PYNCHON'S PARKER PASSAGE: A SOURCE AND SOUND ANALYSIS

Gerhard Westerath

In his influential article on the encyclopedic character of Gravity's Rainbow, Edward Mendelson[1] challenges readers to look for background material which Pynchon used for the construction of his book. Mendelson himself not only identifies the source for one "local cluster of data," the NTA episode, but also explicates the author's ways of adapting such material to his own purposes. Here I want to present another case where Pynchon uses a--more or less obscure--source to add yet another voice to the polyphony of voices[2] that makes up Gravity's Rainbow.

The significance of music is obvious in all of Pynchon's work and has been widely discussed. J. O. Tate suggests a more general concern in his article "Gravity's Rainbow: The Original Soundtrack."[3] Except for one sentence in the opening part, however, Tate basically restricts himself to listing the various sources and uses Pynchon has for music. That one sentence is worth repeating, defining as it does the wider context for the present study:

> The "aural interface," the totalitarian background noise of civilization, is represented in the text--or on the tape--of that "acoustic collage," Gravity's Rainbow.

To treat Gravity's Rainbow as an "acoustic collage," however, is a worthwhile project. The following pages are taken from a longer study in which I have tried to analyze the acoustic texture of Gravity's Rainbow with regard to four aspects of sound: environmental sounds, voices, music, and silence--an attempt to read Gravity's Rainbow which takes a listening approach.[4] In this sense the following argument is meant not only to demonstrate what background material Pynchon put into his book but also to advocate a postmodern approach in which a listening reader completes the text by putting his imaginative power into the book as well.

The local cluster to be discussed here exemplifies the use of jazz, an area Tate neglects completely. Pynchon includes references to famous jazz musicians in most of his writing. If V. alludes discreetly to Ornette Coleman--the name is changed to McClintic Sphere--it and Gravity's Rainbow both refer explicitly to the most influential alto-saxophonist in the history of jazz, Charlie Parker.

Jazz constitutes an "art outside the realm of written fiction"[5] of the sort Mendelson sees as typically featured in his canon of encyclopedic narratives. Furthermore, jazz is

exceptionally well suited to convey Pynchon's most positive values, the "affirmation of life" (N. O. Brown) emerging from an anti-establishment, preterite perspective. Jazz is essentially a personal music, an affirmation of individual life, in its best forms working against the limiting codes of convention.

The one sentence on Charlie "Yardbird" Parker in Gravity's Rainbow evokes Pynchon's most prominent codes of meaning and value. Moreover, it provides a close look at Pynchon's technique of quoting even obscure sources and working these into a deeply metaphoric and extremely sensual language. Pynchon writes with an essential awareness of the acoustic quality of all writing. He seems to enact Marshall McLuhan's observation that "the content of writing . . . is speech,"[6] as becomes more than evident in the Parker passage below.

The passage is spliced into the chapter in which Slothrop recalls his adventures at the Roseland Ballroom in Boston. The "hook [. . .] to hang the story from"[7] is the sound of a tune Parker played frequently.

> "Cherokee" comes wailing up from the dance floor below, over the hi-hat, the string bass, the thousand sets of feet where moving rose lights suggest not pale Harvard boys and their dates, but a lotta dolled-up redskins. (63)

Departing from the name of the tune, Pynchon charges the incident with his codes of meaning. "Cherokee" evokes the American Indian and his preterition, from a white perspective. "The song playing is one more lie about white crimes" (63). But Pynchon knows the music, too, and he connects the level of verbal association with the actual sound of the tune.

> But more musicians have floundered in the channel to "Cherokee" than have got through from end to end. All those long, long notes . . . what're they up to, all that time to do something inside of? is it an Indian spirit plot? (63)

Pynchon plays with the idea that preterite peoples, Indian subjects evoked by the title and black musicians, come together in the medium of jazz to counteract white structures. Thus a certain atmosphere is established before the actual Parker passage comes in. The passage itself takes up this atmosphere and intensifies it in a very complex way. Pynchon has packed a lot of information into one long sentence in which he leaves the setting of the Roseland Ballroom completely.

> Down in New York, drive fast maybe get there for the last set--on 7th Ave., between 139th and 140th, tonight, "Yardbird" Parker is finding out how he can use the notes at the higher ends of these very chords to break up the melody into have mercy what is it a

> fucking machine gun or something man he must be out of his mind 32nd notes demisemiquavers say it very (demisemiquaver) fast in a Munchkin voice if you can dig that coming out of Dan Wall's Chili House and down the street--shit, out in all kinds of streets (his trip, by '39, well begun: down inside his most affirmative solos honks already the idle, amused dum-de-dumming of old Mister fucking Death he self) out over the airwaves, into the society gigs, someday as far as what seeps out hidden speakers in the city elevators and in all the markets, his bird's singing, to gainsay the Man's lullabies, to subvert the groggy wash of the endlessly, gutlessly overdubbed strings. (63-64)

This breathtaking long sentence reveals a number of Pynchon's basic concerns and techniques. He clearly projects his admiration for the virtuosity and musicality of Parker's playing, and by means of changing perspectives he allows the reader to share the experience directly. Starting with a narrative diction, he brings the scene to our immediate experience ("tonight") to go without introduction into an expression of stunned admiration ("have mercy what is it a fucking machine gun or something"). Still in the same flow of language he includes an invitation to the reader to share the admiration by repeating a word out loud (32nd notes demisemiquavers say it very [demisemiquaver] fast in a Munchkin voice"). All of this is part of the same sentence, if that grammatical category still fits this outpouring of words.

