Naturally We Are in Love
On James Alexander’s *Etturnature*

lovely to watch and long to live with
forever
the most musical word of truth

If a younger poet knows the name of James Alexander, it is because of Jack Spicer’s dedication of seven poems to him in a book he called *Apollo Sends Seven Nursery Rhymes to James Alexander* (1959). Alexander was the younger brother of the Black Mountain painter Paul Alexander. Spicer met Alexander in the fall of 1959 in San Francisco. Later that winter Alexander returned home to his parents who lived in Indiana. Spicer, who was in love with the young man and his poems and wrote letters to him in an attempt to keep up a correspondence. So much for the biographical info. But I’m not sure how many younger poets know that James Alexander also wrote a book of poems called *Etturnature* (1965) or, if so, have even read it. In the early nineties when I was reading Jack Spicer, I wondered who James Alexander was. I searched the Small Press Distribution catalogue on a fluke and found a copy of *Etturnature* for a few bucks. Soon after it arrived it was lost in a pile of books, because I was in the process of moving at the time and had put some of the books
Essays on the Peripheries

in storage. Only recently has it surfaced again, and so I decided to give it a close reading. That is the occasion which produced this essay.

James Alexander’s poetry inhabits a poetic space similar to Spicer’s own. It has its “spooks” which invade the poem, and its own “grail castle” that the poet attempts to scale the heights of in order to prove his honor like a knight of Arthur’s roundtable, and there is also the dictation that Alexander draws our attention to. Finally, Alexander’s poem is a book-length, serial poem. But where Spicer’s tone can be melancholic to the point of hopeless despair, Alexander’s tone is lighter, more humorous, and he reaches a sort of conclusion about the human condition which is generally more optimistic than Spicer’s own.

In “pain poem,” Alexander writes “i’ve learned a lot from Jake Spacer / how to hate and spit and cuse.” Of course, Alexander, being heterosexual, had a much easier time of it in the fifties than Spicer. Nevertheless, Spicer was a devoted gay activist and member of the West Coast gay liberation group called the Mattachine Society.

The first thing that strikes a reader when opening a copy of Eturnature is the many apparent spelling “errors.” The overall effect is of an alien script or indeed a dictated poetry, where the poet, as if with his eyes closed, or otherwise covered, has his hand moved quickly by an external force, over the page, so quick in fact, that a kind of shorthand develops, where the “sound” of the word, the music, the pure music, is more important than the formal spelling. Words are also partially spelled, or the tense is “wrong” according to conventional syntax: “you know I don’t speak English / why do you talk to me in Greek.”

The following is an example of some of these effects:

Spicer writes, in Morphemics, that if “moon” “were spelled ‘mune’ it would not cause madness.” I found this quote from Gustaf Sobin, a very different poet, in my copy of The Collected Books of Jack Spicer: “how the / least / shift in syntax, tense / perception, would / re- / set the / heavens.”

Spicer characterized the problem in the following way, in his poem, “Transformations II”: “Troy was a baby when Greek sentence structure emerged. This / was the real Trojan Horse. / The order changes. The
i get so i get scarce
watching all night
for a spook
or a pek
at stars

The poet is frightened of the wrong message being dictated into the poem from the Outside, where the “spooks” dwell; the radio transmission being a possible lie. In the darkness he hopes for a view of the stars, something to illuminate the real, the Truth. For Spicer this “light” was “the noise in the head of the prince. Something in God-language,” the pure music of the poem. In “love poem,” Alexander writes,

sure i’m nervous
i want to get out of here
where the sun reach my body and the birds careen
where the stars leave the sky and become personified
you talk too fast
how can the stars leave the sky

The conflict here is between reality and imagination. The poet desires a place where the sun can warm his body, and where the stars depart from the sky to become “personified.” This is a mythical space. One voice of the poem (the “spook”) implies to the poet that such an idea is ridiculous, and admonishes him for talking too fast, for “jumping the gun,” so to speak, making a bridge between the real and the imagination that can’t exist. These are the language police that Spicer warned us about. The spooks contradict the poet for their amusement. Alexander writes, “to dream is part of our beauty / our relationship to the real.” In the poem the real can exist alongside the dream. The real is as much fact as fantasy. And, of course, this is a love

Trojans / Having no idea of true or false syntax and having no recorded / language / Never knew what hit them.”
essays on the peripheries

poem. The voices tried to undercut the emotion expressed in the poem. Alexander writes, concerning reality and dream:

I personally have had
Inclinations to wonder where the dream
Ends or what it has to do with reality
This has led me thru harrowing
Psychology but when I say dream
Now I mean a tangible reality and
When I say bring me to life i
Mean neither from death nor deprivation
When I say sweet chariot I do not
Mean virginity when I say
Life or sweet chariot I do not mean death
I mean that apparently my metaphors are
Inadequate
When I say bring me to life I do not mean
To death or worse than death
I do not mean bordom on anything.

