreparable breach in Being for it asserts the difference of both terms.

Spicer later puns on this paradoxical being of Christ:

And the stony words that are left down with us greet him mutely almost
rudely casting their own shadows. For example, the shadow the cross cast. No,
now he is the Lowghost when He is pinned down to words (*CB* 178).

As the "lowghost" Christ is no longer the "Logos" for, as a human, the words "greet him." Christ is no longer identical with, or immanent to, meaning; the words cast their own shadow, just as the cross casts its. This shadow is the shadow of death, for as the "lowghost" Christ has become a mortal being. Christ has been distanced from his divinity by being "pinned down" on earth and it is words, like nails, which hold him to his singular being by their very difference from him.

Spicer, very much like Nancy, brings the image of birth to bear on this sense of an inescapable singularity of the human being: "To proclaim his humanity is to lie – to pretend that he was not a Word, that he was not created to Explain. The language where we are born across (temporarily and witlessly) in our prayers." (*CB* 169). To be "born across" language does not make us an "as if" (as Christ is) but a being who *appears* in language. Language, in this sense, is

more than a means of self-expression, but rather a place where we appear in our finitude. However, Spicer's play on words is very dense here, for we are not just born into meaning through language, but the self is also "borne" across time by language. This bearing across (birth) is a temporal journey, and metaphor (the "as if") bears us across time. This birth is a metaphor of finitude and appearance, or appearance in finitude which is in turn a metaphor for metaphor itself. However, in folding meaning into metaphor and metaphor back into meaning, Spicer does not create a self-sufficient ingress of meaning, but rather opens meaning onto time as the Other of meaning. The third meaning of this pun is "bearing a cross" which makes us like Christ, for He became human by bearing our condition and enduring death on the cross. Language, as the space where humans are born "witlessly and temporarily" (169), is also something that must be borne. It is borne "witlessly" because we have no choice (we are born into a community of meaning prior to intentionality) and "temporarily" because nothing is more mortal than the sentence. The sentence of death which Christ is under for becoming human is a metaphor for the temporality of language. We are sentenced to the sentence because metaphor introduces novelty and thus finitude into the system of Absolute Meaning (Logos).

Spicer had announced from the outset that surrealism was the appearance of the Logos which had nothing to say to the public. Traditional narratives presuppose a "community of listeners" (Benjamin *Illuminations* 91) but in the absence of community the community of listeners is also absent. One of the tasks of this "Textbook," therefore, is to foster such a community. The difficulty of the textbook's language is due to the surrealism of the poet who has no word to share with the public, and yet his readership must come from out of that crowd. In a

sense Spicer is drawing the singularity of the reader from the mass of atoms of modern society: "They go through life till the next morning. As we all do. But constantly. As if the shimmering before them were not hell but the reach of something. / Teach" (*CB* 170).

By writing "as we all do," Spicer has created an intimate, plural pronoun against "them" who go through their life "constantly." He is trying to distance the reader from "them" who go through their life without interruption. The poem, or this teaching, is not a transfer of information but an interruption of the reader's life. Spicer's narrative is the interruption of an incessant life-narrative, or the interruption of temporality by "the reach of something" (*CB* 170). This narrative is telling a tale of time, for "teach" that ends this chapter is followed by "Taught" that begins the next chapter. The tense of the verb has already transpired and the reader has been taught the interval. But "taught" is also a pun on the connection that has been made to "elsewhere," for in the interval of the interruption of the reader's life there appears "a silver wire which reaches from the end of the beautiful as if elsewhere. A metaphor. Metaphors are not for humans" (*CB* 170).

If metaphors are not for humans, then who are they for? Spicer continues to create his audience: "The wires dance in the wind of the noise our poems make. The noise without an audience. Because the poems were written for ghosts" (*CB* 170). "Audience" is the public to whom the poet does not have a word to say, but who are the ghosts? In a later chapter Spicer writes, "Hold to the future. With firm hands. The future of each afterlife, of each ghost, of each word that is about to be spoken" (*CB* 179). Ghosts are an aspect of all beings who are the future of themselves, or who are their own afterlife; each presence is exposed to an "elsewhere." Spicer

is creating his audience by drawing the reader into this ghostliness, for the connection between the past and present depends upon the correspondence of this aspect of being: "The ghosts the poems were written for are the ghosts of the poems. We have it second-hand. They cannot hear the noise they have been making" (*CB* 170). Those who are gone can never return to the present, they "cannot hear the noise they have been making." Therefore communicating with them "is not a simple process like a mirror or a radio. They try to give us circuits to see them, to hear them. Teaching an audience. / The wires in the rose are beautiful" (170). The very difficult movement "into" the past by those living in the present is what Spicer is trying, not just to convey, but to effectuate. The ghosts are not misty, insubstantial beings who are *here*. Ghosts are always in the past, they are never here, and yet, to the degree that the present is already past there is a connection between the present and the past. The ghosts are images of what can never be present, and there is an aspect of the present that is already part of this never again. Spicer is teaching an experience of the past as past, which is perhaps the most difficult of all lessons. The value of that experience is embodied in the symbolic image: "The wires in the rose are beautiful." The rose, as an image of the eternal present, is made of wires that are circuits which reach the reader from "elsewhere," as if to say that the present is itself elsewhere, and in that lies its beauty.

Continuing this ontological tale, Spicer begins the next chapter: "The motion of the afterlife. The afterlife of the poem – " (*CB* 171). Time as "unthinkable" is here expressed as the future in the present, or the ambiguous life of the "afterlife of the poem." It is in the nature of the poem to enter time in such a way that it reaches from the past into the future. The poem is never

purely present for it is directed, not to an immediate Other, but to an absent other separated from the poet by time, or by the silence and darkness existing between them. This is what poetry *is*: the reaching into time of words that, in themselves, are temporary, but which begin as an afterlife. But is it not the reader who is the afterlife of the poem? Is this not why teaching an audience is crucial? The poem reaches into silence, subsists in silence, but then is heard. The noise the poem makes can never be heard by the poet who gives the poem over to the future, and in so doing gives him/herself to the past. And the readers, who make the poet's past their future give themselves to the past. The poem draws the reader to the edge of this "silence" of words, or to this silence inhabited by ghosts who can no longer hear themselves. The "as if" returns significantly: "An anti-image as if merely by being dead it could make the motions of what it was to be apparent" (CB 171). Spicer indicates the tenuousness of the ghost's afterlife, for the ghosts are not going to survive "merely by being dead," for they need living others to persist. This chapter ends by telling us that this process is "an argument between the living and the dead" (171). This argument is the communication between the "is" of appearance and "what it was to be apparent."

It is the correspondence of this "was" with the living – who also know the "was" of appearance – that creates being-in-common with the dead. "Metaphors are not for humans" (170), Spicer writes. The dead are not human, and it is through metaphor that one communicates with them, but the Logos is also not human, and it is through the "as if" that humans come to be. The human is thus exposed from within and without to the nonhuman. The future is this intimate inhuman, or time itself. The future of each word is its afterlife, and in Chapter 6 Spicer

moves into the future tense, but finds the hard door of time there: “And in the gradual lack of the beautiful, the lock of the door before him, a new Eurydice, stepping up to him, punning her way through his hell” (*CB* 171). The beautiful that had been reaching from elsewhere like a redemptive promise is now experienced as what it is: elsewhere. The image of Eurydice is the image of the desire to make what is necessarily elsewhere present. In trying to see the elsewhere as present, Orpheus loses it forever. The poet comes up against the absolute absence of those voices, those ghosts:

They won’t come through. Nothing comes through. The
death

Of every poem in every line

The argument con-
tinues. (*CB* 171)

“The argument between the living and the dead” is the narrative thread that holds the “textbook” together. But it is a dialogic narrative between beings not only absent from each other, but the dead themselves cannot be heard. Yet we listen to them. This profound paradox is the paradox of the present’s relationship to the past, or of tradition itself. Not tradition as a storehouse of values, experiences, or knowledge, but tradition as a relationship to the “real” dead. But the “real” dead can only be reached metaphorically. Spicer, in pursuing this paradox, prevents metaphor from being folded into a traditional order by maintaining metaphor’s “impossible” relationship to “them.” The ghosts are “teaching an audience,” and in the interval between “teach” and “taught” continuity is rescued from the heart of discontinuity. The textbook creates a sense of tradition by drawing the reader into this profound experience of time. The

“argument” draws together the ghosts, the poet, the reader and the poem in a shared sense of time. Without this shared time with the inhuman there can be no human. The human present exists in order that the being of the past can persist in its pastness. But metaphor is the only access to this pastness, for it is metaphor that bears the past across time. Spicer’s metaphoric narrative exposes the human to the inhuman rather than using time to create, or affirm, a “world of meaning.”

The use of metaphor to drive the narrative and open it onto time is evinced in the image of the “rope ladder” which in Chapter 8 is used to descend “to the real” (CB 172). This descent to the real recalls the image of Christ and the problem of communion and singularity, for “the soul also goes there,” but “solely ... beyond the thought of God.” In *After Lorca*, Spicer, had argued that “words stick to the real” as if the real were the simple presence of things, but here the issue becomes more complex. The dialectic of the “real” and “God” is told through the ambiguity of the “real God:” “I mean the thought of thinking about God. Naturally. I mean the real God” (CB 172). If Christ descends into time, can he be the real God? When Spicer writes, “The Logos, crying to be healed of his godhead. His dismay,” he is turning the table on Christian Theology by saying that it is by becoming mortal that the Logos is healed. This would be a Logos that is “real like the next day” (CB 172). The future (“*like* the next day”) is a metaphor for the real but in this metaphor shows its temporal quality as well as its binding to the real, for this “like” is more than a comparison since it indicates the very futurity of “the real.” “The real” is not all here, and metaphor is the way in which humans inhabit a present that is not all here. The past and future compose the present, for the present cannot be without past and future. The

difference of the future from the present is a difference that can never be made up, but the present is “real like the next day,” not because tomorrow will be like today, but because the reality of today is wounded in its essence by the being of tomorrow: “And as the words heal, I did not mean the real God” (*CB* 172). The words “heal” because they are in time, but they are something that can heal because they originated as a wound, that is, as an exposure to past and future, or what is outside of the present.

In Chapter 10 the metaphor of the rope becomes an “Indian rope trick” where a “little Indian boy climbs up” a rope to where “there is nothing to stop the top of the rope. There is nothing to argue. People in the audience have seen the boy dancing and it is not hypnosis” (*CB* 173). Metaphor, Spicer is arguing, is not a trick of language, and it is not an argument. “It is the definition of the rope that ought to interest everyone who wants to climb the rope. The rope-dance. Reading the poem” (*CB* 173). Metaphor is a mode of definition, for it says “this is that,” but it is definition which incorporates difference at the heart of it with the use of “like” or “as if.”

The metaphor of a rope trick defines the poem as attached to nothing at the top in order to indicate the non-locatedness of the poem: “Reading the poem that does not appear when the magician starts or when the magician finishes. A climbing in-between. Real.” The “real poem,” then, is defined as this in-between, as a rope dance, or as a magic that is not hypnosis, but also a magic that is unattached to when the trick began and when it ended. The magic *is* the in-between. As an in-between, the poem is temporal in its essence, but as time negates every essence, time cannot be defined as an essence. Metaphor occurs where language fails to express the time of being.

In the next series of chapters, Spicer expands the scope of this relationship of the poet to the reader into an explicit vision of community. During a lecture on “Textbook” that Spicer gave in Vancouver in 1964, someone in the audience commented that “this city became a metaphor. It sounded like real cities like San Francisco, Vancouver – and then – this was a place wherein there were cities of poets? Or?” Spicer answered by saying “cities of anything ... Yes, communities – like this is a city at the moment” (*Caterpillar* 12 202). The voice from the audience then comments that “I got the funny feeling ... that poems and poets were very much a communal thing. And it wasn’t the soul in battle or argument with the dead” (202). This statement points to Spicer’s sense that the city, or community, is together with the dead. As the dead are not human, so the human community is intimate with the inhuman, and metaphor again is that human capacity that makes it possible to be “like” what is not the same.

Spicer imagines a temple “built of solid glass. The temple out there in the weeds and California wild flowers. Out of position. A place where we worship words” (*CB* 175). A difficult sentence maps out the difficulty of this form of worship: “See through into it like it is not possible with flesh only by beginning not to be a human being.” This statement would seem to mean that the human must shed its flesh and become divine in order to see into the temple. But this sentence is followed by, “Only by beginning not to be a soul” which means that one must shed one’s flesh but not take on a soul. The worshiper is a “sole worshiper,” which returns us to an image of singularity as the inescapable condition of being human. So, in this worshiping, “the flesh is important as it rubs into itself your soleness,” but neither is the worshiper absolutely at one with his flesh. Spicer is attempting something very difficult and complex here, for he is

imagining a spiritual condition that is “sole-ful” and not “soul-ful.” “Words” make this possible for, in reversing Christ’s Word that becomes flesh, words make the self “other than” flesh, and yet this does not erase the “soleness” of the self. As Spicer puts it: “A division of where one is” (*CB* 175). Spicer draws an analogy between the institutionalization of Christ in a church and the worshiping of words, for he writes, “where one is is in a temple that sometimes makes us forget that we are in it. Where we are is in a sentence” (*CB* 175). This citation presents a brilliant image of religious or literary discourse that surrounds the self, but the self forgets it is within “the glass temple” because the theology or discourse creates an illusion of transparency. Discourse, from Foucault and Spicer’s point of view, pretends to be nothing but a window onto the outside world. Spicer registers the desperate consciousness of being trapped within the sentence: “Where we are this is idiocy. Where we are a block of solid glass blocks us from all we have dreamed of. But this place is not where we are to meet them” (*CB* 175).

One comes to a temple to commune with the divine or, in this case, to commune with words. But Spicer has subverted this project by saying that the glass temple of the sentence is not where “we meet them.” In order to find “them,” Spicer moves from the temple to an image of the city. The city is

a collection of human beings ... In their municipal trust they sit together in cities.

They talk together in cities. They form groups.

Even when they do not form groups they sit alone together in cities.

Every city that is formed collects its slums and the ghost of it. Every city that is formed collects its ghosts.

