

A Forum on the Prosody of Thelonious Monk



Monk, Bop, and a New Poetics

When Jack Kerouac, in *On the Road*, invokes the holy dawn of "Jazz America," he obviously has be-bop in mind, the music that spread from New York's Harlem night clubs in the forties. In Kerouac's eyes, be-bop players are the purveyors of ecstasy, the embodiments of the eternal "yes," and their music is wild, crazy, swinging, and uninhibited—an expression of the pure energy of life itself, which Kerouac embodied in Dean Moriarty's frenetic adventures and escapades.

Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, Clifford Brown, *et al* invented this style, which has since become an established type, with its own harmonic and melodic practices. The literary style(s) derived from bop is(are) less widespread, but equally established: colloquialism, slang, syntactic breaks, and multi-clausal sentences, along with "long breath phrases" (Ginsberg) that generate excitement and a semi-oracular improvisational quality. The style sounds "hip." It "swings" with an irrepressible, buoyant street-wise energy.

How, then, does Thelonious Monk, from whom many of the bop musicians learned, and with whom they regularly played, fit in? How has he shaped the style we think of as "bop"?

The answer is that he hasn't. Joe Goldberg, in *Jazz Masters of the Fifties*, goes so far as to say that Monk "was never a bop musician," despite being "a major contributor" to jazz, "of the stature of Ellington or Parker" (26,25).

With Monk, an entirely different collection of adjectives arises: "angular," "introspective," "cerebral," "deadpan," "detached," "bemused." Where the Parker/Gillespie/Roach style is one of fast tempos and flamboyant technique, Monk is described as "clumsy" and "awkward," a musician whose fingers lagged behind his ideas, which everyone acknowledges to have been the most original of the period. Thousands of post-fifties jazz players cultivate the typical bop style, but anyone now who soloed or accompanied like Monk would immediately be branded a plagiarist. Monk's musical experiments are more like the literary experiments of William Burroughs than those of Ginsberg and Kerouac—difficult to adopt because more radical and eccentric.

The distinctive features of Monk's style are his spareness (he plays few notes, but they are the "essential" ones); his rhythmic disjunction (his placement of single notes or chords is unpredictable, sometimes outside

the established meter); his insistent dissonance (he will select the major sevenths, minor seconds, etc. from an extended chord); and his use of "turnaround" phrases (i.e., a phrase cast and recast in varying relation to the bar line, as though he is worrying the phrase, or noodling with it, or testing it, trying to "get it right").

Monk doesn't fit the mould of the bop idiom. Technique can always be polished and refined, but Monk cultivated instead a style that seemed awkward—even sloppy—when compared to his predecessors, Art Tatum and Earl "Fatha" Hines, or his be-bop colleague, Bud Powell. Monk's runs and trills seem pointedly clumsy, giving his music a rough-hewn, gutsy quality—not unlike folk art, or the tendency in the seventies and eighties in the visual arts to make objects that are intentionally "dumb" rather than "beautiful."

There is a more elusive quality to his playing as well, usually referred to by words such as "irony," "detachment," "wryness." Monk's music was original and difficult for the obvious reasons, but also because he required of his listener a double perspective. That is, Monk will take a standard melody, or a standard chord progression, or even a standard jazz lick and play it just enough "off" that it becomes a parody of itself. The listener must hear the convention in the distortion.

This relation both to tradition and to the audience is different from Parker and the other bop artists. Although they frequently took chord progressions from standard tunes ("Back Home in Indiana" is the basis for Parker's "Donna Lee"), they asked implicitly that their listeners share the joy, intensity and surprise of new melodies, which would lead in performance to even newer, more exalted improvisational forays. They are ecstasists (like Kerouac and Ginsberg); the listener is awed and entranced. Monk, on the other hand, set the technical brilliance aside and often, along with his original compositions, played the old tunes and old styles (stride piano, cocktail lounge runs, tremolos, two-note ragtime chords), shifting a harmony, giving the rhythm a "ricky-ticky" feel, slightly botching a run, tossing in a clumsy trill—so that his renditions toyed with his sources at the very moment he rendered them.

Monk's distinctiveness, then, is his reflective approach to jazz, conveyed by a quirky, almost perverse approach to style. (I am deliberately focussing on Monk's playing. Obviously, his original compositions are their own important legacy.) The question is whether his playing can be the basis for a new poetics, and what shape that new poetics might take.

