

MICHAEL TURNER / Self-Portrait On George

It's as if everything I say is met with incredulity, insult. He does something similar at readings. After delivering a line, he will look up from his book, straighten his shoulders as if to say, I wrote this or I wrote this?

My first thought when asked to write on George was to draw an owl. Not because he is wise in the way we have come to personify wisdom, or commodify it, but because he looks like one.

In “Letter to Lorca,” Jack Spicer wrote, “I would like to make poems out of real objects. The lemon to be a lemon that the reader could cut or squeeze or taste—a real lemon like a newspaper in a collage is a real newspaper.” I attempted this in my first two books

though few noticed. The poems in these books were not poems in the way we think of Paterson, Gloucester, Black Mountain or San Francisco, but Masters’s Spoon River. Or what Dorothy Livesay called “the documentarian.”

Of course it is not the poems that are important but the insertion of cultural artifacts common to life in a cannery town or a punk rock band—landing tallies, performance contracts—that are, for me, my lemons.

There are no lemons in George’s poems, nor in Spicer’s, only (in Spicer’s case) their consideration, something Spicer (after Rauschenberg) achieved in the collages he made with Fran Herndon, like the one that hangs at Scott’s.

The last chat I had with George took place in front of that collage. I remember what was said, including my recognition of George’s accent, identical to the San Francisco journalists in the Maysles Brothers’ *Gimme Shelter*.

As a child I remember visiting my babushka’s sister on Russian Hill, and then later, as a young man, friends in the Mission, the TV on and an interview with Melvin Belli about Altamont, which was important to punks like us because

Altamont was our father, the Manson Family our mother. That was how we talked in 1983, outside the I-Beam on “New Wave Mondays,” aware of our moment, the tectonics of history, political economy, identity, publicity, a conversation

I tried to convey to George that night as he rocked from heel to toe, his eyes beyond me, surveying the room, asking no one in particular about our public transit system and why, for that reason alone, no one will take it.

Gertrude Stein believed that the essential human being could not be painted, and I agree, if only because I don’t believe in essence. “I wrote portraits knowing that each one is themselves inside them and something about them perhaps everything about them...

[insert lemon]

... will tell someone all about that thing all about what is themselves inside them and I was hoping completely hoping that I was that one the one who would tell that thing,” and this is as much about Stein as it is about me and my attempt to write

on George, whose poems, though new to me when I first read them, were not new until *Gentle Northern Summer*, a book I spent time with, as they say, reading it against what George had written

in the *Georgia Straight Writing Supplement*, or what he surrendered in *The Stick*, or something (what?) from the *Sodomite Invasion Review*, a magazine not unlike the conversations going on at the I-Beam every night but Mondays.

Poets hate sociology not because the State accepts its science but because of something said a long time ago, something forgotten but still believed in, like Judaism, Christianity, Islam...

There is ethnography in *Gentle Northern Summer*, even if it is not called that. There are forests in its poems, and forests outside them. And as with all forests there are economic exchanges, like the ones we find in *Grimms’*, with and without the animals.

The face I have drawn while writing this is an owl’s face. I have added horned-rim glasses but it still does not look like George. It will never look like George because my skills are such that I am able to draw the owl first, not what it might look like.