Time mechanics: The modern Geoffrey Chaucer and the medieval Jack Spicer

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Abstract   Jack Spicer was an important mid-twentieth-century poet, part of the 'Berkeley Renaissance' during the 1950s. He studied at the University of California, Berkeley, completing coursework for a PhD in Old English and Old Norse, specializing in linguistics and philology, largely under Arthur Brodeur. His mature poetics featured ideas about 'dictation' and 'serial poetry,' with works that respond to medieval themes and languages. A closer look at Spicer's handling of medieval sources – beginning with a previously unpublished short story and proceeding to an early play, both of which comically engage with Chaucer – shows how, for Spicer, tradition must be reimagined in contemporary language, as well as being an entity that itself continues to find new life through a poet's words. Spicer's process in turn illuminates Chaucer's own approach to working with and updating source material, most notably in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

The Disappearance of Cleanth Penn Ransom

An unpublished, untitled short story by mid-twentieth-century poet Jack Spicer reveals at an early date some of the basic elements of his mature poetics, especially his complex and ambivalent attitude toward literary history. The story briefly sketches out the theory of 'contrachronism' as developed by a critic named

Cleanth Penn Ransom, a satiric mashup of prominent New Critic poet-scholars.[1] Spicer's critic humorously attempts to read *The Canterbury Tales* absent (or *contra*) any consideration of time. So extreme is this approach that every assumption falls aside, even concerning authorship:

> Ransom reached into his briefcase and brought out a sheaf of notes and a tattered red copy of Robinson's *Chaucer* ... 'With these materials I am going to move the critical world.'
> 'Are you going to write an essay on *Chaucer*?' I asked.
> He glared at me with what seemed like irritation. 'I am going to write an essay on a poem by an unknown author, writing at an unknown date, which is called *The Canterbury Tales*.' (Spicer, 'Untitled Short Story,' 2)

Ransom proceeds to demonstrate his methods in the school cafeteria, beginning with the first lines of 'The General Prologue.' First, he rejects Robinson's glossary and Webster's dictionary as too 'chronophilic.' He instead embraces the *New English Dictionary*, which, despite its name, captures 'the eternal English language.' He then analyzes the language of the poem, careful to account for alternate meanings of each word. The first line, 'Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote' (I.1)[2], is straightforward enough, though the last two words provide the possibility for an 'ironic' reading, since 'showers' can also mean 'birth pangs,' and 'soot' can include its modern meaning of coal and oil waste; hence, ' "When that April with his showers' soot,'' which contrasts the idyllic April of the first level with the sordid, dirty April of the modern industrial world,' thus reminding Ransom of the famous poem by his friend, T.S. Eliot (Spicer, 'Untitled Short Story,' 4).

The second line creates much greater difficulties. After reciting it – 'The droghte of March hath perced to the roote' (I.2) – 'he paused,' the narrator says, 'evidently considering the effort of carrying eternity rather than time as a critical burden' (Spicer, 'Untitled Short Story,' 4). By this point, the story is almost over. Growing agitated, Ransom struggles with the overwhelming plethora of meanings associated with 'March.' The narrator excuses himself to get more tea. While he's gone, the 'fatal accident' occurs – witnessed only by two animal husbandry professors seated nearby. Ransom exclaims jubilantly that he can 'fit everything in,' and at just that moment, he is snatched away by 'a gigantic yellow bird, resembling an eagle.' The narrator comforts himself by noting that Ransom was taken away 'in the moment of his triumph' and wonders if the last line of Chaucer's *House of Fame* might provide some clue to his fate (Spicer, 'Untitled Short Story,' 5). The last lines are, of course:

> Atte laste y saugh a man,
> Which that y [nevene] nat ne kan;
> But he semed for to be
> A man of gret auctorite ... (2155–2158).

1 The name manages to cleverly combine those of Cleanth Brooks (1906–1994), Robert Penn Warren (1905–1989) and John Crowe Ransom (1888–1974). The story, titled 'The Tragic Disappearance of My Friend Cleanth Penn Ransom' (taken from the first sentence) in a version being prepared for publication by editors K. Killian and P. Gizzi, was likely written in the early 1950s while Spicer was still technically a graduate student.