First, one must get somewhat literal and precise in translating Monk's style into language. Steve Lacy, a sax player who worked with Monk in the sixties, described Monk's playing in general terms that would put poetry based on his music within immediate reach of any good writer: "If technique in jazz is the art of making sense, then he's got more technique than

anybody. And he certainly can play the piano. He can get more varied colors, sounds, rhythms and shapes out of the piano than anybody I know. He plays the whole instrument. . . ." (quoted in Goldberg, 27). In other words, one need only explore language resources and make sense.

The best poets already do this. Similarly, writers have characteristically embedded themselves in and have often parodied traditions and conventions. They have also used "turnaround phrases," (part of the composer's stock in trade, from Bach to Stravinsky).

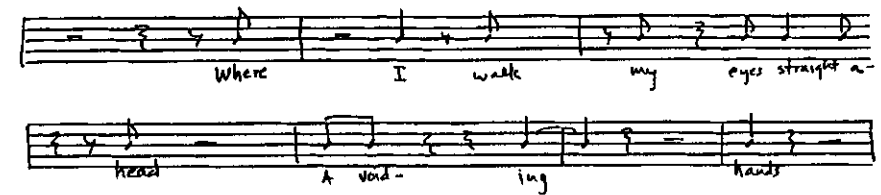
The stylistic devices which seem to offer most in the way of poetic invention—rhythmic unpredictability, open musical space, and insistent dissonance—are more problematic. First, adaptation depends on how one converts specific musical effects into linguistic effects—e.g., is a dissonance equivalent to a contradiction? Second, any adaptation depends on where one decides to place the boundaries beyond which innovation will be counter-productive to one's poetic intentions. Finally, there is the question of how to signify on the page what one intends the reader to hear. Monk is notorious for his individual touch and the sound he draws from the piano, aspects of playing that notation cannot render, just as words on a page cannot render the individual performance.

So, where do we start?

At the most basic level, there is Monk's unpredictable placement of notes. He has the rhythm section's ongoing tempo and the listener's sense of more conventional placements to work against. In poetry, of course, the visual spaces between words and lines can indicate rhythmic irregularity. But without rhythmic cues other than those provided by the words themselves, how is a listener to hear this irregularity as "offbeat," displaced? Perhaps by alternating regularly metered lines with sporadically pulsed lines? There are metric experiments, such as "sprung rhythm," that force accents into unexpected positions. But by and large, poetic experimentation has been in the direction of syllabic lines, accentual lines, and phrase/meaning lines—all of which contribute to a sense of "natural" speech instead of meaning poured into pre-existing moulds. Monk's music seemed an "unnatural" utterance in the jazz idiom.

An inconsistent, halting, abrupt rhythm, rather than one that aspired to the natural "flow" of colloquial speech (if speech does indeed have any smooth flow—it depends on the speaker) might approximate Monk's offset rhythms, but how would a listener hear the rhythmic norm such halting was set against? And how would the reader hear the extended phrase which forms the context for Monk's abruptness? Likewise, what about dissonance? Poetry has "consonance" and "harmony," conceived as rhymes, off-rhymes, alliteration, assonance, etc. But a writer would have to work hard with meaning and sound to bring off the kind of jarring effect immediately and surprisingly achieved by two dissonant notes.

One almost has to go to a "figured" or notated poetry, which might look something like the following:



The rhythm would be established at the outset, and the reader would have to read words precisely at their notated rhythmic intervals. One might employ a time-keeping device such as a drum machine, a metronome, or an actual rhythm section, though without the jazz-as-the-background-to-poetry feeling of the Beat experimenters (Ken Nordine *et al*) in the fifties. Here, the poem would *be* the music, rhythmically notated.

It may be possible to go farther with this if we can step back momentarily to incorporate more of our modern understanding of how language works. Western convention treats language as linear by nature, though words, according to Wittgenstein, have "families" of meaning, and according to Saussure, meaning has a synchronic (vertical) axis that coexists with its diachronic (linear) axis. Plenty of writers have worked against the strict linearity of language, and the languages of other cultures, both ancient and modern, exemplify other modes (quasi-pictorial, for example) of communication.

