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Accessibility
“The Mesmerizing Apparition of the Oracle of Joy Street:
A Critical Study of John Wieners’ Life and Later Work in Boston”

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Abstract

My study examines the later work and life of Boston poet John Wieners, whose work and achievement as a poet were neglected later in his life. My thesis contextualizes his life and his work in relation to his hometown, Boston, reclaiming his rightful place in several seminal poetry movements of post-World War II America, such as Black Mountain College, the Beats, and the San Francisco Renaissance, and the Boston Occult School of poets. My analysis situates his later work properly in relation to select earlier poems, and in relation to his life struggles with mental illness, poverty and drug addiction, addressing the seismic shift in his work that occurred in his politically charged last book of poems, *Behind the State Capitol*. My thesis also focuses on the importance of the visual aspect of his collages in *BTSC*, and the tension between madness and clarity in his later poems that reverberate in the visual collages that accompany his poetry. His freedom of reference and flights of language in his later poems reveal a poetics that takes his mentor Charles Olson’s idea of projective verse further than any other poet influenced by Olson. Wieners’ uncompromising vision was years ahead of his time.

His deliberate disengagement of his poems from meaning, in creating an epic book of poetry, his *magnum opus*, is as varied and ambitious as any poetic work of the 20th century. Wieners engagement in the political and social activism for gay and mental patient’s rights in Boston in the 1970s was a major influencing factor in the creation of his radical work and his personal poetics of the time. My work is essential in restoring
Wieners’ literary reputation to its proper place, by placing his later life and his work in proper context of literary history.

My primary source for this evaluation is a close reading of his last book of poetry, *Behind the State Capitol or Cincinnati Pike (BTSC)* and his later works. I compare and contrast his later work with his earlier lyrical work to investigate the radical shift that occurs in his later work as his published works diminished and he faded from the literary limelight. I also examine later work that scholars have not previously considered, such as his on line poetry cluster, “Lisbon Indian Summer”, published in 2000 in *Big Bridge Magazine*. As a poet myself, and a close friend of Wieners in the last 10 years of his life, I source my own archives of notes, poems and journal entries as well as the letters and various journals of Wieners, both published and unpublished, to further investigate his later work.

Wieners’ last and lost poems reveal his singular talent. My analysis proves he was still creating challenging, masterful work in his later years that deserves renewed attention. Later in his life, Wieners was marginalized economically and artistically in Boston, but he remained ever faithful to his hometown. When he died in Boston in 2002, he came full circle from Boston College to Black Mountain, to San Francisco, New York, Buffalo, Gloucester and finally back to Boston. Beyond all the schools and movements of which he was a seminal member, he was one of Boston’s most daring, innovative and underappreciated poets.
Dedication

My thesis is dedicated to my family, in their unwavering support: Angela, Seamus, Gavin, Koko, my mother Joan, my brothers, Jeff, Tom and Greg, and to the memory of my father, Jim, and my brother, Kevin.
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My grateful thanks to Ammiel Alcalay, Micah Ballard, Michael Bronski, Bill Corbett, Christina Davis, Talaya Delaney, Robert Dewhurst, Derek Fenner, Raymond Foye, Ryan Gallagher, John Galloway, Chuck Houston, Fanny Howe, Kevin Killian, Gerrit Lansing, Sarah Powell, Joe Torra, Charles Shively, Sue Weaver Shopf, Seth Stewart, Joyce Van Dyke, and Carol Weston. I would also like to thank Jack Powers, posthumously, for his generous spirit and for introducing me to John Wieners. Above all, I would like to thank John Wieners. The warm memories of his friendship, his wit, and his poetry continue to grace me with inspiration.
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Chapter I

Introduction

As of very recently, poet John Wieners’ work has finally being getting the attention it deserves, as his reputation continues to grow after years of critical and popular neglect. Specifically, two doctoral candidates have made great gains in bringing Wieners’ poetry to a newfound appreciation. Michael Seth Stewart has gathered Wieners’ journals titled *Stars Seen in Person*, published last year by City Lights. Under the aegis of Ammiel Alcalay’s *Lost and Found* series at CUNY, Stewart has also gathered all of Wieners’ personal correspondence from the 1950s through the 1970s. These journals and letters, along with previously published journals, document the depth of Wieners’ genius as a poet, and as a recurring catalyst for important cultural literary events in the late 20th century. Robert Dewhurst has gathered the multitude of uncollected Wieners’ poems for his Doctoral Dissertation at SUNY Buffalo. His work will be published in two volumes in the coming year under the title *Ungrateful City*. As part of his project he has also written *John Wieners: A Career Biography* 1954-1975 that is an indispensable companion piece to the collection of Wieners complete works. Also a new collection of Wieners’ poems titled *Supplication: Selected Poems of John Wieners*, published by Wave Press, and edited by Dewhurst, CA Conrad, and Joshua Beckman has brought his work to a new generation of young readers. These two young poet scholars have made great strides in delivering a historical and social context to Wieners’ work in his journals, letters and his poems. However, their focus is on his work and life in the 50s
and 60s. His work and life in Boston from 1975 to 2002 is not represented in Stewart’s collection of journals and letters, nor in Dewhurst’s biography. Two invaluable articles about Wieners give a glimpse of his unique eccentric brilliance and his influence in his later years: Cathy Salmon’s feature in The Boston Phoenix in 1997, “He’s Still Young: John Wieners Returns to the Literary World” and Pam Petro’s “The Hipster of Joy Street” written as a feature for Boston College Magazine, published just before Wieners died in 2002. My work will offer a personal and critical study of Wieners at a time of his life that has been the subject of much conjecture and mystery. As a poet, editor, and scholar myself, I have the experience of having known Wieners personally for over ten years; travelling with him, and getting to know him as a mentor, a friend, and fellow poet. My study will rely on my perspective to offer an honest appraisal of the poet and his later work in relation to Boston. I will expound on my experience with Wieners in Boston, building on a personal memoir I wrote for Jacket 2 magazine entitled “The Old Brick City by the Atlantic: John Wieners’ Boston Haunts.” Wieners has always garnered the praise and devotion of poets who recognized his particular creative genius in his luminous heartfelt lyric. In 1985, poet, playwright and fiction writer Kevin Killian felt so indebted to Wieners as an inspiration, that he dedicated an entire edition of his magazine Mirage to him. A diverse collection of poets and writers contributed criticism, poems, memories and tributes to Wieners in Killian’s magazine. It was the first evidence in print of the breadth of the dedication and appreciation fellow writers have for Wieners. This dedication and devotion has continued on a much larger scale to this day, fourteen years after his death. In 1986, friend and poet Robert Creeley wrote a review of Wieners’ Collected Poems, “How Far Is It, If You Think It” that was glowing in its appraisal of the
collection but also sincere in its appreciation of the man. Wieners’ editor Raymond Foye used a condensed version of Creeley’s review for the introduction to Wieners’ second Black Sparrow collection of Poems, *Cultural Affairs in Boston: Poetry and Prose 1956-1985*. In the introduction to that collection, Creeley speaks of Wieners’ unique relationship to Boston, maintaining that Wieners’ poetry and prose creates a Boston that is his inspiration and his home: “[His work]… makes manifest the complex place from which all John Wieners’ work has finally come, and to which it, as he also, insistently returns… there is no one for whom that city or any other, has proved so determining and generative an experience. The changing face of its presence and persons articulate here in this dear man’s art.” (Cultural Affairs 11-12) Even as many fellow poets sang his praise, there remained a dearth of criticism of his work from the literary establishment. Poet and Professor Ammiel Alcalay, in his preface to the City Lights recently published *Stars Seen in Person: Selected Journals of John Wieners*, articulates the sad irony of his reputation, “While celebrated through his lifetime as a unique and masterful lyric poet by the most important poets of the period, the availability of Wieners’ work has varied wildly. Receiving no critical acknowledgement or recognition during and even after his lifetime, gathering the work has mainly been the task of dedicated friends.” (xi)

When his last collection, *Behind the State Capitol or Cincinnati Pike (BTSC)* was published in 1975, the silence and lack of response for it was deafening. Of the few reviews the book received, two of them were written by writers involved with the printing and publishing of the book. Charles Shively, the publisher and close friend published his review “What Happened to the Mind of John Wieners” in his magazine *Fag Rag*. Poet Allen Davies who assisted in putting the book together, penned his own review
which appeared in Killian’s *Mirage* titled, “An Hardness Prompts Literature.” More recently, younger poets like Cedar Sigo in his article titled “Behind the State Capitol: Or Cincinnati Pike” written for the Poetry Foundation blog in 2010, have praised the brilliance and influence of this particular book on their own work. In his obituary of Wieners in the British paper *The Independent*, Geoffrey Ward praises the books influence on future generations of poets and touches upon his baffling brilliance:

> “Behind the State Capitol or Cincinnati Pike (1975) is one of the great books of the twentieth century, a two hundred page whirlwind of paranoid fury, hilarity, outrageous theatricality and ventriloquism…Here the damaged self turns itself into a laboratory for future understanding, a position of acute vulnerability, but one with precedents in the English Romantic movement, and the poetry of Walt Whitman. Treated with silence or alarm by those American writers of Wieners' own generation who were now winning prizes and producing their Collected Poems, Behind the State Capitol was read carefully by British poets such as John Wilkinson. Wieners' punishing and punished refusal to control his lyrical flights became a bequest to younger writers.” (Ward)

The later work presents more challenges than his celebrated early work. Although his output diminished, the work in *BTSC* and beyond offers a complex and honest vision of a poet who truly lived out the logical conclusion of his poetry until his final days. Despite the general perception that he was mentally ill, destitute, and living alone, he kept writing and was kept alive in Boston through the salvation of his writing and the special care of his small circle of Boston friends and poets. He became a man one with his poetry living out “the logical conclusion of his poetry” and became the human embodiment of Charles Olson projective verse dictum that one perception must immediately follow another. Like other Boston poets such a Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell, the legend of Wieners life sometime eclipsed the achievement of his later work. The goal of my thesis is that a picture will emerge from my analysis of his later work, of the total poetic
achievement and development of the man in his later mysterious years in his city of Boston.

Boston in the 1950s was seminal to Wieners’ development as a poet. His unique relationship with Boston remained throughout his life, yet evolved as the city developed and as Wieners himself grew old and endured mental illness, drug addiction and poverty. This relationship inspired his work as well as serving as a backdrop to the drama of his lyric. It was an essential element to the particular emotion inherent in his work. His early poems reveal his lyric style and his amazing technical facility as a poet. His earliest poem, a lyric tribute to the iconic Boston landmark, written in long Whitmanesque lines, appeared in the Boston College *Stylus* and published as the first poem in his 1964 book *Ace of Pentacles*. It was written while he was an undergraduate, bringing to mind, Keats “Ode to an Urn”, in formal verse, in praise of The Brewer Fountain, located in the Boston Common, titled “Ode on a Common Fountain.” The classic echoes, what Allen Ginsberg called his “Keatsian eloquence, pathos, substantiality, the sound of Immortality in auto exhaust”, (*Selected Poems* 15) combined with his technical mastery displayed in the poem was far above the poetic facility of a typical college undergraduate. Even though his lyric would develop far beyond the style and vision of early work, it contains all the artistic components that would set his work apart from his contemporaries: his use of classic form, his ability to find beauty in otherwise mundane every day modern objects, his use of archaic old fashioned language, a spiritual, yearning searching aspect in his Catholic belief in God in his work. His confidence in his technical facility and poetic ability were rooted in his awareness from a young age of his vocation as a poet. He also was aware, early on of his sexual orientation and wrote frankly about it. It was never a
struggle for him. His self-awareness and self-confidence were evident in his early poems. His frankness in his work dealing with his sexuality, his struggles with drugs, and mental illness, set him apart, but would be mitigating factors in the marginalization of his poetry later in his life. This frankness and freedom of reference in content combined with his mastery of form, is one reason his work is so revered and worshipped by poets of many generations. He was cursed throughout his life with the burden of being a “poet’s poet.” In truth, he was a catalyst, a leading member of many poetic movements that became the hallmark of avant-garde poetry after the Second World War. In particular, Wieners was the energizing agent for the Boston school of poets. He took full advantage of the fertile environment that Boston offered a young talented poet in the 1950s. It was here he made valuable connections and literary friendships that would help launch his career and sustain him in the later years of his life. The back side of Beacon Hill would be his inspiration and home during the early 50s and again after his return in the early 70s. The city landscape and the poet, having changed so much over a lifetime, would be forever linked. Thusly, his poetry reflected this ebb and flow relationship between the man and his sense of place, his sense of himself as a poet; his place in time, his place in town, and his place in mind.

After leaving the protective enclave of Boston College in 1954, Wieners was inspired and stimulated by the swinging electric energy of Boston in the mid-50s; Scollay Square with its Burlesque theatres, such as the Old Howard Theatre, Jazz clubs such as Wally’s in the South End, and the working class Irish-Italian tenements of the Old West End. Although all were vital inspiring sections of Boston to Wieners as he developed as a poet, it was Beacon Hill that was his home and inspiration in the 50s and when he
returned there in the 70s, a much changed man in much changed city. He was very aware of this difference in him, and in Boston when he returned in the early 70s, after a decade of near fame, world travel, drug addiction, mental illness, and deep personal loss. He articulates this sentiment particularly in his poem, “What I Imagine to Be My Lover Whispers in the Corner” written shortly after returning home in 1970 to his parents’ house in Hanover after a six month stay in Central Islip Hospital in Long Island.

Those who stay at home
often worship far away places
and unattainable ambitions,
such as fame and idealized love
Those who travel find their dreams come true, meet fantastically interesting persons
through talent and achievement, even of a minor sort. I have moved all
my adult life, finding success sweet when I came home in overt defeat forgot it and settled down to a routine,
to wake up at those out of the way places, with hands full of familiar feelings, a new sense of glamor pervaded the scene.

Oh yes, this is that bus station known at twenty years old, And now past thirty-five, in good health, I sit at the same tables, bearing the moon and its dream from the fifties rushing down Charles Street, on fire with desire for beautiful women, bubbling alcohol, late hours, smart cafes fast limousines more demanding assignments on my energy. (Cultural Affairs 91)

Bearing the moon and its dream of the fifties, a transitory dream of great promise and ambition in the heart of Beacon Hill. These are the laments of a broken, but not bitter
man where every part of the city, even a table at the bus station, is charged with ghosts and memories. In his later life and his later work, the ghosts of old poems, and the memories of a poets’ life would inspire and haunt him.

In the fifties, his influences expanded from his early obsession with Edna St Millay and other women poets like Edith Sitwell, to William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. This expansion of his poetic sensibilities were due, in part, to his chance meeting with poet Charles Olson at the Charles Street meeting house on September 11, 1954 during Hurricane Edna. (For years, Wieners and others maintained that the reading was September 23rd of that year during Hurricane Hazel. Robert Dewhurst discovered the correct date in his research). His connection with Olson in Boston that fateful day would guide him and inspire his work throughout his life. Looking back years later, in the final line of the poem, “Youth”, Wieners saw their relationship as life-changing in religious terms where poetry is the holy mystery, “Big Charles put his hand on me, and ordained me a priest.” (Selected 229). After witnessing the reading, Wieners was so enamored of Olson that he immediately applied to Black Mountain College in Asheville, NC, where Olson was serving as the Rector of the progressive arts college. Wieners excitedly applied to the Registrar for admission. His letter details his desperate desire to become Olson’s student and leave Boston to achieve his dream:

My age is twenty-one and I feel, in terms of my own development as a writer, that one to two years at Black Mountain College, “ham-mering form out of content” is the most worthwhile thing I could do. I am eager to study under Mr. Charles Olson, having read his poetry in Origin, Four Winds, and the Black Mountain Review, VI, No. 1, and also having heard him read his poems at the Charles Street Meeting House in Boston last year. His essay, “Projective Verse” has been the most important work I have read on the writing of poetry in 1955. (Olson Wieners Letters 8)
Wieners became Olson’s star pupil in the two semesters he spent studying under Olson at Black Mountain, taking Olson’s poetics of Projective Verse as a guiding principle in his work. Boston and Massachusetts was never far from his thoughts while at Black Mountain. Olson was a native New Englander growing up in Worcester and eventually settling in Gloucester. Also, while there Wieners made other important friendships and connections that kept him connected to Massachusetts and inspired him as a poet. He connected immediately with Robert Creeley, a poet from Arlington, MA, raised in Acton, who became a life-long friend and confidante, and whose poetic principle that “Form is never more than an extension of content” also impacted deeply Wieners’ development as a young poet. He befriended other writers at Black Mountain, painters and artists, like Michael Rumaker, a young gay novelist and writer from New Jersey, painter Basil King, and Bay Area poet Robert Duncan, who also inspired him to create and become a major voice in the Black Mountain School of poets. Also, two good friends, and his lover from Boston accompanied him to North Carolina. The love of his life and the muse of many poems, Dana Duerken, and poet friend from Boston College, Joe Dunn, and his wife, Carolyn travelled with him to Black Mountain. He was surrounded by a small group of poets and friends who looked out for him and championed his work. Throughout his life, amidst the rooming houses, the mental institutions, the streets of San Francisco, the lower East side tenements of New York, the University classrooms of Buffalo, the betrayals and heartbreaking loss in Gloucester and his final years behind the State Capitol in Boston, the one constant, his saving grace, was the care and support of a small circle of friends and family who gave him undying support. The support of friends was augmented by his
complete dedication to the vocation of poetry as salvation and refuge from the stark realities of the real world.

After his stint at Black Mountain Wieners returned to Boston in 1956. That year, he connected with poets Robin Blaser and Jack Spicer who were both living in Boston at that time; Blaser working at the Harvard Libraries and Spicer working at the Rare Book room of the Boston Public Library. Both poets would become friends with Wieners, and the mysterious Boston poet, Steve Jonas. In 1956, the group published *The Boston Newsletter*, a 33 page collection of poems by this burgeoning group of Boston poets, including Wieners, Spicer, Blaser, Jonas, Joe Dunn and Ed Marshall. Wieners published three early works in the Newsletter. There was only one issue published and today it is so rare, that only one complete copy is known in existence, having been recently located in the papers of Jack Spicer at Emory University. The nucleus of this group would form what poet Fanny Howe has called “The Boston Renaissance”, Wieners and Blaser would become lifelong friends and poet contemporaries. However, the group was invisible to the Boston literary community at the time and years later, critics ignored this vital Boston school of poets. Joe Torra, in his article on the academic and literary disregard for Wieners and his contemporaries, clarifies why they were ignored in relation to the city of Boston: “As a literary city Boston is cruel to its own, especially towards anyone from the underclasses and or whose writing doesn’t correspond to established literary norms. The poets who made up the Wieners, Jonas, Spicer, Blaser, Marshall and Dunn circle: an occult school, unknown” (Gerrit Lansing) during the 1950’s were not an Ivy-league educated, in opposition to the poetics of the New Criticism, mostly homosexual and connected with
drug use. ..For a socialite, cocktail drinking (Robert Lowell), madness is genius. For a blue collar, homosexual, drug-using Wieners, madness is crazy” (Torra 54).