2 All references to Chaucer's (1987) works are from Benson's edition of *The Riverside Chaucer*, by line numbers (as well as by book and fragment numbers, where applicable).

The beginning of one Chaucerian poem; the ending of another. Attempting to escape its grasp, Ransom is snatched up and carried off by literary history in Spicer's story, just as slipping out from under the burden of time only seems to place him at the mercy of eternity. Spicer's complex poetics have been a source of inspiration and debate among poets and critics for many years, but too often the focus is on the ways in which Spicer anticipates and contributes to postmodern avant-garde movements, rather than on how often and how radically he works through and recovers the past. A closer look at Spicer's medieval studies provides key insights to his later poetic practice, elucidating how, for Spicer, tradition (in the form of literary history) was something to be lived (or relived) in contemporary language, as well as something that itself continues to find new life through a poet's language.

Time Mechanics

On one level, the story outlined above is simply an amusing *reductio ad absurdum* of New Critical tenets.[3] But Spicer's choice for his fictional critic's subject matter – and especially the character's come-uppance at the moment of his seeming triumph – is a thread worth teasing out further. For one thing, recent research has revealed the extent to which Spicer seriously pursued medieval scholarship undertaken during his studies at University of California, Berkeley, in the late 1940s and early 1950s.[4] Indeed, the story is written out in a notebook of poet and Berkeley classmate Robin Blaser's that also includes Blaser's partial draft of a *Beowulf* translation, which Spicer reportedly had sent to him while teaching a course on *Beowulf* at the University of Minnesota in the early 1950s.[5] This situates the story deep in Spicer's medieval academic sojourn, a time when he left the University of California due to his refusal to sign the infamous 'loyalty oath,' continued his studies at Minnesota, and returned to Berkeley in 1952 to finish coursework toward a PhD in Anglo Saxon and Old Norse.[6] It identifies him as firmly opposed to New Criticism's attempt to lift texts out of their time and culture, and marks him as a sort of proto-New Historicist. Yet as the body of Spicer's later poetic work shows, the problem of literary history is no easy thing to solve; Chaucer's giant eagle is just as capable of snatching a poet who believes in it as a critic who denies its existence.

The problem is laid out in the epistolary sections of *After Lorca* (1957), the first of Spicer's 'dictated' books of poetry.[7] The book famously begins with an introduction from the already deceased Lorca, critiquing the poems as 'not translations,' since '[i]n 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' (Spicer, 2008, 107). *After Lorca* indeed consists of many rather straightforward translations of Lorca's poems, such as 'Juan Ramón Jimenez' and 'Ode for Walt Whitman,'

3 Spicer's stance towards New Criticism was straightforward and consistent. In a 1965 lecture, he said, 'the New Criticism is big in universities. I haven't seen it have any effect at all on poets for the last ten years. Anybody knows that a poem is not something which was written at no particular time, which is what New Criticism is about, and that it is written at some particular time. You have to know that. You're a fool if you don't' (Spicer, 1998, 165).

4 See Spicer's (2011) *Beowulf*, eds. Hadbawnik

along with numerous fake translations, interspersed with letters from Spicer to Lorca. It is significant that Spicer already signals here his reliance on previous poets and poems as raw material for dictation; the source for subsequent projects would not be so obvious, nor the resulting poems so close to their originals, as in this work. The letters, meanwhile, lay out the difficulties of this type of poetry.

The first difficulty is what to do with tradition. For Spicer, tradition is the life-blood of poetry, but it cannot be simply picked up and repackaged. It is not, he makes clear, 'an historical patchwork ... which is used to cover up the nakedness of the bare word. [Tradition] means generations of different poets in different countries patiently telling the same story, writing the same poem, gaining and losing something with each transformation – but, of course, never really losing anything' (Spicer, 2008, 110–111). In a sense, this resembles Ezra Pound's famous dictum, 'Make it new.' The phrase first appears in Canto LIII, alongside Chinese ideograms that the *Companion to the Cantos* glosses as 'make new, day by day, make new' (Terrell, 1980, 205). The Canto itself reads: 'Tching prayed on the mountain and/wrote MAKE IT NEW/on his bath tub/Day by day make it new' (Pound [1971] 1993, 264–265). The phrase 'Make it new' is troubling on a number of levels, with an overemphasis on the 'new' portion of the equation at the expense of considering what 'it' might be, as well as the extent to which 'new' folds together with the logic of capitalism.[8] For Spicer, 'tradition' would have to be, at least in part, the 'it' that is being made new, but there is a great deal less of a sense of control, let alone violence, in Spicer's description of the process. In keeping with the undertone of exchange and profit that might be seen in Pound's phrase, it must be noted that Spicer's description of 'gaining and losing something with each transformation' sounds much less anxious about the gain, or the new. Tradition will be different in different poets' hands because the particularities of their flesh, time and place will be different. The *language* will be different. But there is no need to worry about whether something is gained in the process of working through tradition. Spicer attends to temporal change, but without any sense of teleological progression or valorization of the new.