Poetry comes along long after the city is collected. It recognizes *them* as a metaphor. An unavoidable metaphor. Almost the opposite. (CB 175)

Poetry discloses the community out of which it has emerged. Spicer is very clear that poetry does not exist on its own, and that part of its responsibility is to recognize *them*. The singular relationship to Lorca's ghost in *After Lorca* becomes a relationship to the immemorial, for these ghosts have no names. Spicer's experience of the immemorial retains the singularity of all those who are beyond memory. These past beings are anonymous but the reality of their past is no less real because we can't see their faces; we may not know who they were, but we know *that* they were. The impossibility of identifying the dead makes metaphor absolutely necessary. "They" will always be different than what we call them, but metaphor is the very access to their reality. The diachrony of metaphor (bearing across) corresponds to the diachrony of this most basic of human experiences: sharing being with past beings. For this to be a sharing and not a way of using the past for the present's purposes, the dead cannot be dissolved into the meaning of the present. The present must be exposed to the past as Other. The last words in the book proclaim "The real sound of the dead. A blowing of trumpets proclaiming that they had been there and been alive" (CB 183).

In the Vancouver lecture, Spicer also says that "There is a confusion between the City of God and the city, the community and the Civitas Dei" (*Caterpillar* 12 202). This confusion is part of the story; it is the confusion of being inside a sentence as in a temple of glass. It is also the confusion due to the opaque discourse anchored by the City of God that obscures the singular beings who comprise the real city. The ghosts are "an unavoidable metaphor," but they are also

“almost the opposite” of a metaphor. It is only as a metaphor we meet them, but *they* are not a metaphor. Metaphor does not create a communion with the dead, but rather it is that which makes it possible to communicate with *them*. In this way, the dead are not dissolved into a monolithic tradition, but retain an otherness that is also a “like.” Spicer is resisting the process in which “the city redefined becomes a church,” or the reification of metaphor. The story of metaphor is the “long history ... that passes from the state of novelty to that of faded or dead metaphor” (“Word, Polysemy, Metaphor” 83). The passage from novel metaphor to literal meaning is the “redefinition” which makes us forget we are in a glass temple. Against the calcification of metaphors like the *Civitas Dei*, Spicer expresses an experience of the city that “we create in our bartalk or in our fuss and fury about one another [and that] is in an utterly mixed and mirrored way an image of the city. A return from exile” (CB 176). In a sense, one is exiled into a temple of glass, or into a language, that reifies the city and denies the living, finite relationship between humans as what the city *is*.

If a relationship to past beings is constitutive of the community, then that loss is the loss of community itself. Chapter 13 is the allegory of this loss: “When the gas exploded the ghosts disappeared. There was merely a city of chattering human beings” (CB 177). Language without a sense of the past becomes a one-dimensional collection of humans chattering away like birds. What distinguishes humans from natural beings is a present that is suffused with past and future. The present, Spicer is saying, only has substance in its relationship to the immemorial for “there was a tremendous loss of substance when the gas exploded” (CB 177). The human present is thus made up of a temporal depth, and this temporal depth is not simply the present’s

relationship to the past, but it is precisely the movement into the future which creates the past, or which creates ghosts: “Hold to the future. With firm hands. The future of each afterlife, of each ghost, of each word that is about to be mentioned” (CB 179). Tradition, in this sense, is not the mere preservation of the past but, as the continuity of community, tradition is a mode of temporal being. The past would disappear irrevocably without a future: “You have left the boys’ club where the past matters. The future of your words matters. The future is continually in the past” (CB 179). This poetic tradition is a “pathology [that] leads to new paths and pathfinding. All the way down past the future. The words go swimming past you as if they were blue fish” (CB 179).

This image that finishes the chapter invokes Surrealism (particularly Breton’s *Soluble Fish*) and leads into the next chapter. The Surrealists were Spicer’s immediate poetic predecessors, and Surrealism embodied bold ventures onto new paths. Surrealism was very much a group adventure with many of the surrealist experiments occurring *between* writers who wrote joint texts as well as shared experiments in automatic writing. And in their manifestoes, they drew a deep distinction between their poetic community and society at large. Re-affirming the distinction of poetic discourse from other forms of social discourse, Spicer writes that “all the words they use for poetry are meaningless” (CB 180). He then goes on to say what poetry is: “Postage stamps at the best. Surrealism a blue surcharge for Tchad. This is an imaginary African kingdom which will never gain independence because it does not exist and is not merely an act of the imagination and did issue postage stamps” (CB 180). The imaginary kingdom will never gain independence because it depends on those who imagine it, but it *did* issue postage stamps

because the communication of its being makes it more than imaginary. This marvelous sense of the poetic community as both real and imaginary (or real *in* being imaginary, which is the community of absence, or a *shared* imaginary kingdom) is involved in time both as its possibility and anguish: “And each stamp we put on the letters they send us must be canceled heartlessly. As if its delivery, the beautiful image of it, were a metaphor” (CB 180). As in *After Lorca*, Spicer is disengaging the poem from its presence in words. The poem is the stamp and not the letter, as if to say it is by way of the stamp that the letter is delivered. The stamp is not the message but the metaphor of the letter’s delivery, that is, the poem is the emblem of transmission, or the “between.”

This intimacy of the transitory and permanent is the very possibility of the continuity of community: “To create the beautiful again. It is as if somehow the lovers of postage stamps had created images of themselves” (CB 180). If the beautiful were truly permanent, then beauty would not need to be created again, but if beauty were absolutely temporary, it could not be brought back into being. Beauty is shared by those who create and re-create it, and the communality of this enterprise is coded in the plural pronoun “themselves.” Correspondence in beauty gives the poetic community continuity. But it is the very temporality of beauty that is shared for “each stamp we put on the letters they send us must be canceled, heartlessly. As if its delivery, the beautiful image of it, were a metaphor.” The stamps (poems) must be “canceled heartlessly,” for the poem is the emblem of the transitory. The poem is the very mortality of the letter, but the message has a permanence that exceeds the transmission. The message, in this sense, is the afterlife of the poem, or what endures. Spicer does not succumb to the power of

time to erase every trace of human being, but rather, in distinguishing the temporariness of the poem from the message, he has affirmed a kind of permanence. Beauty, in these lines, takes on a social character, for it is not just a beautiful image but “the image of *themselves*.” And the beautiful image of the poem (“a blue image of the unknown”) is a metaphor for its delivery, which is to say that the beauty of a poem is the fact that it is sent. The tiny beautiful image on stamps coming from exotic countries like Tchad is a metaphor for the transmission of messages among human beings. The poem (as a stamp more than a message) bears the community across time. The poem (as metaphor) is the trace of community because, as we saw with Nancy, community is not a supra-personal subject but the very exposure of selves to *each* other. The poem is a metaphor for this condition of being between. But it is a condition which must be re-created for there is the permanent crisis of the potential disappearance of the ghosts. This disappearance involves the transformation of surrealism into Surrealism, or the tendency of language to calcify the novelty of metaphor into literalness, or the tendency of the city to become a church.

The play of pronouns in the second to last chapter expresses the indeterminate temporal boundaries of community. This textbook is more than a lesson in poetry, but an offering to bring the reader into this community:

We do not hate the human beings that listen to it, read it, make comments on it.

They are like you. It is as if they or you observed one continual movement of surf breaking against the rocks. A textbook of poetry is created to explain. We do not hate the human beings that listen to it, the moment of surf breaking. (CB 183)

“You” and “they” are not yet “we.” Spicer is able to use “we” because of his intimacy with the ghosts. The previous chapter ended: “the eye in the weeds (I am, I was, I will be, I am not). The eyes the ghosts have seeing. Our eyes” (*CB* 183). The ambiguity of “our” indicates the ambiguous boundary of the poetic community, for is it “our” in the sense of Spicer and the ghosts, or “our” in terms of Spicer, the reader, and the ghosts? The ambiguity leaves the door open to the reader. The boundaries of the community are temporal boundaries and what this textbook emphasizes is the boundary between the living and the dead – a boundary that is as indiscernible as the boundary between the present and the past. It is the correspondence of this indiscernibility that makes the “I” intimate with the ghosts. The “I” is all of those predicates at once – “I am, I was, I will be, I am not” – but the ghosts are only “not.” Except as metaphor. Metaphor, as a correspondence of being, creates an “our.” What the “I” and the ghosts share is the “not” (“I am not”), but this shared non-being opens the self onto the past life of the dead just as the dead opens the self onto non-being. The ghosts depend upon the living for their being as the living depend upon the dead for their being. The “our” gives the dead a personal pronoun while this same “our” brings the living together with the immemorial being of human being: “our eyes” is also “our I’s.”

But just as the living poet incarnates “our” as the present’s relationship to the past, so the reader is the future being of this relationship. If the community has no future it has no being. The past had being, the present already has being, but the “not yet” may never be. “They” are the human beings who read poetry, and they are like “you” because every reader is singular, but every singularity can also escape into being a they, or into a public living in a glass temple which

it doesn't recognize itself as being within. The moment of poetry as surf breaking is an image of chilling indifference that corresponds to the "beyond memory" of immemoriality. By using pronouns, Spicer emphasizes the namelessness of the reader while retaining their singularity and thereby giving the reader a relationship to the immemorial moment of poetry by, in effect, making the reader immemorial. A textbook explains, Spicer observes, but poetry is a moment of surf breaking that can only be listened to. This image creates an intentional undoing of intentionality that loosens the private "I" and makes possible a listening that privileges what is outside. This image also folds the textbook back into poetry as it creates a metaphor which discloses rather than defines poetry:

The real poetry is beyond us, beyond them ... and the rocks were not there and the real birds, they seemed like seagulls, were nesting on the real rocks. Close to the edge. The ocean (the habit of seeing) Christ, the Logos unbelieved in, where the real edge of it is (*CB* 183).

This point is precisely where *After Lorca* ended: at the edge of the real. The difference between the two books is that the relationship to Lorca is broadened in "Textbook" to become a relationship to immemorial Others; the relationship of friendship has become a community whose narrative is the story of the very possibility of poetic community. The possibility of community in the modern age is not simply the story of its mythic beginnings, or of its history, but of a certain relatedness, or a sharing of time. A community's temporal being involves past beings, the living and future beings. The past is shared with the future by way of the living. This textbook is necessary because without the future reader, or without those who can read there

would be no community. But “reading” is more (or less) than reading. The textbook is about what reading involves, but Spicer was unable to explain what this was without exposing the reader to what it *means* to read. What it means is to listen to the dead. But the dead cannot be heard. This is the paradox of tradition, and the story of time and metaphor is the story of listening to the dead *as if* you could hear *them*.

The ambiguous boundary between this textbook and poetry corresponds to the ambiguous boundary between the living and the dead, or between time and temporality. Textbooks about poetry explain this relationship in terms of genre, influence, changes in style etc., while Spicer’s textbook establishes a relationship with the dead. The temporal proximity of the living and the dead ends the text where “been alive” corresponds to “to be alive:”

The real sound of the dead. A blowing of trumpets
proclaiming that they had been there and been alive. The silver
voices of them.

To be alive. Like the noises alive people wear. Like the
word Jim, es-specially – more than the words. (*CB* 183)

III. The Poetics of Time:

A Community in Spite of Itself.

“In every era the attempt must be made to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it...even *the dead* will not be safe.”

Walter Benjamin *Theses on the Philosophy of History* VI.(I 255)

Tradition is the concept that brings time and community together, for it is through tradition that communities survive in time. However, the concept of tradition, like the concepts of community and time, is very problematic. As a noun “tradition” suffers the same conceptual fate as time: “Being speaks out of the constancy of time’s passing away. Nevertheless, nowhere do we find time as something that is like a thing” (Heidegger *On Time and Being* 7). We tend to think of “a tradition” as a “simultaneous order” of monuments, customs, and beliefs. To be persuaded by the synchronicity of the term “tradition” is to imagine ‘a’ tradition assembled and possessed by ‘a’ community. But where is the final gathering of a community or a tradition? It would perhaps be more accurate to say a community traditions than that a community has a tradition, for even the most stable monument works to pass on something, and where it fails to pass it on, the monument is no longer part of a tradition. (This is perhaps why the Sphinx has had such a life among modern poets, for it is a monument cut adrift in time). This passing on is a resistance to passing away, for tradition creates continuity under the incessant threat of discontinuity. In tradition, the temporal capacity of humans confronts the crisis of discontinuity. However, tradition also destroys as it saves, for it is never the past itself, or the beings who are passing away, that is preserved against time. Rather, past beings are destroyed in their very preservation, for they become something else than what they were: a name, a story, a

representation, a sign. Identity is therefore a two-edged sword, for what is identified is also lost; what is preserved is also destroyed.

Community hands itself down or, as Spicer would say, it is borne (a)cross time. But does community hand *itself* down? This handing down is always in time, for it is never complete, never absolute; the *itself* of community is the handing down. Tradition makes the survival of identity possible, but that identity only becomes itself in a handing down that cannot cease, for if it ceases, then the community ceases. Tradition, by legitimizing a community's identity through repetition, tends to bury time in ritual, myth and other images of a "simultaneous order." This is T. S. Eliot's position in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in which "the existing monuments form an ideal order amongst themselves" and "the whole literature of Europe...has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" that is "complete before the new work arrives" (441). But where is Western literature complete except in the minds of those who elect themselves to be keepers of the tradition? In Eliot's formula, what appears to be a strong attempt to preserve the past is actually a gathering of the alterity of the past into the present's representation of the past as a simultaneous order. The present creates an image of the past and assimilates it to itself, or to the ideal of its "timeless" values. Tradition, in other words, serves the present more than it does the past. As Benjamin would say, the dead are not safe from the conformism of tradition.

Spicer had named this conformist tradition "a historical patchwork...used to cover up the nakedness of the bare word" (CB 15). The "bare word" is the word exposed to time, and the poet a "time-mechanic" in which the alterity of the dead is "led across time not preserved against it" (CB 25). The "mummy sheet of tradition" (25) denies, or resists time in handing itself down. This

denial of time is one of the functions of traditionalism, for the threat of discontinuity is overcome by creating “immortal” values that hold sway over the finitude of singular beings, as well as over the community’s finitude. Spicer’s sense of tradition as a correspondence of singular poets who “translate” each other returns tradition to the shakier ground of time and experience. The problematic and often paradoxical tradition of modern poetry is due to the “experience of time” that is “passed on,” for this experience re-awakens the consciousness of time from its sleep in tradition. If tradition is essentially a resistance to the transitory, or discontinuity, then poetry like Spicer’s passes on an experience of time that subverts tradition while forming a tradition.

