

Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo?: Musical Moods in the Casino Hermann Goering

Sally E. Parry

The songs in *Gravity's Rainbow*, especially those seemingly based on popular sources, have been seen as commentaries on reality, as subversive attempts to undermine the system, and even as the creation of a mythic mode through which to understand the universe.¹ Some of the music sung at the Casino Hermann Goering, especially the "Vulgar Song" and "The Penis He Thought Was His Own," and its apparent sources recall a supposedly civilized past, specifically the Gilded Age, and juxtapose it with a rude and chaotic present. Yoking older, romanticized ballads with crude modern lyrics about sex is not as odd as it might seem at first. In the Gilded Age, as any historian or reader of Mark Twain knows, forceful capitalists, like the robber barons, and increasing urbanization were changing common perceptions about the United States as primarily a pleasant agrarian democracy. At the same time, popular music and literature were presenting a sentimental view of life in which behavior was highly codified and ladies and gentlemen had to follow certain patterns of behavior in public. Even deviations from expected behaviors, like adultery and violent crime, were sentimentalized by ballads. This conflict between the representations in popular culture and the harshness of real life is also embodied by Slothrop in his constant reference to songs, films and comic books while being pummeled by forces beyond his control.

The Casino Hermann Goering, despite being named for Hitler's Air Force Commander, is presented as an artifact of another time, certainly before the Second World War, possibly even before the First. References to history abound. During Slothrop's first morning near Cap d'Antibes, he observes an "ancient aqueduct" (181), sign of a long-ago expansionistic society, the Roman Empire. The invitation to breakfast on the beach with the three dancers reminds Tantivy of "'Something by an Impressionist. A Fauve'" (183). The "great war" (also what the First World War was called before the Second) has "gone north" (181). Slothrop is linked with icons of the '20s and '30s: "sleek Hispano-Suizas" (181), Rudolph Valentino (182), and sexual byplay in which Katje calls him "'My little chickadee'" (198). Officers at the Casino "go drifting in and out, brown and distant as rotogravure" (194). The

Casino's prewar glory is evident at night, although during the daytime it is shabby, full of dust and ghosts.

A number of actual songs from before the First World War are mentioned: "School Days, School Days" (1907), "Come, Josephine, in My Flying Machine" (1910) and "There'll be a HOT TIME in the Old Town Tonite!" (1886, 1896) (GR 222-23), this last a minstrel song made popular during the Spanish-American War (Boni 36). The music in Slothrop's head as he searches the beach for Tantivy, "As I walk along the Bwa-deboolong with an independent air" (203), comes from the 1891 hit "The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo."² The rhythmic pattern of this song is repeated in the "Vulgar Song" drunkenly sung in the Casino. The end of the chorus of the "Vulgar Song," "So call me what you will, m' lads, but make way for the bloke / That's poked the love-ly lit-tle Queen of Transyl-vaayn-yaa!" (213), echoes "You can hear them sigh, / And wish to die, / You can see them wink the other eye / At the man who broke the Bank at Monte Car-lo" (Gilbert 126). Both songs feature opportunists who appear rich and successful and seem to enjoy every minute of it.

Another song that draws on the rhythmic conventions of Gilded Age songs is "The Penis He Thought Was His Own," a melodramatic ballad of a man whose penis is more popular than he is and which disappears with "girlies"—or perhaps, more sinisterly, with "They"—who "sweet-talked it clear out of sight" (216-17). Several songs are antecedents of this one: the ballad "She Is More to Be Pitied, Than Censured" (1894); "Alice Blue Gown," a hit from the 1919 musical *Irene*; and "My Sweetheart's the Man in the Moon" (1892), a Tin Pan Alley favorite. All were written to be sung, in true Gilded Age style, with a lead singer and then a chorus (usually of four men) echoing parts of lines. "She Is More to Be Pitied" tells of a young woman who "ventured / On life's stormy path, ill advised" (Gray 94-95), was betrayed by her lover, and dies. The chorus reminds us "That a man was the cause of it all" (95). Margaret Boni calls the song "righteously maudlin" (92), much like "The Penis He Thought Was His Own," heard as Sir Stephen and Slothrop discuss their troubles. (They are both betrayed by the system and in turn act as betrayers.) The story in "Alice Blue Gown" is of a woman who had a lovely dress she wore so much that "it wore, and it wore, and it wore, / Till it went and it wasn't no more" (McCarthy 19), paralleling the penis, which disappears, apparently from overuse. In "My Sweetheart's the Man in the Moon," a woman sings about her lover, the man in the moon; the chorus is as follows:

