



ART

**A Stephen Jonas Reader**

# CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

ARCANA

A Stephen Jonas Reader

Edited by Garrett Caples, Derek Fenner,  
David Rich, & Joseph Torra



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# CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

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# CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

When I say vortex  
do I mean vertex as well.  
I think not only of Wyndham Lewis & Pound  
but of Jonas, Wieners, Marshall, Spicer & Blaser  
Boston in the fifties of the 20th Century.  
Remission does not advertise itself  
but the old Boston vortex still swirls  
thru the lives of us poets forever old forever young

Gerrit Lansing

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## Editorial Note

Even the shortest list of notable omissions from Donald Allen's groundbreaking anthology *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* (Grove, 1960) would have to include Stephen Jonas (ca. 1921-1970). His absence is hardly surprising, however, if only because it would have been difficult in 1960 to obtain a comprehensive view of Jonas's work from the small number of poems scattered in little magazines of the period. The one single-author publication to his name at the time, *Love, the Poem, the Sea & Other Pieces Examined by Me* (White Rabbit Press, 1957), is a short long poem, four pages in the present edition, and Jonas's first substantial collection, *Transmutations* (Ferry Press), doesn't appear until 1966, from an English press at that.

But Jonas's significance to the extraordinary efflorescence of American poetry after the Second World War is beyond dispute. When he is taken into account, it's generally as a member of what is variously termed the "Occult School of Boston," the "Boston Renaissance," or some similar such phrase. This largely gay male configuration of poets has never achieved the notoriety of the San Francisco Renaissance, the New York School, or the Black Mountain Poets, in part because it overlaps with these groups. Broadly speaking, the Boston Renaissance is a mid-'50s phenomenon, beginning, say, when Jonas meets Edward Marshall in 1953. The galvanizing events of this group are the reading by Charles Olson at the Charles Street Meetinghouse in 1954—attended by Jonas, John Wieners, and Joe Dunn—and the temporary relocation to Boston of Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser in 1955-1956. Wieners and Dunn soon follow Olson to Black Mountain College but return while Spicer and Blaser are still in town. Olson himself—not a poet of the Boston Renaissance so much as its *éminence grise*—moves to nearby Gloucester, MA in 1956. This brief but intense period of ferment might be said to conclude in 1957, when Dunn moves to San Francisco and, at Spicer's behest, launches White Rabbit Press with Jonas's *Love, the Poem, the Sea & Other Pieces Examined by Me*, while back in Boston Wieners publishes the first issue of *Measure*.

Among this group, Wieners attests to the influence of Jonas, for example, in "Road of Straw," a section from one of his journals collected in *Stars Seen in Person: Selected Journals* (City Lights, 2015) (124-29). Jonas was also an inspiration to Spicer, particularly in terms of the serial poem. A solution to the problem posed by unfinishable modernist epics like Pound's *Cantos* or Olson's *Maximus Poems*, the serial poem was a major preoccupation for Jonas. His chief works in this regard are *Exercises for Ear* (Ferry Press, 1968) and the uncollected, unfinished series first written under the title *Orgasms*, and later, *Dominations*. He also began at least one further numbered but untitled series, individual examples of which appeared in magazines. On returning to San Francisco, Spicer immediately begins his first set of serial poems, *After Lorca*

(White Rabbit Press, 1957), the longest of which, “Ode to Walt Whitman,” is dedicated to Jonas. Given the substantial increase in the reputations of Wieners and Spicer over the past several years, Jonas’s reappearance in print is long overdue.

Nearly a quarter century has passed since the publication of the last major collection of Jonas’s poetry, *Selected Poems* (Talisman House, 1994), edited with an introduction by Joseph Torra. This book remains the gold standard of Jonas scholarship, but it’s no longer in print and secondhand copies have grown increasingly rare and expensive. The idea of preparing a new edition began a few years ago in conversation with Gerrit Lansing, who, along with Raffael De Gruttola, served as executor of Jonas’s estate and custodian of his papers. Lansing, a significant American poet in his own right, moved to Gloucester in 1960, and became an important intimate of Olson, Wieners, and Jonas for the rest of their lives. Regrettably, Lansing passed away before this book achieved fruition, but we cannot overstate how instrumental to the realization of this project he was.

It is hoped that one day, some enterprising scholar/editor will undertake a complete reckoning of the work of Stephen Jonas. In creating *Arcana: A Stephen Jonas Reader*, we have had the more modest goal of simply bringing him back before the poetry-reading public. We do not claim to supersede the landmark achievement of *Selected Poems*. In large part because, concurrent with this edition, Bootstrap Press is publishing a standalone edition of *Exercises for Ear*, the entirety of which appears in *Selected Poems*, we have chosen not to reproduce the Talisman House book in favor of the “reader” format. We have, however, relied heavily on Joseph Torra’s longstanding expertise on Jonas, reproducing many of the major poems whose texts Torra established in 1994. In particular, we have reproduced Torra’s biographical “Introduction” to *Selected Poems*, as it would be almost impossible to improve upon. To conclude the book, we have added David Rich’s extraordinary “Postscript,” which provides an account of information concerning Jonas’s deliberately self-observed origins that has surfaced in the intervening years, mostly through Rich’s own research.

As we have indicated above, many of the poems in *Arcana*, including the lengthy selection from *Exercises for Ear*, have been drawn from *Selected Poems*. We have also included a number of previously uncollected poems that were printed in little magazines, like *Yugen*, *Floating Bear*, *Origin*, and *Caterpillar*. To these we have added a short selection of previously unpublished poems from those papers of Jonas housed by Lansing and De Gruttola, if only to indicate that there remains more to fathom than what has already appeared. We have not attempted a chronological arrangement of the work, as Jonas frequently but by no means always dated his poems in MS. Instead, we have arranged the poems with an eye towards flow, as has been customary with editions of Jonas.

Finally, we have included a few items from Jonas' notebooks, 16 of which were in Lansing's possession at the time of his death. As David Rich notes in his "Postscript," Lansing directed Jonas to books on many esoteric subjects, and we have reproduced here his notes on alchemy ("Ars Magna") and the tarot ("Tarot Diary"). These notes are influenced by Raymond Lully's work on alchemy and works on the tarot by both Papus (Gerard Encausse) and Oswald Wirth, in addition to those titles Rich refers to. Jonas' "Tarot Diary" was of sufficient visual interest to warrant its reproduction *en face* with a transcription. These notebooks, along with the papers in Lansing's possession, will eventually be made available to scholarship once they are added to the Gerrit Lansing Papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

*Arcana* is dedicated to Gerrit Lansing and Raffael De Gruttola, keepers of the flame of Stephen Jonas.