In this chapter I shall explore the problematic relationship of the “tradition” of modern poetry to the paradoxical “tradition of the new” of modern society, and Spicer’s own place in this poetic tradition. The crisis of tradition that is the hallmark of modernity reveals a deeper crisis: the crisis of time itself which is the crisis of discontinuity, or an experience of finitude. The tradition of modernism, I will be arguing, bifurcates into the containment of this crisis in the temporality of modern society (the tradition of the new) and into the revelation of this crisis in modern poetry. The tension between time and temporality that I began to explore in the last chapter now comes to the fore. Temporality, as I defined it earlier, is a “structure of time.” This means primarily that humans “live in time” by valuing past, present, and future differentially. When a culture develops a consistent temporal structure, it creates the time it lives in, but by the same token, temporalities are forged out of time. As Max Weber has argued, human history can be divided into traditional and non-traditional societies, and this great divide is characterized by two different temporal structures. Traditional societies place great value on the past as they live to fulfill their traditions, while non-traditional or modern societies live towards the future thus developing an anti-

traditional tradition. But keeping to my distinction of time and temporality, traditional cultures cannot escape the future no more than modern societies can escape the past. The concept of denial is important here because although cultures cannot escape the past or future, they can deny their importance. To give time a structure is to value certain aspects of time while denying the value of other aspects. Traditional cultures deny the value of the future just as modern societies deny the value of the past, but this does not erase time, for time never stops undoing the very permanence that traditions affirm, or reminding the present of the past it had thought it had left behind.

While it is beyond the bounds of this chapter to argue how time undoes the temporality of traditional societies, it is the purpose of this chapter to indicate how “the experience of time” in modern poetry undoes the temporality of modern culture. In this chapter, I will follow the fault line between the poetic “experience of time” and the temporality of modern society by focusing primarily on the French poet Charles Baudelaire. However, I am not trying to discern *the* literary tradition of modernity, but what I want to bring to light is *a* modern poetic tradition in which the experience of time is shared across time. Spicer, as it should be clear by now, was highly aware of the communitarian nature of poetry, while often his predecessors were less explicitly aware of this. Poets draw from others (contemporaries and predecessors) and give to others (readers) in an explicit manner without always making the leap to a concept of community. But it is an unavowable community “because too numerous but also because it does not even know itself...[for] shared texts, like all texts [offer] what belongs to no one and returns to everyone” (Nancy *IC* 42). The point I will be arguing is that modern poetry, in isolating itself from “society,” does not become less social for doing so but, on the contrary, evinces an

“originary sociality” through this sharing of experience.

But first I must define more clearly what I mean by modern temporality. As Adorno writes “modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological, category” (*Minima Moralia* 218). However, the very term “modern” is abstract in the sense that it means simply “up to date” or “today” without any specific reference to the content or quality of this “todayness.” “Modern” emerged as a term in the middle ages, coming from the Latin *modernus*, which was “coined from the adverb *modo* (meaning recently, just now)” (Calinescu 15), and from which sprang *modernitas* (modern times) and *moderni* (men of today). From the Renaissance on, a very discernible difference between contemporary life and traditional ways of life was evident, but the future imagined by Renaissance thinkers was a future return to the “former pure radiance” (Petrarch qtd. in Calinescu 21) of ancient times. The ideal future was still conceived as a repetition of the past; however, real historical development was not leading back to Rome or Greece. “Only in the course of the eighteenth century,” Habermas writes, “did the epochal threshold around 1500 become conceptualized as this beginning” (Habermas 5) of modernity. This “modern epoch” is characterized as one “that lives for the future, that opens itself up to the novelty of the future” (Habermas 5).

As Kosselleck writes “‘the modern age’ refers only to time, characterizing it as new, without, however, providing any indication of the historical content of this time or even its nature as a period” (*Future's Past* 233). Kosselleck traces the self-awareness of modernity to the awareness of the primary value of being “new.” Modernity began by distinguishing itself from the “Middle Ages,” and took on “meaning only in contrast with the preceding ‘old’ time” (*FP* 233). It was “only when Christian eschatology shed its constant expectation of the immanent arrival of

doomsday that a temporality could be revealed that would be open for the new and without limit" (FP 241). In the nineteenth century, this shift in temporality became dominant, and it was only then that the terms modern and modern times, or modernity, coalesced into their present meaning. There was in Europe a "conscious working-over of the nature of time," and concepts like "Revolution, Progress, Crisis, Development and *Zeitgeist* all contained temporal indications that had never before been used in the same way" (FP 245). In this era "time is no longer the medium in which all histories take place; it gains an historical quality...history no longer occurs in, but through, time. Time becomes a dynamic and historical force in its own right" (FP 246). History, in this sense, is "temporalized," because history is no longer a scene of eternal recurrence, or the process leading to an inevitable end, but an open-ended process without precedence.

"Progress and historical consciousness reciprocally temporalize all histories into the singularity of the world-historical process" (FP 253). But it was translating these grand concepts of Revolution, Progress, Development etc., into everyday life that constituted a working ideology: "Liberalism thus advances at the same pace as time itself, or is inhibited to the degree that the past survives into the present" (FP 260). Liberalism is the ideal of selves keeping pace with progress by pursuing their own self-interest; the alignment of self-interest with the value of the new is what characterizes modern social life. The concept of progress became a quasi-mythical force that gave European history not only unity and momentum, but a superior value. It is during the eighteenth century, or the Enlightenment, that modern times was seen as being "completely other, even better than what has gone before" (FP 238). By the nineteenth century, this had become doctrine. The ideals of Progress and "the new" may have been championed by philosophers and writers of all kinds, but technological progress and the production of new commodities were a

historical/material reality. What distinguishes modern society from traditional societies is not novelty per se, but the valuation and momentum of the new; production and consumption of new commodities had become the driving force of social life. The need to produce new products is the very logic of capitalist industry, but this necessity must be met by the compulsion to buy these products. It is against the backdrop of this twin compulsiveness that I want to discuss Baudelaire's poetry.

One of the enduring values of Baudelaire's work lies in the profound way in which he expressed the paradox of modernity. The paradox of modernity is the "tradition of the new," for the new negates everything old, but in order for the new to persist as a value it must be passed on; it must, in essence, become a tradition. But it is a tradition built around the negation of tradition. Modern art partakes of this anti-traditionalism for, as Adorno writes, "Modern art is different than all previous art in that its mode of negation is different. Previously, styles and artistic practices were negated by new styles and practices ... modernism negates tradition itself" (AT 30-31). Yet, the anti-traditionalism of modern poetry is not identical to the anti-traditionalism of modern society. Benjamin quotes a contemporary of Baudelaire's who writes that "Baudelaire... curses 'progress,' he loathes the industry of the century, and yet he enjoys the special flavour which this industry has given today's life ... I believe the specifically Baudelairian is the constant combination of two opposite modes of reaction ... one could call it a past and a present mode ... the latest innovation in the sphere of emotional life" (qtd in *Charles Baudelaire: Lyric Poet of High Capitalism* 94). Kosselleck writes that the emergence of *nouveau* "as an epithet is an indication of an increasingly reflected experiential change" (Kosselleck 242). But this "experiential change" is very problematic because, as I will argue along with Benjamin, it diminishes the very capacity

for experience. Baudelaire's emotional innovation was to bring the past to bear on this experiential shift and expose its one-dimensionality. If Progress is the ideal that blends individual self-interest into the mass of consumers and producers, then modern poetry like Baudelaire's "ruins" the ideal of Progress by refusing to forget. His poetry creates a social grouping around the poem that exists in the wake of progress.

Lyric poetry would seem the least likely place to look for a sense of community, since lyric poetry refers to the expression of private emotion. But Baudelaire opens his masterpiece, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, with a direct address to the reader and, as Benjamin notes, these readers are "kindred spirits" (*Charles Baudelaire* 109). "Au Lecteur" uses "nous" and "notre" throughout, indicating that Baudelaire is not speaking just of his private experience, but of a shared condition: the common condition of being alive in the modern world. The poem is a call to awareness: "even as we breathe the invisible stream of Death flows down into our lungs, yet we hear not its groans" (*Charles Baudelaire* 155). He is speaking to those *like* him who have lost a certain capacity to feel, or perceive, their own lives: "each day we take a step further into Hell, yet feel no horror as we descend through stinking gloom." This is remarkably close to Spicer's "Textbook of Poetry" when he writes, "Poor bastards, trying to get through hell in a hurry....They go through life till the next morning. As well all do. But constantly" (*CB* 170). It is this going through life "constantly" that produces the kind of amnesia that both Baudelaire and Spicer are trying to shake their readers from. Both poets recognize that it is not just a temporal distance that separates them from their readers, but a certain way of living in time that obstructs the capacity for sharing experience.

Baudelaire counts himself among those who "steal their furtive pleasure as we pass on," but what distinguishes him from them is his awareness of the *consequences* of this way of life. The

poem is an unworking of the task of conscious life to keep pace with the social world. Baudelaire is peddling what no one wants: “Boredom, *Tedium vitae*, who with an unwilling tear in his eye dreams of gibbets as he smokes his pipe. You know him Reader, you know that fastidious monster – O Hypocrite Reader, my semblance and brother!” (*Baudelaire* 154). Baudelaire shares with his reader a sense of boredom that is not that of someone waiting for something new to come along, but rather the *tedium vitae* where one feels that there is nothing new. In this boredom, the self winds down to a stasis, and cannot be roused by all the positive values and products that society has to offer. Boredom cuts the self off from society by making the self useless, but it also exposes the self in its singularity, for in boredom one is radically detached. Boredom undermines the very functioning of the world, for it is “uglier and more wicked and filthier than all the rest! Although it makes no frenzied gestures or savage cries, yet it would fain reduce the earth to ruin” (*Baudelaire* 156). The providential dream of Progress is interrupted by this decadent posture. It is this state of being apart from the momentum of modern life that Baudelaire shares with the reader. This poem calls into being a community of the isolated.

In his essay “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin diagnosed the decline of storytelling in the modern era as the result of “the communicability of experience...decreasing” (*Illuminations* 86). Through the disappearing figure of the storyteller, Benjamin is able to articulate the transition to modernity. Baudelaire’s “Au Lecteur” is also a sign of the decreasing capacity to share experience, but through boredom the poem creates a space where there can be such a sharing. Benjamin sees boredom as the *precondition* of the sharing of experience: “If sleep is the apogee of physical relaxation, boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation. Boredom is the dream child that hatches the egg of experience His nesting places – the activities that are intimately associated

with boredom – are already extinct in the cities and are declining in the country as well. With this the gift for listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears”(I 91). In “A Postscript for Charles Olson” from *Admonitions*, Spicer writes,

If nothing happens it is possible
To make things happen.
Human history shows this (CB 65).

Only when the self slows down to a standstill (as it does in boredom) is it possible to make history rather than being made by history. The storyteller “makes” history in the sense that in telling the story of what happened, the past is both retained and interpreted. Modern lyric poetry like Baudelaire’s interrupts the amnesia of readers who, in “not hearing the groans of death,” are being born along by the momentum of history.

Lyric poetry and storytelling share this need for a “community of listeners” in order to exist. However, it is not just a lack of time and place, but the absence of experience itself, Benjamin argues, that makes sharing experience a disappearing phenomenon in the modern age. Benjamin makes a profound distinction between the concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) and the concept of “living through” (*Erlebnis*). He uses the image of the unskilled worker whose “work has been sealed off from experience,” to illustrate the concept of *Erlebnis*: “The worker at the machine has no connection with the preceding operation for the very reason that it is an exact repetition”, and in him “practice counts for nothing” (*Illuminations* 133). The unskilled factory worker is different than the artisan who learns his practice through tradition, and whose work is not a series of repetitions, but displays profound continuity. This contrast corresponds to the contrast between the storyteller and the production of “news”:

The replacement of the older narration by information, of information by sensation,

reflects the increasing atrophy of experience. In turn, there is a contrast between all these forms and the story, which is one of the oldest forms of communication. It is not the object of the story to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storyteller as much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hands. (*ChB* 113).

The storyteller does not repeat discrete moments, but rather "the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of re-tellings" (*Illuminations* 93). In the lyric poem the sense of re-telling is not as acute, but the lyric poem, as an expression of individual emotion or experience, bares the trace of the writer in an even more direct way than the story. The poem exhibits a singularity that the mass-produced product cannot imitate because the poem is not simply an object, words on the page, but the transmission of experience. But it is not just the singularity of Baudelaire's experience that makes his poetry unassimilable into modern temporality, but the very temporal quality of that experience. For if "the new is an invariant" as "the *desire* for the new" (Adorno *AT* 41), then Baudelaire's poetry of loss undermines the dominant value of the new.

In Baudelaire's work the experience of loss bears the shock of discontinuity. Loss registers the passage of the present into the past, while retaining the integrity of what is lost. The experience of loss awakens the self to the value of what has been lost, and it prevents it from being replaced. There can be no replacement for what has "been irretrievably lost" (*ChB* 139). This is what distinguishes the Baudelairian experience from the "already-always-the-same [that] appears palpably in mass-production" (Benjamin "Central Park" 48). The experience of loss

exposes the self nakedly to time:

The *duree* from which death has been eliminated has the miserable endlessness of a scroll. Tradition is excluded from it. It is the quintessence of the passing moment that struts around in the borrowed garb of experience. The *spleen*, on the other hand, exposes the passing moment in all its nakedness. (*ChB* 145)

This poetics brings an immediate sense of the past, or loss not as just as what has past, but what is passing. As Spicer writes, “Yesterday was eternity. Is backwards. Is the way that man faces the real that is always going past him. And him it” (*CB* 158). “Is” is already past. Benjamin’s “borrowed garb of experience” refers to the one-dimensionality of modern life ruled by fashion, for fashion escapes the loss inherent in being by replacing one new style with another. Fashion, in these terms, is the ritual of the new, but a ritual in which the past is constantly erased rather than retained. Fashion wears the *borrowed* garb of experience because the modern “*duree* from which death has been eliminated” lacks the temporal depth that characterizes experience. The figure of the gambler given over to the “next moment” illustrates this mode of being for he “resembles Bergson’s fictitious characters who have completely liquidated their memories” (*ChB* 135). This liquidation of the past characterizes modern temporality – that is, modernity is a temporality in denial of time.