Blaser helped Wieners land a job at the Woodberry Poetry Room at Harvard, a short lived gig that supposedly terminated due to Wieners’ rumored drug use and absenteeism. Spicer would be one of the primary reasons Wieners would move to San Francisco within the year. Their influence, as well as Olson’s guiding hand would inspire Wieners to start his own journal, Measure. Fittingly, the first issue, published in the summer of 1957 focused on the city of Boston as its theme, including an amazing cross section of poets: Charles Olson, Ed Marshall, Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser, Ed Dorn, Larry Eigner and Frank O’Hara. This impressive collection of poets was a precursor to the highly influential landmark anthology The New American Poetry, published by Don Allen in 1960. Allen’s Anthology is now seen as a groundbreaking publication, yet it included many of the poets Wieners gathered for Measure, several years before. Measure, whose title Wieners borrowed from a William Blake poem, was an ambitious undertaking for the young poet. Although he relied heavily on the guidance and wisdom of Olson, he ultimately was the only editor and the singular driving force behind the magazine. His method was meticulous in his mission to “end the decade Olson began with Projective verse in 1950.”(Olson Wieners Correspondence, 4). The magazine published other highly influential poets and writers, in its three issue run. As Seth Stewart points out in his introduction to the correspondence of Wieners and Olson, “Wieners was able to collect poets and writers from across the country, to offer a unique cross-section of New American Poetry coming into the 1960s…Measure cut across and connected disperse communities—Black Mountain, San Francisco, Boston, New York and the vagabond Beats…” (Stewart 4-5). Wieners also
published his own poem, *The Imperatrice* in the third issue of the magazine. It was the Boston poets: Olson, Eigner, Marshall, Jonas, and Gerrit Lansing, that Wieners championed above all others, publishing their work in more than one issue of the three. *Measure* would only last three issues, a fourth issue was rumored to be in the works for years, but would effectively cease publication after Wieners first book was published in 1959, as he descended into heavy drug use and mental illness. The magazine is one of the most telling artifacts of a vibrant and stellar Boston poetry community in the 1950s that not only included John Wieners, and was centered on his tireless inspiration and meticulous editorship.

Wieners’ restless energies and poetic ambition would lead him to San Francisco in the late 50s, leaving Boston and Olson behind. However, he did travel across the country with his lover, Dana, and poet friend Joe Dunn and his wife, Carolyn. While in San Francisco, he once again found himself at the center of another burgeoning poetry movement; the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance. He reconnected with friends, Robert Duncan from Black Mountain, Robin Blaser and Jack Spicer, who both had moved back to California, after their respective stints in Boston with Wieners. Wieners became a regular member of Spicer’s weekly poetry gathering in North Beach, befriending poets like Joanne Kyger, who immediately responded to his shy, retreating New England nature. Spicer, however, eventually became increasingly hostile toward Wieners and his work. The main reason for Spicer’s disenchantment with Wieners was his increasingly alarming hard drug use and erratic behavior. Wieners dove headfirst into the underworld of San Francisco jazz clubs, bath houses, street prostitutes and drug culture with the same commitment he gave to poetry. Wieners began to court madness in the tradition of the 18th century French poet
maudit, the poet accursed, articulated by Arthur Rimbaud, who, in 1871 wrote: ‘The poet makes himself a voyant through a long, immense, and reasoned deranging of all his senses. All the forms of love, of suffering, of madness; he tries to find himself, he exhausts in himself all the poisons... he needs all his faith, all his superhuman strength, in which he becomes among all men the great invalid, the great criminal... and the supreme Savant!’ (Rimbaud) Consequently, Wieners’ would follow this path into madness and addiction, identifying with doomed artists, jazz musicians, singers and movie stars in his poems, often projecting movie stars and torch singers personae onto his lovers, his family and himself.

Wieners took residence in a rooming house in Polk Gulch section of San Francisco called The Hotel Wentley. It is here where he wrote his first book, The Hotel Wentley Poems that took the poetry world by storm. Written in the span of eight days while staying in the room of painter Robert LaVigne (whose pen and ink drawing of Wieners graces the inside cover), Wieners wrote a sequence of 8 poems each in tribute to a thing or a group (“A Poem for the Insane” “A Poem for Painters”, “A Poem for Early Risers”, “A Poem for Cocksuckers”, etc.,) in lean tight lyric verse with brilliant and oft times hallucinogenic imagery. These poems swung with the drama of the moment and the streets in sparse lean language that sparkled with his masterful technical facility. In The Hotel Wentley Poems, Wieners risks all to achieve a pure, and absolute poetic vision. His poetic mission to find the sacred in the mundane, is stated plainly in the first poem in the collection “A poem for record players, “I am engaged in taking away/ from God his sound.” An impossible feat, but one that he will sacrifice all to achieve. This slim, lean volume was the epistle of a poet at the height of his lyrical powers, on the precipice of his sanity. Its publication was a
watershed moment in the burgeoning San Francisco Renaissance. His poetic voice in *The Hotel Wentley Poems* is singular and sparse—a holy whisper countering the bardic yawp of Allen Ginsberg and the beats. In an article titled, “The Hipster of Joy Street”, on Wieners by Pam Petro published in Boston College Magazine, Robert Creeley articulates what set Wieners apart from the other Beat Generation writers: “Others find Wieners’ association with the Beats a convenient generational tag,” says Robert Creeley, ‘If “Beat” is to cover poets at the time who had, as John, put themselves entirely on the line — “At last. I come to the last defense” — then he was certainly one. But I think better to see him as The New American Poetry locates him, singular and primary — not simply as a “Beat” poet, nor defined only by drug use, nor a regional poet, nor one of a “school. Because that begs all the particulars of John’s writing, his immense articulation of the situation and feelings in a relationship with another — literally, love. It’s not a question of gay or straight — it’s how we, humanly, are attracted to and moved by one another, how we know another as being here too. There is no greater poet of this condition than John.’ (Petro 33)

Amongst the reveries of the San Francisco streets weaving throughout these poems, there remains an undercurrent of longing for home, for God, for shelter in the face of terrifying drug fueled visions. However, as the praise and attention for the work rippled through the poetry communities across the country, Wieners withdrew and became increasingly more erratic and disturbed. He moved in to a house at 707 Scott Street with friend and artist Wallace Berman, his wife Shirley, and their young son, Tosh. While living with the Bermans he kept a journal, *The Journal of John Wieners is to be called 707 Scott Street for Billie Holiday 1959*, which was published in 1997 by Sun and Moon Press. In the journal, as he Descends deeper into addiction and madness, he rebukes Olson’s
principles of Projective verse. “I must forget how to write. I must unlearn what has been taught me….I must learn how not to write. I must watch with my five senses.” (707 Scott Street 13-14).

Wieners left San Francisco later that year, in a state of deep paranoid psychosis brought on by his continued drug use. After staying for some time with Irving Rosenthal on 8th Street in New York City, still in a heightened state of psychosis, he arrived home to Boston. His parents had him committed to the State Mental Institution in Medfield, MA. He had little memory of almost two years of his life from 1959-1961. He was committed again by his parents against his will to Metropolitan Hospital in Waltham, MA, where he received multiple electric shock and insulin coma therapy treatments. Around this time in the early sixties, he did receive some good news. Allen Ginsberg had awarded him a young poets grant which allowed him to move to New York City here he lived at 134 Avenue C with a cast of writers, musicians and denizens of the street, including Beat icon Herbert Huncke, fellow Boston poets Ed Marshall and Steve Jonas, Artaud translator David Rattray and young beat poet Janine Pommy Vega. While in New York, he worked for a time at the 8th Street Bookshop. Bookstore owners James Carr and Robert Wilson published his second volume of poetry, *Ace of Pentacles*.

*Ace of Pentacles*, published in 1964, was more ambitious and uneven than his first book. It included poems written over a ten year period, opening with “Ode to a Common Fountain”, the aforementioned poem first published in his Boston college days. The centerpiece of the book, however, was a poem titled “Acts of Youth” that sprung directly from the wreckage of his drug use and multiple hospitalizations. It was a poem that greatly impressed Charles Olson with its sheer breadth and depth. Olson, in his excitement,
misheard the poem as “The Ages of Youth” so Wieners subsequently used both titles for
the poem. The voice is plaintive and unflinching in tone and rhythm:

And with great fear I inhabit the middle of the night
What wrecks of the mind await,
what little I have left me, what drugs
To dull the senses,
What more can be taken away?

It is bleak in the scope of as litany of losses he has suffered through drugs and
insanity, but through blind faith in poetry and stubborn courage, Wieners turns from
bleakness to hope through the transformative power of poetry in the face of doom. This is
a theme that will resonate throughout his later work.

Pain and suffering. Give me the strength
To bear it, to enter those places where the
Great animals are caged. And we can live
At peace by their side. A bride to the burden
That no god imposes but knows we have the means
To sustain its force unto the end of our days.
For that is what we are made for; for that
We are created. Until the dark hours are done.

And we rise again in the dawn.
Infinite particles of the divine sun, now
Worshipped in the pitches of the night. (Ace of Pentacles 64)

Even in the midst of this period of darkness and decline, *Ace of Pentacles* signaled the
achievement of a wholly accomplished poet, who finds the music of his lyrics and the
magic of the drama in the midst of his mental breakdown and the harsh cruelty of
involuntary institutionalization. Wieners’ creative output was uncanny in his ability to
capture a particular feeling, finding his music clear and true, completely aware of what he
sees and feels in the midst of the chaos of a breakdown, shock treatments and
institutionalization in State run facilities. His facility to create and live within the poem in the face of cataclysmic loss is a hallmark of his brilliant lyric throughout all his work, especially his later work. In Ace of Pentacles, Wieners writes from a perspective that separates him from other “confessional” poets, like Robert Lowell and Ann Sexton. His fellow poets and friends immediately recognized this distinguishing mark that differentiated Wieners from the confessional and beat poets of his day. Fellow poet and his friend, Denise Levertov, recognized and articulated this beautifully in her review of Ace of Pentacles: “The things various confessional poets describe have happened to him too—drug addiction, the pain and loneliness of homosexual love, the mental breakdowns—everything except marriage problems and divorce; but in his case they are not autobiographically written about, they are conditions out of which it happens that the songs arise. There is never any sense that he capitalizes on dramatic events or is dependent upon them for his poetry; he doesn’t see them as dramatic. What moves us is not the darkness of the world in which the poems were written, but the pity and terror and joy that is beauty in the poems themselves…His working of poems is towards accuracy of notation for that experience, not in support of the superficial clarity that is only a compulsive neatness and takes insufficient care of the complexities of the live material.” (Levertov 227) This “live material” is the lifeblood of Wieners’ lyric as he follows Olson’s Projective Verse principle, pushing beyond into his own personal poetics. His ability to transform intense experience into music, harkens back to his statement of poetic intent in The Hotel Wentley Poems, “I am engaged in taking from God his sound” and echoes Prometheus stealing fire from Zeus to give to mankind and suffering eternal punishment for it. Also around this time he professes his belief in a poetics of poetry as personal salvation he explained in his
statement in the Don Allen Anthology in 1960. “A poem does not have to be major thing. Or a statement? I am allowed to ask many things because it has been given me the means to plunge into depths and come up with answers? No. Poems, which are my salvation alone. The reader can do with them what he likes.” (456) Salvation in the form of lyric from the depths of his despair are his songs that contain odd syntax, inverted phrases, banal rhymes and antiquated language. However, his uniqueness and freedom from constraint of syntax and grammar, emphasize the urgency and intensity of the music in the moment as he writes from his intense experience, not about them.

Around this time, while still living in Milton with his family, with the money from Ginsberg’s grant, he was able to finish and publish the third and final edition of Measure, which included his own work, The Imperatrice. Although it was the finest and most realized issue of his magazine, he did little to promote it and sent it out only to friends and family. In 1963, a play of his Asphodel in Hell was staged at the Judson Poet’s Theatre in New York City, for which Andy Warhol did the stage design. It was met with mixed reviews. After Warhol died, a copy of the play was found among his papers. Wieners was one of Warhol’s early screen test subjects filmed in 1964 and documented as ST351 (Screen Test 351) in the Callie Angel’s catalogue of Screen Tests, Andy Warhol Screen Tests. Angel describes the mysterious alluring details of Wieners Screen test. “Wieners’ Screen Test, which was probably shot in 1964, begins as a very dark, underexposed image. Illuminated only from the left, his face emerges from the darkness like a dim half-moon, one partially eclipsed eye glistening from the shadows.” (Angel, ST351, 209)
Wieners also had admirers’ amongst Warhol’s factory crowd; poet and photographer Gerard Malanga and art critic poet Rene Ricard were both heavily influenced early in their careers by Wieners’ and his work.

In late 1964, Olson offered him a teaching fellow position at SUNY Buffalo. Buffalo had become a hotbed of counter culture activism for poets, and writers in the 60s. While in Buffalo, he taught one class while pursuing a Master’s degree under the guidance of Olson. In 1965, two events would help bring Wieners back into the national and international poetry world. In 1965, Frank O’Hara invited Wieners and Olson to join him at the Spoleto Arts Festival in Spoleto, Italy with Ezra Pound. A number of fellow American poets appeared there with Wieners - Olson, Bill Berkson, and Leroi Jones, but Pound was the main attraction. Wieners was deeply affected by his meeting with Pound. Friend and fellow poet Bill Berkson recalls the details of that trip in the Afterword to Wieners’ journal, *A New Book from Rome*. “The initial reason for that trip was the Settiman di Poesia in Spoleto that June, at which John and I both read, as did Charles Olson, Ezra
Pound, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Barbara Guest, John Ashbery, Pablo Pasolini and a host of European poets. Such as Ingeborg Bachmann, Salvatore Quasimodo, Andre Frenaud, Miroslav Holub, Yevgeny Yevtushenko (“the discus thrower from Smolensk,” Ferlinghetti called him) and Pier Paolo Pasolini…Later John and I had Pound inscribe copies of a slim selection of his poems bound, somewhat like a notebook in red. “Salut,” he wrote in a careful hand, spelling out our names and his.” (A New Book From Rome 151). It was a magical trip for Wieners. He would write fondly of their meeting a decade later in a prose piece titled “Hanging on for Dear Life” included in BTSC.

Upon his return to the States after a triumphant appearance at Spoleto, Wieners went straight to Berkeley to attend and read at the now famous Berkeley Poetry conference with Olson. He read with Ed Sanders and was introduced by his friend and poet Robert Creeley. Wieners and Olson returned to Buffalo, but halfway through the semester Olson left the university and returned to Gloucester. Wieners continued on at Buffalo connecting with other faculty members, working on manuscripts and still in pursuit of his degree. In March of 1966, on a trip home to Gloucester to visit Olson, Wieners met a Hungarian countess, Panna Grady, a patrician of the arts, with whom he would have an intense summer affair which would lead to heartbreak and another breakdown.

He spent the summer of his return in 1966 close to Olson, taking up residence with Grady and her daughter in a stone castle on Dennison Road in Annisquam. Although Wieners’ had identified his sexual orientation as gay up to that point, he fell deeply and unexpectedly in love with Grady. She had been a supporter of other writers and artists, most notably, William S Burroughs, Herbert Huncke, and Andy Warhol. Wieners threw himself into this relationship with the same commitment he gave to his poetry, taking on
the role of the dutiful husband. During the idyllic summer of their relationship, Grady became pregnant with Wieners’ child. Perhaps as a result of his strict Catholic upbringing and deep seeded family expectations of a wife and family, Wieners was excited and proud to be an expectant father. Grady on the other hand was a dedicated free spirit who loved Wieners but did not want to be burdened with the responsibility of another child. Grady terminated the pregnancy and ended the affair with Wieners, running off to London with Charles Olson. Wieners fell into a deep depression. He returned to Buffalo broken and defeated. He would stay on there without Olson’s companionship for another two years. A month after Wieners’ return to Buffalo, he traveled to New York to read with his old friend Robert Creeley. After the reading, Olson phoned and told Wieners of his affair with Grady and their intention to travel to London together. Wieners was heartbroken. The shock of the betrayal of his mentor with the woman he had loved was too much for the unstable Wieners to bear. The shattering effects of the breakup are documented in Wieners’ poems of the time written in a journal he kept at the time given to him by Grady and recently published in the City Lights collection of Wieners’ journals, *Stars Seen in Person*. The Panna Grady affair and its devastating impact of Wieners would be one of the sub-texts of loss woven into the many themes of his last book, *BTSC*.

In 1967, upon his return to Buffalo, he published a small influential book of poems from a small press called run by Ed Budowski. *Pressed Wafer* was a slim collection of unique lyric poems with the common theme of devotional and spiritually questing poems. They are lean, brilliant and searching in nature, the prayers of a broken man seeking salvation in poetry, and searching for his soul in the streets. While back in Buffalo, his bouts of paranoia and mental illness increased perhaps brought on by the Panna Grady
Charles Olson affair. In 1969, his behavior reached a critical point when on a return visit to New York he was arrested at the Continental Baths in Manhattan on a forgery charge and was transferred to Central Islip Hospital on Long Island where he would remain for 6 months. Upon his release he would return to the Boston area, to his family, now living in Hanover, Massachusetts, where he would live until he moved to Beacon Hill in 1973. His writing changed as well, moving into new, brilliant, challenging territory.

While in Central Islip, in horrific and dire conditions, Wieners, as always, was committed to his writing. He was visited by poet Anne Waldman, a young poet who was involved with the Poetry Project at St Mark’s, and who, along with poet Lew Warsh, ran Angel Hair press. Waldman was one of the few to visit John in the hospital. Wieners gave her a manuscript of poems that was to be appropriately titled *Asylum Poems, For My Father*. Published that year, the Asylum poems were composed during his stay in Central Islip. In an interview with Robbie Dewhurst in his *A Career Biography* of Wieners, Waldman bears witness to the will of Wieners’ vision to write such beautiful poems in the most hellish and horrible conditions. “It was horrific, he was in a room with lots of beds and drugged….It’s amazing he had the vision and the imagination—him being able to write those poems—when you see the physical space.” (A Career Biography, 120) Wieners’ commitment to his vision while in the depths of intense suffering would set him and his work apart. His method for writing poetry would continue throughout his later years when the man and his work became indistinguishable from each other. Writing it down was just as important as living within it. During this time, Wieners kept a journal that included poems, diary entries, and observations from within the institution. This journal, given to
him by poet Bill Berkson, while visiting Wieners, would be published five years after his death in 2007, as *A New Book from Rome.*”

After Wieners’ release from Central Islip, he moved back to Hanover, Massachusetts to recover under the guardianship of his mother and father. His parents now lived in a non-descript suburban duplex on a cul-de-sac out on the South Shore of Boston in Hanover, to be closer to their daughter Marion. Wieners returned reluctantly home and was restless. Within months of his release from the State Hospital in January 1970, Charles Olson passed away. Although their relationship had been strained by the Panna Grady affair, John remained steadfast and appreciative of the immense influence Olson had on him and his poetry. Wieners published a remembrance of Olson in quandary 2 called “Holding On for Dear Life.” A revised, abridged edition was later published in *BTSC* under the same name with a torn collage of Olson and Pound at the Spoleto festival in 1965. Soon after, Olson’s death, Wieners mother Anna passed away at home of a heart attack. Wieners and his father were left to inhabit the large suburban house together, just the two of them. Wieners was still recovering from his stay in the hospital, and his father took to drinking while working in Boston as a handy man. Within the same month, Wieners received word that his good friend poet, Steve Jonas had died of an overdose at his Irving Street apartment in Beacon Hill. The loss of his mentor, his mother, and his good friend, hit Wieners hard. He lived with his father alone in the Hanover house for a year. In that time the book *Nerves*, was published by Cape Goliard Press in association with Grossman Publishers in New York. *Nerves* was a collection of dark lyrical poems covering the period from his last days in Buffalo through his time spent in Central Islip Hospital. *Nerves* included new poems as well as the entirety of the *Asylum* poems, published the previous
year. Allen Ginsberg calls these books, along with *Pressed Wafer*, “three magisterial books of poetry that stand among the few truthful moments of the late 1960s era” because in them “we see his intelligence delve deeper and deeper into a hole, created by his imagination of an impossible love.” (*Selected Poems* 15)

After over a decade of a transient fugitive life highlighted by his readings at Spoleto and Berkeley, his publication of four books amidst his heartbreak, emotional turmoil, and four stints in State Hospitals, Wieners returned to Boston where his nomadic wanderings would end and he settled in his apartment on Joy Street for the remainder of his life. He would spend one last stay in a mental hospital in 1972, when he was incarcerated in Taunton State Hospital in April and May of that year. (Dewhurst 126). While in Taunton State, he would write the poem “Children of the Working Class,” a brave unflinching poem that dignifies mental patients who are ill-treated and lost in the system, broken by the hardships of their working class parents. This poem would be included three years later in *BTSC*, standing out as one of the most courageous, socially minded poems in the book. In general, his work henceforward, would transform radically, becoming more politically charged, exploding into hallucinogenic prose of *BTSC* from the lean, taut lyric of his earlier works such as *The Hotel Wentley Poems*.