Garrett Caples and Derek Fenner

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## Introduction

### I

Americans imagine they can be anything they want to be. This is true of Stephen Jonas, the early part of whose history can only be conjectured. The closer one looks into his life before the mid-1940s, the muddier things get. What we know for certain begins with his discharge from the army. After this he drifted, spent time in New York, and then moved to Boston. Over the next two decades he lived a strained life that included run-ins with the law, a prison term, and mental breakdowns. But Stephen Jonas never lost touch with the idea of himself as a poet, or his commitment to writing. He remained the center of an evolving circle of Boston-area poets until his death in 1970.

Tracing Jonas's ancestry has proven futile. This is due in large part to his own efforts to erase certain aspects of his life and remain elusive about his past. His place and date of birth are unknown, though it has been reported that he was born somewhere in Georgia perhaps in 1920, 1925, or 1927. He was probably raised by adoptive parents and eventually changed his name (though never legally) from Rufus S. Jones to Stephen Jonas. Over the years he used a number of other aliases as well. At different times and to different people, Jonas offered different versions of his early years.

Poet David Rattray in his memoir "Lightning Over the Treasury" in *How I Became One of the Invisible* writes that Jonas "was born a mulatto in post-World War One rural Georgia, a world where lynching and fiery crosses and gunshots fired from passing cars in the night were commonplace." Rattray also relates a tale Jonas told of being seduced by a female teacher in Georgia, with a terrified Jonas running home naked through the fields. All of this appears unlikely, especially in light of a letter from Jonas to his friend Raffael De Gruttola:

what you say abt my latin blood is correct. i was adopted by The Friends at abt age three. my own parents, i didn't know (my mother Perreira and father Santos) i was taken by them (my adoptive parents) to Rockland County New York, where I grew up. My adopted father was Scotch-Dutch Kirkland, his mother & Jonas his father. my adopted mother was Dayhoff & dont remember what her mother's family name was. they were both "American"—sense of Henry James. i have been to New Bedford where I was born, but think it a horror. as far as i can make out, my mother was Spanish—(i think Creole i.e. French-Spanish) her mother's people settled in San Juan & later, i suppose to New Bedford where she met & married my father who was Portuguese—what else, i donno. he was a fisherman & later sailor. my adopted father had some business

interests in New Bedford & Boston—fishing sloops i think—so must have known my father through this association. all of which qualifies me to be a “grease ball” par excellence.

Of course, this elaborate tracing of Jonas’s roots may be a fabrication. What is clear is that he repeatedly attempted to keep people guessing. To those who knew him in his Boston years, Jonas was a generous and compassionate friend. People were always welcome in his various apartments. “If I’m not home, come in through the window, everybody does.” Once he pulled in a tree limb so that it grew through an open window. If the children of his junkie friends were hungry, he fed them. He liked to cook, and it’s common to find recipes next to reading lists in his notebooks. Jonas was extremely resourceful, one time re-wiring the electricity in an apartment building so he received his power free from his landlord’s circuit. Some of his food came from late-night foraging of produce dumpsters at the public market. To his writer and artist friends, he was a major source of information and inspiration.

Jonas often passed as Hispanic or Portuguese and didn’t feel comfortable when someone referred to him as black. But in some ways, he liked his “blackness” and the fact that he could travel in circles not immediately open to whites. His associations and friendships were nearly always with whites, but in black and white worlds, he was an outsider—a rootless, social renegade, which at times created in him an insecurity and self-doubt that he struggled with throughout his life. It seems unlikely that he ever came to terms with his racial identity. While in the eyes of society he was subversive, and though he aligned himself closer to Malcolm X than to Martin Luther King, he was neither of the political left nor the right.

The open, widespread movement driven by Black pride and civil rights consciousness was barely under way in the 1950s. By comparison, notions of gay pride were embryonic. That Jonas was a homosexual further estranged him from the mainstream. Long-term gay relationships evaded him. He often fell in love with straight white men, or druggies or runaways he befriended, who cared for him but rarely reciprocated with the kind of love Jonas offered. Asides, references, and dedications to these relationships and lovers are abundant in his poems.

Jonas survived largely on a monthly military disability check, a pension he told some friends he’d rigged while working in the army’s records division. The money allowed him to live simply but well enough to pursue his range of interests full time. His Boston circle of friends and acquaintances included poets, artists, musicians, prostitutes, runaways, junkies, and thieves. In this underground environment he found sustenance for his life and poetry. Jonas’s tuning in to the street life and its inhabitants became an essential source of

material for his writing. His keen ear enabled him to transcribe the language and various voices he heard and get them down in the poems.

Jonas's poetry became a record of his investigations, a system of mapping out his examinations. He had a great passion for music, a fascination with economics, and a genuine interest in history, mythology, philosophy, science, the arts, magic, alchemy, and politics. His interest in poetry led him to Cid Corman's West End Library poetry group where in 1948 and 1949 he read the work of Pound, Williams, and later Olson and Creeley. Jonas was primarily self-taught; his notebooks are full of extensive reading/listening lists and treatises on his discoveries. (He stole many of his books and records from the Boston Public Library.) Jonas did a good deal of his preliminary writing in his notebooks, which he tended daily. These are full of his far-reaching investigations and drafts of what would become his finished poems. Though Jonas never formalized a poetics, his system was in effect a process of finding out.

## II

By 1954 Jonas was a disciplined, practicing writer. In the fall of that year at Charles Olson's Charles Street Meeting House reading (a reading that transformed the non-academic Boston poetry scene), John Wieners introduced the young poet Joe Dunn to Stephen Jonas. After the reading, Dunn, his wife Carolyn, Wieners, and Jonas talked through the night. Dunn reports that Jonas was "a fountain of books and information." Jonas constantly gave out lists of books to read; he had steeped himself in the work of Pound and Williams, as well as contemporary poets like Creeley and Olson. This was an eye-opener for Dunn and Wieners, whose college readings in modern poetry had only exposed them to Eliot. It was the Olson reading and Jonas's ensuing encouragement that led Wieners and Dunn to Black Mountain College in North Carolina. The two tried to get Jonas to follow, but he preferred to remain in Boston, a city he had grown to love.