Spicer plays into this poetic tradition emanating from Baudelaire because of his own refusal to forget and his passionate relationship to those, like Lorca and Rimbaud, who are gone. Spicer shares with Benjamin the recognition that tradition is an essential function of social experience. The isolation of instants from each other corresponds to the isolation of humans from one another. The lack of continuity attests to the weakening of tradition, but also experience for,

“experience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life” (*I* 110).

To be cut off from tradition, Benjamin argues, is to be cut off from experience. Poetry like Baudelaire’s and Spicer’s assumes great importance when it is realized that it is not just private experience that is being shared, but the very capacity to experience. It is through tradition that those in the present can share their experience, but also share *in* experience. Experience, in this sense, is not the immediate datum of sensation, but profoundly related to past and future.

Tradition is thus a way of being in the present; a way that makes memory constitutive of experience. For Spicer, a community cut off from the past is “merely chattering human beings” (*CB* 177). Consumer culture as the repetition of new sensations is, in some sense, a return to the one-dimensional presence of nature. The storyteller, in his re-tellings, expresses the enduring quality of the story. News does not outlast the moment in which it is current, while “a man listening to a story is in the companion of the storyteller; even a man reading one [a story] shares this companionship” (*I* 100). Spicer’s “Textbook of Poetry” narrates the challenge of this companionship. His shifting pronouns – “us,” “we,” “you,” and “them” – indicate the absence, but also potential presence, of these companions. This companionship is the heart of what I have been pointing to as the literary community, for it is a companionship across time. Community, in the modern age, takes refuge in time because it no longer has a place in space.

But it is not just that this community takes refuge in time, but that the experience of time itself is what is shared. Baudelaire’s sense of time does not form a temporal structure to rival the temporality of modernity (just as the poetic community is not a society to rival modern society), but rather it is an exposure to time that cannot be assimilated to the temporal structure of modernity. This temporal experience was the consequence of taking modernity seriously. As

Benjamin writes “It takes a heroic constitution to live modernism” (*ChB* 74). In a sense, we can call Baudelaire’s lyrical poems narratives of the experience of the condition of modernity. But in seeking to live modern temporality, Baudelaire was exposed to a naked experience of time that he could not forget. Baudelaire’s famous poem “Voyage” begins “for the child in love with maps and prints, the universe matches his vast appetite. Ah, how big the world is in the lamplight; but how small viewed through the eyes of memory” (*B* 182). The desire for “unexplored sensualities” (183), and an attitude of “Let us fare forward!” is exposed as

curiosity [that] torments us and drives us on, like a cruel Angel whipping Suns. A strange destiny, this, in which the target is ever shifting, and which, being nowhere, can be anywhere; in which Man, with untiring hope, is always rushing like a madman in search of rest. (*B* 183).

The ever shifting target is the abstract desire for the new – a sense of time empty of content that propels one along towards new sensations.

The pursuit of the new creates, in the poet, a knowledge that is denied in society at large: “Bitter the knowledge we draw from voyaging! Monotonous and mean, today, tomorrow, always, the world shows us our own image – an oasis of horror in a desert of tedium. Should we go or stay? Stay, if you can, go if you must. One man takes to his heels, and another crouches at home to outwit time, that watchful, baneful enemy” (*B* 188). More important than the morbid judgement on human existence is the knowledge that what drives humans is not the new but the desire to outwit time. The compulsion to the new is revealed as a reaction to time. The important implication of this is that time is what humans seek to escape, but also the means by which they escape it. However, the means subvert the ends because once the new has been attained, the self

is left with time. All it can do is take up another pursuit, or another desire for the new. The poet abstracts himself from this futile process:

Death, old navigator, the hour has come! Let us weigh anchor! O Death, we are weary of this land, let us spread sail! Though sea and sky be black as ink, our hearts, which you know well, are full of shafts of light. Pour us the Hemlock for our comfort; its fire so burns our brains that we yearn to dive into the gulf's depths and – what matter if it's heaven or hell? – into the depths of the Unknown, in quest of *something new*. (*B* 190)

By identifying death with the new, Baudelaire detaches modern poetry from both the Christian tradition and the tradition of the new. By asking “what matter if its heaven or hell,” he has made those Christian absolutes relative to the desire for something new. But by saying that the pursuit of the new is a leap into death – the experience of mortality – Baudelaire has also subverted the ideal of progress as the incessant movement into a better future. Progress posits an endless evolution, while Baudelaire recognizes that death *is* the future. In order to redeem the modern self from the time that modernity exposes it to, progress must gather the finite individual up into an infinite movement forward. Baudelaire's innovation is to see “Death as the gate that opens onto unknown skies” (*Baudelaire* 93). This innovation puts experience on a new footing that distinguishes it from the “always-already-the-same” of the modern compulsion to the new. And if this “innovation” is passed on and taken up by others, we can speak of a tradition that is distinct from both traditionalism and the “tradition of the new.”

Spicer clearly takes up this unavowable tradition when he expresses a vision of time that is not packaged into discrete instants: “that pathology leads to new paths and pathfinding. All the

way down past the future" (CB 179). The future of modernity is a future that opens onto another future like an "endless scroll" without recognizing the future becoming past. As the future becomes present, it is lost as past: "the future of your words matters. The future is continually in the past" (CB 179). Spicer affirms that it is the future of words that matter, or that gives meaning to language, but this future cannot be separated from its becoming-past. The present is thus not simply an opening onto the future, or a desire for new sensations, but the site of loss where what is is continually passing. This temporal vision is the very experience of language, or poetry.

But what kind of a tradition is it that focuses on irretrievable loss? For traditionalism there is a sense in which nothing is lost, for each moment partakes of an eternal Presence, as each being is also God's Being. Baudelaire and Spicer relativize this Absolute Presence through their inability to "get over" time, or the finitude of singularity. In his small book *Fifteen False Propositions Against God*, Spicer creates a narrative of this condition of difference/finitude. The small metaphoric vocabulary of this serial poem uses the image of a tree to create a sense of time. "Trees in their youth look younger / Than almost anything" with their tender young leaves and desire "To look like real trees / Honest to God my heart aches / When I see them trying" (CB 90). The young trees live through the fog of August and then are "amazed that it is no longer summer," for in November their fresh leaves turn "rough." Then "The leaves fall / Such a hard reason to seek" (90). Spicer deepens the metaphor of the tree as he addresses God: "Nobody believes in you / Least of all us trees," and he creates a singular image of a tree "at the final edge / Of a cliff.../ Just standing / There." This tree does not have God as the ground that holds and nourishes it, but rather God "is the nearest / Tree" (179). God is not the Absolute towards which we move as towards Absolute Identity, but God almost appears as the very principle of alterity, or

as the next tree over. Spicer continues the narrative of the tree by recounting the story of William Carlos Williams' grandfather who remarked, on his dying trip to the hospital, "'Trees. Those fuzzy things?'" (CB 91). At the furthest reaches of old age the world begins to become fuzzy, but this is "a journey we will all take" (CB 91) where even "the fact of death [will be] fuzzy / Like a big tree." Spicer finishes this poem with a desire to cut down this "blurred forest" in order to clear away "whatever is in the way of my eyestalks" (CB 91). To retain the sharpness of vision is to see the young tree that makes the heart ache, or to cut down the blurred forest of what stands between the self and its clear perception of its temporal condition. This "hard reason" that Spicer seeks is not God, or a solution to time, but a more naked exposure to time. Time, as the reason for being, is a hard reason for it is not an explanation. We are here because of time, but time gives us no reason. Spicer expressed this condition in *After Lorca*:

Afternoon asks the ocean,
 "Why does a man die?"
 – "It is 1:37
 13 empty boats
 And a seagull. (CB 50).

The redemptive aspect of this experience lies in being exposed to what we already are. If denial of death is mixed into the pursuit of the new, then death as the future, or as an otherness than can never be reached or answered for, would free us from the "endless scroll" of pursuing what can never be. In a sense, Spicer's poetry can be called a struggle to "chop apart / With my bare hands / This blurred forest" (91). The movement of this serial poem is not towards despair, or anguish over time, but to a kind of prayer: "Give me the strength to have joy" (92). The paradox of this prayer is that it is given to an "absent savior" (93) and one, like the ambiguous Logos/Christ of "Textbook," who will never be incarnated as an absolute presence.

This sense of time has its cost, for it requires exposure to finitude, both in terms of the present as passing (loss), and the future as death (mystery/unknown). This cost has consequences for the life of the self to which I will return in the last chapter, but this surrender to the unknown, will bear fruit in later poets who took Baudelaire seriously – Mallarmé, Rimbaud, the Surrealists, Lorca, Rilke, René Char, Jack Spicer etc. We do not need to see Baudelaire as an absolute origin of the tradition of modern poetry to see him as a kind of watershed, or a point of no return; a figure who gave “living through” modern life “the weight of experience,” and passed that experience on. After him, the unconscious denial of time is no longer possible. But, keeping to the concept of tradition, we must look back before looking forward, for Baudelaire found in his immediate predecessor, Edgar Allen Poe, a likeness.

In much the same way that Spicer is after Lorca, Baudelaire is after Poe. In a letter Baudelaire asks: “And do you know why, with such infinite patience, I translate Poe? It was because he was like me! The first time I ever opened a book by him I discovered ... not only subjects which I had dreamt, but whole phrases which I’d conceived, written by him twenty years before” (qtd in Starkie 251). There is no “anxiety of influence” here because Baudelaire is not looking at his art as something that is exclusively “his,” but rather, and perhaps in spite of himself, he sees the value of art in this shared outlook and sentiment, that is, in a shared communication.

What drew Baudelaire to Poe was the shared awareness of a “natural Perversity” (*Baudelaire on Poe* 125). Poe finds “with a remarkably satanic subtlety, the impossibility of finding a reasonably sufficient motive for certain wicked and perilous actions” (125-26). According to Poe, the self is capable of an undetermined freedom that gives it precedence over the imperatives that command it from without. In Nancy’s terms, this means that the self is not

completely immanent to society. "It is pleasant to know that some fragments of an old truth are exploded in the face of all these flatterers of humanity, of all these humbugs and quacks who repeat in every possible tone of voice: 'I am born good, and you too, and all of us are born good!' forgetting, no! pretending to forget...that we are all born marked for evil!" (*Baudelaire on Poe* 126). The paradox of this mark of evil is that it is the mark of being unidentifiable, or undetermined. This mark is the sign of a distance from the meaning of the good; it is the sign of the distance of singularity. Sartre makes precisely this point when he writes that "in a universe where each element sacrifices in order to converge in the greatness of the whole, he [Baudelaire] brings out the singularity, that is to say the rebelliousness of a fragment or a detail" (qtd. in *Bataille Literature and Evil* 36). For Baudelaire to find this in Poe, and Sartre/Bataille to find it in Baudelaire, points to the "sharing of singularity...the tracing of the borders upon which or along which singular beings are exposed" (*IC* 33).

Progress, for Poe and Baudelaire, forgets this mark, or this singularity. "That progress (in so far as there is progress) perfects sorrow to the same extent that it refines pleasure and that, if the epidermis of peoples is becoming delicate, they are evidently pursuing only an *Italiam fugietum*, a conquest lost every minute, a progress always negating itself" (*Baudelaire on Poe* 128). Baudelaire brings time to bear on the ideal of Progress, reminding the world that for every forward movement something is lost. The social ideal of Progress absorbs the singularity of individuals into a faith that insulates them from their own finitude. "Civilized man invents the philosophy of progress to console himself for his abdication and for his downfall" (*Baudelaire on Poe* 129). The Fall is, above all else, a fall into time, or into an awareness of finitude: "to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:20). Progress, with its secularization of the Garden, seeks to erase awareness

of the Fall, but Baudelaire and Poe, in their perversity, return to the inconsolable.

This excursus into Baudelaire's relationship to Poe is important to illustrate how "community is that singular ontological order in which the other and the same are alike: that is to say, the sharing of identity" (*IC* 34). Their shared insight into the amnesia of progress is important, but more important to my thesis is how this insight is kept alive through its sharing. The unavowable community comes into being in this sharing that does not proclaim itself but simply shares this sense of singularity, or being alike in being marked for evil. It can be argued that the experience of singularity is a private experience, and though it may depend upon perceiving the singularity of others, the perception itself is still a private experience. However, it is not just *having* this experience that is important, but *retaining* this experience, and this requires others. The unavowable tradition is that moment when the experience of another corresponds to one's own and through that correspondence experience is held in common. Spicer writes in a late poem "I know / I was not the only one who felt these things" (*CB* 258). But what if one finds no one else who admits to feeling "these things?" The tradition of modern poetry is a sharing of experience that retains, awakens, and re-awakens. Without this community, or without this tracing of the border where alterity is shared, the value of this experience would be lost to the momentum of modernity. Sharing something keeps it in being, and the special quality of tradition is to keep something alive by sharing it with the dead. This sharing does not keep the dead alive, but shares an experience where the trace of the Other creates a kind of companionship across time that validates experiences that would be otherwise lost.