However, even as his work opened up to include the many mirrors of his beautiful, fractured mind, it still was a unique infernal poetry suffused with the broken but pronounced spirit of a poet whose influences have evolved from Edna St Millay to Charles Olson and beyond. Also, as his poetry and its velocity changed radically, he clung to his ideal vision of his city, the Boston of his youthful memories. In the last poem of the *Asylum Poems* titled “After Symonds’ *VENICE*” written for Allen Ginsberg while he was still
committed in Central Islip Hospital he idealizes and recalls with great detail, his city of dreams: “Boston sooty in memory with a//thousand murky dreams of adolescence//still calls to youth; the wide streets, chimney tops over//Charles River’s broad sweep to seahood buoy: the harbor” He travels through every neighborhood in his mind, letting his imagination take him home through the magic of his lyric poem. “Slumbering city, what makes men think you sleep,//but breathe, what chants or paens (sic) needed at this time, except//you stand as first town, first bank of hopes, first envisioned paradise.” (Selected 120) Although he will return to a city much changed, far from an envisioned paradise, and his poetry will change radically too, his loyalty to the dream of his city does not waver. His belief in the salvation of the voices, driving the visions of the wild flights of language and brilliant hallucinations of BTSC raise his singular lyric voice above the din, the voices of his madness.
In 1972, after his father died, Wieners moved back to Beacon Hill taking a modest railroad apartment on Joy Street on the Bohemian side of Beacon Hill, not far from the apartments he shared in the 50s with his lover Dana, poets Steve Jonas, Joe Dunn and Ed Marshall. Boston was a city divided in the early 70s. It was divided by race, it was divided by class, and it wasn’t particularly friendly to gay people or poets outside the academy. Wieners’ friend poet and novelist Fanny Howe in her essay review of Nerves titled Martyr to Nerve, draws a harsh portrait of Boston’s treatment of its artists, its relationship to Wieners, and his relationship to Boston:

“We know the same Boston, came with our youths out of it: the old ratty city of Scollay Square and seedy bars, late nights in the “submarine light” of Hayes Bickford, sailors on downtown Washington Street, the E1 racing through Roxbury, to Park Street and from Park Street onto the bridge over the muddy Charles. That Boston of total segregation, of boarding houses instead of townhouses, of Bunny Lang and the Poets Theater., of Latinate Catholics and Cantabrigians, of post-war dread, of New York worship and South Station’s dereliction, tulips and prostitutes, flush priests and nuns still in habits, of drunken Harvard students slumming blind in blizzards, and swan boats and scholars. This has never been a city of artists and poets, being harder on its own people than it is on anyone else. Especially hard on those in any sense marginal. In Boston, you have to prove yourself somewhere else. You have to pass outside before you pass inside, because it offers membership to the ultimate class club of self-contempt.” (63-64)

Amidst the turbulence of his life at the time and the transitory, fugitive lifestyle he lived in the late 60s and early 70s, one thing remained constant: his writing. It was an act of pure artistic will that he could continue to create lyric poetry that was clear and heartfelt amidst the chaos of his psychosis, hospitalization, and drugs swirled around and
within him. His creative output was not limited to poetry only, he also constantly penned many letters and wrote two revealing journals, covering the period of his hospitalization, his convalescence in Hanover, and the deep losses he suffered from the deaths of his mentor (Olson), his mother, and his close friend (Stephen Jonas). The journals, *A New Book From Rome* and *A Book Of PROPHECIES*, published over forty years later after he wrote them, show his clearness of mind and emotion while suffering involuntary hospitalization, mind altering drug and shock treatments, and the immediate recovery from those purgatorial experiences. Some of the poems are heartbreaking, honest and compassionate, presciently tackling the hellish reality of the forgotten and institutionalized patients lost in the public mental health system in the late 60s. In an untitled prose poem in the journal, Wieners starkly and heartbreakingly describes his, and his fellow patients’ bleak situation.

Oh, what is the use of it, This continued suffering built up as a dam, to bank and explode the reservoir
It’s the lack of money, the savings gone.
Oh god, the thought that one’s whole conscious experience of thirty odd years can be wiped out by a single afternoon on S-1, in and out of it. One’s handwriting changes and becomes more feminine; one’s thought goes into a different pattern.

& in and out of it. Means walking around, trying to Find one’s bearings in new surroundings.
Only this will disappear and my life return In new form, when my friends come to visit here, and they shall. Or when the mail arrives. And when I am released this will disappear. At least for me.
I find this kind of institution wrong.
The patient are half-drugged. They would be better off dead, and this kind of place burnt off the face of the earth. (*A New Book from Rome* 52)
Around this time, along with “these multi-directional communiques” (Stewart 4) Wieners co-edited with Mark Robison, a double issue of Anonym magazine. Along with publishing many of his friends in the magazine (Gerrit Lansing, Stephen Jonas, Ann Waldman, Ted Berrigan, Larry Eigner, and Duncan McNaughton) he also included two poems of his own. One of the two poems, “Paltry Freedom”, included in the 1988 Black Sparrow collection of poetry and prose, Cultural Affairs in Boston, deals honestly and directly with the painful wreckage and aftermath of living with his parents after his state imposed hospitalization, and treatment. “Let the mind be restored/to its old glow and the wind rung/to old melodies tow//Let there be no resistance/to that dour pealing/of the righteous bow./Whether to go ahead or stay in memory’s boy…At home the answer lies/when in grace and review one/recaps the unmentioned past anew. ‘ (Cultural Affairs 111). As with Wieners’ finer work, there is a spiritual yearning, a faith in the healing of the mind, a prayer to poetry for peace after devastating and painful loss. His “paltry freedom” from the Mental Hospital was tinged with family dysfunction and immediate tragedy that Wieners processed through his writing at the time he moved back to Joy Street on Beacon Hill. Being a gay poet struggling with mental illness, alienated Wieners in his own city. Wieners was buoyed by his friendships and by his participation in the Gay Rights movement in Boston at that time. While still incarcerated at Central Islip Hospital, in 1969, Wieners began a correspondence with an admirer who would become a lifelong friend, as well as his publisher and editor. Charles Shively was a Professor at Boston State University (later to become UMass Boston) and one of the early leaders of the Gay Rights movement in Boston. He is a Harvard Graduate, and a Walt Whitman scholar, from Ohio. According to Dewhurst in John Wieners. A Career Biography 1954-
1975, “Shively took Wieners to meetings of the Boston Homophile League and introduced him to a new community of impassioned gay activists, journalists, booksellers and writers.” (127). Shively would gain notoriety for his activism in 1977, when he burnt his Harvard Diploma and the Bible during a protest for gay rights on Boston Common. With Shively’s friendship, Wieners became an active participant in Boston’s Gay Liberation Movement and politically active in Mental Patient rights as well. His work would reflect his increased political and social consciousness. He became a contributor to the gay anarchist newspaper, *Fag Rag*, the first national gay male periodical. It was published by an anarchist collective and connected to Gay Men’s Liberation, Boston’s Gay Liberation Front which was also connected to the Good Gay Poets Collective, who would also publish Wieners’ *BTSC*. Another seminal activist and member of the Fag Rag Collective and the Good Gay poets was John Mitzel. Mitzel met Shively while attending a rally for the Boston Homophile League at BU in 1971. He worked as the camera operator for years at the South Street Cinema porno theatre, Boston’s first gay cinema theatre, in Boston in the early 70s until its closing in the 80s. He and Charlie served as editors for *Fag Rag*, a political, gay liberation periodical that published homo-erotic articles and pictures along with poetry, prose and literary interviews with such literary figures such as Gore Vidal, Allen Ginsberg, and Herbert Huncke. Another member of the Gay Men’s Liberation was writer Michael Bronski, who joined the Fag Rag collective in 1973 and became fast friends with Mitzel and Shively. In Mitzel’s obituary, Bronski details Mitzel’s passion for community and writing. “He (Mitzel) was a founding member of the Fag Rag collective in 1971. He helped found the Good Gay Poets collective in 1973, even though he professed to hate poetry. (As usual, his perversity
emerged as he secretly wrote it and published a book of his collected poetry earlier this
year.) He was a founding member of the Boston Gay Review, a gay male literary journal,
in 1976. He founded Stonewall Distributors, a gay book and magazine distribution non-
profit, in 1975. He wrote numerous articles for Boston’s Gay Community News in the
1970s and 1980s. He wrote a column in Philadelphia Gay News for years during the same
period. For nearly 20 years he wrote a monthly column, “Common Sense,” for The
Guide, a Boston-based gay travel and political magazine. As a publisher, he started
Manifest Destiny Press in the 1970s and Calamus Books, a press that emerged from the
bookstore in 2002.” (Bronski)

Mitzel owned and operated the Glad Day Bookstore, and
later the Calamus bookstore until his death in 2013. Mitzel also served a vital role as
Wieners’ banker and funding source throughout his life whenever he needed to cash a
check or was short of funds. Mitzel described his first impressions of Wieners in an
interview with Dewhurst included in his A Career Biography:

“I was amused by his eccentricity… It was through Charley that I got to know his
history… John had this sort of crippled bird appeal, or something like that. (The
Fag Rag Collective) recognized that he was a great poet, and they all realized that
he was very fragile. But he was pretty hearty, from my point of view.” (128)

Wieners would contribute poems to Fag Rag occasionally. The most memorable
being the publication of an unflinchingly honest poem about his parents, “Two
Barbarians”, transposed over a pink hued picture of the poet himself. The poem,
originally written by hand in his journal that would become “A New Book from Rome”
deals unflinchingly with his parents’ marriage and his relationship to his family when he
moved back home to Hanover Street after hospitalization at Central Islip. Incorporating
his family into the details of his poetry had been an aspect of his poetry as far back as “A
poem for museum goers” in The Hotel Wentley Poems where he is confronted with an
infernal hellish image of his sister while observing an Edvard Munch painting, high on drugs, in San Francisco museum. “It is Edvard Munch//Turn right turn//and I see my sister//hanging on the wall//heavy breasts and hair//Tied to a tree in the garden/with the full moon/are the ladies of the street//Whipped for whoring.” (Selected 39) In the Fag Rag published poem “Two Barbarians”, Wieners gives a brutally honest appraisal of his parents, the two barbarians, trapped in the misery of their marriage half drunk, shouting, slamming doors as Wieners is equally trapped as the celebrated dandified, nervous poet son observing them as he writes the poem which is his only escape from their “wrangling.”

I am trapped by their poverty
Of minds. My work lies
Unused on the shelf. Unheard
My loins clamber for attention
No where does. My head aches.

No matter how many pills I take,
I am still ill. At every loud noise
I buck. At every door opening
I expect an encounter
I will write a friend and get away

I stare stupidly at this page, blank.
I have tried everything It’s no use.
It doesn’t matter. Everywhere I go
it is still the same. They have left a mark
on me permanent as skin. (240)

One of the earliest publications by the Good Gay poets independent of the Fag Rag newspaper was a journal publication titled “We Were There!” which included a political travel diary poem of Wieners’, titled “Playboy”. The poem details Wieners’ and Shively’s car trip in a VW bug from Boston to Miami for the 1972 Democratic convention. This was a time of much political tension amidst the strong currents of
protest and revolution in response to the ongoing Vietnam War, and particularly for Gay Rights after the Stonewall Riot in New York City in 1969. As Dewhurst notes in his *A Career Biography* of Wieners, it was the first convention after the 1968 riots at the convention in Chicago, and it was the first time the Democratic party invited members of the Gay Rights Liberation movement to speak at the convention, as antiwar protests surged outside and “poets, Yippies, migrant farm workers, veterans, students and others marched collectively for peace—only to have their ranks infiltrated by an undercover FBI agent..” (127) Wieners was energized by the trip and his reconnection with old friends like Allen Ginsberg, Leroi Jones and Ed Sanders and what Dewhurst calls, “a sweeping personal rejuvenation”(127) for Wieners, igniting his political activism, enriching his relationship with Shively and the Good Gay Poets Collective in Boston, and most importantly informing and inspiring his poetry.

In an interview with the literary duo Bockris-Wylie (Victor Bockris and Andrew Wylie) in their column in *The Drummer* magazine in the fall of 1972, this rejuvenation and rebirth was evident in their description of him during the interview conducted soon after his return from the Miami Convention. “He’s (Wieners) not on drugs anymore, and he looks better, rubbing vitamin E into his skin and never going a day without an orgasm. He’s rebuilding his cellular structure, he says, and it looks like he is building his poetic reputation, too…You won’t have to look far to find a man who has become, in his own words, ‘a slave to poetry.’” (Bockris-Wylie, *The Drummer*)

Seth Stewart, in a recent introduction to his self-published edition of the letters of Wieners and Charley Shively also takes note of Wieners struggle to continue to rebuild and write his way out of the darkness in the face of life threatening and mind altering
circumstances. “These multi-directional communes capture the poet at a pivotal moment as he struggles to restructure his mind after a decade of drugs and state-sponsored medical abuse. ‘For the past 20-18 months I have been under the delusion of being about 50 persons.’ He reported to Charles Olson. ‘I have given them all up and am now ready for the next 50.’” Stewart also notes the revolutionary aspect of the letters and the developing relationship between the poet and the anarchist activist—“a truly queer love, rooted in shared dedication to poetry as a vocation, to political resistance, and to loving solidarity between children of the working class.” (Stewart, *The Letters of John Wieners & Charles Shively, 1969-1975*). As their relationship developed, and Wieners became politically engaged in the Boston Gay Liberation Movement and the Boston’s Mental Liberation front, his poetry was infused with a political awareness collaged and combined with his ever present intense personal concern for the lyrical.

In August 1972, Wieners was invited to his friend Robert Creeley’s Eng-1670 Class at the Harvard Extension School. Wieners and Creeley had been good friends since Black Mountain, but when they were in Buffalo in the late 60s, Wieners’ erratic and paranoid behavior was sometimes directed towards Creeley and his then wife Bobbie Hawkins, motivated by Wieners longstanding sexual attraction to Creeley. Creeley to his credit never let Wieners’ infatuation and erratic behavior influence their friendship. So he invited Wieners to the class as a guest instructor and gave a lecture and reading over the span of two classes that was brilliant beautiful and insightful. “John has generously accepted an invitation to simply do whatever you want to…just do John whatever you feel” The complete recording of the classes is available at the University of Pennsylvania’s Pennsound website and is a brilliant interchange between two great
contemporary poets and friends. Wieners sounds sharp, witty, and full of confident self-awareness and humor, while reading his work from the Selected Poems and engaging with the gathered students of Creeley. The two poets display an affection and a consideration for each other and their work that comes through clearly in the recording. This was over 15 years after Wieners was fired from the Harvard Lamont Library for tardiness and suspected amphetamine use. It would be 27 years later in 1999, in the adjacent room next to the Poetry room that Wieners would give one of his best readings and one of his last, clocking in at a total of 17 minutes, delivered to a small devoted crowd of poets, friends, and admirers.

In the course of the two lectures, Wieners reads several poems from his then recently published Selected Poems, from Cape Goliard Press. Wieners had written a few new pieces for the Selected Poems including an introduction to the book that he wrote himself. In the introduction, Wieners further develops his ideas on his poetics, his process, and his anointed position between the “illusory far and the near, dependent on questing, producing revelatory postures for men, animals and stars. The poet is one pastor of this distribution between two visions. The quality of gift of being alone. Wraiths cross time.” (Selected Poems 5) The image of the poet as an anointed solitary pastor of poetry as religion, between the two visions of past and present, of love and loss, of dream and reality, mindfulness and memory, will remain important to Wieners as his work transforms and he uses poetry to examine his colored past in the bleakness of his later condition. His image of wraiths crossing time is the image of him as a ghost of his poetry, haunting lost loves, lost family, and lost youth. Later in his life as he became more solitary and receded from the poetry world, he would be seen as a faded movie star ghost,
or as Cathy Salmons described him in her article on Wieners in the *Boston Phoenix* in 1997, “This mesmerizing apparition is Beacon Hill's own John Wieners, the oracle of Joy Street -- one of Boston's best-kept poetic secrets.” (Salmons, *Boston Phoenix*) The only problem with this common assumption of Wieners as a reclusive ghost was that Wieners was alive and vital throughout the 90s and his struggle to rebuild his mind through his poetry was one he never abandoned. His work became more splintered and refractory but it still contained “The quality of gift of being alone.” Important to this gift of being alone was “a return to places of origin, one instance of namely objects, the second an absolute rendition of balance and movement, the third transformations by fire, the easiest of all, if will be inherited.” (Grossman *Selected Poems* 5) A return to the place of origin, Wieners returning to his home Beacon Hill in Boston was important to him as a poet as he rebuilt his mind and his life after years of traumatic incarceration and treatment and emotional upheaval. Wieners was broken in many ways but he knew how to achieve this absolute rendition of balance and movement through the transformation by fire of his poetry into a new exciting and dangerous territory.

In the course of the Harvard lecture with Creeley, Wieners makes reference to the Stone Soup Readings held every Thursday night. In 1971, Jack Powers a poet who grew up in the projects of South Boston, started Stone Soup Poetry readings in a storefront location on Cambridge Street in Beacon Hill. Jack was a strapping, dark Irish poet who had started Stone Soup after returning from two years in San Francisco, in the late 60s, hanging out at City Lights bookstore and forging a lifelong friendship with the owner, beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Along with Stone Soup, Jack started the Beacon Hill Free School teaching and making poetry available to the community. Wieners became an
essential contributor to Stone Soup, appearing in the Stone Soup Journal in 1971 and more importantly teaching a class in poetry. Wieners wrote an essay for the class, *Mass.: Free Verse in U.S. Since 1955*, that was eventually published in his second Black Sparrow book, *Cultural Affairs in Boston*. The essay is a rambling personal memoir of poetry’s progress from the 1950’s as perceived through the fractured brilliant lens of the poet himself. It is a strange personal exposition on the various occult and magical influences on poetry and the poet since his own poetic awakening in 1955, when he graduated from Boston College and enrolled at Black Mountain College. In it, he also chronicles the influence of Boston on the development of poetry since 1950. It is an insightful meditation on verse and its varied inspirations as perceived through the fertile and fragile mind of the poet. Wieners never taught another class after this one. However, his relationship with Jack Powers would be a lifelong friendship and a vital lifeline for him throughout his life. Jack would be Wieners’ neighbor on Joy Street for 25 years. He would also be a comrade in poetry, setting up readings and paying gigs for Wieners the remainder of his life. Wieners’ last reading ever, a month before he passed away in 2002, was organized and arranged by Stone Soup and Jack. Through Stone Soup, Wieners stayed connected to the local poetry scene. Moreover, he connected with his many friends who came through and read there, Herbert Huncke, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Ed Sanders, Joe Dunn and Allen Ginsberg, to name a few of John’s literary friends who Jack facilitated reconnecting with Wieners at Stone Soup.

During this time of political involvement, one-off teaching and lecturing gigs, Wieners settled into his apartment on the backside of Beacon Hill, and as always continued to write prodigiously. Several poems written circa 1972 were eventually

The selection of poems for the Grossman *Selected Poems* book was idiosyncratic. He included several new prose pieces and omitted many of his stronger poems from his earlier books. Also, he revised certain poems that were previously published, following a poetic that appeared arbitrary and random. This practice would cause critics to presume that Wieners’ was damaging the quality of the specific earlier poems he changed, and that he was irrevocably hurting his reputation as a unique lyrical poet. George Butterick, a Wieners and Charles Olson scholar and friend, who was a proponent of Wieners work, thought that his revisions and quirky editorial habits were damaging to his later published work.