When Black Mountain College was in the process of closing down, Dunn and Wieners returned to Boston. There they met Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser who had moved to Boston in 1955. Blaser was working at Harvard's Widener Library, and he had found Spicer a job at the rare book room at the Boston Public Library. Spicer was slow to respond to the likes of Dunn, Wieners, and Jonas. He despised Boston and didn't believe anyone there could be writing viable poetry. Through Dunn's insistence, Spicer read the work of Jonas and Wieners and was astonished. Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian, in their biography of Jack Spicer, write, "What drew Spicer to Jonas? One reason is surely Spicer's curiosity about Black Mountain College. Despite Spicer's tumultuous relationship to Olson's poetics, he was drawn intellectually to the

coherence of his system, and the young poets of Boston were pure products of that thinking... Uniformly charming, witty, lovable, they sought poetry by a systematic derangement of the senses, a system which left little time or inclination for ordinary jobs or schedules. The most liminal of all was Jonas..." Blaser reports that he and Spicer were amazed at the range of subject matter Jonas was already folding into his work.

Joe Dunn has described the summer of 1956 as "that intense summer." Jonas, Wieners, Dunn, Spicer, and Blaser were all living within blocks of each other on the inexpensive backside of Beacon Hill. Meeting regularly, writing, and sharing their work, the group began publishing a Boston "Newsletter," which they sent off to friends. According to Ellingham and Killian:

This odd document, a curious blend of acid raillery and low camp, features "Coming Attractions" such as Jonas' "Cock Drill," an obvious pun on Pound's then-new "Rock Drill" section of the *Cantos*, as well as Wieners' "Wieners." The newsletter came with instructions: *Post whatever pages of it poke you in the eye in the most public place you can find—i.e., an art gallery, a bohemian bar, or a lavatory frequented by poets.* It's a very gay text, and its emphasis on collaboration, disjunction, gender politics, "nonsense" locates it at the exact site of post-modern practice. It was received with delight by Robert Duncan during the last faltering days of Black Mountain College.

What has been called the "Boston Renaissance" was merely a handful of poets who got to know each other one summer. But the "Boston Gang," as Spicer called them, participated in establishing an alternative poetry scene in Boston that shared an affinity with Black Mountain, Beat, New York, and San Francisco "schools." In September the group gave a public reading. Disgusted by the fact that only eight people showed up, Spicer planned his return to the West Coast. But the group's summer encounter was fruitful. After hearing a Bird recording coming from Joe and Carolyn Dunn's apartment, Spicer wrote "Song for Bird and Myself," which would be his transitional poem. The same summer Jonas wrote "Love, the Poem, the Sea & Other Pieces Examined by Me," a pivotal poem for him.

This was Jonas's first important poem, bringing together the essential elements of his work within a system that could contain them. His method is poetry as examination, entwining polymorphic themes through a projective-like musical delineation. The poems reflect Jonas's sense of the classics, history, American culture, music (especially jazz), the language and life of the streets, love found and lost. Beginning with "Love, the Poem, the Sea & Other Pieces Examined by Me," it became regular practice for Jonas to consciously address the poem at hand while in the middle of writing it, a charting of the poem

as a thinking/breathing entity. When Joe Dunn moved to San Francisco in 1957, he carried the manuscript of Jonas's "Love, the Poem, the Sea & Other Pieces Examined by Me" with him. It became the first publication of his White Rabbit Press.

Though Jack Spicer's stay in Boston was brief (he left Boston in November 1956), his artistic relationship with Jonas must be underscored. In many ways they were at opposite ends in terms of their poetics, but each greatly inspired the other. They shared common social and cultural interests, and each was vehemently skeptical about much of the poetry being written and published at the time, especially the more formal poetry associated with the New Criticism. Ellingham and Killian write that it was Jonas who taught Spicer "to use anger (as opposed to angry irony) in a poem":

In a sense, Jonas was the objective correlative of Spicer's longings and fears, the outsider complete. He'd even changed his name to redefine the new self he'd created, like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon. Born plain "Jones," *Jonas* perhaps better reflects all kinds of antimonies—the man in the belly of the great beast, the man chosen by God, the sufferer, the exile. Spicer (who played with the closeness of his own name to "Spider," and who abjured the use of the formal "John Lester Spicer" in favor of the folksy "Jack") was a firm believer in notional power.

When Spicer translated Lorca's "Ode to Walt Whitman" in his book *After Lorca*, he dedicated it to Jonas. And in his detective novel, *The Tower of Babel*, he based his "Washington Jones" character on Jonas. Jonas responded with numerous poems dedicated and addressed to Spicer, including major poems like "Canto Jondo for Soul Brother Jack Spicer, His Beloved California & Andalusia of Lorca," and "Morphogenesis, (being a conventionalization of 'Morphemes' of Jack Spicer)." Jonas often refers to fellow poets in his writings, but Spicer is omnipresent.

In 1957 John Wieners edited and published the first of three issues of the magazine *Measure*. This first issue included Charles Olson, Edward Marshall, Ed Dorn, Larry Eigner, Fielding Dawson, Frank O'Hara, Robin Blaser, Jack Spicer, Jonathan Williams, and Robert Duncan. At the center of the issue was Stephen Jonas's manifesto-like "Word on Measure." *Measure* nurtured the small but lively Boston group, and it was their lifeline to the poetry activity in New York and San Francisco. At this time Jonas hit his stride and wrote profusely. He was regularly writing shorter, lyric pieces and had already written several significant long poems, including "Love, the Poem..." and "Word on Measure." It was not uncommon, after a two- or three-day period, for Jonas to appear with a twenty- or thirty-page draft.

Wherever Jonas lived in Boston, his apartment was inevitably a kind of nexus for various underworld activities. Although Jonas was never a junkie himself, junkies, prostitutes, thieves, and runaways were common house guests who might drop by to crash for the night, shoot up and stash their drugs or loot. At some point during 1957 and 1958, Jonas and some of his associates became involved in scamming record and book clubs. Addressed to C. H. Corman and Dr. Charles Duncan among others, books and records were ordered and mailed to Jonas's apartment. These were then sold with the money going to purchase drugs.