In Spicer's next letter, he discusses the second problem, which involves language:

> It is very difficult. 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 ... Words are what stick 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. (Spicer, 2008, 122–123)

What Spicer means by 'the real' are precisely those objects – 'the real cliff and the real ocean' – that he wishes to put in his poetry, as a collage artist might put a real tennis shoe or soda can into his or her art. Part of the problem is language

and Reynolds. Daniel Remein (New York University) is also preparing a dissertation on the so-called 'Berkeley Renaissance' poets, which includes Spicer, Robin Blaser and Robert Duncan, in relation to their medievalist roots.

5 It appears that Blaser had used the notebook in the same *Beowulf* class in which Spicer produced his own translation and later sent it to Spicer, which explains its presence in the latter's archive.

6 See *Jack Spicer's Beowulf*, eds. Hadbawnik and Reynolds (2011, 3), for more details and a timeline.

7 'Dictation' is one of the key concepts explaining Spicer's approach to poetry (the other being 'serial poetry'). It is explained in some detail in the first 'Vancouver Lecture.' As outlined in brief by editor P. Gizzi: '[T]he poet is a host being invaded by the parasite of

itself: always changing, sometimes growing stale, tending toward mere transparency instead of disclosure. Spicer's concept of the real grows increasingly complicated over the course of *After Lorca* and Spicer's career as a whole, resembling in some ways the development of the same term in the thought of Lacan. While Lacan ([2002] 2006, 87) begins in 1936 thinking of the real as something concrete and absolute unto itself, following Emile Myerson, by the 1950s he specifies that the real 'subsists outside of symbolization,' adding that it 'expects nothing of speech' (Lacan, [2002] 2006, 324). And finally, in *Seminar XI*, he associates the real with impossibility: '[S]ince the opposite of the possible is certainly the real, we would be led to define the real as the impossible' (Lacan, [1991] 1998, 167). This is because the real is impossible to imagine or express. It escapes language; in fact, it is what language (the symbolic field) compensates for. The real is in part, for Spicer as for Lacan, the material and biological; but it also encompasses what cannot be known, the traumatic gaps in the Symbolic order that haunt and trouble the subject, partly because they cannot be fully articulated in language and thus worked through (Lacan, 1992, 118). This difficulty is what Spicer's poetry constantly grapples with.

Recognizing this, in further letters Spicer expresses a desire to write poems that 'point to the real, disclose it,' and he asserts that, 'Things do not connect; they correspond,' which is what makes it necessary for poets to be 'time mechanics' (Spicer, 2008, 133). A real object from Lorca's poetry (he mentions a lemon tree) cannot be experienced by Spicer in present-day California, but some other tree, some other object can be experienced in a way that would correspond in some way with that real. The poet's job is to find such correspondences. Reconciling this attitude toward *things* with that toward *tradition*, it becomes clear that as with things, the poet cannot simply repeat old forms without taking into account his or her particular context. Blaser elaborates on this quality of Spicer's poetics: In terms of language, it means welcoming in jokes, laughter and nonsense, listening for 'the dead speaking to us' (Blaser, 2006, 120, 121). In terms of tradition and sources, these require a discipline in which, however, Spicer works 'independently and fiercely' (Blaser, 2006, 121). To approach Spicer's poetics, Blaser turns to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's essay, 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm,' in which the author struggles to hammer out a poetic language with which to push phenomenology toward expressing that which cannot be expressed, and which in its thinking comes to resemble Spicer's own ideas about poetry.