But “love poem” shows the way in which the Spiritworld operates, as Alexander makes clear in “the spirit of poetry”:

unfeeling poetry, cold-blooded poetry, that’s
what we want, to warm us, on a cold night
something you can //////stuff in the chim
something you can su
something you can stuff in the chimney to
keep the cold air out
that is a spirit.

This is what the “spirits” want to warm themselves with. They are vampiric. They feed on the poet’s blood, on the poet’s life. I’m thinking of Spicer: “my vocabulary did this to me.” Notice how the poet stutters; the word “chim” is an incomplete reading by the poet of the alien message. The word then becomes
“chimney.” But “su” is a mistake; perhaps the poet meant “stu” for “stuff.” In this way the spooks play with the poet, in one case suggesting part of a word, and then completing it with the additional letters, and in another case, causing the poet to be misled into writing down a mistake. As a knight in the forest seeking the grail may lose his way. This is one of the risks of dictated poetry: the loss of control for the poet, where a mistake can prove fatal.

Dictated poetry requires the absence of any ego, the poet becoming like an empty vessel through which language passes on its way to the page. The goal is a poem purified of excess, ornamentation, the false, the writing down of “something in God-language.” But of course, the spirits of Mars are not always on the side of man and can just as easily intercept the “God-language,” and infect it with lies. Alexander cautions the poet:

parts of our live
ar not memorabl
tho we do not regres
nor lose track
of the engine
the train
or the passengers.

For Alexander, the poet/knight is steadfast in his search for the truth. He is no Lancelot in Spicer’s reading of the Grail Legend. Alexander writes

you can’t scare me with the terrible
the awful truth…..

it’s just a small forest, tree tonnage, and all that
yes, i can wield an ax, bow, and arrow. what?
the rebels are dirty you know
they live on hog cabbage
and take root in the hills.
The poet believes “in the silverness of my sword / my word of honor.”

Throughout his book, Alexander is keenly aware of the pitfalls of the poet in his search for truth: the lies, the games, the cruelty of men and women, and of private ownership, which leads to violence:

the indiscriminate destruction in warfare is automatically involved because of the destruction of the production places.
only by acknowledgment of the most primitive truths will you oust the real enemy. Where actual properties are concerned defense of them is necessary. Right of ownership bears upon strength to maintain it…. the needs of the body for the mind which watches over the body cannot ultimately conflict, but no sacrifice to sin is necessary.

Alexander speaks of the primitive truth which will destroy the enemy in society. His vision of freedom is more Dionysian than Apollonian. He has a pagan view of nature and of man’s place in it. Perhaps this is why Spicer addressed Alexander in the guise of Apollo. For Alexander, the sense of bliss occurs outside an urban setting, in nature. Eturnature = Eternity + Nature, a waverering light through eternity. He titled his poem on this subject, “honor”:

slept on the seashore
swan in the sea
ate wild honey, and loved her

hav you never looked at the trees as if they were gesturing
or seen the expressions of the waves
the palaces of cloud

“this place, rumored to have been” lace, might have
that place, rumored to have been new, might be

native, nativity, native to freedom.
This place that exists in an almost forgotten memory; it is a place of freedom. Notice the movement from, “native” to “nativity” to “native to freedom.” Native has the meaning of being found in nature especially in a pure form. Native suggests birth. And finally we learn that the place is “native to freedom.” Here the departure with Spicer is clear. Spicer would have never seen nature as having a transformative power on man such that he would be able to experience any longstanding bliss. There is a photo of Spicer on a beach, squatting in the sand, fully clothed. It is a sad photo. Even though Alexander’s place remains a myth, a place “rumoured to have been new;” what makes the above such an important poem is that the essence of the scene is captured in the poem, and resides there as an image, in potential. And Alexander writes in a poem called, “professor,”

walk in the alabaster quietude
my mind reaches out for the creek and the wood
disconsolate places
jungles of meaningless terror bombs
the mechanically inclined

He prefers the “wilde woode” to the civilized world, even though it is a place that is without comfort, and desolate. Here is where the poem dwells, in the wild of language but, he writes, “the strange animal sounds / will carry me / throughout.” Of course, there is also love:

the instrument, the hollow
song, Orpheus and Eurydice
are in love, noone
can destroy that fact, not even Helen.