Now, an eighth or ninth-century A.D. listener might have thought that music was inherently linear. Gregorian chant and plainsong were the only games in town. But music evolved from a diachronic syntax into a syntax that realized its potential for harmonized melodies and clusters of sound. In language, meaning "families" and synchronicity raise the question of whether a "chordal" kind of writing is also possible, a quasi-operatic poetry in which words are placed along a musical "staff" (explicit or implicit). A poetic "line," thus, is not simply one linear string of words, but that one line plus words and/or phrases that might be placed above or below it, to be read/heard simultaneously—in readings requiring several voices, not just one—like a section of instruments.

Such a poem might look like the following:

The image shows three staves of handwritten musical notation. The words are written on the staff lines, with various annotations above and below. The first staff has the words: Shall, un certainties, as, raped, skull, hollow, sockets, gone, from die, cap, cover, wired, fireflies, fires. The second staff has: cracked wrinkles, forgive me, forget me, me: she accosted, old, lady, stained, tea, skin tight, worn gold, pallor, blamed, curtsy. The third staff has: wisdom, why, we, leaf prophecies, of the dial, forgotten, alone, star, paired, use.

* Individual parts can be thoroughly scored for concert readings.

I am not suggesting Dada experiments, in which simultaneous voices intoned nonsense syllables as a revolt against social and artistic stagnation and the horrors of World War I, although some of these group readings were scored.

The only work I can think of that comes close to chordal, polyphonic effects is *Finnegan's Wake*, where Joyce dismantles and recombines words and phrases (I am studiously avoiding the word "deconstruct") to free them for multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings—meanings that are combined in ways not available to linear prose. The "language poets" might be said to be on a similar track. Chordal writing, however, would not break words down, it would stack them, accumulate them, build coexisting meaning relationships. Its primary difficulty would be irreducibility to readily accessible linear meaning.

I am certainly not polemicizing for chordal writing as a new *via sacra*: it is possible, by juxtaposing "dissonant" words and phrases, visually staggering words and lines, marking accents, and leaving blank spaces, to approximate the irregularities of Monk's style. But poets know these devices already. Chordal writing opens the way for multiple and simultaneous tracks that can infuse one another with meaning as strictly linear writing cannot. And it might lead to new modes of information reception.

Monk's intention was not to tear down, but to go his own way. In doing so, he built an edifice of originality and innovation, suggesting possibilities for current music that, depending on one's perspective, is either outside the jazz mainstream or defining its new directions—Chicago's Creative Jazz Ensemble, Roland Shannon Jackson's Decoding Society, and the World Saxophone Quartet are examples, along with James Blood Ulmer and The Dirty Dozen Brass Band.

Caliban campaigns for a literature that resists the pressures of a dollar-based society toward the trite, the conventional, the parochial, the one-dimensional, the merely entertaining and the easily-accessible. Thelonious Monk, in his life and in his music, stood for the same determined, individualistic integrity. A poetics that treats rhythm and harmonics in a new way might be another symbol, a metaphor for a new political vision of a multi-cultural world, in which the feeling patterns of other cultures have begun to blend with the West, so that we are no longer the linear, one-dimensional culture that the Powers That Be have often tried to represent.

Monk, A Head

What could be seen in the back of a panel truck
allowed to be seen, Monk allows
that isn't thought, not so
much quickness as not thought
never to go over it
all in the head

a small bright round hard object
felt for by hand if not accompanying
eye

three silver sailors
watching the edge or ridge
picture on the back
packing of a harrowing marriage
men at large
in a lento or largo
argentina

Monk reported
hard eyes and riskier fingers
the laugh as interstitial haste
or click lid of grace
no brighter than the violet of Ruby
My Dear

Needn't
be you
takes a laugh at the sun
they could bring
back your bicycle bent
from the atmosphere tamer
black as those skips hard to track

the entrance to the phone was left blanker
white noise in a television toy
or eclipsing of plan, a sealed key
on the orangutanian piano

anyway, he beveled round streetsigns
lamps needing touch, felt answers
and brightness in the wall of friar's cell
he knew it possible to sheboygan encaustic
Monk weighed in at earhole possible

and the largest of suits on the sun
the barrier moon, the trim trees, the saddle
of lacy scandal, the impossible
to trace valuable variable
though it's all visible

mind cogged best when laid up on the hip
then the gentian gesture dries, then suspended
month of sundays, the icy single plan
that it sound backward, but intentionally
surmise, he held the piano
at length as a sort of Spain

then children rung in the kilter twilight
needn't but, they do, we see
he do, and the liars set out their
empties for him to

