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# Pynchon's Flatted Fifth:
# The Dissonance of the Blues in *Gravity's Rainbow*

Throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* Thomas Pynchon explores the use of blues music to accentuate his postmodern leanings, frequently interrupting the text to introduce impromptu lyrical excerpts or unanticipated references to contemporary and antiquated musicians, spanning both high and pop cultural allusion. Of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Kathryn Hume suggests that Pynchon has "incontrovertibly created an uncertain, or at least an imperfectly knowable, world" (366). Undeniably, Pynchon goes to lengths to allow — and, perhaps, ensure — the reader's recognition of this unknowable-state. As Hume goes on to point out, as readers, we can never confirm that Jamf has conditioned Tyrone Slothrop with the material Impiolex G, and we can also never completely be sure of the existence of The System (366). It is Hume's belief that "music turns out to be one of several major methods by which Pynchon's characters try to bring order into their reality" and goes on to argue that "the allusions to music are so numerous and so diverse because music helps define the characters' relationships to reality" (367), thus adding to the text's coherence. However, acknowledging postmodern ambitions, we may actually read Pynchon's use of music as the opposite — the improvisational nature of these interludes actually accentuates the disjointedness of the novel, dismantling any remnants of lucidity, while underlining the postmodern tendency to consciously and continually subvert the reader's expectations.

Despite Pynchon's media-appointed recluse persona, his association with the blues and early-era jazz is no secret. David Witzling notes that despite the little biographical information available about Pynchon, it is known that he had lived in New York City after his graduation from Cornell; during this time he was a frequent visitor at the Five Spot, "the

center of avante garde jazz in New York City at the time, where [Pynchon] heard many of the seminal performances by Ornette Coleman" (28). This observation is supported by *New York Magazine*, where Nancy Sales explains that following Pynchon's graduation from Cornell in 1958 with a degree in English, Pynchon then returned to New York City, "doing the beatnik thing. 'Like others,' Pynchon writes in *Slow Learner*, 'I spent a lot of time in jazz clubs . . . I put on hornrimmed sunglasses at night. I went to parties in lofts where girls wore strange attire'" (Sales).

As Witzling goes on to assert, "Pynchon's cultivation of knowledge of late-fifties jazz and his awareness of the way in which the music and the milieu were racialized challenge the argument that his interest in African-American culture was merely incidental" (29). With this knowledge of Pynchon's extensive experience and familiarity with early blues and jazz, it can be assumed that his employing of this music throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* is intentional. Furthermore, Pynchon would have been quite aware of the disjointed nature of the genre, thus adding to its purpose in the novel to stress the inherent disorder of the text as a whole.

Blues, rustic in origin, was "haphazardly documented" and we have little information about its history before the 1920s, when its recording began on a significant scale (Shipton 41). Though not well documented, its roots have been cemented into history, as LeRoi Jones explains:

> Very early blues did not have the "classic" twelve-bar three-line AAB structure…blues-type songs utilized the structure of the early English ballad, and sometimes the songs were eight, ten, or sixteen bars. The shout as much as the African call-and-response singing dictated the form blues took. Blues issued directly out of the shout and, of course, the spiritual. The three-line structure of blues was a feature of the shout. The first two lines of the song repeated, it would seem, while the singer was waiting for the next line to come. Or, as was characteristic of the hollers and shouts, the single line could be repeated again and again, either because the singer especially liked it, or because he could not think of another line. The repeated phrase also carries into instrumental jazz as the *riff*. (62)

The improvisational nature and characteristics, there from the origins of the genre, serve as the basis for the blues, seen in the "blue notes". Of these notes is the so-called 'flatted fifth'. According to Gerhard Kubik, "the flatted fifth appears sporadically and became more common in the blues during the 1940s after it had assumed a permanent position in bebop, a development which could have reflected back to blues singers such as John Lee Hooker" (146). In essence, the trademark notes that make up and distinguish the blues from other genres in terms of theory and composition are these sporadic notes that enter and, just as quickly, exit the bars as the musician plays on. Much like Pynchon as he orchestrates *Gravity's Rainbow,* these sporadic bursts of lyricism and musical allusion serve as the novel's flatted fifth, both purposefully breaking it up and setting it apart from others.

Like a musical scene from a film,[1] our first encounter with these brief interruptions comes in the second episode of "Beyond the Zero":

> Time to gather your arse up off the floor,
>
> (have a bana-na)
>
> Brush your teeth and go toddling off to war. (Pynchon 9)

This song, delivered by Osbie Feel, immediately follows Pirate Prentice's sighting of a rocket, and afterwards we are told that there may be a second verse "but before he can get quite into it, prancing Osbie is leaped upon and thoroughly pummeled, in part with his own stout banana, by Bartley Gobbitch, DeCoverley Pox, and Maurice ('Saxophone') Reed, among others" (9). The unrelated interlude exemplifies Pynchon's connection between these lyrical bursts and the nature of blues and jazz, going so far as to interrupt the interruption itself with the sudden inclusion of a man named Maurice "Saxophone" Reed. These links suggest to the reader that Pynchon's style is as deliberately disorganized as the music he is emulating.