When Merleau-Ponty confronts 'the most difficult point' in that essay (that is, the bond between flesh and idea, visible and invisible), he invokes 'the little phrase' in which Proust's Swann is able to capture (or at least experience) ideas in terms of their particularities. Merleau-Ponty recognizes that '[the] invisible, these ideas ... cannot be detached from the sensible appearances and be erected into a second positivity' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 149). This is analogous to Spicer's assertions about words attaching to things at a particular point in time, in such a way that the poet must constantly seek correspondences in order to find the

right mode of expression. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty writes, 'these entities ... have been acquired only through [the invisible's] commerce with the visible, to which they remain attached' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 150). To put this in Spicer's terms, the poet is the one who remains open to the invisible in order to bring it over to the visible via the words that 'stick to the real,' a conduit that attaches one to the other.

This explains why the 'outside' for Spicer is so scary, a dead place of spooks, ghosts and Martians, and why the poet must empty himself of 'the big lie of the personal' in order to allow this impossible real to come through in language (Spicer, 2008, 150). These entities can and do use what is there – whatever images or words reside within the poet – to emerge in poetry. But the poetry cannot be guided or forced by personal desires. This also makes clear why the idea of stripping away time and cultural context from a consideration of literature would be so offensive to Spicer. To deny the particularities of a historical moment in relation to poetry is, indeed, to burden poetry's language with an eternity of meanings, essentially rendering it meaningless and allowing the invisible real to which it is attached to slip away in the process. In this way, Spicer seems to differ not only with Pound and the New Critics, but also with Benjamin, who, for all his attention to linguistic variation and aversion to literal translation, still insists, in 'The Task of the Translator,' on temporal progression and a kind of idealized original text (Benjamin, [1996] 2004, 254). Spicer would object to the notion that a poem in a new language based on a source text should 'produce in that language the echo of the original,' and he would also appear to collapse the distance between translator and poet that Benjamin maintains (Benjamin, [1996] 2004, 258). There are no 'echoes' for Spicer, only a real that corresponds with something in the tradition. Moreover, poet and translator alike (the former, in a sense, already the latter) work with 'specific linguistic contextual aspects' to connect with that real (Benjamin, [1996] 2004, 258).

Returning to Spicer's relationship to medieval literature in general, and Chaucer in particular, I can't help but recall Michael Camille's exploration of the restoration of Notre Dame, as overseen by Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc and Jean-Baptiste Lassus, in his book *Monsters of Modernity: The Gargoyles of Notre Dame*. Camille's central insight is that the medieval was 'constructed' in opposition to (and by) the modern, which is then followed by a rigorous working out of how and why modernity undertook such a construction (Camille, 2009, xiii). This is an insight that Spicer anticipated, as evidenced by the humorous interlude in his unfinished detective novel when a character based on poet Kenneth Rexroth, recording a program for local radio, asserts that *Beowulf* is a hoax – 'clearly,' he says, a 'bedtime-story folktale' invented by eighteenth-century antiquarians (Spicer, 1994, 106).[9] While Spicer in fact worked under Berkeley philologist Arthur Brodeur to translate *Beowulf* (and would later teach it, as mentioned above), he anticipates, however facetiously, Frantzen's assertion that *Beowulf* has been 'created' by the critics and scholars who've studied it (Frantzen, 1990, 176). In a sense, Spicer is not unlike the two artists tasked with working on

9 The book was published in its unfinished state as *The Tower of Babel*.

Notre Dame, as described by Camille, standing before the monolith of the cathedral, transforming in the act of restoring, melding a 'medieval spirit' with a thoroughly modern aesthetic (Camille, 2009, 37). The difference is one of perspective; Spicer's treatment of medieval source material seems to bring such material forward in time, while the work of Viollet-le-Duc and Lassus seems to push the cathedral back toward a medieval antiquity. For example, even the most overtly medieval of Spicer's mature poems, 1962's *The Holy Grail* – which takes the Arthurian love triangle as a theme and includes a number of incidents from Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* – begins, and is preoccupied with, a then current love triangle involving two 'Tony's' (Spicer, 2008, 331, 339).