“Whether through loss of confidence or false notions of improvement, in almost every case the alterations are for the poorer. The changes usually result from a misguided effort to attain a more "poetic" effect, most often through the elimination of articles and copulas or from the compression of openly whispered lines into more regular stanzas, but the effect is to eliminate the spoken directness and accuracy of the original. For example, the poet adds the title "153 Avenue C" (on New York's Lower East Side, where the poem was written) to previously untitled lines but takes away their perfectly understated horror by removing the copulas of natural speech. Other changes are simply strange if not inept, and they are endemic throughout the volume. In *Behind the State Capitol*, produced from copy apparently prepared by the poet himself, typing eccentricities have been allowed to stand, contributing nothing but confusion. The poet has forsaken his own genius and the stark simplicity of the original statements, so forthright they cannot be doubted or denied. (Contemporary Poets)

The idea that Wieners had forsaken his own genius, sabotaged his own work by crowding it with so many voices that he has lost the clear lyrical elegance of his earlier work is a valid criticism. However, as he ventured into new modes of poetic expression, his innovations were experimental, ahead of his time, and although not always successful, he
exploded the field of possibilities with lyric, always heartfelt and poetic. Although the language tended toward the more cryptic, disjointed and montaged, it was inherently compelling and loaded with an occult, and hidden power. For a poet who had achieved lyrical perfection with perfect emotional pitch in his early work with a highly developed technical facility, to shift so radically to the cut up imagery, the manic music of multiple voices and styles in the same poem was a jarring shift. However, the heartbreaking pain and vulnerability at the very core of these torn collages and splintered images and emotions, were true and the work was years ahead of its time, as relevant as any modern work of poetry. In the tradition of Walt Whitman’s lifelong editing process of *Leaves of Grass*, Wieners constantly overlaid words over the original text, crossed out entire phrases and lines of old published poems in his personal copies of his own books. There was a performative aspect to his revising: like a jazz musician improvising, never playing the old song the same way twice, Wieners would change published poems for public performance or for re-publishing, editing old works in a continual process of revision. Also, as evident in *BTSC* and in his later notebooks, he often employed the same techniques to images and pictures. He would collage vintage movie star images over pictures of himself and his friends, and he would assemble new collaged images out of an assortment of discarded advertising supplements, gossip columns pictures and other pop culture ephemera he randomly collected. In his discussion with Creeley’s class at Harvard, Wieners, after reading one of the new prose pieces in the *Selected Poems*, “The Magic of Summer,” makes reference himself to this shift as “integrative consciousness and obsessive return to verbal form” (Reading and Lecture, Aug 17, 1972, “Pennsound”). Charles Shively is present and prominent in the classroom discussion. Shively sparks a
lively discussion between Creeley, Wieners and Creeley’s wife at the time, Bobby, on
homosexuality in poems, society’s attitude in regards to sexual identification as a social
condition at that time, and Wieners’ poetics in terms of his sexuality. Shively, Wieners,
and Creeley robustly discusses ideas on homosexuality and love in regards to his work
and to the work the work of their mutual friend, and the iconic Beat and gay poet Allen
Ginsberg’s sexuality in his work.

Shively: Growing up, for myself, I felt that the Hotel Wentley Poems, that was the
first thing that I ever read in which homosexuality was taken seriously as a form
of love and Allen Ginsberg is, like, very important, like it was like a carnival or a
circus if you wanted to be a giraffe or a…

Creeley: I always felt that Allen’s sexuality was like an adolescent, not to, you
know what I mean, it was like the homosexuality or sexuality of particular, I
guess to both sexes, usually the period from 12-14 or 15. I don’t mean that in
some clinical attitude toward it. It was like comrades, it was like us kids together,
you know, us boys together. I always felt like in relation to Peter (Ginsberg’s
partner, Peter Orlovsky) for instance that was primarily the way they lived
together…

Wieners: I don’t think it was the same thing as homosexual love, either…when it
is a decision between adults and you’ve already known what heterosexual love is.
I think that condition between 12 and 15 is unknowing, is the condition of
unknowing

Creeley: Yes, it is explorative…..

Wieners: Unavailability of the other sex and just …

Creeley: I felt that Allen got curiously centered in that. That that became the
particular experience of his sexuality…I don’t know that’s an incredible…

Wieners: Well it’s very interesting... because, well I ‘m not going to say anything
about him, I mean his poems are pretty straight if you want to hunt for them but
they are directed towards a single person. And maybe that’s when he said he was
growing up those poems meant something to him. When you do fall in love it is
usually with one

Creeley: One

Wieners is clear and concise regarding his poetics in terms of his sexual identity and the
human condition. As Shively points out, Wieners was one of the first poets to portray
his sexuality honestly and frankly as a legitimate form of love. There were other
contemporaries of Wieners who were gay and dealt with their sexuality frankly in their
poetry like Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, and Frank O’Hara. However, Wieners possessed solitary genius in conveying empathy, compassion, love and loss, particular emotions and basic human drama, by offering a window that allows the reader to identify or sympathize with the poet and to see the world differently, “one’s substantiation of the world” as Bobbie Creeley calls it.

**Bobbie Creeley:** ...For instance, the homosexual references in your poems don’t make me feel that that suddenly is an instance in which I am dumped out of the poem at all. So I tend not to think of them as homosexual poems like message poems but I realize that if I were a homosexual and particularly years ago and had gone through all of those problematic experiences of anyone who is designated as...

**Creeley:** Outside

**Bobbie Creeley:** if they were within a negative encapsulation. I’d probably be reading these poems much for that kind of content because one wants the substantiation of one’s condition in the world...

**Wieners:** Well, I think it’s necessary. I don’t think anyone wants it so much. I mean, you’re just looking around for a window somewhere so you can see out of. And if a poem allows you to look a little clearer at the world that you are presented with for your lifespan you know it brings up your sensibilities a little more...

**Student:** I think it’s a triumph

Wieners is also very clear in clarifying his belief that his sexuality is not a choice, as Creeley infers, and he shows his solidarity for activists, like him and Shively, who fight for liberation for sexual minorities; a freedom and a right not to be discarded.

**Creeley:** I don’t think it is a locked condition like it’s the tape recorder or the radio or something like that. I didn’t think the containers are interesting. Especially not in humans

**Wieners:** But that might be mistaken by the back of the room, somehow, that one, when somebody spends a lot of time many years on something like liberation for sexual minorities, that it will be something that they will discard…

**Wieners:** Maybe the word homosexuality is going to die soon and maybe they’ll replace it with another word because people think that is a choice you make but actually I don’t think it is. It is something you are walking in through, not into but you’re walking through.

(Reading and Lecture, Aug 17, 1972, “Pennsound”).
Wieners’ sexuality, as well as his struggle with mental illness, was an essential aspect to his poetry that he had always dealt with in frank an honest terms, not something he glossed over or veiled with vague language or metaphor. As he became more involved with Shively and the more radical politics of the Good Gay Poets, his writing changed. That radical change in form, content, and visual presentation would come to fruition in _BTSC_ and would be further explored in his work until his death. Nat Raha in her article, _A Queer Excess_, articulates this shift. “Wieners’ poetry emerged from these liberation movements with a transformed political consciousness that would echo in his formal innovations and in the content of his later work.”(Raha, _Critical Flame_) The transformation of his consciousness and his deeper involvement with Charley Shiveley, _Fag Rag_, and the Good Gay Poets would set the stage for his magnum opus, _Behind the State Capitol_.


Wieners’ political activism and affiliation with the Good Gay Poets led to the publication of his most ambitious, substantial, and controversial work to date. *Behind the State Capitol* or *Cincinnati Pike*, published in 1975, is a book years ahead of its time in form and content. Few people bought or reviewed it when it was published. Originally published in an edition of 1,500 softbound books and 100 hardback copies, it is now one of the most sought after poetry books published in the 1970s. Copies of the book were made even harder to find when the headquarters of the Good Gay Poets was firebombed in 1982 by a rogue group of off-duty police and firemen destroying the office and many copies of the book. Robert Dewhurst gives a detailed account of the events surrounding the incident, in his *A Career Biography*, that denied the book any chance at success:

> “On the morning of July 7, 1982, Shively awoke to find the sacred offices of the Gay Community News, Glad Day Bookstore, and Good Gay Poets Press, located in a historically registered Federalist building at 22 Bromfield Street, wildly aflame. Boxes of shrink-wrapped copies of *Behind the State Capitol*, print-run sixteen hundred, lined the wall nearest the blaze; all but a few hundred, which he salvaged from the flames and set in an alleyway, burned. The fire was more than a hundred set over ’82-83 by a prolific local arson ring, conducted by a small cell of off-duty police officers, “fire buffs.” And municipal workers, in protest of a state austerity measure that had cut funding to public services, the Fag Rag collective believed that is was also a hate crime, related to their recent editorializing against the city vice squad. Wieners magnum opus was never reprinted. “The fire was the definitive exegesis of *Behind the State Capitol,***” Shively wrote in a ’87 issue of Fag Rag. “Here was revealed the void, the ashes, the destruction, the devastation. John Wieners had lived it first in his mind, in his poems, in his body.”” (135)
As the reputation of the author and the book have grown over the years, and the original supply so scarce, demand for it has also grown exponentially. Its radical departure in style and content divided the poetry world and threatened Wieners’ reputation as a master lyric poet. The common perception was that the lack of support and critical response for his masterpiece forced Wieners into his subsequent seclusion and was the impetus for his receding, in Greta Garbo fashion, from public and the literary spotlight for the remainder of his life. William Corbett befriended Wieners in 1971. Corbett invited Wieners to his home on Columbus Square in the South and he remained a life-long acquaintance of Wieners. Corbett and others believed that BTSC was a new book in an entirely different lyric voice. A book in which “the record needle won’t stay in the groove”. He explained his feelings on the book at the time of its publication in an interview with Dewhurst in A Career Biography.

I remember that when I first read it, I felt that marvelously lucid poet of The Hotel Wentley Poems and of Nerves, that something had happened to him…And my first response was that I thought it was kind of a record of disintegration. I still think it is, but (I now realize) it’s so much more than that—it’s as if his nerves are on the outside of his skin. (It would be) very rare poetry, at any time any place. This man was a sensitive receptor, out in the world always. (134)

Dewhurst also notes that “the initial sense that it was merely “a record of disintegration” or exploitative as a testimony to Wieners’ mental illness, was widespread among friends, and readers, but not unanimous. Publisher and friend, Raymond Foye, remembers that one of Wieners’ old friends and poetry mentors, Robert Duncan, was incensed. “It started out in ’75 when Charley Shively published Behind the State Capitol and Robert Duncan was furious and really thought he (Shively) was destroying John’s reputation.” (Foye, Oral History Initiative) For better or worse, the influence of the Good Gay Poets on
Wieners and their importance in the making of the book cannot be underestimated.

Charley Shively reveals the importance of publishing *BTSC* and how it came to be, in his article *JohnJob, Editing Behind The State Capitol or Cincinnati Pike*.

“But in December, 1975, when *Behind the State Capitol* came off the press, published by the Good Gay Poets, the work signaled an emerging energy and possibility of gay publishing that had yet to be realized… In this creation, John Wieners looked to the Good Gay Poets because it was not established, because it represented a coming to flower of newly released and previously unrehearsed energies… John hinted that the established is often (if not always) an obstacle to creation. As one of the Good Gay Poets Collective, I saw our publishing as a way of bringing total freedom to our authors, allowing each of us to write whatever and however we wished. What we needed most was not respect from the straight world but respect for each other’s work.” (Shively, *Mirage* 78)

*BTSC* was one of many books published by the Good Gay Poets collective. Wieners’ book was a manifestation of the aesthetics of the *Fag Rag Collective* echoing other books of poetry published by the collective by poets such as Freddie Greenfield, Shively, and others. *Fag Rag Magazine* was a revolutionary pastiche of radical gay politics and poetics, explicit pornographic pictures and a wide assortment of poetry, fiction and interviews with gay literary icons like Herbert Huncke and Gore Vidal. Shively explains:

“Fag Rag was one among a whole network of GLF (Gay Liberation Front) papers that included New York’s Coming Out; Detroit’s *Gay Liberator*; Toronto’s *Body Politic*; Berkeley /San Francisco *Gay Sunshine*; Washington DC’s *The Furies*; Oakland California’s *Amazon Quarterly*; and many more. All these publications offered a brisk view of sexual liberation, liberation, anarchism, hippie love, drugs, peace, Maoism, Marxism, rock-n-roll, folk song, cultural separatism, feminism, effeminism, tofu/brown rice, communal living, urban junkie, rural purism, nudism, leather, high camp drag, gender fuck drag, poetry, essays, pictures and more. (Shively, *Fag Rag: The Most Loathsome Publication in the English Language*)
In obvious ways, *BTSC* mirrored the uncompromising aesthetic and style of *Fag Rag*, visually with the assortment of collaged images and their subject matter, the range of its content, the juxtaposition of the voices, the disengaged language. Also, as Shively points out *BTSC* is the unabashed poetry of the aging queen, not the usual gay poetry that tends to concentrate on the young. As Shively states, “Little has been said about the aging queen. *What Happens Twenty Years Later* might be another subtitle to the book—a sustained meditation on aging in the gay ghetto…Unlike some of the staunchly apolitical poets associated with Olson, John has not hesitated to be “political.” He has read at Earth Day rallies, marched in the Gay Pride Parades, protested with Allen Ginsberg, Abbie Hoffman and John Giorno at the 1972 Democratic Convention, written for *Gay Sunshine*…But more important than any such token gesture is the way class consciousness has become so deeply imbedded in his poetry.” (Shively, *What Happened to the Mind of John Wieners*?)

*BTSC* with cinema decoupages and its abbreviated prose insights, its multi-voice poems, its pre-occupation with movie stars, socialites, and First Ladies, its tabloid headline collages ripped from gossip magazines and gay porn magazines, stands as one of the most brilliant and baffling flights of linguistic rebellion in contemporary poetry published in our time. The achievement of the book is that the poet in adopting many masks, channeling many voices, gives expression to the outsider, in defiance of suppression of the homosexual and the marginalization and abuse of the disenfranchised individual by the state. The book’s lack of response may have appeared to adversely affect Wieners reputation when it published in 1975, however, time and the enthusiasm of a new generation of poets have prompted a wholesale reconsideration of this book and
of Wieners’ later work. Robert Peters, along with Alan Davies and Shively, one of the few critics to review the book when it was published, addresses the difficulty and the rewards: “BTSC …is one of the most eccentrically conceived, arcane, and self-revelatory ever written by an American poet. The book is a medley of forms…Let the reader be warned: Many of these poems are undecipherable. The reader enthusiastic about Wieners must satisfy himself with latching points of meaning. Despite the eccentricities, this book deserves to be more widely known. Few people have bought it, fewer critics have reviewed it. In reading through, one is outraged, dismayed, amused, bored, and excited, all by turn and turn again.” (Peters, Contact II, 32) Although the later work was sparsely published and his language and imagery were more cryptic and abrupt, it also was defiant in its lyrical multi-voiced stance that he first perfected in BTSC. His work from then forward would go even further stylistically, continuing the complete transformation and abrupt break in form and content from his earlier lyrical work.

Wieners worked in a uniquely singular method with Shively and Mitzel to prepare the book for publication. In his A Career Biography of Wieners, Mitzel tells Robert Dewhurst of the process for preparing the book for publication:

John would come in, he’d stick pictures of Jackie Kennedy in. I remember once he ripped a tag out of his underpants and scotch taped it in: he’d do a kind of editing…In those days, before computers, you’d have to go to the typesetter and they had to make a photographic image on film. My friend was doing it—the guy who did the work for Gay Community News, the newspaper that (Michael) Bronski and Charley and I wrote for, Dave Stryker. He had one of these big machines, and he put these big rolls of basically photographic paper in, and you would hit the keyboard and it would make an impression. It was like you were putting a black image on film. And you’d take that and you’d cut it and paste it down and photograph it—it looks antediluvian now, but that’s what we did at the time. Rick Kinman (helped Stryker); his gay name was Jack Sweetland…Rick liked John’s work and he wanted to do it, so he did it for free and all we had to do was pay for the rental and the machine. Someone would go over there and he did all that weird typography that John liked. (Dewhurst, 133)
There are over forty collages in the book that isolate, layer and demonstrate Wieners obsession with his own memories and personal history commingled with movie stars, socialites, and random ephemera he includes in his creative process. The collages have the visual immediacy and folded, torn, isolated imagery that complement and augment the collaged language of the poetry. The collages can be seen as visual poems in and of themselves. Wieners was close friends and very influenced by collage and assemblage artists, particularly Wallace Berman and Jess Collins. His collages and cinema decoupages stand on their own in relation to these visual artists. Poet Cedar Sigo notes the particular effect the collages have in relation to the text: “They work well with the poetry to see the reader through its concurrent and chronic dissemblance of syntax. The same jagged line is employed but made manifest in a visual format, The collages seem to have been done quickly for maximum impact, and the edges are not perfectly (if at all) trimmed. They barely want to be held together. Their content reflects and echoes the poetry, in that much of it pours over John’s past. In fact, the collages can be seen as visual manifestations of poems in their own right.” (Sigo) Similar artists like Wallace and especially Jess Collins created visual works with a distinct literary quality. In fact, Jess Collins created special unique collages for Wiener’s good friend, Joe Dunn’s book, *Build a better dream house*. Each page of text was mirrored by a specific collage created by Jess for that particular page of poetry. In fact on the opening page collage at the bottom of the title page it states “reflected by Jess”
These collages like Wieners are reflections of the poetry contained within and are visual poems unto themselves. The title of each collage taken directly from the text of the opposite page as shown below in the collage titled “I have let the sink grow cold.”

(“I have let the sink grow cold” collage by Jess, text by Joe Dunn, *The Better Dream House*, p 2-3)
It was brilliant, baffling and it worked on many levels, very similar to Wieners’ collages in BTSC. Wieners collages are on par with Jess’, whose collages are now highly regarded, hanging in museums throughout the country. Investigative Poet Ed Sanders particularly was aware of the artistic values and genius of Wieners collages. In conversations with me, he reiterated the importance and value of Wieners collages beyond those found in BTSC, and emphasized the importance of rescuing and preserving them. There are newspaper clippings devoted to readings in Buffalo and the death of Charles Olson, as well as numerous articles from Hollywood fan magazines: “Comeback Hopes High for Yvonne De Carlo.” A Carl VanVechten portrait of Billie Holiday is left alone and intact. Subtle (and effective) disfigurement is made to ’70s gay pornography. One boy’s head is pasted perfectly backward so both his face and ass are turned to the viewer. He is being strangled with the tip of a whip.” (Sigo, Behind the State Capitol: Or Cincinnati Pike, Harriet Blog) The jagged line running through the collages that reflects the dissemblance of syntax in the text is an essential intentional component to Wieners’ artistic approach.

The collages serve as tokens of his obsessive imagination populated with movie stars ripped, obscured, and taped to random personal images and documents mirroring the cut up method of the poems themselves. These images, obscured torn and yet imbued with glamour are a mirror of what Wieners does poetically as he looks back over his life, he conflates family and friends with movie stars, First Ladies and torch singers. He will push this approach even further visually and poetically in his later work. The visual collages are essential and were a collaboration between Wieners, Mitzel and Shively.
Shively explains the process in his article on editing the book in *Mirage*, “The layout was a combined effort of Mitzel, John, and myself. The cover was taken from a portfolio John had glued together for carrying the manuscript. Sometimes Mitzel or I laid something out something too obvious; John would overlay and shred the image to his liking. At times, he’d replace the illustration in order to re-assemble the image to his liking. At times, he’s replace an illustration. “En-Route” originally was laid out with a picture of the Dallas motorcade; John pulled that up and replaced it with labels from my undershirt and his straw hat. Other times he giggled happily over one of Mitzel’s or my own collage.”