Monk held cold hope
pressed that momentum never even
still the kernel waits his marvel

jazz his adventure bell
his bubble dark
his friction list his tension
hoof his pendulum out
his function down his arm
down his arm

The Rhythm of Thelonious Monk

With influences as diverse as African music and contemporary European classical music, the music of Thelonious Monk is strikingly original. One aspect which contributed to this originality is his unique use of many different rhythmic elements: the concept of swing, the democratization of rhythmic values, rhythmic phrase alteration, rhythmic diminution and augmentation, and the alternation of displacement and conformity. All of these elements are common to both jazz and African music. However, Monk used these techniques in his own personal way, rather than just lifting them from the African context. The integration was his own.

One thing that can be said about Monk's music is that it does swing. The concept of swing is difficult for the uninitiated listener to understand; it is complex and involves a number of elements, one of which is displaced eighth note patterns. Most of Monk's solos and compositions utilize the eighth note as the basic unit. However, the written eighth note is often played unevenly by Monk, resulting in long, short, long, short rhythmic patterns (See Example 1). Thus, the second eighth note is moved slightly off the beat, creating a microcosmic version of alternating displacement and conformity.



Example 1. Eighth notes, written and played.

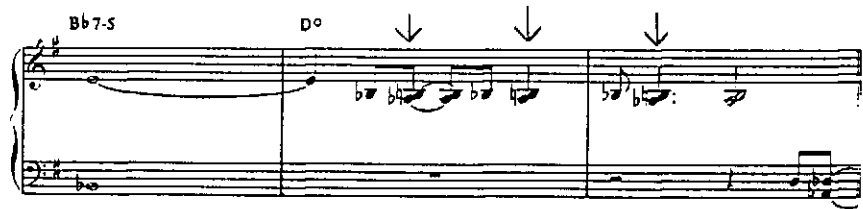
In Monk's music, as in African music, any part of the beat may be subject to accentuation (See Example 2). The differentiation between weak and strong beats becomes increasingly obscure. This equality of dynamics among all of the beats contained in a rhythmic gesture leads to a democratization of rhythmic values. When Monk worked with an ensemble there was always a wide variety of accentuation happening on various levels. Drummer Max Roach, who worked with Monk often, had this to say about him: "Monk encouraged me to emancipate the drums from their subservient role as timekeepers. He knew how to compose within the rhythm section by using

Example 2. Nyayito Dance, A.M. Jones, *Studies in African Music*. London: Oxford University Press, 1968.

Monk often repeated short phrases several times, placing the notes on different parts of the beat in ingenious ways. He does this in compositions (See Example 3) as well as in his improvisations (See Example 4). In his tune *Off Minor*, Monk takes a seemingly simple group of two and places the double notes (which are a major second interval and characteristic of his piano style) on four different parts of the beat: the and of two, four, the and of one, and three. These examples of rhythmic phrase alteration often simultaneously create an alteration of displacement and conformity, essentially creating a series of off beat accents followed by a series of on beat accents.



Example 3. Rhythmic Phrase Alteration, Monk: *Straight, No Chaser*.



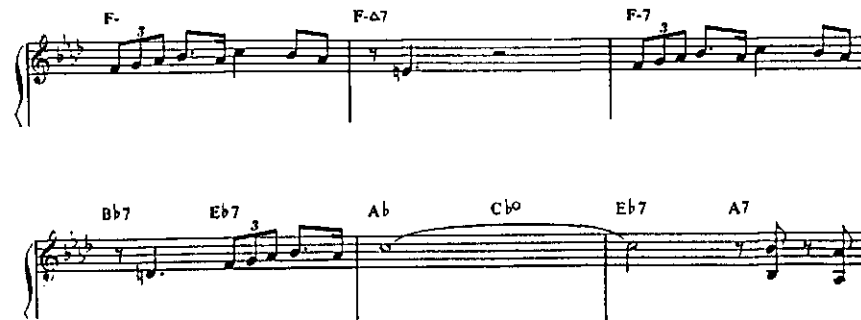
Example 4. Rhythmic Phrase Alteration, Monk: *Off Minor*.