But perhaps the difference in perspective mainly resides with us, as readers and viewers, experiencing different media (stone, word, image and so on). Camille's work, in sifting through archives, documents, drawings and architectural plans, helps us to see through the constructed layers of Notre Dame and to understand the choices the restorers made, the elements they added, and the 'medieval' structure they produced. When he recounts Viollet-le-Duc defending his addition of chimeras to the façade in an 1856 lecture by fancifully describing the decayed monsters who 'left their claws attached to the stone' (Camille, 2009, 7), this evokes both Merleau-Ponty struggling to specify the terms of his 'intertwining,' the attachment between the visible and the invisible, and Spicer's stating of the problem of the 'real' in his letters to Lorca. In other words, here we have an example of Spicer's idea of words 'sticking' to the real; but we must imagine these fragmented claws clinging not to the decaying structure, but to the already decayed and invisible real that was there before in the shape of whatever preceded the chimeras – the 'shadowy ... sculptural masses' that Viollet-le-Duc dragged forth anew in the form of gargoyles (Camille, 2009, 8). There is also a sense of a search for correspondences in the restorers' efforts that Camille unearths, and a recognition of the shifting cultural context of the cathedral over time, from its 'temporal function' as a sort of clock for the medieval city to its modern 'silence' that makes it a sort of 'cadaver' (Camille, 2009, 9). Like Spicer's attitude toward medieval source texts, this recognition radically informs and allows for working with tradition in a way that is historically aware, but not mindlessly faithful.

A 'ravyshying swetnesse'

The best way to demonstrate this is through a comparative reading of one of Spicer's early texts that responds to a poem by Chaucer, a poem that itself raises issues of working through literary tradition. The text is *Troilus and Criseyde*, which Spicer used as a source for his play *Troilus*. Begun in 1953, it predates *After Lorca*, but is one of the few early works that Spicer mentions as not looking 'foul' to him in a letter to Blaser, as he apparently counted it as a dictated, serial

piece (Spicer, 2008, 163). Spicer had written, either during his undergraduate or MA studies, a comparison of Shakespeare's and Dryden's versions of this same material, thus attending to the process of updating and altering that the poem had already undergone in subsequent ages.[10] Here, one sees Spicer working through the changes that Dryden made in Shakespeare's version at the level of language, as well as through the central concepts that the separate artists wished to explore, respectively, via the structure of the story. Spicer notices that for Shakespeare, power is meant 'in the obsolete Renaissance sense,' a kind of force that can be constructive or destructive, while for Dryden it means '*only* human power, corrupted.' Spicer also sees no point to many of Dryden's material changes and accuses him of 'Bowlderization' in editing Shakespeare (Spicer, 'A Preliminary Excursion,' n.p.). Clearly, for Spicer, Dryden is in some ways not sensitive enough to the source material to bring it across with the proper level of correspondence.

Spicer's own reworking of *Troilus* accounts for these later versions – it is a play, of course, and like Shakespeare and Dryden, Spicer gives larger roles to a greater number of Greek characters than Chaucer does. Yet Spicer had memorized portions of Chaucer's poem and considered it 'the greatest poem in English' (Spicer, 2004, 77). What Spicer recovers from Chaucer, and interrogates in his play, is the central plot point: Troilus scorns love at the outset but falls in love with Criseyde by the power of the gods, then he wins her with the help of Pandarus, enjoys her love in return for some time and finally endures the loss of her to the Greeks.[11] Spicer is also interested in the poem's deeper structure, wherein Chaucer *himself* explores what it means to handle literary-historical material, and he investigates his own poetic process via the transformations his characters undergo over the course of the poem.[12] In a sense, Chaucer provides a literary-historical model for Spicer: How does a poet navigate, integrate and alternately preserve and update layers of legend, history and prior poems, including not only the legend of Troy's fall, as recounted by Virgil and Ovid, but also the story of the siege of Thebes that haunts Chaucer's Troy and the more recent romance *Il Filostrato* by Boccaccio that constitutes his most immediate source material? From a poetic standpoint, Chaucer asks questions about poetry via his characters, imagining them as versions of poets who struggle to compose in the midst of war, love and loss. These thematic structures (the handling of prior material and the metapoetic role of characters) must in turn be updated and transformed by Spicer in his version, and the latter structure – literary characters as poetic avatars – requires further explanation.