(Shively, *Mirage*, 80)

![John Wieners Collage, *Behind The State Capitol*, p 40](image)

A great example of the apparent randomness of a collage with obscure political interpretations is the collage that accompanies the poem “Second Poem For Agnes Varda’s Plastic *Walk-Up.*” The collage is a picture of Clara Petracci, Mussolini’s
mistress, looking like a movie star in repose, with the caption, “‘I am only asking.. That I shall be shot with him’, said Claretta Petracci, his mistress. Petracci was executed alongside Mussolini and strung up in the streets. Her picture is framed in the background by a flyer for a reading featuring at Boston’s Hatch Shell featuring Wieners by Jack Powers’ Stone Soup Poetry group. The juxtaposition of the portrait of a doomed beauty, prepared to die for love, alongside a poetry flyer is indicative of the disparate elements of his imagination, both personal and cultural, from which he drew his inspiration. It also magically counters the poem on the adjacent page an homage to the French director Agnes Varda, known as the Godmother of the French New Wave. The second line in italics and in French almost seems to be a dedication: Femme et Poupee (Woman and Doll). In the rush of words and images Wieners’ envisions himself as a “rich woman, referred from the portal of Utica to Birmingham.” The first verse of the poem, a rushing collage of language, rises and descends with strange spelling, disconnected images and moments of lyrical clarity:

SECOND POEM FOR AGNES VARDA’S PLASTIC WALK-UP

Femme et Poupee

Long distance call by W N T to the Hotel Ballroom
having seen again myself, as a rich woman referred from the portals of Utica to Birmingham
alabamied spectre viewing Clifton Teller I strode before the marquee
mot in maquillage opposite Victoria’s Pantages (41)
Mot in maquillage translates to “word in makeup”. The glamorous image resonates; “I strode before the marquee” word in makeup. The word made beautiful through makeup, through the poem.

The softcover edition of the books includes the collage that Shively refers to that Wieners had created and affixed to the manuscript folder of the poems. It includes several layered newspaper clippings and letters with a clip of a letter from President Gerald Ford, a letter from Food and Agriculture organization from the UN to Wieners, layered collaged ripped pictures of the Prince Charles, and a newspaper picture of members of the Boston Symphony. Wieners’ name and the book title, in capital letters, is displayed in a pink colored thick font that is reminiscent of a travel brochure or movie cinema marquee lettering. Curiously, the hardback edition, of which only 100 copies were published, has a solid bronze gold cover with no collage, with the name and title in a silver colored version of the same font. The staid gold bronze of the hardback edition gives the book the look of a church hymn book or a hotel bible. Why the hardback cover was different from the softbound edition is not known, but the overall effect of the plain bronze and gold of the hardback is one of a contraband book or a banned book censored by being covered in a glittery brown paper bag.
The title page of the book is a telling visual example of what to expect in the book; a picture of the author as an angelic college student is crudely an urgently layered with personal mementoes and letters from his past. In the upper right hand corner, a cutout of the playbill of his play *Asphodel in Hell* at the Judson Poet’s Theatre is overlaid, with a picture of Lana Turner below it and ripped portions of a letter addressed to Wieners at his 44 Joy Street apartment on the right side of the collage. The whole effect of the collage is that of a scrapbook of crudely collaged personal mementoes patched together with the backdrop of the author, smiling young innocent and not yet touched by madness or the ravages of drugs.
When Wieners’ entire cosmology changed, he visually and textually manifest this change in his collages and his poetry. As Cedar Sigo pointed out, “Their content reflects and echoes the poetry, in that much of it pours over John’s past.” (Sigo). The first collage is a perfect example of this reflection of talismans of Wieners past and his devotion to the glamour of movies stars, especially Lana Turner, to signify the poetry that accompanies the collages. The reflection and echoing of collage images with text disengaged from meaning but charged with personal value reinforce each other and add credence to his idea of the book as one continuous poem. The symbiotic relationship of language and image charge the book with a velocity that lights up the lyric with new meaning and deeper impact.

*BTSC* is a luminous, electric, eccentric work in which the poet unleashes his imagination in the open field of his poetic powers after his mind has been wiped clean by the trauma of 15 years in and out of institutions, drugs, shock treatments, and personal loss. In *BTSC*, Wieners uses a pastiche of literary forms and collaged images to rebuild his broken mind with his tattered remnants of memories using image and language. Wieners risks all in this tightrope act of rebuilding the damaged mind with patches of memory and images and a cacophony of voices set down on paper. The velocity and cadence of the words and the disjointed patches of meaning disorients and stimulates the reader. The torn folded language including misspelled words, bizarre syntax, and elongated capital letters across the page, all signifying the varied speed of language over painful loss. A brilliant example of this is the poem which denaturalizes language syntax and grammar to the point of barely being comprehensible but still elementally Wieners poetry, looking back to 1957 to places he lived in Boston (and his family address on Eliot
Street in Milton) with his lover, Dana, as a young man, interspersed with random and barely intelligible phrases and images. Even the spacing of the title forces the reader to reconsider the word “Homecoming”. This excerpt is a dizzying and exhaustive poetry as performance:

The HO MECOMING II

for Stephanie Bright

*It depends on who they’re in love with, where, when, and why, and for whom?*

1957 3 weekends ceaseless
38 Grove rear
3rd 33 South Russell

STREET

a second floor whole
quitted 37 Middlesex November cause

CAPTAIN

Jack’s June ete guests

Post sloan house
Washington Y
G U T ted Elliot Street
Base front X 2 Mexican Totem

Hall Codexes
Hearing Peggy’s voice in the men’s room – Ronnie’s through Tom
Tom’s Toil -ets
Steve’s “I murraied Huey Newton,” forfing
CARLotta Stoppato Venetian non-negr’Roi LEvine was born
George Bra ziller (43)

There is a method to Wieners linguistic mania. The writing at times seems automatic and improvised like a Charlie Parker solo super-powered by the propulsion of a two minute punk rock song. All mistakes signify the urgency and velocity of the
language of the broken poet obsessively gathering memories from his personal pain refracted through the cracked lens of the glamorous lives of movie stars. He assembles them into collages of a punk rock raw beauty, do-it-yourself grittiness, taped, torn and obscured. The brilliance of his method was, that after all the trauma and shock treatments, he had internalized these memories, movie stars, movie titles, torch singers, and he was able to rebuild his memories through his poetic imagination and the sheer force of will. Through these cinematic decoupage and prose insights, a chorus of voices sing through the tattered, denaturalized language and images he collages together.

Allen Davies in his review lists the texts, the movies, and the wide ranging names of celebrities, torch singers, socialites, poets and writers who appear in the book, either mentioned or whose personae he adopts in some of the many voices whose language he speaks through:

Jaqueline Kennedy Onassis  Billie Holiday  Alida Valli  Barbara Hutton  Lana Turner  Marilyn Monroe  Mata Hari  Jennifer Jones. There are persons that recur; voices from which he addresses repeatedly. THE ACE OF PENTACLES (1964) was dedicated FOR THE VOICES. IN WOMAN he says, “Wealthy born I aspire to Marlene Dietrich, Judy Garland, Garbo and Lana Turner, all multi-millionaires and male-oriented.” Also: Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel  John Giorno  Robert Creeley Charles Olson  Allen Ginsberg  Frank Sinatra  Elizabeth Monroe  Barbara Stanwyck  Dante Garbo  Simone de Beauvoir  Bette Davis  Joan Crawford  Virginia Valli  Alisa Mellon Bruce  Francoise Sagan  Virgil  Saint Bernadette  Marlene Dietrich  Blessed Virgin.

Texts he mentions are also a sketch of the scope of his mind: Enquirer; Whitman’s poems to MANHATTAN; The National Enquirer; “After the Pleasure Party” by Herman Melville: A Curriculum of the Soul, WOMAN, Fasicle Three; Time; The Spy Who Came In From The Cold; The Looking Glass War; ANONYMOUS DIARY OF NEW YORK YOUTH; Vogue: Across the river and Into the Trees; To Have and Have Not; Les Pavillions.

And to accompany the stars, some movies: The Miracle of the Bells, The White Mountain;, Third Man, Weep No More, Sweet Bird of Youth, Cass Timberlane, Jonny Eager, The Postman Always Rings Twice, A King’s Story, Two Mrs.
Carroll’s, Mr. Skeffington, If I Die Before I Wake, Flamingo Road; The Flower Thief, Queen Sheba meets the Atom Man. (Davies 32)

Of all the movie stars who appear in the book Lana Turner occupies a special place in his pantheon. She was a movie star of the highest order she suffered from depression, attempting suicide once. She also was married eight times and had several lovers. She appears prominently in the first collage partially covering a picture of a smiling John Wieners in his college days. Wieners, in adopting the persona of Lana Turner, could be talking about himself. In fact in several poems, Wieners speaks painful lyrical truths about himself behind the masks of his idols. “Lana turner is not the Lana Turner of yesterday. Still beautiful, yes but very much her own woman, in control of her own life.”(BTSC 52) Through the voice of Lana, and the parade of woman’s voices through the book, Wieners is free to find his own voice in flight. “If I get a chance to stay home // I do. I don’t go out // unless I have to. If fare’s/ there and I have a chance to go // out. I do. It’s up in the air.”(52) But there is also the darker side, a tragic or violent side to the movie stars that he identifies with in the book. Beyond the glamor there is the darker side, a back story of sexualized, eroticized violence that just below the surface of the stars’ dream lives, that Wieners is drawn to, and which he internalizes and speaks through. The story of Lana Turner and the murder of her lover, Johnny Stomponato, by her daughter Cheryl Crane, is one of sadism, masochism and murder that was more than intriguing to Wieners. Not only did he identify with the glamor of Lana Turner, he also was sympathetic to the story of her battles with depression, her dark, abusive lover with ties to the crime underworld, a relationship marred by violence, murder, cover up and family secrets. This undercurrent of violent, disruption, disenchantment and dysfunction
is an important subtext to the book as it relates to Wieners own family dynamic, his
ambivalent feelings toward his parents and his siblings. More urgently, the subtext also
related to the pain and loss he suffered due to the devastating betrayal and abandonment
he felt when his only heterosexual relationship with Panna Grady ended in abandonment.
The incident was more devastating because he was not only betrayed by his lover, but
also by his mentor and greatest influence, Charles Olson. The heartbreak and shock from
that incident was a major factor in Wieners’ mental breakdown and eventual commitment
to Central Islip Hospital in 1969. The poems he wrote at the time, recently published in
the collection of Wieners’ Journals by City Lights Books called *Stars Seen in Person*, are
so raw and heartbreaking they are difficult to read; they pulse and throb with the exposed
nerves of heartbreak and mental breakdown. Besides the poem *Drinkin Lonely Wine*,
which mentions Grady, there is one other poem in *BTSC* which amidst the champagne,
the flowers, the music and the moon, hints at the loneliness and loss Wieners’ felt as a
result of the Panna Grady affair:

**DOM PERIGNON**

1959

One of us is going to die,
I don’t know which
champagne and cake on the balcony
geraniums newly planted after the rain
dogs baying to the moon,
The geraniums,
their faces freshly painted
flow/in the moon, also of the wall
with a luminous red I have never seen before—
at twilight –
the sky grey
but the geraniums
vibrous
different than the firefly
different than the contralto
singing
Schubert’s Last Songs,
four of them
different from the Bavarian Gentians
of Lawrence.
Only you, geraniums alone
of the moon.

Unpublished Composition Dennison Road, Summer Annisquam,
1966 (13)

Wieners is unflinching in confronting the pain and loss that still surrounds his memories of Grady. In the midst of the voices and collages there are nests of memories in prose form and then there are lyric poems that are breathtaking in their own right and in relation to the myriad of various forms the book encapsulates. The poem Drinkin Lonely Wine is a painful unflinching look back at the Panna Grady affair from the perspective of a lover who had enjoyed a fairy tale summer with his love and then lost it all, a poet who lived in luxury only to be left behind, eating hamburgers and riding buses. He also frames the lines like lyrics of songs that he memorized and would repeat randomly. In fact John Temple in his article “Haven of the Heart: The Poetry of John Wieners”, traces the poem to “the Sonny Til song, “Lonely Wine” (also recorded by Roy Orbison: lyrics by Kitty Wells.) “How can I go back to dreamin//when reality has become heaven’ appears to comment on the song’s second line ‘my heart must have its way and dream of you.” The poem is built around the contrast between poverty and high society…” (Temple, Haven of the Heart). Wieners painful poem is honest and simply stated:

When you’re used to taxicabs
You can’t switch to buses—
after champagne & caviar
eat hamburgers with relish.

How can I go back to dreamin’
when reality’s become heaven.
Oh roses bloomin’ the afternoon,
shadows on oriental rugs—
rich phonograph records, ring rose wines

oh, belles—dreaming in the afternoon,
purchasing value out of nowhere bring me back to paradise:

I need no empty after glow now
When women with long legs walk through the room like swans.
… Long wings after them
And heavy breasts
An hair/with coronets of diamonds/ ah Panna
take up the cudgel now And beat my brains since

I can go any further.

Oh, not only your poor dreams destroy me,

golden girl of the

twenties
purchasing value outofnowhere

You poets dream on
and find out where the path leads you

an empty face in their glassy editions
that is not so full any prevalent residence
LOOKing for you. (131)

There is also a pronounced working class truth to his Cinderella story of a fairy
tale romance prematurely disrupted by circumstance, leaving the poet behind to face stark
reality back in his rightful place amongst the poor. There is one other poem in the book
that dramatically and unflinchingly underscores this working class truth is “Children of
the Working Class.” Wieners wrote the poem from inside Taunton State Hospital. In it,
his Catholic compassion and powerful identification with fellow metal patients, leads him
to indict God and society for creating this deformed class of people, by directly correlating their mental and physical disfigurement with the hardships and suffering of their poor parents. The poem is a scathing indictment of the State Mental Health system and a plea for the humane treatment of its suffering patients. The poem is stunning in its connection and compassion for the forgotten and marginalized, in the face of the poet’s fear that he will be punished by God for even writing such dark and ugly truths:

C H I L D R E N OF THE WORKING CLASS

to Somes

from incarceration, Taunton State Hospital, 1972

gaut, ugly deformed

broken from the womb, and horribly shriven
at the labor of their forefathers, if you check back

scout around grey before actual time
their sordid brains don’t work right
pinched men emaciated, piling up railroad ties and highway ditches
blanched woman, swollen and crudely numb
er ed before the dark of dawn

scuttling by candlelight, one not to touch, that is, a signal panic
thick peasants after the attitude

at that time of their century, bleak and centrifugal
they carry about them, tough disciplines of copper Indianheads,

there are worse, whom you may never see, non-crucial around the
spoke, these you do, seldom
locked in Taunton State Hospital and other peon work farms
drudge from morning until night, abandoned with destitute crevices odd clothes
intent on performing some particular task long has been far removed
there is no hope, they locked-in key’s; housed of course
and there fed, poorly
off sooted plastic dishes, soiled grimy silver knives and forks,
stamped Department of Mental Health spoons
but the unshrinkable duties of any society
produces its ill-kempt, ignorant and sore idiosyncrasies.

There has never been a man yet, whom no matter how wise
can explain how a god, s beautiful he can create
the graces of formal gardens, the exquisite twilight sunsets
in splendor of elegant toolsmiths, still can yield the horror of
dwarfs, who cannot stand up straight with crushed skulls,
diseases on their legs and feet unshaven faces and women,
worn humped backs, deformed necks, hare lips, obese arms
distended rumps, there is not a flame shoots out could ex-
tinguish the torc of an liberty’s state infection.

1907, My mother was born, I am witness t
o the exasperation of gallant human beings at g-
od, priestly fathers and Her highness, Holy Mother of the Church
persons who felt they were never given a chance had n-
o luck and were flayed at suffering.

They produce children with phobias, mania and depression,
they cared little for their own métier, and kept watch upon
others, some chance to get ahead

Yes life was hard for them, much more hard than any blo
ated millionaire, who still lives on
their hard earned monies. I fell I shall
have to be punished for writing this,
that the omniscient god is the rich one,
cared little for looks, less for Art,
stil kept weekly films close for the
free dishes and scandal hot. Some how
though got cheated in health and upon
hearth. I am one of them. I am witness
not to Whitman’s vision, but instead the
poorhouses, the mad city asylums and rel-
lief worklines. Yes, I am witness not to
God’s goodness, but better or less scorn.

The First of May, The Commonwealth of State Massachusetts,
1972 (34-35)
Jackie Kennedy Onassis holds a special place amongst the First ladies mentioned throughout the book. A full size image of her in profile that could have been ripped from the pages of a gossip magazine, is the backdrop to the title page. Collaged across her image are three white labels; across the top it reads “A collection of poetry, written by John Wieners in The United States”; across the middle of the collage is the book title “BEHIND THE STATE CAPITOL: OR CINCINNATI PIKE” and across the bottom is Wieners’ description of the book, include as a guide to the reader, “Cinema decoupages: verses, abbreviated prose insights.” Along with The Good Gay Poets insignia in the lower right hand corner.