This retention of experience, and perhaps of the very capacity to experience, is what we owe to these others, but it is a debt that cannot be repaid, and it was a gift for which no return

was expected. This tradition is, then, holds onto what cannot be held onto, but also what cannot be replaced. It is a tradition that shares what cannot be exchanged, that is, the singular openness to time and being. This debt that cannot be repaid points to the non-instrumental nature of the “sharing of identity.” Baudelaire distinguishes between the singular figure of the poet and “that mob of buyers and sellers, [and] that nameless creature, that headless monster...you call a State!” The poet’s “republic of the mind presided over by beauty” is marginalized in a “country [America] where the idea of utility, the most hostile in the world to the idea of beauty, dominates and takes precedence over everything” (*Baudelaire on Poe* 131). It is in this taking “precedence over everything” that Baudelaire recognizes the totalizing power of society. “He alone is a poet who is a master of his memory, the sovereign of words, the record book of his own feelings always open for examination” (*Baudelaire on Poe* 137). The affirmation of this sovereignty expresses the secret politics of modern poetry, or the line that divides it from the totalizing power of society. Poe’s importance for French poetry resides in his idea that “poetry has no other goal than itself; no poem will be so...worthy of the name of poetry as that which will have been written solely for the pleasure of writing a poem” (*Baudelaire on Poe* 139). This poetics describes the “community in spite of itself,” for in asserting its isolation from society it would seem as if this poetics is anti-social. But Baudelaire, in embracing Poe’s poetics, is seeking a way of escaping the totalitarian discourse of utilitarianism. Spicer’s “Textbook of Poetry” is firmly in this tradition when he writes that “he [the poet] does not have a word to say to them [the public]” (*CB*169). This position does not isolate poetry into a pure being-in-itself, but serves to separate poetry from becoming an instrument of society or the public. In the last poem in *Language*, Spicer writes that “Love is not mocked whatever use you put to it. Words are also / not mocked” (*CB* 243). Love and poetic

language correspond in their value that is beyond “whatever use you put to” them. This value gives them their duration:

The dark
forest of words lets in some light from its branches.
Mocking them, the deep leaves
That Time leaves us
Words, loves. (CB 243)

It is through this “community in spite of itself” that works endure, for a work that is not responded to, disappears. Love defines that response which is beyond the utilitarian, and in Baudelaire’s relationship to Poe and Spicer’s to Lorca, there is love. To his dying day, Baudelaire was most proud of his translations of Poe. Spicer takes up this unavowable tradition when he writes, “what I am trying to do is establish a *tradition*. When I’m through (although I’m sure no one will ever publish them) I’d like someone as good as I am to translate these translations into French (or Pushtu) adding more” (Ellingham and Killian 105). This is a radical awareness of both the communal nature of poetry, and of a process of continuity. Baudelaire had found those “like” himself in Paris – “the lost women, the outcasts” – but “having been betrayed by these last allies of his, Baudelaire battled the crowd – with the impotent rage of someone fighting the rain and wind. This is the nature of something lived through (*Erlenis*) to which Baudelaire has given the weight of experience (*Erfahrung*)” (ChB 154). Baudelaire envisaged this betrayal as the day when his allies “would be ready to advocate a well-ordered life, condemn libertinism, and reject everything except money” (ChB 154). As he wrote in *Intimate Journals*: “Commerce, in its very essence, is *satanic*. Commerce is return on the loan in which there is the understanding: *give me more than I give you*” (51). In this statement, Baudelaire goes to the heart of the distinction between the ethic of a market driven society and the communitarian ethic. What he shares with

the “lost women and outcasts” he loses as they “rejected everything but money.” However, in the absent Poe, he still had a likeness and a brother. “Poe was fated to become a most unhappy writer. Rancor aroused him, solitude settled around him. In Paris, in Germany, he would have found friends who could easily have understood and comforted him; in America, he had to fight for his bread” (*Baudelaire on Poe* 63). This imagined friendship corresponds to Spicer’s relationship to Lorca, and indicates the trace of an unavowable tradition where friendship and community meet.

But this sense of friendship also indicates how tenuous this community and tradition is. Even to call modern poetry a tradition is suspect, for it is a tradition that undermines the very nature of tradition as a triumph over discontinuity, for in the expression of singularity, it is discontinuity that is passed on. As Benjamin said of Kafka’s writings, they are the sign of “tradition falling ill” (qtd. in Osborne 69). Modern literature is, in many ways, the expression of the failure of tradition. Modern poetry, like Spicer’s and Baudelaire’s, returns tradition to the impossibility of its project (to overcome discontinuity), but in passing on the experience of that impossibility modern poetry creates a tradition. In other words, this modern poetry returns tradition to a naked experience of time making this tradition, in a sense, anterior to tradition. Tradition arises out of the experience of time, or out of the capacity to see the present passing and being lost, and it creates lasting rituals, institutions etc., as a buttress against this loss, or discontinuity. The degree to which tradition denies the irretrievable is the degree to which the experience of loss is denied. But experience is always singular, and tradition depends upon experience and the individual’s capacity for time for its existence. Thus, tradition is a plurality disguised as a totality that modern poetry unmask by refusing to let go of the value of singularity.

But this naked experience of time has profound consequences for the self. The tradition of

modern poetry that follows from Baudelaire can be called an “art of self-destruction,” and nothing illustrates this art more clearly than modern poetry’s reclaiming of the Orphic myth. And nothing indicates more clearly Spicer’s own sharing in the tradition of modern poetry than his use of this myth. It is the Orphic narrative that ties together the three books of *Heads of the Town in the Aether*: “Homage to Creeley,” “A Fake Novel about the Life of Rimbaud,” and “Textbook of Poetry.” If tradition is a means for surviving in time, then the very problematic nature of the modern poetic tradition lies in the creation of a tradition in which survival itself is brought into question. My next and final chapter on the “art of self-destruction” is necessary, therefore, if we are to decide whether or not modern poetry constitutes a tradition as a mode of survival, or an exquisite dead end taking perverse pleasure in its own demise.

Chapter IV.

The Art of Self-Destruction:

“The identity of the poet gets more obvious”

In this chapter, the distinction I will be drawing between the *logic* of self-destruction and the *art* of self-destruction corresponds to the distinction I drew in the second chapter between community and society, and in the last chapter between a poetics of time and the tradition of the new. The distinction between community and society turned on the distinction between relationships based on a sharing of singularity and those based on self-interest, while the distinction between the poetics of time and the tradition of the new turned on the distinction between a naked experience of time and a temporality in which the “new” appears within “the ever-always-the-same.” These lines become finer and more difficult to draw when one realizes that it is the same self that shares and pursues its own interest, and the same self that is exposed to time and escapes this exposure through pursuit of new sensations. What I am calling the logic of self-destruction goes to the very heart of modernity, for modernity is destructive both of traditionalism and of itself. The break between traditional society and modern society is not a singular or definitive moment, and therefore the identity of modern society is comprised of traditional elements. Thus, in the progressive purging of these traditional elements from itself, modern society is being self-destructive. However, modernity breaks not only with traditionalism, but also with its own advances as it replaces one technological or organizational innovation with another, or one product or fashion with another. Fashion, as the ritual of the new, lives on its own destruction.

The self-destructiveness of modernity means that every desire for the new carries its own destruction within it. Each desire is a desire for a particular thing, but every particular desire falls short of the new because the moment it is fulfilled the desire is no longer new and must be replaced. Baudelaire captures this process in the image of the gambler who compulsively replaces each loss with another throw of the dice. Gambling is a process of discrete instants where each moment promises to be *the* moment, but each, as it ends, is forgotten and replaced by the next gamble. In the succession of new sensations, memory and a capacity for the future are eroded because experience is cut off from the past, and yet each “new” sensation is a repetition of the “ever-always-the-same” pursuit of the new. What characterizes this as *self*-destruction is that the modern gambler is the one “hastening eagerly towards the gaping pit, who, drunk with his own blood, would really prefer pain to death, and Hell to nothingness” (*Baudelaire* 174). Self-destructiveness lies in the *eager hastening* towards death, for it is the very hastening that propels the self towards the very thing that it is rushing away from. The logic of self-destruction creates a non-reflexive momentum that compulsively replaces one new moment, gamble, or sensation with another.

As Marx writes, “production creates consumption...by creating the consumer need for the object which it presents as products. It therefore produces the object of consumption, the mode of consumption and the urge to consume” (“Introduction of Critique of Political Economy” 133). In consumer culture, human need or desire is translated into the need or desire to consume. The logic of self-destruction refers to those needs, desires and capacities that cannot be fulfilled through commodity consumption, and atrophy for lack of expression. The atrophy I have been

focusing on is the atrophy of the capacity for time-consciousness, for in the compulsive pursuit of the next new sensation, the present becomes isolated from the past. It can be argued that the contemporary “epidemic” of addictive behavior is a flaw in the social system, but this position ignores the compulsive nature of the pursuit of new sensations that is a normative force in modern culture. Where do we draw the line between compulsive and addictive behavior? To see addiction as a disease that can be cured turns attention from the social process that inculcates and benefits from addictive behavior. Unconsciousness is the point, and the hastening of the addict is the enactment of unconsciousness. Denial, which has become such a crucial concept in “curing” addiction, is kept isolated in the realm of addiction therapy, while the denial of the addictive nature of modern society reflects the deeper denial of time itself. The addict, like the normal consumer, thrives on amnesia. As De Man writes, “the full power of the idea of modernity is the desire to wipe out whatever came earlier” (qtd. in Gergen 32). I will be arguing that this compulsive “wiping out” does not simply erase the past, but diminishes the very capacity for experience.

In this chapter, the logic of self-destruction and the art of self-destruction will meet in Spicer’s confusion of alcoholism and poetry: “Giving yourself to poetry is like giving yourself to alcohol – most people can’t or are afraid. I’ve given myself to both” (Ellingham and Killian 58). The art of self-destruction is distinguished from the logic of self-destruction by an awareness of time rather than the denial of time-awareness in the pursuit of the new. However, this awareness has its “cost” to the self, for the self’s identity depends upon a sense of continuity that an awareness of time “ruins.” The art of self-destruction involves the self’s struggle to overcome,

escape, destroy, or distance itself from itself. But time is already at work in this distancing of the self from itself, so there is only a hair's breadth between a consciousness guided by a firm sense of self, and the shattering experience that time-awareness brings. The modern self exchanges past and future for an immediate sensation that does not last, and therefore always "loses." Yet the modern self "wins" by renewing its pursuit. The art of self-destruction disturbs this logic, for by allowing the self to be exposed to time, the very self that has been created to pursue the new is undone. This art of self-destruction, I am arguing, is one of the key traditions of modern poetry, and therefore in the distinction between the logic and the art of self-destruction, we can discern the distinction between modern society and the community of poets.

The profound relationship between surrendering to time and surviving in time is what I am calling the art of self-destruction. The challenge of this art lies in losing one's identity without losing one's life. This difficult art of self-destruction tosses and turns between an active and passive relationship to time. Baudelaire's exposure to time initiates this insomnia in relation to being. In Baudelaire, we encounter an inability to forget time, but also a profound desire to do so: "Resign yourself, my heart, sleep the sleep of the brute" (*B* 181). This desire to return to the unconsciousness of nature is a desire to forget, but Baudelaire does not forget. The hyper-active working upon nature that is the legacy of the Enlightenment and capitalist development meets its shadow in Baudelaire's passivity: "Time is engulfing me, minute by minute, as the interminable snow swallows a stiffening body" (*B* 181). However, in the midst of this helplessness, there is a kind of activity, for there is a surrender to time. Surrender is the performance of this passive/active dialectic. This ambiguous act, this surrender, appears in Baudelaire as a question:

"O avalanche will you take me with you when you fall?" (181).

In this ambiguous drama, time is seen as an external force falling over the self, a force that "eats life away" (B 164). But there is also at work in Baudelaire an intimacy with time, or an identity with time in which images of the self appear like scent bottles "which remember everything," though they "no longer live in the memories of men" (B 144). For Baudelaire, what endures beyond the memory of men, is an aspect of the self as "an old love full of death and charm [that] writhes into wakefulness," and his poetry is, like a scent bottle, where this "poison brewed by angels" survives, "proof of your strength and virulence" (147). If the self were totally identified with the corrosive being of time, then there would only be a pure passing, but because the self has the capacity to remember itself and cast itself into the future, it endures. Time makes self-reflection possible, and in this self-reflection, both the substance of the self – "a poison brewed by angels" – and its passing are experienced. The art of self-destruction, as I am conceiving it, then, involves a deliberate, or retained, awareness of this temporal condition; time is not just suffered, or lived through, but the poetic self retains of the experience of its passing.

Hell is the place of non-being, and the journey into hell is an ancient tradition in Western culture that stretches from before Homer to beyond Spicer. This trip into hell is itself an art of self-destruction for it is a naked exposure to non-being, or to the shadow of life. This tradition of an art of self-destruction is evident in the modern poetic movement from Baudelaire's *gout de néant* to Mallarmé's descent into Nothingness¹ that resulted in his poetics of "nothing in action" (Blanchot *The Space of Literature* 109). John Granger in an essay on *Heads of the Town in the Aether*, used Mallarmé to discuss Spicer's "emptying of the subject and self in 'Homage to

Creeley” (Granger 146). However, Dante’s art of self-destruction figures more directly than Mallarmé’s in “Homage to Creeley.” In the *Inferno* “the goal of the descent is to reach the zero-point so the climb of the *Purgatorio* can begin. In order to do this, it is necessary to strip away all the illusory values with which we ordinarily comfort ourselves” (Freccero 176). This stripping away is an art of self-destruction: “The primary destruction that must take place in this mystic representation of biography is the destruction of the poet’s former self” (Freccero 176).

In a lecture on *Heads of the Town*, Spicer admits that the three books contained in it are patterned after Dante’s *Divinia Comedia*, with “Homage to Creeley” an “analogy of Dante’s *Inferno*” (*Caterpillar* 12 186). However, Spicer also explains that the book “is almost entirely [based] on Cocteau’s film *Orphée*” (*Caterpillar* 186). Spicer’s sense of hell is thus not tied to a Christian narrative where the self goes through a sequential progression, but hell is a component of the structure of experience. “Throughout it [“Homage to Creeley”] and throughout the whole book [*Heads of the Town*] runs the business of the pathway down into hell” (*Caterpillar* 186). For Spicer, one never leaves Hell in a definitive way as Dante did, and one does not cease the “purification” of Purgatory, just as one never arrives finally in Paradise. The poems in “Homage” are followed by “Explanatory Notes” in prose, but these notes refer to the poems less as explanations than as further passageways into hell. In looking for the meaning of hell in this text, one finds oneself looking for meaning in hell, for Spicer’s language does not so much conceal or reveal the meaning of this hell as embody it in language. Puns, rhymes, broken sentences and discordant images disturb any sense of continuity, and yet voices, meanings and images arise. In “Car Song,” “The wheel and the road turn into a stair / The pun at our backs at our backs is a

yellow star / We pin our puns on the windshield like / We crossed each crossing in hell's despite" (CB 119). Looking for connecting links and metaphors that create identity, or narrative threads that lead to resolutions, one finds only "stairs...that are awfully steep" (121). But "What I knew / Wasn't true... / Stepping up to poetry / Demands / Hands" (121). This hand up from hell is the love that appears and disappears in the series of poems.