Christopher Cannon isolates the term 'ravyshing swetnesse' from a passage in *The Parliament of Fowles* as Chaucer's characterization of his own poetic process.[13] He then examines lines from Book 3 of *Troilus and Criseyde*, wherein 'the narrator ... anticipates the *Canticus Troili* ... by describing the tropic effects he expects it to have' (Cannon, [1998] 2005, 36–37):

> And by the hond ful ofte he wolde take
> This Pandarus, and into gardyn lede,

10 The paper is whimsically titled 'A Preliminary Excursion into Comparison of Shakespeare's and Dryden's *Troilus and Cressida* in a Quixotic Attempt to Discover Neo-Classical Poetic Technique, or Some Little Truth Found too Early.'

11 Shakespeare's play begins with Pandarus and Troilus already discussing Troilus's suit for Cressida's hand. Dryden's begins with a council among the Greeks.

12 On the first point, see Patterson (1991, 84–164), Lewis ([1932] 2006, 451–463) and Bloomfield ([1957] 2006, 464–474), as well as the narrator's frequent allusions to prior authors such as the fictitious 'Lollius.'

13 'Of instruments of strenges in acord/ Herde I so pleye a

And swich a feste and swich a proces make
Hym of Criseyde, and of hire wommanhede,
And of hire beaute, that withouten drede
It was an hevene his wordes for to here. (3.1737–1742)

Cannon focuses on the material method by which Chaucer attains this 'heavenly' effect in his verse. Notice, however, that there is a meta-poetic encapsulation of this method presented in the passage itself. Like much of Chaucer's adapting of his own translation of Boethius for *Troilus and Criseyde*, it is, in a sense, twice removed: the narrator describes a character's compositional practice for a poem that he himself will present. It involves that character metaphorically 'making' Criseyde into a song, a pun that is full of meaning. Not only is Criseyde the inspiration for the song; she is, I argue, a sort of text that is experienced as a 'ravishing sweetness' and is brought forth as a different text, in a way that dramatizes and allows Chaucer to think through his own poetic process.

Over the course of *Troilus and Criseyde*, all of the main characters are forced to articulate a stance as both readers and authors. This is most obvious in the case of the narrator, who frequently worries about deviating too far from his source material, perhaps the model of a too-faithful reader. Pandarus, who constructs the narrative of Troilus and Criseyde's romance out of lies and embellishments, is the type of author who takes too many liberties. Troilus and Criseyde are depicted exchanging letters in Books 2 and 5, but in a departure from Boccaccio, who gives the text of the letters themselves, the emphasis for Chaucer is on their careful composition and interpretive process in writing, then reading each other's words, respectively. By the end of the poem, Criseyde comes to openly lament her future name as a *literary* character, almost as if she were speaking as a poem itself wondering how it would be received (5.1055). It is this element of Chaucer's poem that seems to most inspire Spicer's exploration of the love narrative and characters in his play, and to require the most intensive work of updating to fit with his own poetics.

In Spicer's *Troilus*, the characters act like stand-ins for his developing poetics. Ulysses complains that he has 'wasted nine years of poetry on this war' (Spicer, 2004, 98), openly comparing his ingenious schemes to the task of the poet. Characters do not merely have their fates guided by the gods, but are actually possessed by them in certain moments – a clear analogy to Spicer's idea of being invaded by a parasite, Martian or spook that dictates the poem.[14] Aside from the numerous modern touches that Spicer adds – such as the Greeks and Trojans being characterized like college sports teams, with uniforms and locker rooms, and the contemporary 1950s lingo and curse words – perhaps the greatest anachronism is the extreme self-awareness of the characters, their transparency to themselves and others. It is as if the entire Trojan War had endured long enough to experience the Enlightenment, psychoanalysis, and the atomic bomb; as if Spicer had taken the

ravyshying swetnesse' (197–198). The 'ravishing' portion of this phrase seems related to Spicer's own ideas about poetry, wherein the poet allows messages to enter from outside and take over. Cannon examines in some detail Chaucer's linguistic and poetic choices in 'sweetening' his own prose translation of Boethius from philosophical prose into poetry.

14 The first instance of this happens in Act I, Scene 2, when Aeneas, Paris and Troilus are arguing about love: '*Paris and Aeneas now suddenly seem to*

suggestive self-awareness afforded to Troilus and Criseyde at the end of Chaucer's poem and made it a basic condition which *still* doesn't save them from their fate. Indeed, it is a poem about praying for inspiration, and suffering interference, from gods whom no one really believes in anymore.