(John Wieners Collage, Behind the State Capitol, p iii)

Wieners’ poetic identification with Jackie Onassis may have been a factor in the incident that precipitated his final mandatory stay in a state hospital at Taunton State for a month in 1972. Shively details the incident in his review of BTSC, “On April Fool’s day
1971, John was arrested at Boston’s Logan airport for being a Kennedy, wisked (sic) off to the asylum and imprisoned there. The authorities object strenuously to the appearance of the Virgin, to the voices and songs he hears. They have blasted his brain with chemicals, electricity, and outright demands that HE NOT WRITE. Having done nothing to ease his life, they have failed to silence the voice.” (What Happened to Mind of John Wieners? 3)

Many times throughout the book, he seems to replace celebrities with friends and family members and memories that may be too painful to face directly. Throughout his later life, Wieners continued this practice of transposing pictures or ads over any images of himself as if he was constantly overlaying the ravages of reality with the cinematic dreams of his scattered, yet vast imagination. Friend and fellow poet David Meltzer in an interview with Dewhurst in A Career Biography touches upon this technique in regards to Wieners’
method around the time of BTSC. “While drugs and repeated institutionalization, David Meltzer says, had obviously pushed (John) into a completely alternative universe, he instantly saw Behind The State Capitol as a kind of post-modern pastiche or assemblage, that incorporated the “Vaseline-lens glamour” aesthetics that Wieners loved into a “kind of fabulous, demented fantasy land.” (134)

Wieners’ method of cutting up language, images, memories, and feelings in his work is similar to the technique that William Burroughs developed with fellow writer artist Brion Gysin that was used in many of Burroughs’ work especially The Third Mind, a book he wrote with Gysin using the cut-up method as the sole source of the book’s content. Burroughs’ cut-up method was based on the power of random chance and dis-ordering of words to create a hidden and powerful narrative work of art. Robert Peters in his review, makes this association in terms of the reader's approach to this difficult book. “Is helps at the outset to recall the excitement one feels in reading William Burroughs. The Wieners of Behind the State Capitol would be thoroughly at home in the drug-ridden psychedelic sexually bizarre suburbs of Interzone.” (Peters 32) Burroughs would cut up words from various texts and newspapers and would then re-assemble them forging a new dimension in writing Burroughs called his process, letting the future leak out of the past. Burroughs did create collages and shotgun art later in his life. His collages also paralleled Wieners visual art.
He saw the cut-up method as an inspiration. Laura Hopton quotes Burroughs explaining his ideas on the cut up method: “Cutting and re-arranging a page of written words introduces a new dimension in to writing, enabling the writer to turn images in cinematic variation. Images shift sense under the scissors smell images to sound sight to sound sound to kinesthetic. This is where Rimbaud was going with his color of vowels. And his systematic ‘derangement of senses’ (Hopton 76). The idea of adding a new dimension to his writing and turning images into cinematic variations, was similar to what Wieners was doing in BTSC. However, Wieners subconsciously used the cut-up method in his creative process using the method internally his mind, cutting up memories and dreams without cutting up physical texts. His mental cut-up of the language, disengaging it from meaning adding this new fantastic dimension to his poetry. It is a
dazzling and disorienting performance as in the excerpted poem, UNDERSTOOD

DISBELIEF IN PAGANISM, LIES AND HERESY:

Prick any literary dichotomy
Sung unrent gibberish from maxim skulls
west Manchester cemetery

recidivist testimony damned
promulgated post-mortem Harry ghouls
wills pleasant chicanery hulled

in opposition to queer honesty,
flyng hapless good humuors
Morphe erroneous untedious mystery,

non-said mistakes; pure levity
to a method of confused doubt;
lipping erratic contrary indexd (2)

It is exhilarating and exhausting to follow the leaps and jumps of Wieners brand of cut-up in this poem. “Prick any literary dichotomy” could be a dare to the reader to investigate Wieners’ literary techniques, at their own peril. However, it also requires the reader to interpret the poem when the language, spelling and the grammar are disengaged from meaning. Shively touches upon this in his essay “What Happened to the mind of John Wieners”: “Each reader will have to open themselves to BEHIND THE STATE CAPITOL: OR CINCINATTI PIKE for continuous surprises, tassels, jumps photographs, underwear labels, nudes, and other bric-a-brac.” (Shively, Gay Sunshine No. 25)

Assemblage and collage as visual artistic techniques were familiar to Wieners as he was close friends with many of the leading West Coast Assemblage and Collage artists like Wallace Berman and Jess Collins. Wieners and Burroughs were both homosexual, legendary heroin addicts and considered Beat writers. (Burroughs was a seminal founding member with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Wieners was considered a fringe
member of the Beats.) Like all of the poetry movements he was involved in, Wieners was often on the outside, in a class all his own. The primary difference between the Wieners and Burroughs, other than one was a novelist and the other a lyric poet, was the issue of class. Wieners was a working class Catholic poet who struggled with poverty his life. Burroughs was an heir to the Burroughs/Univac adding machine fortune, from an Upper Class St, Louis family and a Harvard graduate. Wieners was very familiar with Burroughs work when he wrote BTSC. In fact, Wieners planned on publishing Burroughs (under his early career pen name, William Lee), earliest version excerpt of his Beat classic novel *Naked Lunch* in his Measure magazine. The most striking difference between Burroughs’ method and Wieners’ work in BTSC, was that Wieners was assembling his cut up texts and images internally from his brilliantly fragmented mind.

(John Wieners Collage, *Behind the State Capitol*, p 179)
His work was more instinctive than deliberate. His language cut up and re-assembled was charged with an electricity of cryptic meaning and alternate spelling. As Alan Davies notes in his review of BTSC, “The collages provide visual sense of the way he cuts up words and memories and texts to produce the writing. By the “soundless permeation of madness upon sanity” the mind is broken open and fragments are kept as desirable, as poems, language kept as collage also. It reminds slightly of surrealistic-dada techniques of automatic writing or the cut-up method of prior texts. But the language remains subjective, sensual, the strong lyrical push and voice through the words.” (Davies 34)

The uncompromising vision of the cut up language and the collaged images in the book reveal a punk rock aesthetic years ahead of its time, that goes beyond poetry and can be traced back to the surrealist and dada techniques of automatic writing and the cut up method employed by Burroughs, also used by Tristan Tzara and the Surreal poets of the 1920s. Linda Hopton discusses the cut up method’s connection to the Surrealists. “The idea of the cut-up method was not lost on Gysin, who began his career with a brush with the Surrealists who claimed it. Similar to the case of the Calligraphies, which superficially resemble calligraphic paintings by the Abstract Expressionists and Informel artists, the Cut-up’s connection to Tristan Tzara’s legendary Dada gesture of pulling individual words out of a hat to create a poem is based primarily on similarity of technique (cutting) and material (found literature). Gysin recalled that he used to run into Tzara in Paris during the time that work with the Cut-up method was so intense and had begun to receive attention through the publication of Burroughs’ novels. Confronted by Tzara, who claimed to have covered the same ground in the 1920s. Gysin tartly
responded: “You didn’t do it well enough; you didn’t do it long enough, and not enough people caught on.” (Hopton 76-77). Although not intentionally employing the cut up method, the overriding aesthetic of BTSC can be traced to the surreal poets and the dada movement in pursuit of this radical disengagement of meaning from language and images. Wieners collages, and cinematic decoupages also can be traced back to the Situationalist Internatonale Guy Debord’s fascinating cut up radical art book that was the secret story of the Lettrist Internationale movement’s transformation into the Situationalist Internationale movement. In his indispensable study of the secret connections of the punk movement to the Lettrist Internationale (which evolved into the Situationalist Internationale,) Surrealism, and dada, A Secret History of the 20th Century, Greil Marcus describes Debord’s unique groundbreaking book. In his description of Memoires, he could just as easily be describing Wieners artistic approach in BTSC: He didn’t write it. He cut scores of paragraphs, sentences, phrases, or sometimes single words out of books, magazines, and newspapers; these he scattered and smeared across some fifty pages that his friend Asger Jorn, a Danish painter, crossed and splattered with colored lines, blotches, spots, and drips. Here and there were photographs, advertisements, plans of buildings and cities, cartoons, comic-strip panels, reproduction of woodcuts and engravings, these too scavenged from libraries and newsstands, each piece as mute, all as estranged from any informing context, the whole as much like glossolia, as the spectral text…The story had to be pieced together, and then, as one followed up its clues, deciphered according to where it had come from and where it meant to go. Made out of detritus—so apparently random in its organization it communicated as detritus—the book was a history out of the first year of the Lettrist International, a shifting group of young people living in Paris, as they were from June 1952 to September 1953—ex-students, ex-pots, ex-filmmakers, now lollars, runaways, drunks—who had banded together under one-line manifestos: The new generation will leave nothing to chance,” “We’ll never get out of this alive.” It was the secret history of a time that has passed—“without leaving a trace,” said the next to last page…In this new world, the disconnected, seemingly meaningless words and pictures of Memoires would make sense. They would make sense, first as
noise, a cacophony ripping up the syntax of social life—the syntax as Debord put it in *The Society of the Spectacle*, of “the existing order’s uninterrupted discourse about itself.” As the noise grew, those words and pictures would begin to link up—as graffiti on countless walls, shouts coming out of thousands of mouths, even as familiar streets and buildings one suddenly saw as if never before—and then, with the old syntax broken, these things would make a second kind of sense. They would be experienced not as things at all, but as possibilities:” (Marcus 165-166)

*BTSC* was published in 1975, the same year Patti Smith released her groundbreaking first album, *Horses*, a year before the Ramones released their first albums and two years before the Sex Pistols release their first album, and punk rock was born. The Ramones were years ahead of their time. Often written off as a cartoon or joke band, their music shared a velocity, a propulsion, similar to the rush of words cascading from the poems in *BTSC*. Although their first album didn’t have the variety of voices and forms that Wieners did in *BTSC*, the songs were lean amphetamine fueled visions of
teenage alienation and angst, just as Wieners poems were driven by his outsider status and a sense of dislocation. It is more than a coincidence that Wieners, Shively and Mitzel were assembling the book a year before the Ramones were recording their first album in seven days for under ten thousand dollars in January of 1976. Both works of art were cultural time bombs, exploding in the minds and ears of future generations of listeners and readers, while being relatively ignored by the general public at the time of their respective release. Also, the visual aspect of their work was as important to the Ramones first album as the collage and decoupages were to BTSC. The Ramones iconic album cover of the four band members leaning against a brick wall in the Village in torn jeans, leather jackets, disheveled hair and blank looks on their faces, would fit right in as a collage in BTSC.

(Robert Bayley, Ramones Album Cover, The Ramones, 1976)

It has the feel of a found photograph of rough trade street hoods. In fact, the picture snapped by Robert Bayley has become one of the most iconic rock album covers of all time. Just as the Ramones stripped rock n roll down to it most elemental, three
chords, simple repetitive lyrics about teen lust, violence and drug use, Wieners delivers the literary equivalent of the driving rhythm and shouted disjointed lyrics of the punk generation’s political discontent of the disaffected outsider. He does it through lyric poetry, by disengaging language from ostensible meaning, charged with “the strong lyrical push and voice through the words.”

The Sex Pistols were the mastermind of Malcolm McLaren and Jamie Reid, inspired by the Ramones and the New York Dolls, and born in McLaren’s sex shop in London. An important aspect to the groundbreaking rebellious and truly dangerous punk music of the Sex Pistols was the visual graphics of their album covers and the style of their clothing borrowed ripped and safety pinned from the S & M clothes that McLaren sold in his sex shop. Their songs, like Wieners’ poems in BTSC, were the rebellious and disconnected language of the outsider who no longer wants in but who wants to “destroy passers-by” as Johnny Lydon howls in the Sex Pistols first single “Anarchy in the U.K.”

There is a freedom and an uncompromising vision in the Pistols first album that is vitally the foundation of Wieners’ BTSC. Also, the Sex Pistols visual art, anarchistic spirit, and secret history have been linked back beyond Situationalist International, surrealism, and ultimately back to Hugo Ball and Dada. (Lipstick Traces, Marcus). Marcus, in describing the impact of The Sex Pistols crystalizes their intent and in doing so, hits on the crux of what makes BTSC so relevant, urgent and dangerous. “It was the sound of the city collapsing. In the measured, deliberate noise, words tumbling past each other too fast it was almost impossible to tell them apart, you could hear social facts begin to break up…This was a code that didn’t have to be deciphered…It felt like freedom, it was freedom…” (Marcus 8) Wieners also draws upon this anarchistic spirit in visual form
and content. The Jamie Reid designed album cover for the Sex Pistols first album and the
posters and sleeves for their single “God Save The Queen” would fit seamlessly into
Wieners’ book as collages.

(Jamie Reid, *God Save the Queen*, Sex Pistols, 1977, reprinted from *Secret History*, Greil Marcus.)

Also in Wieners wide ranging lyrical open field, he addresses the Queen in his
poem “Necromancy” paving the way for the punk rebellion lyrics of the Sex Pistols “God
Save The Queen.”

Necromancy

The Queen can grant no mercy, no clemency
for she is owed permanently too much money
by false prophets and religious piety

answering questions as to her daily office
whether small town matron or play girl vice
may it be said she is no man’s sexy notice
unrelated of course to her homely treasury,
the trespassing of beasts novice trickery
undos many servitors, pressed to worshipless salary
saving or preserving only the erectioned money

dubious swindle and auctioned celibacy
that is, unmarried men are always on duty
without forgery from assassination’s legacy…. (114)

Wieners estimation of the Queen as a woman of perceived power but ultimately a figurehead of the state is condensed, echoed and reduced to its most elemental form in the lyrics of the Sex Pistols two years later:

God save the Queen
We mean it, man
We love our Queen
God saves
God save the Queen

’Cause tourists are money
And our figurehead
Is not what she seems

God save history
God save your mad parade
Oh Lord, God, have mercy
All crimes are paid

When there's no future, how can there be sin?
We're the flowers in the dustbin
We're the poison in the human machine
We're the future, your future (God Save The Queen, Never Mind The Bollocks, Warner Brothers, 1977)

Wieners’ approach to the method had not changed but the writing was charged with the radical politics and activism of the Good Gay poets. His intentions were clear and the radical shift in style and content was the product of his Rimbaudian long and deliberate disordering of the senses. Raymond Foye reiterated Wieners specific intentions
in regards to *BTSC* in his introduction to the Black Sparrow Collected Edition published eleven years after the publication of *BTSC*:

It should be noted that since the publication of *Behind The State Capitol*, the poet has expressed the desire that the work not be excerpted in any form. Wieners has always considered that book to be a single work—a single *poem*. Yet it is imperative that any overview of Wieners’ career take into consideration this important book. For the purposes of this volume, the author has allowed excerpts to be made (from the original typescript), to give the reader an indication of the shifts in subjects and “styles” that take place circa 1971-1975. These shifts are a critical link to the later work, which for the most part pursue a similar line of radical disengagement of language from rational or ostensible meaning. (*Selected Poems* 20)

That Wieners insisted the book be considered a single work was a testament to his uncompromising vision of a new all-inclusive punk rock poetic inspired by his radical queer identity and rising political activism. *BTSC* was more than the location of his apartment on Joy Street. It was the Bohemian side of Beacon Hill, originally a predominantly black neighborhood around the time of the Civil War, and eventually populated by artists, writers, and students, with a significant gay population. Wieners’ apartment overlooked the roof of the African Meetinghouse where Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison gave fiery ant-slavery speeches. It was a psychic map of his fragmented mind engaged in “this radical disengagement of language from meaning.” (Foye 19) Also, there is an understated paranoid aspect to the title that Wieners may have intended, not as a physical location but as a distrustful instrument of control. The title begs the question, “Who is behind the State Capitol and what power is really in charge that runs and controls the state?” Through his multi-voiced personas of the movie stars, socialites and the cameo appearances of many First Ladies of the United States, Wieners gives voice to the marginalized individual. He accomplishes this with his unique
approach, recurring themes emerge of love, loss, politics, sexual identity, poverty and money, and the reality of working class distinctions in Boston. Wieners is transformed through poetry his stark reality into the luxurious, and oft times tragic dreams of famous and glamorous women. The book is a time capsule of kaleidoscopic voices of dispossessed women. Even the movie starlets have either a hint of tragedy, sadness or some dark secret that tinges their glamour with tragedy or scandal. Lana Turner and the murder of her lover, mafia underworld man, Johnny Stompanato, Billie Holiday and her tragic drug fueled early death. Wieners not only dreams of what it’s like to live like his feminine heroes, he becomes them and takes on their beauty, their glamour and their enduring pain. His identification with Billie Holiday is heartfelt and authentic. Billie Holiday’s tragic early death, her heroin addiction, and her soft sweet voice all make her Wieners’ most revered tragic heroine. His memories of meeting her are bittersweet and he intertwines her fate closely with his own, and her music brings him back. In meeting her, he makes reference to another of her songs that could be taken as a casual comment about his sexuality, “He’s funny that way” and at the end of the poem she becomes the strange fruit of death, “rotting nectarines.” There is no separation between his memory and his emotion, between time elapsed and emotional distance. He has no defense, he hears the music and he is transported back:

BROKEN HEARTED MEMORYS

And when that music starts
there is no time, she takes you back
over fifteen years, as if yesterday
a song immortalized. Do you know her name
I met her once with my lover: “You must be Jack! And saw her twice afterwards, at Storyville and The Black Hawk. Sunday in the rain, “He’s funny That Way”, and I went crazy afterwards, woman’s Sorrow her legacy holding hands under the table. Billie’s grey-hair was Parisian style and her Singing Big Apple. She’s still rotting nectarines. (66)

Within this time capsule, Wieners is looking back in time, going over his life and his loss, his incarceration and his freedom, and creating these collaged tangled poems and images. In doing so, he focuses on an array of themes from the sadness and dysfunction of his relations, to the power structures of the state, and the hierarchy of gay world from the perspective of the outsider position of an aging gay poet; a poet living on the fringes below the poverty level, a former mental patient, and a recovered drug addict. The first poem in the book is a straight forward lyric poem with the cryptic title of “1952” It has the feel of someone who is looking back over his past but is paralyzed in his
examinations by the persistent ghost of loss. In a way this first beautiful lyric poem serves also as a hidden warning. This poem serves as Wieners’ version of Dante’s warning to those about to enter hell, “Abandon all hope ye who enter” But Wieners warns with heartfelt lyrical verse in his own voice:

Beyond this river which I have no desire to cross
There are no mountains which I have no desire to climb
I am fenced in by rivers and mountains
And though year’s day goes, I fell no loss.

Where am I forced to stay?
Why wake to life that holds no hopeful dawn?
What have I lost that all these losses matter not?
You do not answer World, you cannot say!

They have taken from you also, all the best
And leave you with your speech and sight a sham.
Yes, you can speak and see but there is nothing left
To stare and stutter over with the rest

Why, why is it so, since there is nothing here
We force ourselves to wait and watch our life
Empty of peace and empty of love.
Remembering always remembered the former faithful year! (1)

There is an undercurrent of Dante’s Inferno throughout the book with multiple references to Beatrice. Shively explains Wieners’ intentions to write a trilogy to include his version of Dante’s Purgatory, Heaven and Hell. “So I asked him about “Dante Sweeting Watching Upon Virgin Appearances/Appearances of Virgil’s Beatrice:”(139) being a hard core atheist, I had no appreciation for appearances of the Virgin Mary…She came to John through the silver dressing mirror of his own dead mother. Here is the epicenter of BTSC…Nel mezzo del cammin di mostra vita/ni ritrovai per una selva
obscura/che la dirita via era smarrita—can be compared to 1952… *Behind the State Capitol* had been projected as the first part of a work which included two additional books, *Under Bismark Bridges* and *Marble Harbor*. Most of John’s Purgatorio had been assembled before he simply threw it away and abandoned the whole project.” (Shively, *JohnJob* 80) He combines the appearance of Beatrice with another important and essential woman who is the true secret center of the book beyond the movie stars, the first ladies, even beyond the heartbreak of his true love Panna Grady. That woman is the Virgin Mary, for whom he not only professes his appreciation and reverence for, but who visits him personally in his Joy Street apartment. Wieners belief in his personal visions of the Virgin Mary were not allegorical nor metaphorical. He truly believed in the vision and grace of the Virgin Mary. In the Calamus bookstore newsletter online, in his remembrance of John Wieners, John Mitzel explains:

> I have known John since 1972. Over the years, my role in his life was: cashier of checks and provider of money, a role I didn't resent. I enjoyed John's company and his gifts, but as I got older I lost interest in the charms of the whimsical and the crazy. My favorite Wieners story? Actually, it's a Miss Tom story. Miss Tom was a colleague of mine when I ran the fabulous South Station Cinema (1972-1983). Miss Tom was a sweet Puerto Rican queen and was a neighbor of John Wieners on Beacon Hill and nearly as religious as John.