Love is more important and enduring than beauty. And though the poet who practices dictation takes enormous risks with the cold of poetry, he is warmed by the memory of Orpheus and Eurydice’s love. The story of what happened in the myth is ir-
relevant. That they did love each other absolutely is what is important. Furthermore, “som things ar not to be mentioned / som things / ar silent / your eyes.” Alexander realizes the inadequacy of language in describing the expression in his lover’s eyes.

Alexander’s poems also deal with essence, origin, the primitive truth:


to know where we are
draw from the resources
deeper than time, mysterious
suggestive but mysterious
corresponding and creating
resources that were not, now are
the possibility extended beyond us.

Here, the poet is concerned with the origin of ourselves, and our ability to come to a deeper understanding of our purpose on earth. He seeks to go beyond time, to read the “mysterious” and “suggestive” fragments of prehistoric cultures, in the belief that there is a sign there of a place, or knowledge of a way of life, that can allow us to better understand ourselves; becoming truly human is the goal; the danger, of course, is all around us: the corruption of money, the neglect of poetry, the mistreatment of those that are different from us. In the following poem, Alexander suggests that our misunderstandings come from the language we use. It is also a commentary on the economics of being a poet:


did you get the loot
no but I got this lute, man
fuck the lute, man

---

3 In the poem, “Peter Salt” Alexander writes of a childhood incident that led him to see that people are different. He writes, “i’m getting fed up / the roady o changes stations by itself / like the kid who used to kick up my sand castles / i hid on the roof and pelted him in the act / with apple seeds / he didn’t know what was happening but he said cut that out / this was a human being / there are differences in the world.”
how much loot did you get

In a world where everything rushes by so fast, where technology assumes such importance in people’s lives that they forget their fellow human, it is harder and harder to live in the instant, to slow down and stop time, to experience the immediacy of events in the world:

    the beauty of the immediate
    i need all around me
    immediately he said
    don’t jump to conclusions.

Here again, we have the contrary voice, the voice that undercuts the poet’s voice, the ghost in the poem who says, “Not so fast, you might want to think about what you’re saying.” Elsewhere, Alexander speaks of the pain of thinking about an idea when there is no action. Ironically, “he” \textit{immediately} responds to the poet. Beauty is undercut by the real. The spook reminds the poet of this “awful truth.” But the poet knows that the important thing is

    belief in the goodness of ourselves (not the errors)
    and this is what should be instilled in doubtful children
    fools go on and on but wise men never lie
    that is the truth and not the definition
    love is a great honor.

And addressing Virgil, Alexander writes, “you get tired of pessimism, threts, and verbage, Virgil, but you / dont go to sleep.” In another poem, he echoes the same sentiment:

    somebody asked me what some of this
    stuf means
    i guess it means you better make
    sure you deserve to be a man
    i don’t mean feats of daring
i mean actually doing something.

In contrast to Alexander’s words above, Spicer had reached a point of utter despair in the early sixites. Spicer, in 1963, writes, “Your life does not count. It is the rules of the tribe.” And in a sense, he is absolutely right. The world was changing in the early sixties and the freedom that was coming was not something Spicer would have wanted or been comfortable with. And in this sense, his mistrust of the world that he saw coming proved prophetic. On the other hand, Alexander, as I suggested in the beginning, came to a different conclusion. What matters is not to give up and to continue to “do things,” to continue to write, for example, if you are a writer. For him this is showing that “you deserve to be a man,” the stakes are that high. His “advice” is “begin with purity, and love / and learn to live, a sensible way / begin to learn out of the deep shadows that draw forth / out of the silence of time.” But he is also aware that the “rules of the tribe” will continue to exert their pressure on the poet in a different sense. This is why the poet must be committed to his art. The figures of authority in the “castle” will continue to haunt the poet. This is why he must be careful and listen to the “pure music.” Spicer was also aware that there were bosses in poetry just like in any other job.  