In September of 1958, Jonas was arrested and held for a month at Suffolk County prison before being tried on forty-seven counts of mail fraud. He chose to defend himself, and he reportedly told the judge that in a country of grand larceny, petty larceny was no crime. He was convicted and sentenced to prison for six months, of which he served four in the federal penitentiary in Danbury, Connecticut. Apparently, Jonas immensely enjoyed his jail experience—meeting other gay men and mob-types, and identifying with his hero Ezra Pound's incarceration. When the authorities refused him paper, Jonas wrote on toilet paper. Naturally, his prison experiences and the voices of inmates appeared in his future writings.

Upon his release from prison and return to Boston in 1959, a newer group of poets began to make up the Jonas circle. Jonas generated much interest in poetry among younger friends, reading and critiquing their works, always pushing the idea of the poem as more than self-expression. To younger writers like Dale Landers and Tony Sherrod, Jonas became a mentor. He also became emotionally involved with these men to varying degrees and in 1961 wrote several long poems, including "A Poem for Dale Landers" and "A Trio for Tony Sherrod," in which he raised all these issues. Alas, Sherrod and Landers eventually left Boston, Landers dying of an overdose in Mexico City.

These were highly charged times. Many of Jonas's associates used heroin, speed, and alcohol. But poetry remained a constant. Around 1960 Jonas met Gerrit Lansing, and they became lifelong friends. They shared mutual interests in gay life, music, poetry, the arts, and the occult. In the early 1960s they saw each other in Boston or New York, to which Jonas made occasional trips. Lansing crashed at Jonas's apartment when passing through Boston, and he eventually settled in Gloucester where he edited SET, a magazine that published Jonas, Olson, LeRoi Jones, Diane Wakoski, Robert Kelly, John Wieners, Ed Dorn, and others. Lansing and Jonas continued to correspond and visit, sharing their poetry, reading lists, discoveries, and gossip until Jonas's death.

Mental breakdowns had left Jonas hospitalized in the past. At one point in the early 1960s, he walked out of a hospital unit and got to New York where he was acting so wild that even close friends feared him. He was hearing voices through his teeth and fillings. Later, this experience fueled “Orgasm VII: The Oracle Bone.” There were times in his life when Jonas experienced states of paranoia, yet at other times he was capable of great clarity and insight. He often took psychotropic medication prescribed by doctors in combination with street drugs. He was especially fond of speed, and heavy doses of it may have contributed to his bouts of paranoia. Several times Jonas was hospitalized, stabilized, and eventually released.

During the early 1960s Jonas stepped up work on a series of long poems called *Orgasms*. Left incomplete, these are his most ambitious writing project. Although clearly in debt to Pound’s *Cantos* and, to a lesser degree, Olson’s *Maximus Poems*, Jonas had no grand design in mind. These were bursts of his enormous energy and intellect, reflecting his encyclopedic mind. The subject matter of an *Orgasm* might range from street incidents to the classics, from the Tarot to the Constitution, from the voice of a prison inmate to a quote from Thomas Jefferson. There’s an improvisational quality Jonas had learned from years of listening to jazz. The poems are a collage addressing the breadth of Jonas’s investigations. Shifting in tone and focus from line to line, here fragmented structure becomes a mirror of the actual life-psyche driving the writing.

In June 1962 Jonas wrote to Lansing that “the whole picture of the *Great Work* is clear.” However, Jonas’s view of the *Orgasms* continually shifted. By 1967 he had written about forty pieces and in a letter to Lansing stated, “there are 15 or so *Orgasms* that I don’t intend on using—but shall salvage them as the Light moves me to it.” At the time of his death he’d even decided to change the name of the project to *Dominations*. Most of the poems that survive in manuscript are titled *Orgasms* (and were published as such), but it is apparent that had Jonas lived longer, he would have retitled them. So for this selection I have chosen to title them *Orgasms/Dominations*. It’s apparent from the surviving manuscripts that Jonas changed numbers as time went on, and he continued to write new installments causing some confusion. In May 1967 he wrote to Lansing:

i’ve written two sets of XX series/?! i can’t explain why for i don’t understand it myself. when I wrote the *Orgasms* (JFK-Banker series) last summer, i was well aware that there was a XX series already written, but i did it again! but i allow the, what i term “poetic judgment”, take precedent over my formal judgment—i follow the former. but to date the “poetic judgment” has not directed me as to what numbers to give the prior XX series. well, we shall see.

The *Orgasms* in the first “XX” series, which were written before the abovementioned “JFK-Banker Series,” may have become the *Orgasms* that comprise the “Second Series.”

Each time Jonas moved into new territory with a series of *Orgasms*, his own sense of the project changed. There are threads of correspondences throughout the series, and new themes emerge from time to time. This is most evident in the “JFK-Banker Series” from 1966 and 1967. These are electrifying political rants, Jonas up on the soapbox spewing forth his most didactic and anti-Semitic writing. Picking up on Pound’s economic and historical perspective (“what keeps me sane in this madhouse of a country, is that I have read & digested a few of Pound’s indicated areas of economics & history”), Jonas maps out a case of government conspiracy through an exploration of the National Banking Act of 1862 and the Federal Reserve Act of 1913. His heroes are Sam Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and John F. Kennedy, and he cites the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations as examples of a nation undermined by foreign-influenced usury—i.e., usury that Jonas believed was Jewish in origin. These poems are angry, dogmatic treatises that can become tiresome, repetitive, ugly, and hateful.

#### IV

Jonas is one of the great jazz voices in American poetry; he wrote with an improviser’s sensibility. His spontaneity, starts, stops, inflections are unique. He adopted Williams’s revolution of the line and tuned an idiom to his own jazz-ear. He frequently read poetry out loud, including Pound, over jazz. His letters and notebooks are filled with music-related references. Lester Young, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Coleman Hawkins, Ornette Coleman, and others (including classical composers) make their way into the poems as subject matter and into the underlying formal structure. In a letter to Raffael De Gruttola, Jonas lists the music he would listen to on a typical day:

Scott & I got some new sides: Vivaldi, Bach, Rameau, (couldn’t find any Francesco da Milano!!) Scarlatti, Corelli, & of course Mozart also Pergolesi—Concerto No. 2, 3, 4 & Concerto for Flute & Strings which Scott tried to wrangle out of me by offering to trade a “pres” side WHICH I GAVE HIM. Got a Carmen McRae, Modern Jazz Quartet—The Sheriff & a new Frank (eternal) Sinatra yeahhh...