There are numerous examples of rhythmic phrase alteration throughout Monk's work. During the solo of *In Walked Bud* (Bud Powell was a pianist and a contemporary of Monk whose style was based on smoothly executed eighth note runs. He was more conservative rhythmically than Monk, and his style became more influential in the world of jazz piano than Monk's) Monk repeats a four note phrase, varying the rhythm each time. The phrase begins on the and of one, one, four, and three (See Example 5). Monk's uses of repeated phrases and often literally repeated single notes during solos reflects an almost minimalist approach to music. The music of Steve Reich contains similar concepts, as rhythms gradually change, usually over a longer period of time. Monk's music can also be very sparsely textured at one moment, while at another flurries of sound may end abruptly on an off beat, to be followed by several measures of silence, or a held tone.



Example 5. Rhythmic Phrase Alteration, Monk: *In Walked Bud*.

Repeated phrases are often augmented or diminished rhythmically by Monk. He begins his solo for *In Walked Bud* on the down beat, repeats it, and then begins it on the three, this time amplifying the phrase and concluding with three off beat accents (See Example 6).



Example 6. Rhythmic Expansion, Monk: *In Walked Bud*.

Rhythms may also be diminished. In the fifth measure at the head of *Introspection* Monk utilizes a group of three with all off beat accents, and then in the next measure immediately contracts the rhythm and plays it on the beat (See Example 7). This fragmented utilization of rhythmic gestures is a major source of Monk's originality.

Example 7. Rhythmic Diminution, Monk: *Introspection*

As we have seen, syncopation is an essential part of Monk's music. In early jazz, syncopation was virtually the only way in which the African's instinct for polyrhythm survived, as drumming had been banned for such a long period of time. Inevitably it was the simpler African rhythms, the ones that blended easily with European elements, that survived in early jazz. Very little is known about his actual study of African music, but Monk seems to have reconnected with the African heritage, largely through his rhythmic inventiveness. The alternation of rhythmic displacement and conformity is a fundamental element of swing, but it is found in African music as well. Although Monk often played several measures of music with mostly off beat accentuation, followed by several measures of on beat playing, his predilection was decidedly for the off beat (See Examples 8 and 9).

Example 8. Alternation of Displacement and Conformity, Monk: *Introspection*.

Example 9. Alternation of Displacement and Conformity, Monk: *Off Minor*.

Along with Monk's sophisticated use of rhythm he also employed clusters, dense intervals, novel harmonic progressions, and whole tone scales. All of these elements, as well as others, contributed to the highly original and eclectic style of Thelonious Sphere Monk. His influence not only affected other musicians, but also artists, poets, and others. The extent to which writers have used these elements consciously remains uncertain. However, the conscious use of these essentially musical ideas (possibly transformed) could prove to be useful to any artist, regardless of the medium.

The Plea

Round about midnight
the clock's ugly stare
hangs in mental repose
& its antimagnetic second hand
measures a man's descent.
Bop, bop, bebop, rebop.
The bottom falls out
of each dream—
the silver spike is
in my hands & I'm on the floor.
The Alice in Malice
does a little soft shoe
on my troubled heart.
Hot & heavy,
cool & cosmic honeydripper
fingers play the missing notes
inbetween life & death
round midnight.
Bop, bop, bebop, rebop.
Lost lovers in my empty doorway
groove to a sweet pain
in the bruise-colored neon
where my soul weaves
itself into *terra incognita*,
into the blue & green
sounds of Botany Bay
reflected like rozellas
through the big, black
slow dance of waves grinding against the shore.
Bop, bop, bebop, rebop.
Thelonious & bright as that
golden plea of gospel
underneath everything
Monk wrung from the keys.

Round about midnight
despair returns each minute
like a drop of moonshine
elongating into rapture
moaned through Bird's mouthpiece
in a soundproof room
where trust & love
is white dust on the dark
furniture. Time is nothing
but an endless bridge.
All those who thought
they could use my body
for nowhere's roadmap
I see their blank faces
float up from a whirlpool
as the turntable spins.
Bop, bop, bebop, rebop.
Each undying note
resounds in my head;
there's a cry in every pocket
& low swell of unhappy
lust I've suffered,
& round about midnight the odor of sex
& salvation quivers in each song
the wooden hammers
strike from wire strings
like anger stolen back
from the soil.