Two loves I had. One rang a bell
Connected on both sides with hell (CB 118)

The signal (bell) is connected, not to two ears, but on both sides to non-being. This poem ends,

They pushed their cocks in many places
And I'm not certain of their faces
Or which I kissed or which I didn't
Or which of both of them I hadn't. (118)

The lithographs by Fran Herndon that were contained in the original edition, present outlines of shadowy figures on a black background. Faces and bodies appear out of the blackness, but they lack distinctness or singularity. These are beings at the edge of non-being. The effect of Spicer's language corresponds to this indistinctness, and one is left hanging on the rim of hell, looking in like Dante at the condemned shadows.

But it is also a trip into Hell looking for the loved one in order to redeem him/her from the indistinctness. In the chapter entitled "The Territory Is Not The Map," Spicer writes: "Truth is a map of it, oily eyes said / Half-truth is half of a map instead / Which you will squint at until you are dead" (CB 122). This map misses as much as it shows. Truth, like a map, is always *of* the world, but the substitution of the map, or of truth, for the world creates a blind spot. The territory is the blind spot on the map just as the lover is the blind spot in the ideal of love. Loving

the representation of the Other and not the Other is the terrain of hell:

Dante would have blamed Beatrice
 If she turned up 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 them were object. (*CB* 125)

Spicer is describing the hell of language's tendency to appropriate the Other. In Spicer's explanatory note to the above poem, he writes: "What Beatrice did did not become her own business. Dante saw to that. Sawed off the last plank that anyone he loved could stand on" (*CB* 125). One loves the Other, yet love predates the Other as an ideal. The self-destructiveness of love lies in this tendency to sacrifice the loved one to the ideal. Time figures into this hell because the danger of love lies in loss:

Love isn't proud enough to hate
 The stranger at its gate
 That says and does

 Or strong enough to return
 Or strong enough to return (and back and back and back again)
 What was (*CB* 129)

This language hanging at the rim of hell is, in a sense, the hell of time, for love is not strong enough to return to "what was." Eurydice is the image of "what was." Orpheus loses Eurydice to death, then he journeys into the world of non-beings to recover (recall) her, and manages to bring her back into the light, but then loses her when he turns to look at her. The genius of the Orphic myth is in the story of the second loss. Orpheus loses her because he wants to fix her in his gaze. This gaze desires a presence saved from non-being. The myth tells us that our love can recall the

loved one, but love cannot overcome its nothingness. As Spicer writes in "Textbook", "nothingness is alive in the eyes of the beloved ... He is what he is because he is never where he is" (CB 172). The Other's nothingness is not just its death, but its perpetual loss to time. By trying to save the Other from non-being the ideal gaze sends the Other back into the non-being of ideality. This region between love and the ideal of love corresponds to the region between community and communion, for in both cases the self wants to fuse with the Other. But this fusion is always an ideal communion, for one can only merge with one's idea of the Other and not the Other. "Lovers expose, at the limit, the exposition of singular beings to one another and the pulse of this exposition: the compearance, the passage, and the divide of sharing" (Nancy IC 38). Lovers and friends give us an image of community because in both relationships, what is shared is singularity. But in love this shared singularity tends towards union. As Bataille writes,

Only the beloved can in this world bring about what our human limitations deny, a total blending of two beings, a continuity between two discontinuous creatures.

Hence love spells suffering for us as it is a quest for the impossible. (*Erotism* 20)

This impossible desire is the hell of love and accounts for the theme of suicide that haunts Western love stories, for only in mutual death does one become the same as the other. In life there can be no such absolute fusion. The *art* of self-destruction in love would be surviving this impossible desire, and remaining in love. "Continuity is what we are after, but generally only if that continuity which the death of discontinuous beings can alone establish is not the victor in the long run" (*Erotism* 19). The art of self-destruction resides in this difficulty of losing yourself without losing your life, that is, a self-destruction in which death is not victorious. It is the

promise of love as redemption from time (“I will love you forever”) that makes love an impossible ideal and, as Spicer says “saws off the last plank anyone he loved could stand on” (CB 125).

Poetry also tends toward the impossible project of creating a supra-temporal continuity. By way of the image, poetry brings life to a standstill: dead time, *nature morte*. In the living present, there is never “an” image because the image never arrives at a perfect synchronicity. Spicer struggled within his poetry and poetics against the reification of the image. As he writes in a letter to Lorca, he wants to “make him [a boy in a blue bathing suit] visible in a poem as a tree is visible, not as an image or a picture but as something alive – caught forever in the structure of words” (CB 34). Nothing expresses the impossible task of modern poetry, or the extremity of its contradiction, more than this impossible gesture. What Spicer seeks to capture is not the eternal quality of the Other, but its living presence, its mortality, or its otherness. The explanatory note of “The Territory Is Not A Map” reads, “This is a poem to prevent idealism – i.e. the study of images. It did not succeed” (CB 122). The image cannot be prevented, but neither can it succeed to bring back the dead.

This hell of being exposed to non-being becomes, in “A Fake Novel about the Life of Arthur Rimbaud,” the purgatory of biography. This book stands midway between “Homage to Creeley” and “Textbook of Poetry” in *Heads of the Town*, but it can also be situated between *After Lorca* and “Textbook.” If *After Lorca* is communication with an individual ghost, and “Textbook” is about an experience of immemorial ghosts, then this fake novel is about the becoming-immemorial, or becoming-ghost, of the individual poet. “A Fake Novel about the Life of Arthur Rimbaud” has the particular poet, Rimbaud, as its subject, but it also explores the

ambiguous “presence” of Rimbaud that is more impersonal than the “casual friendship with an undramatic ghost” that Spicer had with Lorca. The ambiguity of the Word, or Logos, that is so central to “Textbook” begins in “A Fake Novel” when Spicer says of Rimbaud that “the Word puts on flesh when he becomes sixteen, seventeen, nineteen” (CB 161). The singular life is here “taken over” by the Logos. Rimbaud, as a figure, is entering the realm of immemoriality:

“Rimbaud. A cry in the night. An offer. What the words choose to say. An offer of something. A peace” (CB 166). To become immemorial is to be “beyond memory,” or to lose that personal sense of self by entering the impersonal being of language. The “Fake Novel” narrates the agony of retention of singularity in the self becoming Word, or the art of self-destruction.

As Ricoeur writes, “On the one hand history makes use in some way of fiction to refigure time and, on the other hand, fiction makes use of history for the same ends. This reciprocal concretization marks the triumph of the notion of figure in the form of ‘imagining that’” (*Time and Narrative Vol. III* 181). The very title of Spicer’s book indicates this ambiguous ground between fact and fiction, for if a novel is fiction, then a fake novel would be fake fiction, or the real story. But what is the real Rimbaud? Not just *who* was the real Rimbaud, but *what* is the real Rimbaud? There is the Rimbaud who lived a real life and wrote poems, and then there is the figure of literary history, but also the Rimbaud Spicer had tremendous affection for and to whom he owed a great poetic debt. This “fake novel” flies in the face of Eliot’s critical dictum that we must “divert interest from the poet to the poetry” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 447), for this strange biography argues for a profound experience of the relationship of a poet to his work, and of the reader to the poet: “What are we saying when we say that something ‘really’ happened?”

This question is the most troubling of all questions that historiography raises for thought about history" (*TN III* 142). "A Fake Novel" is a kind of historiography, for it raises this troubling question, not just for thought, but for experience, as if to ask: what is the experience of the Other who is past? How does the Other persist, or endure? What trace of the Other remains in the work they left behind? The play of endurance and disappearance is an art of self-destruction in which the self becomes an Other, a trace, or figure that points back to the "real" singular being.

To divest poetry of its poet, or to speak as if poetry is only "text," is to live in denial of the nature of the work, for it is to replace the ambiguity of what it means to be present, with the presence of the text. The presence of the text has a synchronicity that the life of the poet never had. To view the poem as "text" is to fail to imagine it as having been a present moment with a future, for as Spicer writes, "The future of your words matter" (*CB* 179). The art of self-destruction resides in retaining this sense of living at the edge of absence – the absence of both past and future – against the festishized presence of "text." In Spicer's "fake novel," the reader is not merely consuming a poetic object but is exposed to the time of Rimbaud's life. Translating Rimbaud's invention of "the colors of the vowels" (*Season In Hell* 51), Spicer writes, "A is a blank piece of driftwood being busted, E is a carpenter whose pockets are filled with saws, and shadows, and needles. I is a pun" (*CB* 163). Language, as the means for the creation of metaphor, is made the object metaphor by Spicer/Rimbaud. Pun is a doubling of meaning, and so it becomes a metaphor for the doubling of "I" as vowel and identity. But identity is itself an infinite folding – "I within I within i etc" (*CB* 242) – or a perpetual pun on itself. This pun refers to Rimbaud's "Je est un autre" in which the "I" is defined as what it is not. This metaphoric definition opens the "I"

onto the unknown, for “metaphor is something unexplained – like a place in a map that says after that is desert. A shorthand to admit the unknown” (*CB* 162). In this sense, the “I is another” is shorthand for the unknown being of the self. Spicer adds, “when he [Rimbaud] said it first, he invented the world” (163). By recognizing that Rimbaud “said it first,” Spicer acknowledges the tradition of the art of self-destruction where this art is an exposure to the unknown being of the “I.” In this tradition metaphor is the unknown in action, or the future of language. When metaphors become literal they die, and when Rimbaud becomes “text” or a *figure* in literary history, his work is stripped of its futurity. Spicer begins the “Fake ‘Novel’” by saying, “‘You can’t close the door. It is in the future,’ French history said as it was born in Charlieville” (*CB* 149).

Throughout this “fake novel,” Spicer lists the years of Rimbaud’s life: “being 15, 16, 17, 18 19, even 20” (154), but, “since he is now dead, the years...are unimportant to both his death and our lives” (153). To see our lives chronologically is to see our lives from the point of view of “history,” or dead time, that is, as an enumeration of what has already happened. But when do we ever escape the living present? It is as a corresponding life that Spicer approaches Rimbaud. Poetry, in this sense, is the trace of the Other; it is a trace that is more than an archival artifact, but an opening onto a life that was. To follow this trace to the life of the other is to imagine a life that corresponds to one’s own in its temporality, that is, as an opening onto the future. As Ricoeur writes “it is the imaginary that keeps the otherness from slipping into the unsayable” (*TN Vol.III* 184).

A real novel gives us the living present “as if” it were real, and involves us in a similar way

that we are involved in the living present, while Spicer's recovery of Rimbaud forces the reader to imagine Rimbaud both in his living presence, but also in his being gone. The "Fake Novel" does not have the luxury of the suspended disbelief of fiction, for the "real" Rimbaud is really dead. This is "the danger any reader takes reading these words" (CB 162). The chapter "So Far We Have Stressed The Humanness Of Rimbaud" begins, "The dead are not alive. This is what this unattractive prose wants to stamp out. Once you see an end to it, you believe that the dead are alive" (CB 152). But then, after exposing the reader to the years of Rimbaud's life, Spicer ends the chapter by saying, "imagine also that the dead are not alive and his awkward face" (153). The image of Rimbaud's face forces the reader to imagine Rimbaud as he was when he realized, in his own way, "the dead are not alive." The vulnerability of Rimbaud's face exposes the reader in time to time, and saves the image from being a mere picture, for in the imagination, the past has a certain life to it. In the imagination, the past face is animated and has duration. It is also, like Lorca's ghost, finite.

The art of self-destruction arises out of this inescapable vulnerability to time that the logic of self-destruction compulsively escapes. Boldly Rimbaud announces "Je est un autre" (*Illuminations* xxxi), but this statement is less a declaration than an experiment. Making the self an other is the art of self-destruction and Rimbaud's *Season in Hell* is the record of this art and its consequences². This experiment isolated him – "not even a companion" (17), "But no friendly hand! And where to turn for help!" (87) – and, as Spicer says in "Homage to Creeley:" "sheer hell is where your apartness is your apartness" (CB 144). To survive this hell, this is the art of self-destruction, and the terrible question that Rimbaud raises for modern poetry is whether or not

survival from this experiment is possible. In some ways, the “Fake Novel” is an answer to this question, for in it Rimbaud survives, but multiply. Rimbaud survives as a figure, but more profoundly he survives immemorially, as a ghost, or metaphor, and yet he survives also in the vivid image of his “awkward face.” This last survival is not “as if he were here,” but is itself an image of the “as if” as non-being, both because it is the image of a face exposed to death, but also because its very vividness makes us more aware that Rimbaud is not here.

Spicer’s narrative takes up Rimbaud’s art of self-destruction, or his multiplicity. The Orphic narrative that connects the three books of *The Heads of the Town* is invisible in the “Fake Novel,” for neither Orpheus nor Eurydice appears by name as they do in the other two books. However, the identity of Rimbaud in the “Fake Novel” takes on a complex ambiguity when we see Rimbaud as both Orpheus and Eurydice. In a chapter called “Rimbaud,” Spicer writes: “His eyes would watch the lovers walking past / His lips would sing and nothing else would move,” creating an image of the dismembered head of the Orphic poet floating down the river singing. Spicer identifies the “I” of the poet with the river – “‘I is the river,’ the ghost said” (CB 164) – and the poet’s song is carried along “in the middle of the river of our life” (160). Spicer is not describing a “simple” loss of identity, but a very complex relationship between “I” and Other where the Other is the poet, and the “I” is the river of the poet’s life. The Orphic art of self-destruction lies in this surviving head, disembodied from the river of its life, but born(e) along in song. The surviving head is not one with the river of its life, and the very disembodiment is part of the being, or experience, of the poet. Poetic identity is to be nonidentical. The danger of this disembodiment lies in how the life of the poet is sacrificed to song. How does this disembodiment

occur, or by what means does the poet separate himself from his life? Spicer's gift of himself to alcohol comes into play here, for by taking up drinking as a "career," he disengages himself from a useful role in society, and ensures a pure commitment to poetry. But, as I will be arguing shortly, is giving yourself to alcohol so counter to modern identity as it seems?