Jonas always impressed younger poets with the fact that poetry was music first, not simply a matter of trying to say something. And he often lamented that the younger writers didn’t listen. In his poems Jonas sacrificed anything to get the music right. Content, meaning, and spelling all came after the fact. In 1961 he wrote to Cid Corman:

Knollledge and the *mot juste* just aint my forte. You had better realize now once and for all that me and “the correct way” just don’t make it. When I write, I write listening for the sound of the word and I come as close to the spelling of it as spelling will permit me. Usually that is not close enuf. What I’m trying here to get over to you Cid is that I am a Poet (I hope so) drunk with the music of langwidge. Hell, man its all I can do to get the sounds down let-alone wrassle with a fucking dictionary.

As spontaneous as Jonas’s poems are, it’s clear from his notebooks and the number of drafts some poems went through, that there was a tremendous amount of revision in his process. He worked his line to make music. Citing his mentors in a letter to Gerrit Lansing, Jonas wrote, “Pound and WCW constantly revised and reformed their line. The earlier and by comparison their later things reveal some change in speech rhythms.” In the same letter Jonas discussed how he’d spent weeks on a poem, trying to get the metrics of it right. Free verse, he explained, could have “dire consequences. If we speak in Time then our things must arrest and retain this time. I have tried (short of counting) to recognize in the Ear such measures as are contain’d in speech especially ‘charged speech’ that as it were laboring to bring forth, newly born, some particular, worth of celebrating...”

By 1965 Jonas’s reputation among other poets had grown. His poems appeared in many little magazines including *Yugen*, *Floating Bear*, and *Origin*, and editors solicited his work. But a full-length book still eluded him. In July of that year he received a fan letter. An Englishman named Andrew Crozier, who was at the State University of New York at Buffalo, wrote saying he’d read Jonas’s poems in various magazines and asked if Jonas would let him publish a collection of his poems. The collection would be small since funds were limited. This must have posed a problem for Jonas, whose body of work could have filled several volumes. Nonetheless, in March 1966 Crozier’s Ferry Press in London brought out Jonas’s first substantial volume, *Transmutations* (the alchemical term for transforming base metals into gold), with an introduction by John Wieners and cover drawings by Basil King. It contained an impressive selection of Jonas’s various long and short poems, including several *Orgasms*, and short poems called *Exercises for Ear*.

Working from older poems, notebook drafts, and new compositions, Jonas had been honing his short takes down to quick, lively riffs he titled *Exercises for Ear*. In these poems, Jonas knew that he’d hit on something essential. “(Pres is still the genius for understatement),” he wrote to Raffael De Gruttola:

What I’m getting at can only be gotten at (effectively) in the short poem. a little chune that is complete from the first word of it to

the last...I would venture to say that WCW hit on this clean classic stance (as clean & as classic as Pisanello or Botticelli are clearly defined w/o clutter of excessive descriptive—(adjectives) etc from a study of D.H. Lawrence. However, most of D.H. Lawrence (to my ear) is not successful or “are not” I shd. say, Poem-chunes. but he does these aforementioned “musts”. Lawrence (exception *Ship of Death*) never mastered free verse form. Pound describes this quality in WCW as “opacity”. I incorporated this quality of WCW also in my short poems.

Jonas adopted the encyclopedic, fragmented structure of Pound’s *Cantos* in his *Orgasms*. In the *Exercises for Ear*, Jonas took his cue from Williams’s spare, direct, down-to-earth sensibility. In the *Exercises* his great multiplicity of references remain, but the brevity of the pieces doesn’t allow them to become convoluted by the barrage, as they can in some of the *Orgasms/Dominations*.

The *Exercises for Ear* swing. Their polyphony and rhythmic textures shift in intensity, pitch, and timbre. In some poems Jonas uses direct statement, in others pure image. There’s a condensed drama and an immediacy of the streets’ rhythms, voices, and commonplace occurrences. “Ear is brain,” Gerrit Lansing writes in his introduction to the Ferry Press edition of *Exercises for Ear*. The poems are gritty, freewheeling but controlled. Jonas’s line is as tight or as fluid as it needs to be. Each poem is individually spring-loaded, laden with riffs, starts and stops. In terms of his shorter poems, the *Exercises for Ear* are the apex of Jonas’s efforts. Jonas spent much time meticulously tending poems in *Exercises for Ear* until they’d reached their musical potential. He labored over the change of a word or the deletion of a comma—the musical composition his primary concern. Referring to the poems in a letter, he wrote, “they’re swinging & let’s hope once & for all the ‘jazz poetry’ hassle be resolved. The methodology is in the language that hugs the scene like Zukofsky’s vowels to necks of consonants.” The 174 poems that make up the *Exercises for Ear* never lose the tune. Written at the height of his creative powers, the book remains a seminal work of American poetry in a jazz idiom, the only complete book of a single work or series that Jonas would collect and see into publication.

V

Jonas remained active and befriended another group of younger writers including Raffael De Gruttola (to whom he dedicated the *Exercises*). On Saturday nights Jonas held Magic Evenings at his Beacon Hill apartment. Locals attended, as did those visiting from out-of-town such as Robert Kelly and Harvey Brown. They listened to music and read poetry, and discussions snowballed. At the time Jonas was attempting to organize the *Orgasms/Dominations* into some kind of order that would make publishing sense, and he was also writing new

poems, including another series of short poems to which he gave Roman numerals but never titled. The series remains uncollected.

Jonas was also slowing down. He'd grown indifferent to relationships, having soured on sex and love. He encountered long periods where he couldn't write. His physical health began to fail, the intensity with which he'd lived catching up. His teeth were rotting, and he'd lost the vitality of his looks. Near the end of his life he faced deepening bouts of depression. While moving things into his last apartment on Anderson Street with some friends, he became short of breath and would have collapsed without their aid. Apparently he was still taking street drugs in various combinations as well as prescribed medications.