> Miss Tom was a daily communicant in the Roman Catholic Church and in church when not working the porno theatre and when not cruising our porno competitors. One day, John Wieners came down to the porno palace to cash a check. I gave him his money and we had a nice chat. After John left, Miss Tom said: "Ooo, that one, he's weird!" I asked Miss Tom to explain. "I see him out walking around Beacon Hill at 3 or 4 in the morning, talking to himself"—meaning, of course, that dear Miss Tom was also out cruising the lonely streets of Beacon Hill at that young hour. I acknowledged that John was a bit strange, but, since I had just learned something--from Charley Shively--about John, as a result of laying out BEHIND THE STATE CAPITOL for Good Gay Poets, I had to say to Miss Tom: "There's something very unusual that happens to John Wieners." "What's that?" "Well," I told Miss Tom, "John has the Virgin Mary visit him every Tuesday at 4 PM." Miss Tom was less than impressed. "Pshaw," said Miss Tom, "She visits me every Friday at 5!" *Who knew?* (Mitzel, *Calamus Newsletter*)
Despite all his challenges being marginalized in the city of his birth, Wieners’
defiantly created his neglected masterpiece, his magnum opus, as David Meltzer had said,
constructing a post-modern pastiche using the Vaseline lens glamor aesthetics and
transforming his stark dire reality into a “demented fantasy land.” (Dewhurst, 134) His
mission was the complete and unexpurgated freedom of expression through poetry in
various forms and voices, as his vessel of escape. Wieners, like Olson in his Maximus
Poems, and Pound in the later Cantos, in his unedited flights of language and reference,
employs a freedom of reference. By freedom of reference, his flight of language and
disengagement of meaning, I am referring to his method of using a dizzying array of
personal memories, half remembered songs, books, movies, lovers, family, friends and
movie stars to create his cosmos. Wieners world is a world where ideas and their
opposites exist in torn collaged images and language. Ideas and themes brought to
fruition through the overriding tension in the book between logic and insanity,
glamorous dreams and harsh reality, money and poverty, love and loss, friendship and
loneliness, excess and deprivation, damnation and redemption, freedom and
incarceration, past and present, the state and the individual, the poet and the prisoner, the
city and the victim.
Chapter IV
The Mesmerizing Apparition of the Oracle of Joy Street

After the disappointing silence that met his last official publication, BTSC, Wieners retreated from public life and appeared to give up poetry, shunning his literary friends. He also seemed to stop writing, or at least, publishing, as few works of his were published in the late 70s and early 80s. It was rumored that from 1978-1983, he wrote only one poem a year on his birthday, January 6th. Raymond Foye calculates that “Between 1976 and 1983 Wieners wrote fewer than a dozen poems, most of which did not survive. In 1983 resumed writing…” (Foye 19) He became the living embodiment of his own poetry. He lived meagerly just above the poverty line on state assistance and food stamps. The ravages of drugs and mental illness were apparent in his deeply lined face. He gave readings, often giving the audience the impression of an eccentric poet, broken glasses, reading partial poems, sometimes his own, sometimes of others, whispering poem-prayers to himself between public declarations of surrealistic non-sequiturs. Every reading was a new adventure and often redefined what a poetry reading performance could be. His unique style, unspoken dignity and singular approach to each reading sometimes baffled, sometimes amused the audience, but always left an impression. Wieners’ readings were magical, brilliant conjuring’s. Cathy Salmons perfectly described the magic of a Wieners reading at the Old West Church for Jack Kerouac’s birthday in 1997. “The volume of poems in his hands is bulging with pasted-in souvenirs and yellowed magazine clippings -- everything from Sealy mattress ads to pin-up photos of ’50s movie stars, letters, and bits of recipes. They're tokens of a mania for
collecting that mimics his poems' internal complexity, their labyrinths of carefully
layered detail. As he reads, he rifflès the pages incessantly, darting from one poem to
another, as if he were improvising, resplicing the written stanzas to suit his
mood.” (Salmons, *Boston Phoenix*) He often whispered poems to himself, repeating
certain phrases as if he was discovering them for the first time, emphasizing the
devotional and deeply personal aspect of his work. Although he seemed at times to
distance himself from the poetry of his youth, saying that those poems are “old faces I
don’t care to see again,” (Foye 19) he continued reading his older poems until his last
reading given ten days before he died, Ironically, the last poem he ever read publicly was
one of the first poems he ever wrote, “Ode to a Common Fountain.” In interview with
Raymond Foye, he said, “I am living out the logical conclusions of my books, and they
are out of print. (Selected 64.) He told Bill Corbett, “Poetry is no longer on my
calendar.” (Corbett, *Snapshots of John Wieners*) Although he seemed to retreat in Greta
Garbo fashion to a self-imposed exile and isolation from friends, he was far from
hermetic and lived a meager but vibrant, literary life in his beloved Boston. Although his
involvement in the Good Gay Poetry collective waned, he remained close friends with
John Mitzel, who continued to serve as his banker, cashing all John’s checks from his
bookstore, Glad Day books, across the street from the Boston Public Library, and
especially with Charley Shively, with whom he remained close friends until his death in
2002. His close circle of poetry friends, including his neighbor and Stone Soup founder,
poet Jack Powers, not only gave him the will to survive bleak and dark times in Boston in
the 1970s and 1980s, they also gave him money, food, cigarettes, and lasting friendship.
It was a miracle he survived in a Boston in the 80s and 90s that cared little for such a
unique, off-beat lyrical genius. Wieners religious devotional belief in poetry extended to a deep trust in poet friends and fellow writers who did what they could to sustain and support him. However, as his circle of trusted poets and friends tightened, he also lost touch with some old dear friends and some of his older work. In Robert Dewhurst’s *A Career Biography*, he details some examples of this: “Nevertheless, from the mid-seventies onward Wieners let correspondence lapse with many friends from earlier eras, and he likewise felt detached from his own previous writings, dismissing past poems as “old faces I don’t care to see again.”… Some people told me that at one point he was living on champagne and donuts”, Basil King recalls.” (138)

Wieners was living on another plane altogether. He acknowledged his fate with an unflinching level of acceptance. He also existed in some rarified air where poetry and daily life intertwined, where dreams and reality were often one in the same. His later poems were evidence of this entanglement of daily life and poetic dreams. Although this made them more opaque, and sometimes cryptically difficult to decode, they also were luminously charged with various meanings and quick cut images, imbued with an infinite depth and velocity. He lived in a visionary and, at times, hallucinatory state, yet he was completely in control of his faculties, always aware of his surroundings. In my essay that prefaced the journal “*A Book of PROPHECIES,*” I detailed my personal experience with Wieners in this state of grace:

“Many times, I watched John silently meditating on the edge of his single bed or a bed in a hotel room, as he traveled within his mind to some distant time or particular memory. His hands would dance as if conducting a secret symphony. He would whisper gently as he would transport himself musically and magically from memory to memory. It was beautiful to witness, but it seemed to be an intensely personal experience. I often felt like I was intruding in the presence of such an introspective journey. John’s sensibilities didn’t allow him any psychic distance from the specific emotions of his memories. There was no separation
between his dreams and reality, no distance between his memory of love and its loss. Although his reality was often bleak, he was surprisingly content, because his dreams were only a blink away. His poems were invocations, prayers recited to himself. As his lyric became more cryptic, his obsessive duty to his writing continued, as he spilled his poetry out on everything from shopping list, to advertising supplements. With much of John’s writing, he was mirroring his thoughts and feeling exactly, into a poetry of personal drama. His poetry directly mapped his heart to his mind, a yearning yet always loving heart, and a mind of a million mirrors each reflecting a vision of their own world; each world of its own space, time, and feeling.” (Dunn 7-8)

When Wieners passed away, John Mitzel remembered Wieners’ unique relationship to Boston, as secret royalty, “reigning as The Queen of Beacon Hill (and speaking of royalty, I once ran into Wieners at the post office as he was about to dispatch a handful of letters; I couldn't help but notice one chunky envelope was addressed to the British monarch and another to The Pope)” (Calamus Newsletter Online). Wieners took the ideas put forth in BTSC even further later in his life, transforming daily life into poetry. He was living in an exulted state of poetic existence. He interjected poetry into mundane daily tasks, such as writing shopping lists or talking to himself. Cathy Salmons also witnessed this unique phenomenon and detailed it in her Boston Phoenix article on Wieners. “Everything he says is a metaphor, a gesture. The gestures themselves are poetry, and it's up to us to find the key. To appreciate his eccentric, zen-masterly reinvention of the intellect, we must abandon all preconceptions of how an "important" artist should act and think.” (Salmons) More importantly, as he gathered nests of papers, correspondences, magazine advertisements, and general ephemera in his apartment at 44 Joy Street, he continued to write devotional lyrical poetry as he lived devoted to poetry. He legendarily destroyed or gave away countless manuscripts and pages of original poetry. Raymond Foye said that being Wieners’ editor “was really only a matter of getting to the waste basket before he did.” (Oral History Initiative) Since he existed in a persistent state of
creation, he was less concerned with the fate of the poems themselves than with the pure
grace he derived from the power of creating them, living in his imagination while
performing the rites and rituals of his day. As Wieners published less, and became more
hermetic, anecdotes about his whimsical and fanciful manner sometimes became more
noted than his work. As his books went out of print, they were increasingly harder to
find, and his relevance to the contemporary poetry establishment faded. However, these
stories tended to reinforce the overall perception that Wieners was no longer writing
poetry at all, and that he retired from the literary and public life. However, the truth is
that Wieners continued writing, taking Olson’s ideas of projective verse by open field
composition further than anyone else writing under Olson’s influence. He also possessed
a deep dark Irish wit, part of his particular sense of humor, marked by an impeccable
sense of timing, notable in his work and in person. Allen Ginsberg highlighted Wieners’
humor in his Introduction to the *Collected Poems*. “Wieners always had an oddly
humorous aesthetic floating on the surface of his somber reverie, or New York Glamor
daydream. The puns & doubleplay or words almost dreamlike themselves suggest a
mortal tangle too true & deep to be recognized in the gossip columns, a world of meat,
drink, gambling, rich hotels, transvestite fellatio, married aristocrats, shopping,
masturbation, tormented Pilgrim spirits. Tremendous morbid wit, derived from his
stubborn resilient strain of New England genius... (Ginsberg 18). With the help of
Ginsberg, John Martin of Black Sparrow Press agreed to publish two books by Wieners:
prose, *Cultural Affairs in Boston: poetry & Prose, 1956-1985*. Both books were edited
by a young Lowell. Massachusetts native, Raymond Foye, who had worked for City
Lights publishers for three years, editing the *Unknown Poe*, also editing the works of other Beat poets, such as Gregory Corso and Bob Kaufman. Foye, a lifelong resident of the Chelsea Hotel, became close friends with Patti Smith, William Burroughs and Ginsberg. He eventually became Wieners literary executor, as well as the literary executor for many other literary luminaries, such as Jimmy Schuyler. Foye was determined to give the reader a comprehensive overview of the work of John Wieners’ “from his first book, *The Hotel Wentley Poems* (1958) to his most recent compositions at the age of fifty.” (Foye, 19) He vowed to publish as much of John’s work as possible in the *Selected Poems* since many of Wieners’ books were out of print and much of his uncollected work was scattered in small magazines across the globe. However, Foye encountered pushback from the reticent author: “This volume was compiled with some initial reluctance on the part of its author, who repeatedly expressed an interest solely in his recent work, referring to earlier poems as “old faces I don’t want to see again.”—not entirely surprising for an author who keeps no copies of his own books, and regularly cleans house by discarding manuscripts.” (Foye, 19) Kevin Killian, in his review of the *Selected Poems* in Contact II articulates the pleasures of “New and Improved Wieners” later work in the collection. “Foye is aided here by the magnificent surprises these last two sections will bring to many readers, to those (their name is legion) who believe that Wieners hasn’t been writing since --say—the death of Judy Garland. The lyric voice that so enchanted readers of *The Hotel Wentley Poems* in 1957 is still here, but thickened and strengthened, almost beyond recognition, with the addition of a mass of material never before used in poetry of any sort: new wine in new bottles: a new language. (Killian, Contact II 37)
One of the two later section sections that Killian refers to, the “new wine in new bottles” is the section titled “She’d Turn on a Dime (1984)” It is a collection of forty-two poems, never published individually on their own. This work tends to get overlooked as an important later work in its own right, and was never recognized as the rightful follow-up to BTSC it so deserved. Like BTSC, it is filled with entwined lyric, velocity of verbal movement from thought to thought, flights of language, moments of madness, coupled with lines of sober sane memory, naked with emotion. Foye included these poems in the Selected Poems as Wieners had wished them to appear, however, with some controversy. I asked Raymond specifically about the book at the Harvard Oral History Initiative, On Wieners. He immediately recognized the value and importance of publishing this later work, but met resistance publishing it. He addressed this specifically at the Oral History Initiative talk at Harvard. “She’d Turn on a Dime was the name of the manuscript he was working on late in life… I really wanted that late work to come out because that is where John was at. And when Gerrit was reading that poem which was one of the first poems John ever wrote, actually, I saw all the late work in that poem. The way he moves from thought to thought. And it is pure projective verse. This is composition by field. It’s all there and he takes Olson further than anybody does but She’d Turn on a Dime was the whole manuscript as I found out. And I got a lot of crap from it because there was a lot of people who said that this man is insane, he’s mad, you’re not doing him any favors by printing this. It doesn’t make any sense. It was a very controversial thing. (Oral History Initiative). As time has passed the poems in She’d Turn on a Dime have become an essential section of the Black Sparrow Collected Poems, and it seems hard to imagine the book without these poems. Yet, as Foye points out, they were very controversial among
Wieners’ contemporaries. For friends and contemporaries of Wieners, like Robert Duncan, it may have been the instinct to protect and guard their friend and fellow poet from harsh judgement of the poetry world, given the tension in the work between the mad poems and the more sober verse. Wieners became the master in intertwining the logical with the surreal, and madness with the clear sanity of his cool lyric imbued with an impeccable sense of comedic timing. Nowhere was this more in play than in She’s Turn on a Dime. His poems start with clear lyrical image of a memory and then take flight without restraint as in the first section of the first poem in the section:

_The Cooler to the Treasury’s Back Rooms._
_A syndicated beauty preferred to be unnamed as such, was approached on a sound stage, recently by one travelling incognito. “I only got my brains blown out twice.”_

**Luchow Choc-au-Lait**

Yes, there are memories, memories of churches whose upper wings are stored with flights of heavenly, angelic choirs; memories of restaurants jazz-roomed in balconies; stoned faces.

Times relieved, derelicted.

Boyish feet scuff along the fall terrace, searches from Jersey to Suez.

Mindless mornings en route to school. Afternoons abed in strange hotel rooms, ballet evenings…

...dwarf the actual present, literal renderings apropos all that has been done, more what’s left undone between seconds of the Minute hand: Tendering to railroad meetings.

Grassy knolls beside the terrace meadows, union signs for detour double crossed.

How can it be only decadent evidence remains?

Of the mountebank Montezuma’s money loan shark delivered In terms of 92nd St. Y.
It replaces congruent quizzical attrition.

The places arrived, plates were served.  
Mine was noel’s, yours above board.

Ship docked, Tickets bought, voyage 
a-borne, casting off out of harbor’s wage

into oceans, perilous but unknown.  
The port Cathay, only Rose of the crew alone

to welcome Harlot’s forlorn escapade.  
Did she return? Was she tailed, has even left the stage. (263-264)

He makes arcane references, echoing forms charged with meaning, with a movement from thought to thought in a swirling complexity that doesn’t always allow the reader the pleasure of deciphering singular meaning. This untitled poem further exemplifies this tension and release:

■

today we had a wonderful day  
the kind of day I’d like to remember  
and like to forget: spent among amnesiac Park Avenue catamites 
not too bull-dozed 
somehow mag-pied doctored in counterfeit adolescence, lost uptown stock pot Macao

Was it Magambo I became attracted to? (Selected 271)

It many ways these poems pushed beyond the aesthetic of BTSC and continued his dual technique of disengaging from meaning, grammar and syntax, while writing pure lyric from an exulted state of grace, imbued with his dark New England wit. In the poem
Biding the Gloom, Wieners’ is randomly reminded of his New York days working at 8th Street Bookstore, prompted by just thinking about his scattered and lost new work. New Work prompts random memories of New York. “My new work” becomes “New York”, new work//New York... He is reminded that the glory and grand illusory memories of spectacles of New York are in stark contrast to his life in Beacon Hill, from where he ponders his scattered new work and grand memories of “the shrine of devotion to Manhattan…weirdos and high jinx”: As Boston as Wieners was, New York represented freedom, glamour and fame. There is a long history of Boston poets aspiring to make their name in New York:

My new work which I presume
already lies scattered, lost and
in error prompts memories of

a dark address in Hell’s Kitchen
the upper story all one floor Mick
but what should I remember; it was

New York and I had a book-keeping job
in Greenwich village, all summer and
into the winter, at a private residence on

West 8th. We lived near the East river over
a laundromat, taking the West bound bus
to work. Glory and grand illusory spectacles.

The shrine of devotion to Manhattan
Gotham shows mad weirdos and high-jinx.
Nothing like it is now on Beacon Hill. (274)

Nothing like it was then, in Beacon Hill. Wieners was hyper-sensitive to stark differences between his glamourous days in New York, San Francisco, Spoleto, and Berkley and his hard scrabble life in Boston. As Beacon Hill gentrified and changed, Wieners became a holy vision of the old Boston. Amongst the million dollar townhouses
of Louisburg Square (it is hard to imagine John Wieners and John Kerry living three blocks from each other), there were still holdovers from the old bohemian Beacon Hill and the Scollay Square days. Wieners, Stone Soup poet Jack Powers who lived a few doors down the hill on Joy Street, and poet Billy Barnum who lived around the corner in a rooming house, were the last of the Beacon Hill Bohemians. Wieners could be seen roaming the streets from Beacon Hill over to Back Bay, where he often would slip into the Boston Public Library to watch classic films like *A Star is Born*, and to visit Mitzel in the Glad Day bookstore to say hello and to get some cash. His physical appearance was sometimes disheveled and rough, but he retained the dignity of a faded movie star.

![Image](https://example.com/image.jpg)

(Jim Dunn, John Wieners, Jack Powers, Jesse Sgro, Squawk Reading Series, Cambridge Baptist Church, November, 1997. Photo: Angela Dunn)

The sheer fact that he survived at all and roamed the streets was reassuring. His existence restored the faith in the fate of the forgotten, in the face of the modern city of Boston. The grace and magic of Wieners as he roamed the streets of the city is articulated exquisitely by Raymond Foye, at the Oral Initiative Project talk at the Woodberry Poetry Room,
“John lived in a state of grace. And reality was sacred. He was a priest and he was keeping the mysteries for all of us. And he was doing magic, that’s really what he was doing all day long. (Oral History Initiative,) This magic he was doing all day was life and his life was poetry.

After the Black Sparrow books were published, Wieners would read occasionally and publish rarely. However, there were two unique books that were published in 1986 and 1987 by Hanuman Books, a joint venture by his Black Sparrow publisher Raymond Foye and celebrated painter Francesca Clemente. Hanuman books, named for the Hindu monkey god of bravery and grammar, published an impressive stable of avant-garde writers in handmade artistic miniature books. Hanuman published an array of great literature, Their roster included Beat writers, painters and poets, including Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Jean Genet, Allen Ginsberg, William DeKooning, Herbert Huncke, and Francis Picabia, to name just a few writers and artists published by Hanuman. They first published Patti Smith’s *Wool Gathering* (recently re-issued by New Directions) and *Saved! The Gospel Speeches of Bob Dylan*, collected speeches he gave between songs on his born-again Christian Saved tour. Wieners’ book was the first publication (Series 1, Number 1) in the entire series of 50 total. They produced twelve handmade books a year, six in the spring and six in the fall from 1986-1993. Wieners was one of the few writers/artists (Jack Kerouac and Eileen Myles were the other two) who published two separate Hanuman books. *A Superficial Estimation*, which written in 1973, but published in 1986, and re-printed in the second Black Sparrow book *Cultural Affairs in Boston*, and *Conjugal Contraries & Quart*, published as a Hanuman book in 1987.
(Conjugal Contraries & Quart, A Superficial Estimation, Hanuman Books. From the collection of Jim Dunn. Photo: Jim Dunn)

A Superficial Estimation was the very first book in the entire series. It is unique in that it contains fascinating prose poems. Wieners shifts from adopting movie star masks for himself and instead now sees his family members as famous movie stars through his imaginative lens. Once again, Wieners mixes celluloid dreams with his personal family and Boston History. “Elizabeth Taylor is my sister, you might as well know it. And as you might know, she is always with me even though married to someone else. I recently visited their home on Cape Cod, where they have a small house, piquant in its quaintness against the woods of Duxbury, Massachusetts.” (A Superficial Estimation 1) Ascribing the glamor of Elizabeth Taylor to his beloved sister is pure manifestation of his admiration and love for her, in Wieners’ own inimitable style. His sister Marion, was ever faithful to Wieners throughout his life, a nun who left her order to marry a Catholic conservative business man, settling in Duxbury Mass. Through his visons of movie stars,
he finds the freedom to express his love for his family, with whom he had an up and
down relationship, but who remained ever faithful and supportive of Wieners throughout
his struggles and troubles. He sees his loving kind mother as Bette Davis and he
expresses true compassion for her. “My mother Bette Davis, was the most generous
woman I have ever known. She tended to me day and night for over, 35 years seeing my
evry wish, my ordinary needs and wants, providing all my emergency seclusions, and
creating a person without doubt, equal to any distraction would offer. She pervaded every
occasion, helping increase its significance, conduct, importance, and satisfy the important
of its occurrence.” (A Superficial Estimation 35) Once he allows himself the freedom to
apply the mask of glamor to his loved ones, Wieners’ prose is refreshingly clear and
direct, without the swift cuts and velocity of many of his later poems. A Superficial
Estimation written in 1973 shortly after his mother’s death is a small wondrous love letter
to his family delivered through the glamor of the stars.