*First performed with pianist Judy Bailey at the Sydney Town Hall Bach to Bebop Concert
on July 17, 1987.*

*It's always night
or we wouldn't need light.*

—Thelonious Monk, *Time*, February 28, 1964

Thelonious Monk was interested in how things struggle with their opposites—an intensity that expands possibility. Nature itself: the pulling into and the letting go. Rhythm. Thus, Monk was a technician of silence. Silence in his compositions is music(al); not mere coloration or transition, but silent spaces as pure units of an emotional continuum. Silence as shape, as tonal artifact, is what Monk captured. Of course, undoubtedly, gospel taught him a lot—his music owes much to the human voice. It helped him to challenge linearity; that is, anticipation is shattered by surprise—by silence. Monk's music is rugged and tough. A percussive truthfulness. A synthesis of conflict and beauty. A futuristic maturity. An opening out toward multidimensionality through simplicity. . . . silence creates poetic tension and suspension. An exactitude defined by what's left out. Monk's music requires an active listener—someone who doesn't have to be told the whole story. A transmutation of mind and sound: a third something is created. He was a deep listener. And, yes, it was this quality of listening that helped him to create tunes like "Ruby, My Dear," "In Walked Bud," and "Misterioso." There's an emotional elasticity to Monk's world. Things that seem at odds with each other fit side by side: the human mind does the framing (inside and outside of conventional references). Clusters of chords. A woman's walk. A man's bluesy cry in the night. Expansion rather than constriction. The listener helps to decide the music's shape—keeping it organic and alive. Always *becoming*. Monk listened to silence and respected it. Maybe his musical theory can be found in his title "Ugly Beauty."

Applied Monk: Preliminary Notes

What is the status of performance in poetry? This statically worded question—too formal & what's status got to do with it?—will not likely lead me to a discussion of Thelonious Monk. But you start where you can, where the mood flings you, like an old dish towel drying in the rain.

Of course, there are still those who don't read their poems, insisting that the page is sufficient, the rest gets in the way. I used to feel more that way myself, that is I thought my work existed in some primary way as words on a page & that in doing a reading I was *adding* a performance element, suggesting one way that a work might be read. Reading poems required a number of performance decisions not obvious from the texts & a reader might well make other decisions in reading to her- or himself than I had done. My insistence on the primacy of the poem as written was partly a reaction against the popular notion of poems as merely scores to be performed, something deficient without infusion of theatrical or musical overlays, as if poems were like lyrics on the back of a record album. A page, a book, seemed to me—still does—an unexcellible site for poetic activity.

Nonetheless, I've come to feel
that the idea of the written
document as primary makes for an unwarranted
or anyway unwanted
hierarchy; hearing
work performed is in no way inferior to
reading it to yourself. Rather, these are two competing
realizations of the work, each
with its own set of advantages &
limitations. Moreover
all reading is performative
& a reader has in some ways to supply the performative
element when reading—
not silently before a page but out
loud & with a beat.

(One advantage of hearing
work performed
is that it does
not allow opportunities to
reread or rehear; at least in my
work, it pretty much forces listeners
to get lost, to give up
any notion of following detail, fore-
grounding tempo & sound,
association & texture
[making the experience
more like hearing music or watching
a movie]. Of course, the ability to read in
detail
is just what gives the written
its primacy—much of what
is happening pros-
odically, thematically, & structurally can't
really be grasped in performance.)

Paul Schmidt, lamenting
performance styles at many poetry
readings, has recently advocated
that poets memorize their work,
suggesting that a declamatory
style of reading would bring life
to an otherwise often deadly practice.

Strong medicine
& met more with a denial of disease
than a discussion of alternative
therapies. *Why spend time preparing
for a performance when that
time could better be used
writing?* —For many poets will make much
of the authenticity or naturalness of their reading
style—mumbling, stumb-
ling over words, fumbling through papers, virtual
inaudibility, sitting in a chair bent over page, no
discernible shape or rhythm in the pro-
jected sound of the work.
Yet this is just as much
a performance style as the most
declamatory reading: all readings
are performative, whether they appear
to deny the performative or flaunt
it.

My experience is that if I really care
about a poet's work, then I am interested
in hearing them (she or he) read regardless
of their attitude to performance, & that
a good deal about the rhythm & acoustic
dimension of the work
(is exhibited). Indeed, there are some poets
who "overperform" their work to the detriment
of being able to hear it—kind of
like doing an electric guitar version, in triple
time, of "Misterioso"; or revving
your car engine while the gear is set to
neutral. Loud is not always better
which is one reason Monk
seems to suggest so much for poetry
performance. & for certain
works, the dreaded monotone style is not only
appropriate but
powerful & evocative; but then there is a difference
in holding to a single tone over a period
of time & just droning on
aimlessly.