Describing Jonas's face in his memoir "Lightning Over The Treasury," David Rattray could also be describing Jonas's poetry: "disquietingly vivid and mobile; it could move, as I later discovered to my increasing consternation, through a succession of masks reflecting hilarity, sympathetic interest, disdain, indignation, murderous rage, or screaming terror, all with an intensity and speed that very few could keep up with, since many of these masks were outward signs of the chemical upheaval with which his body and mind were continually afflicted." It is this succession of masks that comes to mind when I consider Jonas and his poetry. His was a system of upheaval, the continuous turning over of matter and the transmutation of that process into poetry.

On the tenth of February 1970, Jonas, who had been devastated by Olson's death one month earlier (and Spicer's death in 1965), died alone in his Anderson Street apartment. His death certificate reports his color as white, lists the cause of death as an overdose of Dordiden, his parents unknown, and his place of birth simply "Georgia." Nebulous as the details of his background are, Stephen Jonas's poems remain a poet's faith in the audible, palpable energy of the imagination. With this selection some old Boston corridors are no longer silent. Listen.

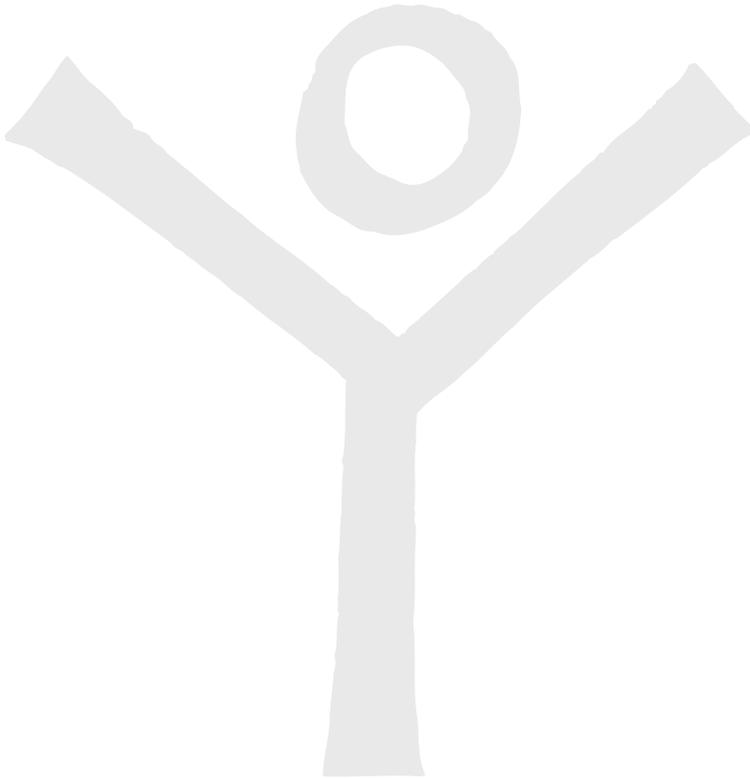
Joseph Torra  
Boston, 1994

This introduction originally appeared in *Selected Poems by Stephen Jonas*, ed. Joseph Torra (Talisman House, 1994).

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# CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

PUBLISHED POEMS



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INVOCATION

O generation gone  
thoroughly to seed  
yr. legislators, yr. heads  
of state  
a great informal  
racket without in-  
struction in-  
capable of re-  
capitulation & no  
distinction between  
subject & object  
suffices anymore  
to distinguish time &  
place  
Long gaps appear in the  
contours of the language  
(as tho' a mere pencil could  
indicate so much grief)  
A language whose word  
of true meaning has been  
severely lost.

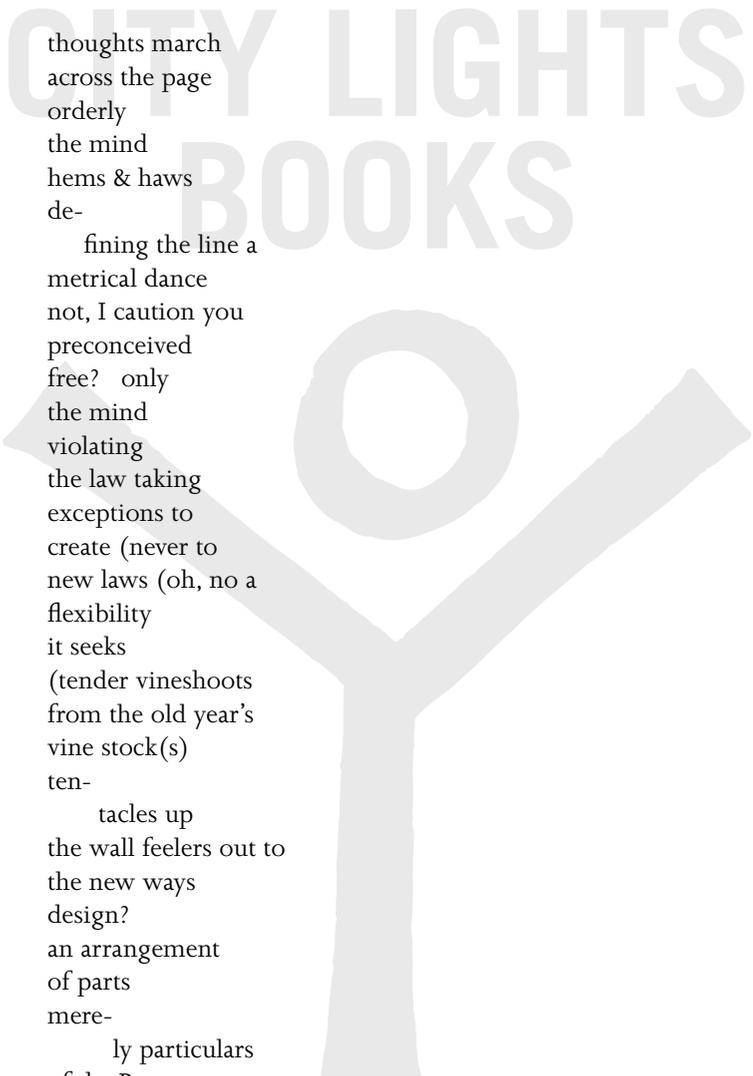
envoi

O lady carved in rosewood  
or set in alabaster  
I pray you  
make us again  
the tall grasses  
to bend & part  
before your footfall.  
Teach us to sin  
and not to sin.