Spicer most clearly demonstrates his work of updating, as well as his faithfulness to the underlying structure of the poem, in his handling of Troilus losing Criseyde. In Chaucer's poem, Troilus is typically distraught, and Pandarus is full of typically contingent advice, telling him that, 'If she be lost, we shal recovere an other' (4.406). He goes on to advise Troilus that new love will chase out the old (4.415), someone else will come along (4.422) and adds anything he can think of 'for the nones' (4.428) to bring Troilus out of his depression. The central message of Pandarus is that Criseyde is interchangeable, something that contradicts his previous observance of Criseyde's 'unique' qualities while Troilus had been wooing her (2.883–889). The changeability of Criseyde (and the pain this causes) parallels the changeability of language that the narrator frequently laments and serves to dramatize Chaucer's struggle to transform his material into 'sweetly ravishing' poetry.[15] Troilus stubbornly rejects Pandarus's comfort; unchanging, he is unable to accept that others change, and vows to continue loving Criseyde even in death (4.475). It is not until the faithlessness of Criseyde has been demonstrated in no uncertain terms that he finally loses hope (5.1665), and not until after death that he seems to gain some perspective and understanding (5.1821). Spicer's rendering of Troilus's progression is similar and different in ways that precisely reflect his approach to poetics.

In Spicer's version of *Troilus*, immediately after Criseyde is led away by Diomede, Pandarus bluntly remarks, 'These things happen.' 'Why?' Troilus asks, and they commence a conversation about love that parallels the one in Chaucer's poem. Spicer's Troilus, while every bit as stubborn, already understands the broader implications of Criseyde's departure. Everything changes, and even if she returns, '[s]omething else will happen as soon as this is fixed' (Spicer, 2004, 127). He also grasps that Criseyde represents something internal, a 'land of the heart's desire' where 'everything can come out in beauty' (Spicer, 2004, 127). Instead of sugar-coating the loss of her, Pandarus tries to help Troilus cope by convincing him that he must compromise, that everyone deals with disappointment and that '[t]he human heart adjusts to anything' (Spicer, 2004, 128). In this way, some of the wisdom that Troilus perhaps attains in Chaucer's poem after death is already apportioned to him, but the central fact of Criseyde's departure remains: she is what changes. Moreover, her role as a representation of the poetic process is maintained, even heightened. Spicer speeds up Troilus's recognition of the truth of Criseyde, but not his acceptance, in order to push harder at the implications of that truth for his poetry.

Thus, Spicer's Troilus is able to actually witness, thanks to Ulysses, Criseyde's all-too-eager submission to Diomede's advances (Spicer, 2004, 136), even to demand an audience with Calchas, where he discovers that Criseyde arranged the

change personality. It is as if someone partly, only partly, had taken them over' (92).

15 Patterson (1991) writes, 'That Criseyde is changeable is the central fact about her: linked imagistically to the moon, to "slydynge fortune," and to the unstable world itself, she is an object of exchange whose subjectivity alters with her circumstances,' adding that 'Criseyde ... is the mediating third term' (143, 144). Fradenburg (2002) develops this point in a different way: '*Troilus and Criseyde* sees the exchange of sentient objects from the standpoint of the Thing by asking what kinds of judgments can be

made by and about objects of exchange whose sentience is constrained by conditions. In other words, it sees from the standpoint of the Thing the ethics of the economy of sentient exchange' (202–203).

16 Spicer uses the Shakespearean spelling of Criseyde, which I have maintained only in direct quotes.

17 See, again, Fradenburg on Criseyde as a 'sentient object of exchange' (emphasis mine) as well as Mann's ([2002] 2006) book Feminizing Chaucer: 'The real tragedy of Troilus and Criseyde is not simply that Troilus is separated from Criseyde, it is that she ceases to exist as the Criseyde he has known and loved ... Troilus's fidelity is enslavement to a ghost' (617). Troilus also perceives Criseyde's final letter as 'straunge,' not merely in the sense of 'off-putting,' but 'lik a