At this point at least it becomes clear that the encouragement to read aloud should be taken to apply to the whole passage. To read aloud is to realize that Pynchon uses his own virtuosity in yet another way. Arguably, the streaming flow of words--not interrupted by any regular punctuation except for two dashes as indications for "what the Germans call 'breath-pauses'" (713)--not only tells about but actually evokes Charlie Parker's long and fast saxophone phrases. A reader who is willing to follow the encouragement will hear the acoustic, even musical element in Pynchon's language that is here foregrounded so explicitly.[8]

Thus by actively listening to this passage, we can be sure that Pynchon is familiar with the sound of Parker's music. At the same time, however, we can demonstrate once again the encyclopedic approach Pynchon also takes to his material. The musical and historical details included in this "language solo" are not so much heard but read. In other words, Pynchon has a written source that he used and changed for his purpose. Most probably, this source is the famous Chili Parlor interview, published as a special edition of the jazz magazine Down Beat[9] and reprinted in an influential collection of interviews entitled, interestingly for us, Hear Me Talking To Ya. In this interview Parker explains the essence of his harmonic and

melodic innovation, and describes the musical context and the time and place in which this innovation occurred. Comparing passages reveals that Pynchon not only imitates Parker's music but also paraphrases his words. This is Charlie Parker talking:

> I remember one night before Monroe's I was jamming in a chili house on Seventh Avenue between 139th and 140th. It was December, 1939. Now I'd been getting bored with the stereotyped changes that were being used all the time at the time, and I kept thinking there's bound to be something else. I could hear it sometimes but I couldn't play it.
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> Well, that night, I was working over "Cherokee," and, as I did, I found that by using the higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes, I could play this thing I'd been hearing. I came alive.[10]

In many ways, Charlie Parker and his alto saxophone represent the forces of life. This affirmation of life, however, is overshadowed by the inevitable presence of death, the basic ontological condition in Pynchon's cosmos. In a parenthesis, as we have seen, Pynchon refers not only to Parker's untimely death but also to the atmosphere of his music, which, in spite of its life-affirming intensity, breathes an awareness of death, an awareness that is also essential to Pynchon's art.

> [. . .] (his trip, by '39, well begun: down inside his most affirmative solos honks already the idle, amused dum-de-dumming of old Mister fucking Death he self) [. . .]

This appearance of death personified echoes Roger and Jessica's experience in the preceding chapter, where after a rocket blast they realize "Death has come in the pantry door: stands watching them, iron and patient, with a look that says try to tickle me" (60). At the same time, it anticipates other passages where Death is also presented as playing a terrible music. Parker's music is an affirmation of life under the shadow of destruction.

Like McClintic Sphere, alias Ornette Coleman, Parker represents the truth of life that has to maintain itself against a white world of negativity and lies. In musical terms, the white lie is in covering up the truth with a "groggy wash of the endlessly, gutlessly overdubbed strings," thus turning the immediate reality of black, improvised, creative music into white, artificial, sterile "Muzak." As a representative of real life, then, Charlie Parker and with him all real musicians form a counterforce against the white plastic world of the establishment. Their function is to "gainsay the Man's lullabies," "the Man" being the generic name for white society as seen from a black, preterite perspective. And Pynchon

includes an optimistic view that this counterforce will in some way be effective. With a statement of hope he wraps up the passage on Parker and takes us back to the Roseland Ballroom and to the sounds of "Cherokee:"

> So that prophecy, even up here on rainy Massachusetts Avenue, is beginning these days to work itself out in "Cherokee," the saxes downstairs getting now into some, oh really weird shit . . . . (64)

Music in general but especially jazz clearly comes out as a positive force in the Manichean struggle of "Life Against Death"[11] which is at the core of Gravity's Rainbow. Although even music can be tinged with the presence of death, or even be used to carry Western Man's obsession with death (as in the case of Wagner), it still speaks to our senses immediately, thus defying the cold, sterile, dead world of abstractions.

It is a major concern of Pynchon's not only to transport his ideas on the level of meaning and content but to transcend the limitations of his medium and speak to our senses directly. He does so not only by alluding to musical or, more generally, acoustic phenomena but by playing with words as if with acoustic objects in a manner that charges his language with sound even on a formal level. In this sense Pynchon calls for a listening reader, and whoever is willing may experience Gravity's Rainbow, that "acoustic collage," as a polyphonic text, a rich sensory world, full of sound, teeming with life.

--Mainz

Notes

[1] Edward Mendelson, "Gravity's Encyclopedia," Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976) 170.

[2] Compare also Stephen A. Tyler, "Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document," Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986) 122-40.

[3] J. O. Tate, "Gravity's Rainbow: The Original Soundtrack," Pynchon Notes 13 (1983): 3-24. The passage quoted below is from p. 4.

[4] Gerhard Westerath, "The Acoustic Texture of Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow," M. A. thesis, Mainz, 1985.

[5] Mendelson 164.

[6] Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 18.

[7] Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973; Penguin, 1987) 74. Subsequent references appear in the text.

[8] Compare also Charles Clerc's remark: "Many of its passages are so extraordinary that they ought to be read aloud." Charles Clerc, introduction, Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow, ed. Clerc (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983) 12.

[9] For this information I am grateful to Thomas Hirschmann, Wiesbaden, who is currently finishing a doctoral thesis on Charlie Parker.

[10] Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, eds., Hear Me Talking To Ya (1955; New York: Dover, 1966) 354.

[11] Compare Norman O. Brown, Life Against Death (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1959).