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. . . . AN EAR INJURED BY HEARING THINGS  
(after a statement of Jack Spicer's)

thoughts march  
across the page  
orderly  
the mind  
hems & haws  
de-  
    fining the line a  
metrical dance  
not, I caution you  
preconceived  
free? only  
the mind  
violating  
the law taking  
exceptions to  
create (never to  
new laws (oh, no a  
flexibility  
it seeks  
(tender vineshoots  
from the old year's  
vine stock(s)  
ten-  
    tacles up  
the wall feelers out to  
the new ways  
design?  
an arrangement  
of parts  
mere-  
    ly particulars  
of the Poem  
traced (for the mind  
sketches  
technique?  
long since  
burrowd under  
but the pattern  
's obvious as are

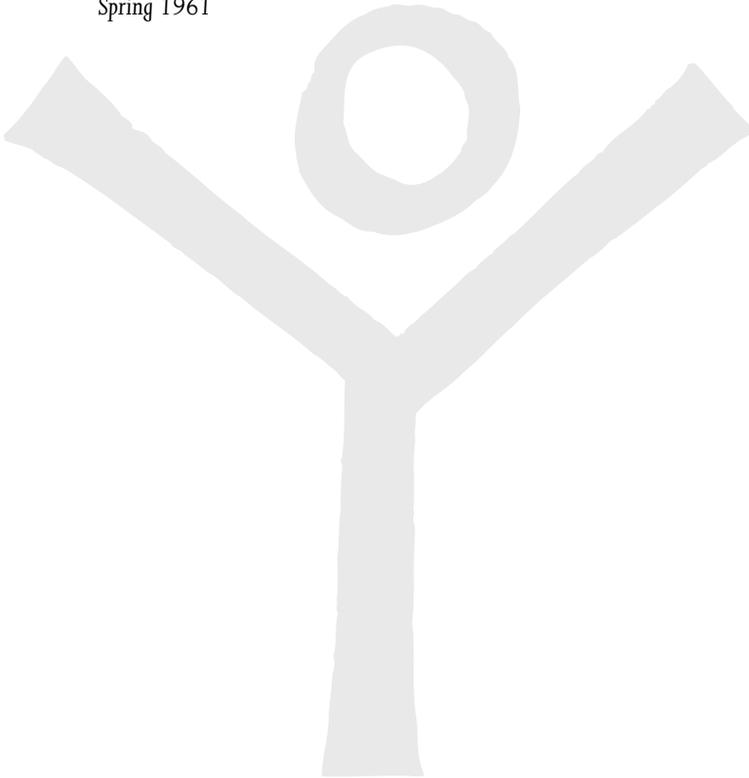


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markings on bird  
form? yes  
what else  
looming before you  
underbrush  
clear that the spaces show  
clean thru  
to a finished what  
have you.

CITY LIGHTS  
BOOKS

*Spring 1961*



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THE OUTRAGED GENIUS

hopped-up  
    & juiced  
you must have  
    a tune in yr head  
(—staggers for the door  
    bounding into  
    chairs  
    other  
    patrons pur-  
sued of their  
    abandond  
    laughter  
    protestations of those  
he missed  
—allow me  
    come i'll be yr Virgil  
& together we'll get said  
    what must be  
buggin' you  
    we'll start tonite  
say an epic for starter  
    —a few of yr  
    choice lyrics  
    for chaser  
posterity will be at yr heels  
    (what' -R-yu  
    sum kinna-nut?)

1962

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BLACKSTONE PARK

(Dans le vieux parc solitaire et glacé)

in this park of dilapidated times  
where no one comes save  
the bums & those  
who love beneath the vine or the rose

winos toss empty pints  
on-to the half shell of  
a no longer running fount  
dry voices of castrated hopes

complain to a jagged moon  
in its final resolve  
at the last bench of a row  
two shadows equivocate

they have no sex nor time  
their words are withered grasses  
beneath the shuddering night;  
some old ecstasy performed for fools

who believe the words they've said  
when the wind is down  
and the green innocence of death  
stalks the place

with a rattle of two elevated cars  
overhead hang-dog  
and headed for the suburbs

1966

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SUBWAY HAIKU

everytime the president speaks  
i close my mouth  
thinking i talk too much  
& there are voices underneath you  
old mr. giacconetti cleaning his pipes  
they'll shut you up if you let 'em

so i move around  
& dont sit in one place too long

everytime i close my eyes  
a new office building goes up  
startling me into taking a pill

60 words per/min  
the ad for typist sd

/never thought i'd make it up the stairs  
the last words i heard June say

3 needles  
& in both sides  
they give me  
& all for getting  
a sick cock

joe joe joe  
dont eat crow

& my box dont work  
a spring broke that  
triggers the mechanism  
underneath

speed king  
the washing machine sd  
in red underneath chrome

o my tenderette  
wrapped in tin foil  
from a bottom  
that slides out

dont get mononucleosis  
it takes a year to cure  
kissing sickness

# CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

i tell you the sentence is doomed

dont take the trains  
ride the verb into town  
take a local  
w/more nouns to stop at

tonite i want a full moon  
like a slice of provolone  
where rats nibbled at the edge

it costs too much  
to have an opinion

o joy i lost yr bread  
in a crap game  
& made you sad

o my head where things  
are all screwed up

even in my dreams  
creditors chase me thru  
a fantastic landscape on mars  
so i hide my poetry  
under an assumd name

winos looking at me  
with dimes & nickels for eyes

o eastman kodak people  
w/yr shades drawn

lover rush into my arms  
186,000 m per/sec

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people lining up to see  
la dolce vita sd the movie marquee

o mechanical bird singing one song  
you are yesterdays late edition  
lying in the gutter

philologists searching for unicorns  
in out of space

o ed marshall w/yr soapbox  
by united farmers

old rugged cross just played out  
on a jukebox by  
universal parts inc.

o jeffersonian 3 ring circus  
m.c.'d by hamiltonians  
w/trained & performing press

castro hates chicken  
& wont be tempted

by big money  
seeding latin american  
counter revolutionary clouds

tv's getting cheaper than ever  
there's mass production for you

and this day just just slid down  
behind the manual arts school

o droopin penis  
my cocatrice  
what queen of the night  
makes you drip

flowers opend and light waiting  
&

bees too busy to bother  
anymore

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christian song playd out  
but the mechanism wont reject  
sacrifice space  
to yr dead gods

scared yes i'm scared  
everytime i pick a knife up  
i see yr face in a late edition

old woman w/yr teeth gone  
& not much left to chew on

o pie for all yr crustiness  
you dont move me

use words sparingly  
so few of us left

o gasman you took my meter out

o lonely world  
with yr/ penis out  
to fuck up the universe

write  
i must write & keep on writing  
till my ink's run out

music  
a form of speech a  
conversational racket with  
some time a  
yak-a-T-yak means  
of talking back