In a poem called, “Commitment” written for H.D., Alexander writes,

we don’t escape, we show off, but we don’t escape
the dungeons are to high, the castle in the wall
will go on writing poetry, the same as you and i
in a different sense.

Spicer, and in different sense, Nerval, were called to suffer a different fate, to follow a different star into the darkness of oblivi-

---

4 The following is Alexanders response to the bosses of poetry: “what you want / the right tune / i never sang before / but I’ll say this / i’ve sung.”
on. And some can even lose their humanity in the process. But as far as Alexander’s muse is concerned, he writes,

    naturally we are in love
    it requires no poetry
    no sentence to death of anything
If she were his lover, the above would also be true.

Alexander does not fall into the trap of those who believe “my kingdom is not of this world.” His retort to that statement is: “isn’t there some harmony of souls that refutes that?” He wonders “what possesses men to defy each other … good acts upon evil successfully because it is good … the kingdom of the devil is of this world while hell is unfortunate.” Can politics solve the world’s problems? The poet answers,

    Surely all things can be solved politically
    The scorns that brood and breed in darkness
    Can be light-changed
    Surely there is enough for all
    And brotherliness.

In these present times, when the country, and indeed the world almost, has veered to the Right in its politics, such words seem to point to a more ideal past, of a socially conscious poetry, that began in the sixties. But it sometimes seems as though the “scorns that brood and breed in darkness” have won the battle waged on the spiritual level between light and darkness, and the light has receded back into the darkness. The poet’s work is concerned with “the comedy of divine hell” and above all “the discovery of the universe,” the “human universe.” To this extent, Alexander is a metaphysical poet. He expresses his discontent

5 In alchemy, and the metaphysical poet is a kind of alchemist, the light must be produced from the darkness, that is, one must be a master of both. Alexander speaks about this kind of work in the following poem: “it was way down / in old shanty town / about have past dark / a litl boy and girl was playin with de dark / witches books and lots of candles / keep those candles burnin / so I can see the page.” The magician must also learn to
about the world in this way: “the cataracts of disgust ring all my brow / browsing the hills of veritable desert / my kingdom is not of this sandheap” but of the “summer lightning.”

In the Appendix, Alexander writes, “i am just in my distribution; fair in my appraisals; outspoken in my actions; human in my endeavor; religious in my conviction.” But to be sexually free, in a sense, is also a kind of revolutionary act, against the masters. To take ownership of own’s own body is an act of freedom. It is perhaps the only remaining freedom we have in a society that more and more resembles Foucault’s panopticon:

    go jack off in a corner of the world
    if you can take all that nature
    go jack off in a corner of San Francisco
    which has about as much to do with St Francis as bird shit
    “the mastrs ar baiting their pupils.”

Sadly, for Alexander, the brotherly love espoused by St. Francis has nothing to do with the situation in San Francisco at the time he was writing. The connection to the spiritual light was broken. Alexander speaks of the wild west, now become commercialized with “hollywood,” and “lost angels, and kids.” Los Angeles becomes “lost angels,” a city of dispossessed kids who are in danger of never being taught the difference between good and evil. For Alexander “politics” is linked to a metaphysics. He is not a Kenneth Rexroth, or Amiri Baraka. For Alexander, it is about the light, the wave that undulates through eternity, the transformative aspect of poetry, such that these “scorns” may be “light-changed” into positive qualities. This is the “God-language” Spicer spoke of, the pure music, instead of “all this horseshit, this uncomfortable music.”

I would like to close with the following excerpt from the Appendix to Eturnature since it sets a high moral standard for a
poet’s life in this time or any other. It is also as close to a poetics that we have from Alexander:

I am a servant of beauty and an opponent of evil; neither do i understand my life; i will go as far as i can in any direction. i will pronounce sentence on some, blame on others, censor on most. my critics are as the seeds of discontent … their value is relative … my value is absolute. abstraction will be used to describe: art will be used to inform. this is a work of art … and not of anything. no man may judge it … because he will not be interested in it as finalities. editions will fail … there is only one poem. there is a vast contribution that will enable all to hear. there is an endurance that will enable all. and there is peace at the end of it. read it then as you would poetry … knowing and feeling. it is all there is to my life.

Works Cited