The Black Sparrow and the Hanuman books brought some attention to Wieners in
the late 80s. A review of the Black Sparrow Selected poems by Robert Creeley was
published in the New York Times. Creeley’s thoughtful and particular review of his
friend’s book was thoughtful and concise, Foye used an edited version of it for the
foreword to Cultural Affairs in Boston. Creeley, in his insight and compassion, highlights
Wieners has an exceptionally human beauty - as if there ever were any other. There is in
it such a commonness of phrase and term, such a substantial fact of a daily life
transformed by the articulateness of his feelings and the intensity of the inexorable world
that is forever out there waiting for any one of us…in these times so bitterly without
human presence, risk, care, response, he becomes the consummate artist of our common voice, and his battered, singular presence our own.” (Creeley, New York Times) Wieners regard and reverence for sanctity and beauty allowed his poetry to transcend his bouts of madness, drugs and poverty. Old friend, poet Gerrit Lansing also recognized Wieners reverence for beauty and unspoken sanctity. “John had a sense of sanctity that was somewhat hidden now and then, but at other time it came out. It had something to do with the veneration of beauty, and Ernest Dowson, and woman, and he wrote this little series of essays late in life called Woman. But I don’t think he would have liked to talk about his own vocation, in a certain way, at all.”(Oral History Initiative)

By the early 90s, the little recognition Wieners had received from the Black Sparrow and Hanuman books had faded, but he still had a rabid and dedicated followers amongst poets, especially those in Boston, New York, and San Francisco. He gave a memorable reading in Lowell in 1993, where he read with old friends Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg and Tibetan Monk, Trungpa Ringpoche. As a memorial for Wieners 80th birthday, I wrote a remembrance of the reading in Lowell that night in September 1994, on the Allen Ginsberg Project blog in 2014:

“Wieners and Ginsberg last read together (with Robert Creeley) at the Smith Baker Center in Lowell, MA, as part of the annual Lowell Celebrates Kerouac festival. The hall resembled an old cathedral and was packed. The air was charged. Heavy rain and thunderstorms persisted into the night. Wieners took to the stage wearing a full yellow raincoat with a shopping-basket draped around his arm. He ambled back and forth upon the stage reading fragments from his copy of his own Selected Poems, ragged, and stuffed with advertisements, newspaper clippings and random ephemera. It was difficult to hear him as he whispered to himself, almost in prayer, repeating certain phrases that even he seemed surprised he had written. Ginsberg was beside himself, up and down, trying to get Wieners to focus, approaching the stage, pacing back and forth from his seat, waving his arms beseeching someone to get Wieners off the stage. Wieners remained unconcerned. He continued to read poems in his own time, he then roamed the stage like he was casually shopping in the supermarket in his
mind. After the reading, as Ginsberg signed books and greeted the crowd, Wieners and his good friend, Charley Shively walked out alone into the rain, sharing an old umbrella.” (Dunn, “The Allen Ginsberg Project Blog”)

Through his connection to Foye, Wieners gave several readings in New York at the Bowery Poetry Project from 1988-1996. In 1997, there were a flurry of events that augured a mini-comeback for Wieners. His journal from San Francisco, 707 Scott Street was published by Sun & Moon Press. The Boston Phoenix published an insightful and sympathetic profile of Wieners and his unique place in Boston’s literary community, written by poet, and Classics scholar Cathy Salmons. Around that time, in March 1997, there was a massive celebration at the Old West Church in Beacon Hill, organized by Jack Powers of Stone Soup, to celebrate Jack Kerouac’s birthday with Wieners as the featured attraction. The night was full of writers, musicians and readers who revered Kerouac but came to see Wieners. Musicians Willie Alexander, Randy Black and Mark Mulcahy of Miracle Legion performed. Writers and poets, such as Bill Corbett, Jack Powers, and Billy Barnum also performed. It was a legendary night with Wieners reading last, almost at midnight, with half the crowd already gone. In 1999, he gave his last reading in New York with Michael McClure at the Guggenheim in celebration of an opening for an exhibit of the paintings of Francesca Clemente. He read for a total of twelve minutes. He gave a stellar, if shortened reading. He may have been thrown off by having to read before his friend and Beat poet Michael McClure, who read after him. His last lines were, “I feel my time has been satiated, or saturated, rather by the next reader. Forgive me.” (Reading at the Guggenheim, October 29, 1999, “Pennsound”)

Throughout the 90s Wieners published rarely. He was invited to read at the University of Maine Poetry conference in July, 2000 that focused on poets of the 1960s.
In anticipation of that reading, Wieners wrote a cluster of five poems that he allowed to be published by poet Michael Rothenberg’s online poetry web poetry magazine called *Big Bridge*. The poems are short, lean and filled with the usual movie references, particularly to the Bette Davis, Claude Rains movie, “Mr. Skeffington” as well as an array of other Joan Crawford movies: *Humoresque*, and *The Torch*, among others. The poems in this small cluster ruminate on the state of Maine, Wieners’ memories, and Joan Crawford movies. The first poem begins as book reviews of book that have become movies and movies that become dreams for a weekend reading at the University of Maine and then takes off from there, leading to Bob Creeley and the exact dates of the upcoming poetry conference at the University of Maine:

Liv Ullman

**Book reviews for a Weekend Reading at University Of Maine.**

John Wieners

I. *Mr. Skeffington* by Elizabeth R.

II. The Waves by Virgil Dorothy in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (See above)

III. *The Miracle of the Bells* – James Ramsay

Orions- Olga Trocchi

Dorothy Thompson

The Group by M & M

The Left Hand of God- Cesare Ingres 1960

Tootsie Roll in Vertigo’s

Technicolor Thompson Spa Charlestown

Pour mon marie Bob Creeley

Wednesday June 28

Sunday July 2

Transcription: Vanni S

Weiller

Friday June 30
Saturday July 1 (“Lisbon Indian Summer”, *Big Bridge*)

The poem “Empty Halls” is a short lyric ruminating on his perspective memories of Sunday morning, and then takes flight into identity choice, real and imagined characters in stories through the poet and covered up matters by the Registry of Motor Vehicles. Forgotten details that do not exist and a pipe dream on bicycle air. Beautifully cryptic lyric that is charged with his own logic and meaning:

**EMPTY HALLS**

Sunday mornings are not the same.

Whether in Monterey or out back of town—
the level mean is different. I chose Mr. Skeffington because it became well-known around the Legion of Decency that people in the story through myself are not real. No matter how hard it is to lay by them- They never were of this concern.

Forget the details. They do not exist. Like a pipe-dream on bicycle air the Registry of Motor Vehicles shussed the matter up.

May- 2000 A.D. (“Lisbon Indian Summer”, *Big Bridge*)

This slim online volume of Wieners' poems was published with little or no fanfare and was virtually ignored by critics and fans. Wieners had no investment in them after he wrote them nor did he read any the five poems when he attended the University of Maine Poetry Conference that summer as one of the feature readers. However, they are representative of the depth of the wide ranging and various references he loaded into the later poems. These poems were inward facing and searching but revealed the bottomless reserve of his palate, mixing memory with vison and pulling images form his amazing knowledge of everything—literature, movies, the occult, Boston History, and music.
Raymond Foye recognized this and spoke specifically about Wieners’ later poems in the Woodberry Room Oral History Initiative. “It’s the late poems I read of John’s. Maybe because the early poems are to me like Beatles records, I don’t have to listen to them, there up here (points to his head). But it’s the late work that I keep going back to, and finding he’s layered so many great mysteries there. And it is this picture of pure consciousness; of one thought following another and the gaps in between them circling back around again. So it’s magnificent work, absolutely. There’s grandeur to it.” (Oral History Initiative)

In the fall of 2000, Wieners returned to Harvard to Lamont Library to read in the Farnsworth room hosted by Stratis Haviaras, curator of the Woodberry Poetry Room at that time. Wieners had come full circle and returned to Harvard where he had been an employee working in the Woodberry Poetry room in 1957, and where he had been the guest lecturer in Robert Creeley’s Poetry class at the Extension School in 1972. The first few poems he read in his return to the Farnsworth for his reading in 2000 addressed specifically his time working at Harvard and his eventual dismissal. They are fascinating poems that do not exist on paper. I discovered the recordings in my research, and transcribed for the Oral History Initiative on John Wieners at Harvard in 2015. Like the Maine poems, they start out occasional, written specifically for the reading at Harvard and then they take off into Wieners imagination:

*Thank You….I used to work in the library here in 1957….before I was discharged for the effects of Benzedrine…effects on Benzedrine. But that was so many years ago, it must be thirty-three, fifty-seven to six, forty-three years ago!*

**For The Widener Library**

Welcome to the Farnsworth Room
Over the holidays on Beacon Hill
when the weather was cooler,
reminiscing from its back side.
to be off of it,
to introduce yourselves to some of the joys
library engagement represents

I have read here before upstairs
in the Lamont Library
and warming to the staff and faculty
members within your vast archives
the advantages in terms of acknowledgement
allows little in the way of a personal expression.

Manners always show education and
to have the exhibition hall in mind
on the main staircases, a former employee
might say, “Make sure the windows are open
and the cases not tampered with.”
Brings back memories of great delight

Business corporations let them go at once
here are the keys and follow instructions
toward lunch and visitors
some had cards, some were merely children
some were on tour when the stairs
were carpeted differently

An extra booth provided before the open doors
to honor the members of this vast system
it was extra duty for a glass of milk
many were not allowed to know
some came from different causes
because of our youth out of far-away countries
in strange costume.

(“Poetry Reading, April 13, 2000”, Listening Booth,
Woodberry Poetry Room)

It was a modest but glorious return for the poet. The audience was no more than thirty
people, but they were energetic and devoted admirers of Wieners. Bill Corbett gave the
introduction. Fellow Boston poets Gerrit Lansing, Joe Torra, Dan Bouchard, Joel Sloman
and many others were among the crowd. Wieners read for a total of 17 minutes. It was a short stellar reading. Of the several poems he read, only two were previously published poems, “Rise Shining Martyrs” and “For Denise Levertov.” As the above poem demonstrates, the new work was wide ranging with references to Harvard University, Lamont Library, Joan Miro, his hometown of Milton, and the reading itself. The new poems possessed disjointed yet heartfelt lyric, yet they were also are imbued with a sense of humor, using witty pun or unexpected wordplay, that elicited several laughs from the gathered audience, that seemed intentional, not an accidental result of his unrestrained flights of mad language. The later work was ahead of its time. The audience was not ready for Wieners’ shifts of gender and identity, his disengagement from meaning, his flights of language and image, his intentional disordering of grammar, and his spelling and line breaks. But his work was unapologetic and courageous in that it allowed the audience a raw, unvarnished view into the mind of the poet. Raymond Foye also recognizes the layered mysteries and the hidden pleasures of the later work. “It’s the late work that I keep going back to, and finding he’s layered so many great mysteries there. And it is this picture of pure consciousness; of one thought following another and the gaps in between them circling back around again. So it’s magnificent work, absolutely. There’s grandeur to it” (Oral History Initiative).

The barriers of the past that have prevented Wieners from getting the recognition he deserves are slowly but surely being removed. The issue of access and the availability of the later work is being rectified with the recent publications of a new Selected Poems from Wave Books, and the Collection of Journals, published by City Lights. Also, there is a reconsideration of his later work outside of the common perception in the 1970s and
1980s that it was mad work that served only to damage Wieners reputation as opposed to vital work years ahead of its time. Slowly the literary world is recognizing the accomplishment of the later work, not as mad flights of language but what British writer Geoffrey Ward called, “a laboratory for future understanding, a position of acute vulnerability, but one with precedence in the English Romantic movement, and the poetry of Walt Whitman” (Ward), securing his rightful place as one of the most daring and accomplished lyric poets of his time. Once again, Raymond Foye offer a final insight into Wieners place as a masterful poet. “He was always engaged in poetry and that’s where this thing about loving the early work, you know, the feeling was that he was betraying a belle lettrist sensibility. He just broke it open in such an amazing way. He’s always the master. He always will be.” (Oral History Initiative)
Appendix

In the course of my research, I transcribed entire sections of the Harvard Woodberry Room’s Oral History Initiative, titled *On John Wieners* that took place on October 21, 2015 at Harvard University, sponsored by the Woodberry Poetry Room. The panel consisted of Fanny Howe, Gerrit Lansing, Ammiel Alcalay, Raymond Foye and me, facilitated by Robert Dewhurst and hosted by Christina Davis, curator of the Woodberry Poetry Room. All of the panelists are poets, scholars and were friends of John Wieners. The excerpts that were referenced in my thesis are included below in their entirety. I have also included a copy of the Wieners poem “Charity Balls” referenced in last excerpt from Raymond Foye.

**Robert Dewhurst:** What was John’s own sense of his achievement as a poet or his legacy?

**Gerrit Lansing:** Well that’s a good question but I don’t think it’s one that John would ever have talked about…John had a sense of sanctity that was somewhat hidden now and then, but at other time it came out. It had something to do with the veneration of beauty, and Ernest Dowson, and woman, and he wrote this little series of essays late in life called *Woman*. But I don’t think he would have liked to talk about his own vocation, in a certain way, at all. And my experience of reading with him very early which must have been at Stone Soup in the late 50s or the very early 60s when Stone Soup was in Boston at
Cambridge Street. It was an extremely wonderful and straightforward reading. So at this period in his life there weren’t anecdotes about him as eccentric at all, nor was he. And his critical sense and his ear was attuned and his criticism of others’ poetry, of Steve (Jonas) and mine, and we talked about it at the time. There was nothing eccentric, or outre or funny, He had a great sense of humor; fun was there. That’s what I meant by caper at the first time in the 60s of wandering around and talking about everything in Boston. (Oral History Initiative)

**Damon Krukowski:** I had a question to return to the Boston geography, just because, where he lived on Joy Street was at the edge of the West End, and he was so attuned to the past, I was just wondering if that ever came up? If he ever talked about of what was missing there in Boston. Scollay Square was gone. The West End was gone. Was that a part of his personal geography of the city still?

**Raymond Foye:** Yes, he writes about it. I mean, the urban renewal in the 60s was a part of popular madness. It was just unbelievable what they tore down, what they destroyed. And yeah, I think John…he does write about that. Yeah, and, he wouldn’t talk about that so much, but you know he’d take you somewhere and you would go down one street and another street and you would end up in a back alley. And there be just like a brick wall and maybe a garbage can but you could tell it would be a really special place for him. You know, it was kind of like a shrine. I mean, John lived in a state of grace. And reality was sacred. He was a priest and he was keeping the mysteries for all of us. And he was doing magic, that’s really what he was doing all day long. There’s this great Jonas Mekas quote from the New York Sunday Times this past weekend. They asked him what he
does, he’s ninety-two. He says, “I get up. I don’t have any thoughts. I don’t have any work. I make the angels do the work.” That’s what John did. And that’s magic, so…

(Oral History Initiative,)

**Jim Dunn:** I have question… *She’d Turn on a Dime*, was that ever published (outside of the Black Sparrow Collected Poems edition)?

**Raymond Foye:** Yeah, that came out in the first Black Sparrow book, *She’d Turn on a Dime* was the name of the manuscript he was working on late in life and I was telling John Martin at Black Sparrow press that he had to publish a book and that it had to be at least 400 pages because I thought there was not going to be anything else of John’s to come out and I wanted as much to go in and I wanted the books to be printed as John edited them, but then there’s all this other stuff. So I’m telling John Martin at Black Sparrow Press it has to be four hundred or five hundred pages and John (Wieners) writes him a letter where he says, “Dear Mr. Martin, I would like to inform you that the mistress of the Pope is a very wealthy woman. My new book should be less than a hundred pages and it will be titled *Night Nurse at Massachusetts General Hospital a.k.a. She’d turn on a Dime.*” And it went on like this. And John Martin who actually was a bit of a conservative guy even though he published Charles Bukowski, I mean, he made his living as a furniture dealer and I think he was kind of like a Christian Scientist. He was really weird. And he called me up all upset saying “What is this? What’s going on? And he’s like, I got this letter from John Wieners… And I was like, oh my God. Read it to me. So I had a lot of explaining to do but I really wanted that late work to come out because that is where John was at. And when Gerrit was reading that poem which was one of the first poems John ever wrote, actually, I saw all the late work in that poem. The way he
moves from thought to thought. And it is pure projective verse. This is composition by
field. It’s all there and he takes Olson further than anybody does but *She’d Turn on a
Dime* was the whole manuscript as I found out. And I got a lot of crap from it because
there was a lot of people who said that this man is insane, he’s mad, you’re not doing him
any favors by printing this. It doesn’t make any sense. It was a very controversial thing. It
started out in ’75 when Charley Shively published *Behind the State Capitol* and Robert
Duncan was furious and really thought he (Shively) was destroying John’s reputation. So
there was this tension throughout John’s career, between the mad poems and madness
and sanity. And I grappled with it quite a lot. But I thought, “Well, he’s still using words.
So let him go. (Oral History Initiative)

**Raymond Foye:** It’s the late poems I read of John’s. Maybe because the early poems are
to me like Beatles records, I don’t have to listen to them, there up here (points to his
head). But it’s the late work that I keep going back to, and finding he’s layered so many
great mysteries there. And it is this picture of pure consciousness; of one thought
following another and the gaps in between them circling back around again. So it’s
magnificent work, absolutely. There’s grandeur to it….The last poem in *Cultural Affairs
in Boston* was a poem I was sitting at my kitchen table one morning and John was
staying over and I was preparing some manuscript that I had to work on and I had
deadlines. And he was sitting there and he was talking to himself. And I was getting
really annoyed and I was about to say “John, shut up!” And then I thought, “Wait a
minute, why don’t you just listen to what he’s saying. And so I didn’t let him know I was
listening to what he was saying, I pretended to keep working. And I started listening and
then I started writing down what he was saying. And it was this extraordinary poem. And then when he saw that I was writing down what he was saying, he stopped. And later that day, I typed the poem up and I gave it to him, and I said, “What do you think?” And he wrote the title at the top. He took out his pen and he wrote “Charity Balls.” And it’s a fantastic poem. He was always engaged in poetry and that’s where this thing about loving the early work, you know, the feeling was that he was betraying a *belle lettrist* sensibility. He just broke it open in such an amazing way. He’s always the master. He always will be.

(Oral History Initiative)

Charity Balls

I had a fellowship, but live poorly
On slices of pizza
Later, a career washing lettuce;
But I have always been the same.
It’s a question of acquiring a mastery of tone
Beneath the crystal chandeliers and champagne
On a glass table top.
At the age of five I thought Scarlett O’Hara
A fictional character. It was not until
The age of forty-eight I knew she was real.
Old clothes and bedroom slippers and a scarf.
Wrapped around her head.
In low cost tenement housing
She began talking about my writing
And her sex life
I’m curt by nature and dolorous
But I knew if I worked hard I’d eventually make it.

(October 2, 1985) (*Cultural Affairs* 184)
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