To perform a poem is to make it a physically present acoustic event, to give bodily dimension—beat—to what is otherwise spatial & visual. Poems, no matter how short, necessarily involve duration, & writing as much as performing is an act of shaping this durational passage. In performance, it becomes possible to lay down a rhythmic beat, a pulse, that is otherwise more speculative or tenuous in the scoring of words on a page. For me, this pulse is constructed around “nodal” points of pauses or silences or breaks—a *point* I want to put as technically as I can to distinguish this from notions of breath or speech rhythms or other notions of an unconstructed or unimposed reading style.

While I am skeptical about the value of appropriating musical terms to discuss performance prosody, I am still tempted to suggest that breaks or silences can be a most active musical device in poetry performance in that they create musical phrases that are then syncopated by the rhythmic pace that precedes & follows them. In my performances, I’m interested in employing several different, shifting, tempos & several different intonations (voices) that pivot & spin around these nodal shifting points. These blank spaces—silences or intervals—serve as fulcrums for making audible the rhythmic pulse & phrasing being played out, at the same time scissoring the syntax of the language (that is, cutting *against* expected breaks of the grammatical phrase or unit of breath). Given these interests, the sound I am laying down is not simply that of a

person reading words in any “straightforward” way but playing *each* word as if a note or chord on the piano, with slight pauses creating unexpected spaces between words, allowing phrases to veer off into unexpected sequences of wobbling sound. I no more take for granted how to do this than I assume the syntax or prosody of a poem I am writing; it is a highly constructed, albeit improvised, process, based on choosing from a variety of different tonal, rhythmic, & phrasal possibilities.

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A number of years ago, I was asked to read in the International Sound Poetry Festival in New York, despite the fact that my work & style of reading would not normally be considered sound poetry or performance poetry. I prefaced my reading by saying that I thought there were only two types of poetry: sound poetry & unsound poetry. But now I would change that to *sounded* poetry & *unsounded* poetry.

It is perhaps a remnant of Romantic ideology that still haunts that performance styles of poetry readings are so often self-represented in terms of an authentic voicing of “the” emotions or “the” unconscious, where effacement of the performative is equated with genuineness of the work, where the acting style is to pretend that there is no

acting, where the performance style is to feign that no performing is going on. This of course is the story of our everyday life—where troubling social acts are performed as if without premeditation or self-conscious intent; it's the sort of acting that resembles puppetry. The best symbol of this phenomenon is a presidential actor widely praised for his relaxed, natural—I hear this as untheatrical & nonrhetorical—style.

Every reading (whether one's own reading of a book or a poet's reading to an audience) is an enactment, a sounding, an embodiment, which is to say a reading that takes or makes time, that enters into the social, material, & historical space of our lives. To deny the performative aspect of poetry is to repress its most literally political dimension, which is to say, how it enters into the world. To deny the rhetoricity (rhetoricalness?) & theatricality of a poem is to idealize a literary space outside of ideology & history, a zone timeless & blank in which evasion substitutes for the friction of interaction. Yet this friction is the music of our lives. The acknowledgment of the performative dimension of poems is a recognition of their political bearing in the world, fully as much as recognition of the theatricality of each of our social performances is a necessary prerequisite for us to find out how these ingrained habits might be changed or reshaped. For to sound is to give a hearing— & without such forums we are doomed to endless repetition of sounds

we have not ourselves participated in making. The performative dimension of poetry can be understood in Louis Zukofsky's sense as its upper limit—*music*. This would make an attempt to understand the relation of the work of Thelonious Monk to contemporary poetry as essentially political gesture.

Monk's Prosody

April 5, 1957: "I can't do that right. I have to practice that."—Thelonious Monk, composer, to his pianist during a solo run-through of "'Round Midnight."

April 5, 1957: Maybe I'm sitting on a fire escape in Berkeley, trying to write some poetry. I know one thing: I was listening to Monk by then—particularly his solo on "Bag's Groove," on the Miles Davis 10-inch lp. You might say I was studying Monk's prosody—how each time he'd come out of the speakers in a different, distinctive way, and always swinging.

Years pass. Decades. Prosody.