whole seduction scene for Troilus to see, because, Calchas tells him, 'she wanted to kill your love.' The reason is apt, but surprising; even though, Calchas admits, she doesn't really love Diomede, '[s]he just doesn't want to go back to being your Trojan Cressida. You never did understand her' (Spicer, 2004, 138).[16] Yet Troilus, stubborn as ever, *does* want his 'Trojan Cressida,' refusing to believe the evidence of his own eyes if it doesn't happen in Troy, where their love first bloomed. This, despite the additional scene, reveals Spicer's insightful fidelity to Chaucer's poem. For everything about Criseyde, including her language, changes when her social and geographical circumstances change.[17] But Spicer goes further. Troilus also refuses to accept the help of Apollo, via Calchas, to 'find her inside yourself,' a more internal and abstract 'balance and pleasure' that begins to sound like the emptied-out state in which the poet, according to Spicer is open to the dictation of the outside (Spicer, 2004, 139). In these ways, just as Chaucer reads and thinks through his various sources in *Troilus and Criseyde*, using the narrative itself as a way to figure the challenges of poetic making, Spicer thinks through Chaucer and subsequent iterations of the poem, likewise transforming source material and exploring the implications of the drama the characters undergo for his own poetry.

'Words are what sticks to the real' – because of this, Spicer could not abide what he saw as New Criticism's attempt to scrub words of their contingent, cultural reality. He committed himself, largely through a lifelong engagement with medieval poetry, to discovering 'correspondences' that would allow tradition to break through in the language of his own poetry, as in the example above from Chaucer's poem. In this way he helps us understand the work of creation, the additions that alter our view of the past, involved in any project that engages with tradition. His poetics and practice also show the way in which 'sensible appearances,' as Merleau-Ponty writes, attach through language to the invisible real.

'Words are what sticks to the real' – but the converse is also true. Words are what the real sticks to in order to break through to us, with sometimes terrifying results. This seems to be the point of a later poem by Spicer, from a sequence posthumously titled *Golem*. In the poem, he writes:

I met my death walking down Grant Avenue at
four miles an hour,
She said, 'I am your death.'
I asked or I sort of asked, 'Are you my doom?'
She didn't know Anglo-Saxon so she coyly
repeated, 'Isn't it enough that I am
your death? What else should bother us?'
'Doom,' I said. 'Doom means judgement
in Anglo-Saxon. The Priestess of the
dead has a face like whey.'
Whey is the liquid which is left after they

spoon off the curds which are good with
sugar. The dead do not know judgement.
I am writing this against the Great Mother
that lives in the earth and in mysteries
I am unable to repeat
Heros take their doom. I will not face
My Death.

kalendes of
chaunge' (5.1632,
1634).

<div align="center">(Spicer, 2008, 362–363)</div>

Sean Reynolds writes that in this encounter, 'death's ignorance of Anglo-Saxon … fails to properly reflect the particular poet. She fails to use *his furniture*' (that is, his linguistic knowledge) (Reynolds, 2011, 36). This rings true, especially since the narrator of the poem asserts he will *not* face his death, and in the next poem in the sequence Spicer writes, 'The death of a poet or a poem is / fixed to a point' (Spicer, 2008, 363). These points, of course, must be the correspondences that emerge out of a particular time and place to assume the mantle of language. But the near-miss described in the poem has, I believe, a further meaning. That the 'dead do not know judgement' (sic) implies that the dead – the spooks, the Martians, the invisible, the real – do not know language, but the further implication is that the poet does. Thus, the dead come to the poet to get language, to emerge out of the invisible into the poet's contingent real. The more language the poet has, the more he or she understands and can uncover the hidden layers of meaning that reside under a word, the more dangerous these encounters potentially are. It is only a matter of time before one 'fixes' the poet at the right 'point.' In a less morbid sense, we could think of this as the mutually productive dynamic between artist and tradition – between architect and cathedral, poet and poem – potentially dangerous, but always with the capacity to bring the work to life, again and again.

About the Author

David Hadbawnik is a PhD student living in Buffalo, New York. In 2012, he edited Thomas Meyer's *Beowulf* (punctum books), and in 2011 he edited (with Sean Reynolds) selections from Jack Spicer's *Beowulf* for CUNY's Lost and Found Document Series. He is also co-editing a special issue of *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* on medieval literature and contemporary poetics (E-mail: dhadbawnik@gmail.com).

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