1962

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THE CELIBATE

my ole uncle so & so  
    (now w/God) had  
(among other things I  
    hesitate to touch upon—)  
the (so help me God) biggest  
    piece ('Scuse the Xpression) in  
the town athletic (unmaled)  
assoc. Christ! he was al-  
    ways (between workouts w/bar-  
bells & the like) beating it (and  
    at the mirror yet) outsized (and  
    no exaggeration) down to  
his knees  
    what can I tell you  
he was (a boy I played w/it  
    in bed) hung (my hand ta' god) like  
    a horse & could have  
(had he turnd pro & stopd  
    playin' w/hissel) kept  
ole Christian Science ladies  
    (w/fat dividend checks  
from husbands mostly dead) happy

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then the fade-out  
& I turn to drink.

Pair of kingfishers shack up in  
the pavilion with rotten teeth  
stoned bi-sexual unicorns  
case the park &  
the thud-like empty tomb  
(to each his own  
after his kind or a folded  
quilt)

to think I let an underpaid  
pencil pushing bureaucratic  
appointment deter me  
from a here she goes fire one  
(just ripe for making)  
plum blossoms

Tu Fu (713-770) T'ang Dynasty

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GREEN

as the day  
you were born  
without leaves with-  
out  
stripped  
barely  
distinguishable  
from other heathen  
branches  
baptised by understanding  
the overfalling  
showers falling  
affectionately upon birches  
boughs of  
old family trees are  
sentimental  
attachments to  
roots joined in  
soil swollen clusters  
of sublimation like  
lines hidden  
never washed  
publicly but  
bathed rumors  
in clothes closets  
behind doors of  
juries  
locked in  
to keep out  
the public-like  
rain  
endlessly falling  
in January when hell  
even the yellow  
is an orange  
hidden in trees  
bathed in smog soaked  
landscape  
endlessly falling  
and rising.

TENSONE WITH RELENT

My things  
    it is high time we put on  
a disreputable face  
    & circulated  
    out among that unmanageable din  
    of verse makers  
let us speak in stricture of  
    terza rima  
concerning their un-  
    metrical skills  
Let us recite at them in  
    outrageous meters  
Oh to hell with them & really, you know  
nothing will ever come of all this  
a barking dog seldom bites  
and anyway above them slowly  
    if you want to feel this with me  
moves the slow waters of the Styx  
and we know their voices will  
    ultimately drown  
in heavy odors of pig fat, besides.

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THREE DANCE MOODS FOR EAR

i

The smile that curved so  
once about the lips  
lifted at the corners  
and yawnd into the spaces left for words  
that never come  
or hides, like the subtle ivy,  
its tentacles beneath a green shade,  
looking out,  
solicits no applause.

ii

. . . nor, in this common light, have we  
fared better, most  
unhappy lot  
made no-  
toriously reasonable;  
chance and circumstance/turns all to  
cold metallic purpose  
setting no sights to move or to dance  
the image. Dismantled  
all that machinery  
departed.  
Leaving the scene/to,  
maudlin abstractions,  
passions too powerful to be believed  
or if believed,  
too long endured.

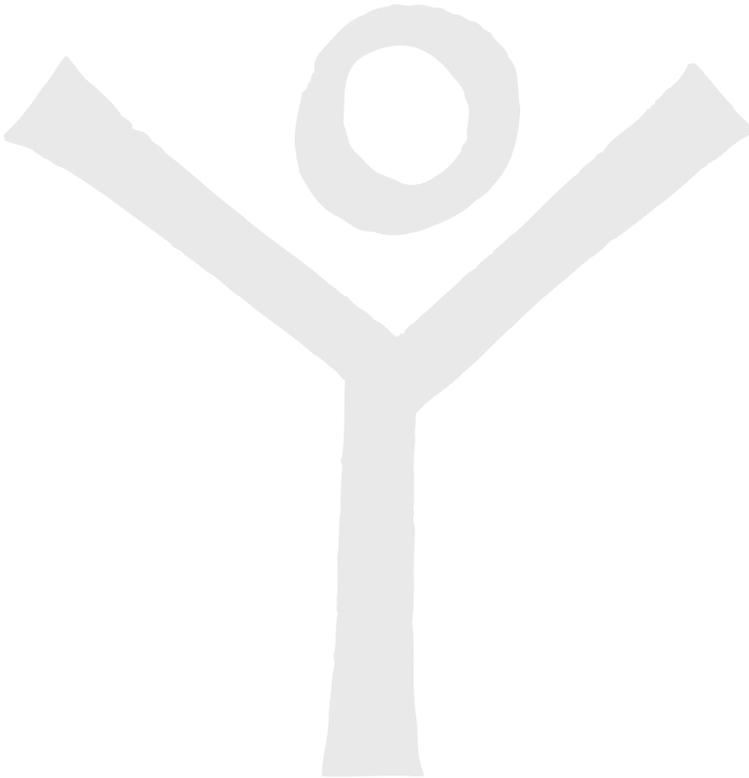
iii

In the age of frescoes he  
married the classic image  
adding to/it his own  
outraged agonies  
depending from the lower limb  
of some Paduan master,  
the vulture surveys almost the entire can-

vas. So one thinks of  
Chagall's husband floating past,  
Caught-  
up in a swirl  
of past regrets. It is  
an audacious willingness to experience.

CITY LIGHTS  
BOOKS

November, 1961



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THE RETURN

Remembering  
it is returning  
somehow to the familiar.  
In the interval  
there has been a loss.  
Alone  
one suffers it.  
Alone  
—with his thoughts  
locked out,  
the old man is  
with us no longer.  
Impotent  
what else is there for him  
unless in old age he write it.  
The birth of tragedy  
remembered it is  
all remembered  
Unconscious the sea surge  
will not let him forget  
save death intercedes  
putting an end to all tragedy.

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