My sweetheart's the man in the moon,
 I'm going to marry him soon.
 'Twould fill me with bliss,
 Just to give him one kiss,
 But I know that a dozen I never would miss.
 I'll go up in a great big balloon,
 And see my sweetheart in the moon.
 Then behind some dark cloud
 Where no one is allow'd,
 I'll make love to the man in the moon. (Thornten 41–42)

The general theme of the song is appropriate to *Gravity's Rainbow*, given both Slothrop's balloon voyage to Berlin and his later incarnation as Rocketman. The verse form is like two limericks put together, reminiscent of Marvy's Mothers' "Rocket Limericks" (305–07, 311, 334–35). In the penis song, the tenor and the inner voices function as the lead singer, while the bass and the inner voices of the last line serve as chorus, commiserating with the poor abandoned lover.

In most of these songs, the melody and style of presentation seem to call for an emotional response from the listeners. In the old songs, lovers are separated by fate, carelessness or even outer space, and the lyrics try to provide a reconciliation or at least a catharsis. In the *Gravity's Rainbow* songs, there really is no catharsis: the penis disappears, and the singer of the "Vulgar Song" is unable to treat his situation seriously. He seems on the edge of a nervous breakdown, "bordering on the State of Schizophren-ia," and "laugh[s] so much you'd think the world was just a silly joke" (213). Whether this response reflects his emotional state or a cynical view of the world is not made clear.

The Gilded Age song paradigms and references to a nostalgic past are intentionally mocked in *Gravity's Rainbow*, whose narrator knows this gracious past never existed. The past was just as strange and violent and cruel (and probably controlled by Them), but the popular culture of the time sentimentalized it. The narrator's intention seems to be to rip off this façade. The same rhythmic structures and, presumably, melodies are used in the *Gravity's Rainbow* songs, but the lyrics are full of vulgar words and implications. By juxtaposing a romanticized and contained past with a stark and frightening present and future, Pynchon deconstructs the conceit that there was ever a past better than (or worse than) the present.

—Illinois State University

Notes

¹See Hume and Knight for a fuller discussion of the function of music in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

²Weisenburger (112) mentions that the Bois de Boulogne is famous as an area for prostitution, but does not give the song reference. The opening of the chorus is "As I walk along the Bois Boolong / With an independent air, / You can hear the girls declare / 'He must be a millionaire'" (Gilbert 126), something Slothrop as an American soldier might be considered by local girls.

Works Cited

- Boni, Margaret Bradford. *Songs of the Gilded Age*. New York: Golden, 1960.
- Gilbert, Fred. "The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo." 1891. Boni 125–28.
- Gray, William B. "She Is More to Be Pitied, Than Censured." 1894. Boni 92–95.
- Hume, Kathryn and Thomas J. Knight. "Pynchon's Orchestration of *Gravity's Rainbow*." *JEGP* 85.3 (1986): 366–85.
- McCarthy, Joseph and Harry Tierney. "Alice Blue Gown." 1919. *Irene*. New York: Leo Feist, 1973. 19–21.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. 1973. New York: Penguin, 1987.
- Thornten, James. "My Sweetheart's the Man in the Moon." 1892. Boni 40–42.
- Weisenburger, Steven. *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988.