In the "Fake Novel," Rimbaud is also Eurydice, and Eurydice is a pun on "yesterday." In "Textbook" "a new Eurydice [is] punning her way through his hell," signaling "the death / of every poem in every line" (171). Eurydice is the intimacy of loss, not just of yesterday, but of the passing present. In "Textbook," Spicer imagined a circle surrounding each person as the boundary of their desire. "On the outside of it is what everybody talks about. On the outside are the dead that try to talk. Once you try to embrace an absolutely geometric circle, the naked loss stays with you like a picture echoing" (173). This loss occurs at the site (sight) where one's desire is its own boundary, that is, where it cannot *have* the Other. "Yesterday is a lover...yesterday was eternity. Is backwards. Is the way that man faces the real that is always going past him. And him it." But the key is that "yesterday survives in his eyes – like one water's particle in his river" (158). Orpheus loses Eurydice by looking back, but she survives in his eyes, or in memory as an after-image, and becomes a drop of water in the river of his life. This dense metaphoric language serves to approach the real as loss, the past as a lover, and to bring historical understanding to an affective understanding on the reader's part, as well as a his/her fuller perception of the problem of time. "One does not discover the past remembering" (158), for remembering gathers the past into the present. But the past is also "nothing in action" (Blanchot *The Space of Literature* 109); one discovers the past by watching the present disappear, or the present become a ghost. The art

of self-destruction is in this perception that is at work in the text, but also in the reader. Rimbaud, like Eurydice, survives in the reader's eyes, but only to the extent that this very survival depends upon recognizing the second loss. Spicer has made it impossible to think of Rimbaud's work without imagining his Eurydice-like presence, or a presence at the edge of the text that cannot be looked at without making it disappear. But this condition is the very condition of being; the reader's exposure to the "awkwardness" of Rimbaud's face is an exposure to finitude. Rimbaud's metaphoric survival thus makes a ghost of the reader: "I mean that the reader of this novel is a ghost. Involved. Involved in the lives of Rimbaud" (*CB* 167). To be involved in the "lives" of Rimbaud is to be exposed to one's own plurality, for this sense of the self's plurality begins with a sense of time, or the passing present. Identity as I = I cannot survive this exposure to time-awareness that exposes the self to its non-being. This exposure is not just to death but to the non-being that it *is*, for if the I is temporal, then it is already what it is not. In this sense, human continuity becomes an art of self-destruction where one survives as the impossibility of being present.

Identity, in these terms, is a metaphor that has lost sight of its metaphoric quality. "The identity of the poet gets more obvious" (*CB* 265), Spicer writes, but the poet's identity is obvious only for what the poet is not – "we're not nightingales and can never become them." Through memory, we triumph over time in rescuing what has been lost, but we lose when we believe we have re-presented the past. Modern poets use the Orphic myth as an ontological drama that is a metaphor for experience itself. I think Walter Strauss, in his otherwise important work on modern Orphism, is wrong when he writes that "His [the Orphic poet's] task is to face Nothingness, to

overcome (abolish) it in order to make poetry once more possible" (*Descent and Return* 12). The second loss of Eurydice indicates that nothingness cannot be overcome. But Strauss is right when he writes, "Orpheus is not only poetry; he has become, in modern times, the agony of poetry" (17). This agony defines both the tradition and strange politics of modern poetry. Spicer writes that Rimbaud invented a political party called "the Frank Terrors," and then relates this invention to the fact that "he knew he would be dead" (*CB* 151). This poetic politics thus shares the experience of finitude that Nancy had seen as the ground zero of community. Nancy had argued in relation to Bataille's statement ("language alone indicates, at the limit, the sovereign moment where it is no longer current") that an "ethics and a politics of discourse are evidently implied here" (*IC* 26). The negative sovereignty of language relinquishes itself in opening onto others: "After he [Rimbaud] had been born in the post office he began to practice his mouth with a new language. He could not imagine persons to listen to the new language. He had not invented politics yet" (*CB* 151). Politics is, in these terms, imagining others. Spicer's politics of communication is centered on the "Dead-Letter-Office": "A dead letter is there because it has no longer real addresses," however, "a dead letter is exactly as if someone received it" (151). Spicer's sense of the "text" as a dead letter that has no living address, but lives on *as if* someone had received it, means that its potential reception is inscribed in its being. The dead letter is an image of the unavowable community, or community of absence, for it is a communication that can only exist for an Other, but that Other is "as if" present. The breaking point of metaphor, and Spicer's profundity, lies in the realization that human presence is "as if" present. The identity of the poet is the art of self-destruction, and this identity did not originate with Baudelaire, or Spicer,

but is a shared identity, originating between times, between poets, between selves, or as the very metaphoric capacity: *as if* I were you. Rimbaud's abandonment of poetry continues to haunt the community of poets, but the strange being of the community of poets lies in sharing Rimbaud's hell, and not succumbing to it. "Slaves, let us not curse life" (*SIH* 83), Rimbaud bequeathed from the heart of his isolation.

Spicer brings this ethics to bear on Rimbaud. "History begins with shrewd people and ends with ghosts ... this is why I/we are writing this novel. If he had read it when he was sixteen, he could have changed human history" (159). Spicer stated earlier that French history was born with Rimbaud, by which he meant the future was opened up by Rimbaud. This is to say that history is as much, or more, involved with the future than with the past. Every record of a past event is the record of an event that *had* a future. Rimbaud's self-experiments could have changed history by changing the self's relationship to the future. When Rimbaud abandoned poetry for colonialism, he abandoned the poetic *nouveau* for the colonial lust for new lands: lands to be made identical with Europe. For the colonialist, the unknown is only there to be discovered and drawn onto the world map. The map is a metaphor that has become literal. But the map is not a territory. Spicer brings it to our attention that "when Rimbaud was sixteen he never even dreamed of Africa" (*CB* 160), for Rimbaud was not destined to go to Africa. From the point of view of the present this past seems necessary, for literary history would not be what it is without Rimbaud's defection. However, Spicer retrieves the indeterminate in Rimbaud's life making Rimbaud's choice more difficult to bear. "To love is not to continue with the Zanzibar slave trade" (*CB* 152). Modern society is an amalgamation of isolated individuals exiled from community through pursuit of their

own interests, and Rimbaud brought the ethic of this anti-social society to bear on Africa. As Spicer wrote in "Textbook," poetry is "a return from exile." The purgatorial aspect of the "Fake Novel," is a movement homeward, or, in Dante's poetics, "the reuniting of...dispersed communities" (Freccero 197). Rimbaud represents a kind of poetic diaspora – "Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I forget you / Zion" (CB 234) – that the imagined nation of "Textbook" calls to. To recall Rimbaud from the hell of non-being, or the hell of the Zanzibar slave trade, is to respond to his work, and this becomes a responsibility that, I would argue, is the source of this "fake novel." Zion is not San Francisco or Jerusalem but, as Robin Blaser would say, an image-nation³. Rimbaud, in this fake novel, is not being rehabilitated, or resurrected, but responded to through the imagination.

This responsibility is "a responsibility that...keeps the secret of sociality, whose total gravity is called... 'love of the neighbor.' It is a love without concupiscence, but as irrefragable as death" (Levinas *TO* 110). Spicer's later poetry, as can be judged by *Book of Magazine Verse*, was becoming more and more political, but in this special, even secret, way. The last poem of his last book speaks to Allen Ginsberg of Ginsberg's leading a march of "one hundred thousand university students ... Toward / A necessity which is not love but is a name" (CB 267). This distinction between a name and love is very important. If the failure of the youth movement of the sixties to amount to anything more than a more advanced form of consumerism can be traced to anything, it is this blending into a mass "in the name" of something that was "just a name." Politics is perhaps a dead metaphor for love of the neighbor. Like Levinas, Spicer distinguishes this love for the other (neighbor) from concupiscence – "the kind of love (not sex but love)" –

but he also distinguishes it from the moving mass of the crowd, and says, "Why / Fight the combine of your heart and my heart or anybody's / heart. People are starving" (CB 167) The "your" and "my" creates a singularity that distinguishes this love from the mass communion of the march. It is in the power of this singular combination to outlast the dispersion of the crowd and the momentum of historical forces that swept young people along from political protest to become a mass of obedient consumers of music at Woodstock.

The image of "People are starving" is a profound judgement on the human condition of the time, for to be starving in the midst of plenty is the great paradox of modern society. Addiction is one of the profound images of our time because addiction is an artificial hunger to answer the artificial paradise of consumer culture. George Bowering's first memory of Spicer is of Spicer asking him if "we used to do a lot of dope in Vancouver; I always remember that as a kind of dumb remark" (Ellingham and Killian 342). Bowering didn't see the import of the question, but what Spicer could see in the early sixties was how the growing use of drugs was destroying the public realm and creating a more pervasive world of private sensation⁴. Nothing is more private than hunger, and no one is more anti-social than the addict. Drinking on the other hand was, for Spicer, profoundly social. The bars around the North Beach district of San Francisco were the public space for his small community of poets and friends. Drinking is certainly more social than injecting methadrine or heroin, and so the "fix" of alcohol is not so obvious. But the great confusion of this era (the era we are still in) is in believing that one can consume one's way out of consumer society. Drinking creates a metamorphosis, and Orpheus is a god of metamorphosis⁵, but the difference is that the change drinking creates does not outlast the drunk (as news does not

outlast the moment in which it was new), while poetry endures. This endurance is the crucial distinction between the logic and art of self-destruction.

Muses are the daughters of memory Spicer reminds us on more than one occasion⁶, and “hold the ground gained” says Rimbaud (*SIH* 89). The tradition of modern poetry holds onto and extends the changes to the self and experience that modern poets struggled for and passed on. This holding on is the *agon* of poetry, or the very experience of reading. Poetry is a movement outward, toward the other, while drinking isolates over time. The isolation of the drug addict is immediate and obvious, while the isolation of the compulsive drinker occurs only at the very end of the night, or at the end of his alcoholic career. Spicer made no deliberate attempt to commit suicide but, I would argue, there is, in his drinking, a confusion of the art of self-destruction and the logic of self-destruction, and this confusion creates the climate of denial. Drinking, like gambling, drug use, and other rituals of the new, creates amnesia as the *agon* of experience is elided by habits that merely replace one state of being with another. Excessive drinking leads to a diminishment of the capacity to experience as one moves closer and closer to unconsciousness, or death. Therefore drinking would fall into the category of “living through” (*Erlebnis*) while poetry takes on the “weight of experience.” The logic of self-destruction has a momentum that Spicer’s slide into extreme alcoholism illustrates, for near the end Spicer would literally drink himself into oblivion.

But, as one of his contemporaries put it, Spicer “didn’t want to die” (Ellingham and Killian 360). The paradox of alcoholism is that the alcoholic is not trying to kill himself while he is in fact doing so. This contradictory logic is the logic of self-destruction, for this logic is lodged in

denial. Denial is a denial of the future, that is, of the death drinking is leading to. In this sense, Spicer's drinking closes the door that Rimabud opened, just as Rimbaud closed the same door when he got into the Zanzibar slave trade. The logic of self-destruction thus works against the art of self-destruction, for the life of the poet is cut short. But, I would argue, this tension between the logic of self-destruction and the art of self-destruction goes right to the heart of Spicer's poetics. The art of self-destruction that I have traced from Baudelaire to Mallarmé, Rimbaud and onto Spicer involves a profound descent, and a dangerous detachment of the self from itself. Time, I argued, is the vehicle for this detachment, for in becoming exposed to finitude the illusion of the self-same (identity) is destroyed. The fact that time is already at work destroying the self means that this "art" is passive; it is due more to a "dwelling in" this knowledge, or letting this knowledge (time) work on you, than it is an act of will. It is the art of becoming time. Drinking also has an active/passive logic where one chooses to drink, but then lets the alcohol work on the self and take over the direction of experience. This corresponds to a poetry by dictation where one opens one's self to an outside force and then follows its direction. In *The Holy Grail*, Spicer had distinguished between this poetic self-sacrifice and the communion of the holy grail: "the grail is the opposite of poetry / Fills us up instead of using us as a cup the dead drink from" (CB 188). The self-destruction of communion merges the self with the Lord, while Spicer sees the role of the poet as an offering to the dead. He had called Rimbaud "an offer," and it is in this offering that the logic of self-destruction and the art of self-destruction can become confused, for it is as an offering that communion occurs, and it is as an offering that the poet gives his voice to the dead.

Spicer flirted with communion in his translations of Lorca, but this becoming-the-Other

was never consummated, and the book ended with a profound sense of loss and difference. In *After Lorca*, translation is a reading of the Other that becomes a correspondence to one's own experience. Experience is shared through communication. Sharing must always be *between*, but in Spicer's poetry by dictation, the poet is filled by messages from an outside force. The "outside" (ghosts, Martians, energy, Language⁷) is incarnated as a message, and the poet communes with the outside force. For there to be an outside there must be an inside, but poetry by dictation evacuates the inside thus erasing the difference. Spicer's art of self-destruction became "a task of dictation [as] a necessary step in eliminating the central ego that wants to express itself... This is the incarnation which forms the book's [*Heads of the Town*] central theme, a trying-to-speak by a voice that has been separated from a body" (Davidson 106). This incarnation forgets the truth of Eurydice, for in his desire to make non-being a presence that speaks, Spicer forgets the second loss. What was can never be. In a sense, poetry by dictation is a lack of imagination for it wants to have the message presented. I went to great lengths in Chapter Three to show that the ghosts in "Textbook" were metaphors for the dead, and that it was only as metaphors that the dead can be heard. In Spicer's desire to hear the ghosts, or to make them present, they lose their metaphoric quality and become intentional, or literal, beings. In his poetry by dictation, Spicer communes with these ghosts in a way that he could not with Lorca, for Lorca is forever absent from his poems. I am not arguing that Spicer's drinking created aural hallucinations, but that there is a corresponding logic in which the self is destroyed in becoming continuous with an outside force: communion with the Word, or oblivion through drinking.