When considering Pynchon's professed interest in those such as Norman Mailer and Jack Kerouac, Witzling suggests, "Pynchon may well have been intentionally divorcing

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[1] Thomas Schaub asserts that the music in *Gravity's Rainbow* "corresponds to the characters' paranoid suspicions that they are only actors in a drama being directed by someone else" (45).

expression from stable meaning so as to create a literary equivalent of free jazz wherein the feeling experienced by the reader becomes more important than the plot of the story." Assuming that this is Pynchon's purpose all along, Witzling imagines that Pynchon "anticipates the emancipatory strain in poststructuralist thought that connects the pleasure of proliferating differences in literary structures with some kind of political liberation" (51). Furthermore, Witzling goes on to explain the abstraction of the music in the text, and its relationship with the reader despite the inability to experience it in sound as we might in a film:

> [Pynchon's] techniques suggest the way both African-American music and white literature produce meaning by provoking a complex combination of embodied feeling and mental cognition in the listener or reader. The associative and digressive leaps in a Pynchon passage are something like the leaps from note to note in a bebop or post-bop solo; success lies in making an unexpected connection between notes that makes intuitive sense despite the surprise it also provokes. Individual notes may fail; the soloist (or author) may leap to the wrong point. But the danger of failure…is part of the sensibility of the artist and his implied audience. Dissonance in such a solo performance is perfectly acceptable, as long as the leaps from point to point are affectively provocative and/or intellectually interesting. (51)

The dissonance in Pynchon's use of music and lyricism is nothing short of provocative — and while a case can be made that the continued dissonance is a connection in itself, the discord it creates within the text only enhances the incoherence.[2] Pynchon alludes to the survival and progress of disharmony — and by extended metaphor, perhaps, postmodernism — with the death of Austrian composer and conductor, Anton Webern. In discussing this death, composer Gustav remarks:

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[2] Cowart reasons that even if we are to make a case for the coherence of the lyrical excerpts, "the musical allusions hint at orders of being far beyond the sober faculties of rational-minded twentieth-century man" (94).

> "Do you know what kind of myth *that's* going to make in a thousand years? The young barbarians coming in to murder the Last European, standing at the far end of what'd been going on since Bach, an expansion of music's polymorphous perversity till all notes were truly equal at last…. Where was there to go after Webern? It was a moment of maximum musical freedom. It all had to come down. Another Götterdämmerung" (Pynchon 448).

And with Webern's death, we may mark the death of strict organization, hyper-structuralized detail, and coherence. And what had all "come down"? As Gerhardt von Göll says to Slothrop "to some musical ears, dissonance is really a higher form of consonance. You've heard about Anton Webern? Very sad" (Pynchon 502). In fact, the nearest following lyrical excerpt after this discussion abandons steady rhyme scheme and incorporates more incoherent techniques, such as scatting:

> Lookin' for a little fun—
> Big old bayou mosquito, oh my you
> Shoulda seen what he done!
> Poked his head up, under her dress,
> Give a little grin and, well I guess,
> Things got rough on Buf-falo Bayou,
> Skeeer turn yer meter, down,
> All—right—now!
> Ya ta, ta-ta, ya-ta-ta, ta-ta
> Lookin' for a little fun,
> *Ev*-rybody! (Pynchon 456)[3]

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[3] Pynchon's lyrical choice, incorporating sexual themes, is consistent with the blues tradition. Paul Oliver explains that any assessment of the "content of Race records soon reveals the preponderance of sexual themes above all other subjects. It might even be argued that they constitute a third, perhaps more, of all Race recordings" (Oliver 186). The use of "ta-ta" is also similar to a term frequently used in the blues: 'yas yas'. Oliver also notes, "if 'arse' could not be spoken or sung on a record the singer settled for 'yas yas', a childhood equivalent which was understood by every listener" (Oliver 208). These similarities further support Pynchon's understanding of blues and his intentional use of it—which also implies the acceptance of the effect blues has in the text, such as the consequence of inserting such improvisational and disjointed music into postmodern literature, rendering it only more disjointed in total.

The metaphysical idea of dissonance creating, in turn, consonance, creates a binary-centered surrealistic literary world, where Pynchon is showing the "permeable nature…of art and fantasy…with our lives, and yet how they keep us from mutual connection…. He wants to bend the novel's life to our own, like water bent through the holes of Slothrop's harmonica" (Moore 33). Interestingly, it is through Slothrop's harmonica that the disjointedness takes physical form and becomes as tangible and literal as ever. David Cowart speaks of the harmonica — as Slothrop allows his "mouth organ" to warp in the stream, there is now "no favored tone or harmonica interval to create a distinctive tonality, however, the familiar aural orientation of music disappears" (84).

Tyrone Slothrop's harmonica, once dropped down the toilet at the Roseland and subsequently reappearing back at the Harz without explanation, serves as the attempted transcending of discordance. Witzling suggests, "in emulating the Romantic desire for transcendence through jazz improvisation that united the beats" Pynchon actually "stumbled upon the problems (both formal and social) that in practice prevent such transcendence" (55).

As the novel closes, music is now associated with the "freaks" of contemporary California, as "they come gibbering in at you from all sides, swarming in, rolling their eyes through the side windows, playing harmonicas and even kazoos in full disrespect for the prohibitions" (Pynchon 771). As Pynchon now describes music (specifically harmonicas, an essential blues instrument) as "gibbering," he further accentuates its incoherence and perhaps alludes to the state of postmodernism of his time — the "they" standing in as the Pynchons of the era in "full disrespect" of the modernists of the time.

Despite Hume's argument for added-coherence due to the musical inserts, Pynchon shows his reader that connective transcendence is ultimately prevented in the novel; the musical excerpts are perpetually unrelated and continually incoherent in their relationship to the plot, the characters, and the overall narrative; even the music itself is ultimately rendered inconsequential and irrelevant, because as readers we must remember that the rocket strikes before it makes a sound, and before the second verse of the concluding song begins, the rocket's victims "die in the same pocket of no-sound" (Cowart 93).

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