

two Orpheus poems
By Jack Spicer

I think that it is certainly possible that the objective universe can be affected by the poet. I mean, you recall Orpheus made the trees and the stones dance and so forth, and this is something which is in almost all primitive cultures. I think it has some definite basis to it. I'm not sure what. It's like telekinesis, which I know very well on a pinball machine is perfectly possible.

Jack Spicer

Warren Tallman: Do you have a sense that the news coming to you is of a non-tragic nature or of a tragic nature, or does that figure at all in your work?

Jack Spicer: "No kid, don't enter here." That's the answer. I don't know if [the universe is] tragic or not, but I just know that you better make certain that you don't get in on the things unless you really want to pay the price for them.

Warren Tallman: Are you speaking there of the poet or what will come to the poet?

Jack Spicer: Well, both. I think that anyone's a fool to become a junkie or a poet.

Warren Tallman: Why both?

Jack Spicer: Well, it's the same kind of hook really, and it has the same withdrawal symptoms if you ever try it.

[For Spicer] the poem is regarded as a mysterious code or message coming from an outside voice. Unlike the poetry of the Beats, this verse does not originate from within the artist's expressive will as a spontaneous gesture unmediated by formal constraints. For Spicer, poetry is a foreign agent, a parasite that invades the poet's language and expresses what 'it' wants to say. The poet's task, then, is to clear away the intrusive, authorial will and allow entrance to an alien and ghostlike language.

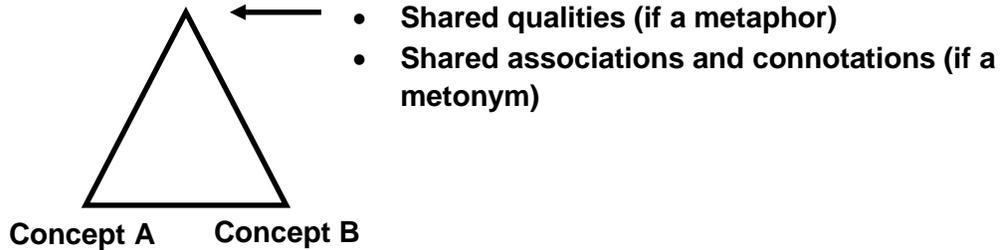
Michael Davidson, *The Beats: Literary Bohemians in Postwar America*, 1983

In poems about poets or poetry, writers are usually interrogating the meaning, function, and/or place of art or the artist. The Orpheus myth interrogates all of these ideas and is, thus, a popular allusion for those writers interested in the meta-narrative about what the writer produces. Poet Jack Spicer uses the Orpheus myth in these ways: both as explicit subject matter (of which these poems are only two examples) or as allusion embedded within other ideas.

DIRECTIONS: Choose one of the two Orpheus poems and complete the following activities.

1. What aspects of the Orpheus myth does the poem engage? Make a list or correspondences.
2. Make a list of events that document what literally happens in the narrative.
3. Briefly describe the chief internal and external conflicts for the protagonist.
4. Annotate the poem (consider color coding to help identify patterns) by the connotation of diction and imagery for at least two of the following concepts: art, the artist, the production of art, and the power of art. Some of this work will be relevant to metonyms you explicate later in the assignment.
5. Chunk the poem into two or three logical divisions. Physically draw a line between sections of the poem to indicate these.

- For each chunk, label the tone and (in parentheses) the words, phrases, and/or images that created it.
- Complete a figurative language triangle on the large paper for the following metaphors and metonyms: Orpheus, music, Hell, Eurydice. Choose at least ONE OTHER important metaphor or metonym from your poem and include a triangle for it as well.



For most credit, look for ways to expand the qualities/associations point of the triangle beyond a single glib characteristic. For “Orfeo,” notice that “Heal” (5) and “Hail” (9) are echoes of “Hell.”

- Given these collected data, sum up your findings in a thematic statement about the ideas that animate the position the poem takes on artistic creation. This would be the second part of conclusion were you writing an essay.

Example Thematic Statement (using the original Greek myth):

The original Orpheus myth suggests both the power and limitations of art as a transformative ideal. On the one hand, through art Orpheus is able to exercise near-divine power over his surroundings, but this is contrasted to notable failures of intent when it would seemingly matter most, viz. the attempt to return Eurydice to life or to save himself from the frenzy of the Maenads. For the Greeks, then, the artist would seem to be a semi-divine figure, but ultimately a human one. There is power in art, certainly, but it is not the sort of power that can reliably be used to control or manipulate others. Though art consecrates and transfigures the world, in other words, it is not, in itself, the world's salvation.



Jack Spicer
1925-1965