This tension, or contest, between the art of self-destruction and the logic of self-

destruction is apparent in his poetry. In a poem from *Language* called “The Sporting Life,” this relationship of Spicer’s life to his poetics is played out as a comparison of the poet to both a radio and a punch-drunk ex-fighter. “The trouble with comparing a poet to a radio is that radios / don’t develop scar tissue” (CB 218), for a radio’s parts can be replaced, but “not like that punchdrunk fighter in the bar. The poet / Takes too many messages” (218). The finitude (irreplaceability) of the poet and fighter is recognized, but also the way in which their “careers” are hastening that finitude. In a later poem from *Book of magazine Verse*, Spicer interrogates the poetics of dictation:

I can’t stand to see them shimmering in the impossible music of
 The Star Spangled Banner. No
 One accepts this system better than poets. Their hurts healed
 for a few dollars.
 Hunt
 The right animals. I can’t. The poetry
 Of the absurd comes through San Francisco television. Directly
 Connected with moon-rockets.
 If this is dictation, it is driving
 Me wild. (CB 265).

The poem, as dictated by reality, would leave the poet perfectly passive – that is, an uncritical receptacle of spectacle. In this sense, the poet would be identical with what he sees, but the image coming through television is of the appropriation of the moon by American Imperialism, and Spicer can’t bear it. This image corresponds to the colonialism that sent Rimbaud off to Africa. Spicer calls this image a “poetry of the absurd,” thus implicating poetry in the very process (“No / one accepts this system better than poets” [130]). But in the midst of it is his “I can’t,” and the recognition that this dictation is driving him mad. Spicer is both *other than* and *of* this social

world, and few poets have agonized over this condition more than Spicer. His love of America comes through in his devotion to baseball and California, but it is his love of America as a community that caused him to find it unacceptable as a society. He perhaps did not realize that his “acceptance” of the system was his alcoholism, but he knew, as he wrote in a late poem, that “it was too late for a nice exit” (*CB* 261). This realization indicates his awareness that he is being borne along by the momentum of the river of his life (alcohol), or by a “vocabulary” (poetry by dictation) that he blames for his death⁸. In addiction, the ritual of the new finds its perfect enactment, for all space for thought or reflection is erased by the need for the next (new) drink that is identical with the last. Yet Spicer’s poetic voice, aided or not by outside forces, does not succumb to the self-indulgence of the addict, but continues to speak of a common condition: “People are starving” (267).

In Spicer’s work, the communitarian ethic resists the drive to self-interest that motivates an antisocial society, but in his life the self-interest of the addict destroys the very life that resists. The momentum of the logic of self-destruction bears Spicer away like a river, with his head disengaged from his body/life, still singing. Orpheus is a metaphor that Spicer took literally, and drinking figured into this confusion of literal and metaphorical, for drinking is a literal self-destruction, while the art of self-destruction is metaphoric. Spicer is a terrible testament to the death of metaphor through literalization, for drinking literally became the death of the poet – the killing of the creator of metaphors.

Notes

1. "I am perfectly dead," Mallarmé writes in a letter, "I am impersonal and no longer the Stephane that you have known...I have made a long enough descent into the Nothing to be able to speak with exactitude" (Strauss 88). Mallarmé's spiritual struggle in the years 1864-69 has become as much a part of his legacy as his works. "I have created my work by mere elimination" Mallarmé wrote in another letter, "destruction was my Beatrice" (qtd. in Strauss 86).

2. "I contrived to purge my mind of all human hope," Rimbaud writes in *A Season in Hell* (3). If hope is attachment to a consistent movement into a future that holds the self together, then purging hope cuts the self adrift in time, exposing it to an unknown future. The twin futures of the European Identity, Christian Heaven and Liberal Progress, are eroded by Rimbaud's self-experiments. He became the "fate of the sons of good families, the premature coffin lid covered with limpid tears" (19). He listens to a voice that says "'You do not know where you are going, nor why you are going; enter everywhere, reply to anything. They will no more kill you than if you were a corpse.' In the morning I had a look so lost, a face so dead, that perhaps those whom I met *did not see me*" (17).

3. Blaser has a series of poems entitled "Image-Nation" in which this sense of community through imagination is expressed. This series of poems is collected in *The Holy Forest*.

4. Spicer generally associated with younger poets, and it was through them that he witnessed the entrance of drugs into the social realm, and its threat to poetry, or public speech. "Spicer felt them [his young poet freinds] slipping away from poetry's truth and life and order" (Ellingham and Killian 155)

5. Strauss, at the beginning of his book on Modern Orphism, writes “understanding of the meaning of the ‘modern’ Orpheus is dependant on a grasp of the importance of the theme of metamorphosis and on the realization that Orpheus himself is its most powerful embodiment and emblem” (*Descent and Return* 2).

6. “These Muses (Lake Remembrance to the thought)” (CB 159), and “Crabs” in “Homage to Creeley” (CB 147).

7. All terms Spicer used in his Vancouver lecture (*Caterpillar* 12) to try and describe the outside force that is trying to speak, or send messages.

8. Robin Blaser reports Spicer as saying from his hospital bed, days before he died that “my vocabulary did this to me” (Ellingham and Killian 366). Then Spicer told Robin that “his love would let him go on,” which resonates with his statement that “to love is not to go on with the Zanzibar slave trade,” for it says that the logic of self-destruction works against the politics of love that Spicer sees as the survival of the poetic community.

Epilogue

It is not yet clear exactly what community is. But this ambiguity is intended, for I have been arguing that community is not a thing, a locality, or a supra-temporal group that one belongs to. We can speak of community as a mode of relationship based upon sharing, but the tendency is then to imagine community as the sum total of these relationships and name that synchronic idea “the” community. But community is, if we follow Spicer and Nancy, inherently diachronic, for community is a relationship *between* finite human beings. Spicer’s poetry does not set itself up as an object, but rather, his poetry appears as the site of a gathering where poet, unknown readers, known readers, past poets, and immemorial others meet. This image of community as a gathering retains the ambiguous sense of community, for a gathering appears and disappears. In “Textbook of Poetry,” Spicer creates such an image:

Whoever shares in the chase deserves the prize. Each wagon edges
towards the clearing where the fire has already been lighted by neighbors.

These animals distinguish us by our smells. This one has a red smell, this
a green, this a purple. They are all alive. They have no ambition to destroy us.

We sit around the campfire and sing songs of snark-hunting. One of us has
been to Africa and knows the dangers of what we seek. Our colors and our smells
glisten in the smoke toward the waiting flock.

What we have said or sung or tearfully remembered can disappear in the
waiting fire. We are snark-hunters. Brave, as we disappear into the clearing.

(CB 165)

Lewis Carroll called his *The Hunting of the Snark* an “Agony in Eight Parts.” Agony means, in its original sense, a struggle or contest. The snark is “the creature that does not exist” (Rilke *Sonnets of Orpheus* 77), so Lewis’ tale is of a contest with non-existence. This is non-sense. Around this non-sense Spicer imagines a gathering, and at this gathering is someone who has been to Africa, presumably Rimbaud, and he knows the dangers of what we seek. The danger of snark-hunting is the danger of non-being. This is not the same as the danger of death, for the snark cannot kill. The danger lies in the living encounter with non-being. This danger is the danger of being human, or of being the one who contests non-being. The gathering Spicer envisions is a gathering of those who sing songs of snark-hunting, or of the experience of the encounter with non-being. Community is the gathering of these hunters, but community is also “the creature who does not exist.” Community does not exist in the modern world because it has been overtaken by an ideology and social practise that isolates humans into private pursuit of their own interests, but it is also absent because community does not exist as a thing. Community is an encounter where the self’s isolation is contested, or where the self’s singularity is exposed. The sharing of this exposure *is* community.

Community is between us, or as Spicer punned, between “our eyes” (I’s). Once community is imagined as a simultaneous order, a synchronic system of belief, or an ideal towards which humans are drawn, then “it” exists. As such, it exists apart from the singular individuals who comprise it: “it is a city I do not remember” (CB 176). Spicer’s poetry is a “return from exile” (176), but it is a return to a gathering where “what we have sung or tearfully remembered can disappear into the waiting fire” (CB 165). The bravery he speaks of is the courage of

community, or the exposure to finitude that makes community possible: the agony of community. Far from being a utopian vision of social harmony, community would be that mode of human relationship that exposes the self to what it least wants to face: its own finitude. This is why the art of self-destruction must be intimate with a concept of community, for the self must relinquish itself, or the ideal of a final, synchronic identity, in order to “elect” itself to community. The freedom implied in this election is the freedom to disappear into the clearing. The clearing of being is the opening onto non-being. Or the future of community.

In the modern world, “our” has become a pronoun subordinated to “mine,” just as sharing has become subordinated to exchange. What remains to be done is to show that sharing is not a utopian ideal, or a nostalgic virtue, but the very condition of social being. Community is a sharing of time/life. Humans have gathered together for survival. We are given life without question: without asking, and without being asked. Life is shared with us before intentionality. This sharing, I hope to argue in a future project, does not vanish as we come of age and are able to pursue our own ends, or has not disappeared into the mists of a traditional past, but rather, underpins our social being. We come into community through language, or as Spicer would say: “the language where we are born across (temporally and witlessly)” (CB 169). We did not trade anything to share in *our* language, and we do not ask our children to give us anything in exchange for sharing language with them. Modern poetry is significant because it retains this sense of sharing language that is shared beyond, or anterior to exchange. The absence of the poet makes exchange impossible, and this is the very condition for Spicer’s special form of communication with the dead – dead men writing to each other.

Communities occur not just in time, but they are exposed to time because communities

must use time, as both foresight and memory, in order to survive. Survival in time implies an exposure to time because to use time to recall the past or determine the future means to become aware of finitude. Communities have, from time immemorial, dealt with this dual nature of time by using myth, ritual, and narrative to control, or deny, this exposure to time. As Levi-Strauss writes, myths are “instruments for the obliteration of time” (*Raw and the Cooked* 16). Time (in the form of narrative) is used to overcome time. This is the basic condition of the art of self-destruction, for to overcome time means to overcome the awareness of time, or to destroy the very capacity that makes human being possible. Poetry can never, for this reason, return to traditionalism.

While much work needs to be done to understand the transition from the prehistoric overcoming of time-consciousness to the historic attempts to overcome time-consciousness, what we can see from this vantage point of modern poetry is a tradition that is both post and pre-traditional. Modern poetry is a tradition that comes after tradition has fallen ill, and yet poets create a tradition out of the very experience of time that modernity suppresses. Spicer’s metaphoric narrative in which the Logos is drawn up into the paradox of time creates such an experience of time that pre-dates tradition. The experience of the finitude of God (the death of God) is not a final event, but one of the conditions of modern experience, and it is an experience that opens onto an unknown future. Can we not say that the future pre-dates the past since it is our movement into the future that creates the past? The death of God is not an obscure event calling from the nineteenth century, but our possible future. The death of God has not closed the book of life, but rather unbound the closed volumes of the simultaneous order. We have, in a sense, returned to before the beginning, to that naked experience of time that being human

exposes us to, and which traditionalism suppresses.

On the other hand, modern poetry does not make common cause with the compulsive pursuit of the new. The being-towards-death that characterizes modern society is not Heideggerian resolve, but denial as a way of life. Pursuit of the new escapes the past that the new is becoming by compulsively replacing one desire for the new with another, or through a compulsive forgetting. This compulsive being-towards-death is not a simple suicide, but the destruction of the very capacity that makes human being possible: the capacity for time. As Benjamin writes: “in the course of the nineteenth century bourgeois society has, by means of hygienic and social, private and public institutions, realized a secondary effect which might have been its subconscious purpose: to make it possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying” (*Illuminations* 93). There are many ways to explain the death-fixation of modern poetry, but Spicer’s is that “true conservation is the effort of the private man and the artist to keep things true. Trees and the cliffs in Big Sur breathe in the dark. Jeffers knew the pain of their breath and the pain of the death of a first-born baby breathing. / Death is not final. Only parking lots” (*CB* 221). Death is not final because of other lives, other births.

It is significant that Spicer invokes the poet Robinson Jeffers as a private man, for this privacy is not one that is isolated into itself, but, through poetry, this privacy is shared. Through language we share a world of meaning, and this meaning, as an unfinished project, is also a communal project. Poetry, like Spicer’s, makes being *between* the essence of what poetry is. The *between* is an essence that belongs to no one, or that inheres inside no individual, but is responsible for the possibility to be. It is the life between that gives birth to the Other. This poem is between Spicer and Jeffers, but its language is like the breathing of those trees in Big Sur.

Poetry is communication, not as an exchange of information, but as the sharing of experience, or the mute within the noise of the Word. Against the progressive reduction of all social relationships to relationships of exchange, Spicer's poetry appears as a somewhat desperate struggle to retain the nakedly social element.

Poetry is one of those rare places where the law of equivalence does not apply. The argument can be made that poetry enters the marketplace, and, therefore, poetry is identical to any other product exchanged. But this is to say that poetry is defined by its market value, and that a poet's primary intention is to create exchange value. I remember going into the SFU Rare Book Room many years ago and sitting down with Spicer's *After Lorca*. Written in pen across the bottom of the cover was: "This guy only paid a buck for this book. Don't pay more." Tradition is holding something in common, and that comic footnote created a shared value beyond the reach of exchange value. The very awareness of the impossibility of escaping the world of exchange sets Spicer's work apart. When Spicer wrote almost ten years later, "No / One accepts this system better than poets. Their hurts healed / for a few dollars" (*CB* 265), he was being painfully ironic. He refused to have his books sold in City Lights Bookstore because poetry was being marketed there like any other product. Poetry, Spicer believed, was losing its difference. Spicer became so adamant about poetry's difference that he refused to have his books distributed outside the Bay Area where he lived, and he refused to have them copyrighted. He had anticipated Nancy's phrase: "shared texts, like all texts, offering what belongs to no one and returns to everyone: the community of writing, the writing of community" (*IC* 42).

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