January 15, 1987: I work a duo concert with Mal Waldron. Mal, even while checking out the tuning, makes reference, says hello, to Monk. The next time we blow, I want to do "Blue Monk."

June, 1987: Whenever the next time is, I'll be ready. I work out a "linear," "horn-like" statement; it fits, like an overlay. Then I jump right into the tune and the piano, and blow something from the inside-out—"percussive"—particularly building around and repeating "ricochet."

April, 1988: One of those long Oregon dusks. Larry Smith calls up to ask if I'd be interested in doing something with Monk's prosody. "Prosody"—yeah. I have to practice that.

Two Variations (Linear and Percussive) on a Theme by Thelonious Monk as Inspired by Mal Waldron:

Blue Monk

for Miles and Lowell

"Solid," as the man himself would say.
"Solid," as the man at his instrument.
"Solid," as the solid composition.

However, at the same time,
this elegant melody,
"Blue Monk,"

while certainly being "solid" enough—
as evidenced by
the ease of our ability
to hum and whistle it,
even in sleep—

is actually solid, fluid,
and a real gas combined;

you know what I mean:
like feelings, like atmosphere,
like right, like here,

you feel like you've been hearing
"Blue Monk" forever,
since the planet started dancing,
like it's been around since sound,

since the blue wind got up
one blue, summer morning,
looked across the cool, blue canyon
at that sweet, blue mountain,
and melodiously started to sing,
"Blue Monk";

you know that lovely feeling,
"Blue Monk";

you know what
“Blue Monk” can do for you,
the melodious message it sends,
the melodious message that always comes
echoing back across the canyons as a result,
“Blue Monk,”

as a result of recognition,
as a consequence of confirmation,
as an accomplishment of affirmation—
“Blue Monk,” “Blue Monk”
in the sun and rain, in all conditions;

and the song, therefore,
just by being what it is—
these huge, blue feelings
spaced and placed just so,
ascending,
these huge, blue feelings
descending, just so,
and including some delightful
dimensions for refreshment
on a huge, blue plateau—

“Blue Monk,” then, by its very nature,
built-in to its basic structure,
encompasses and contains
all the properties of nature:

take a hold of it,
hold it up to the light;
see what I mean?—
“Blue Monk” has you dancing;

by now you’re feeling confident about the song,
feeling like you’ve got it down,
feeling like you’re part of its beauty,
feeling like it’s part of you—
which is certainly true;

feeling fine with the freedom of it;
feeling like going for it
with expansiveness, abandon;

feeling exhilarated in your bones
like you want to do something about
exercising your own right
to rhythm and expression;

yes, you feel like you *own* the song—
which you certainly do—
since you went right down there on West 52nd Street
and got it directly from the man himself,
“Blue Monk,” who turns out to be,
not the imposing artist you had heard and read about,
but just the husband, the father, the neighbor
making his way out of the corner grocery
with some snow peas and stalks of celery
sticking out of a paper sack;
he just needs something back,
gladly giving you the tune
in exchange for a proven recipe of your own;

meanwhile, “Blue Monk” is smiling
that solid “Blue Monk” smile
while offering you directions for usage:

“Look, ‘Blue Monk’ is a solid song;
you can bend it; you can break it;
you can always remake it;
it’s hot and it’s cool,
it’s suitable for digging
in whatever occasion you choose—
ceremonious, thelonious and such...”

Ah, the sheer joy of such ownership!
You take “Blue Monk” home and set it
glowing in your livingroom
like a luxurious lamp.
You stick it in the phone,
sending it out via satellite:

“Hello, Mom? Dig this song!...”;
“Hello, is this the White House?
Listen, I’ve got a solid
new anthem for the shaky republic!...”

You take "Blue Monk" outside to the fire escape,
seeing how far you can throw it,
looping it smoothly over the moonlit harbor
as it becomes a bridge
of flowing blue lights:
"Blue Monk."
You're dancing, humming,
strolling slowly across,
tossing blue notes
floating over the wide, blue water
like you're a luminous, musical spider;
tossing cool, blue clusters high overhead,
creating a blue, musical constellation:
"Blue Monk";

by now, many others,
including birds, animals, insects,
have joined you on your excursion,
having just got wise
to mythology and fireworks combined,
staring awestruck up into the huge, blue night
to find the "Blue Monk" profile outlined,
pointing out and humming
each huge, blue star in the melody—
and, oh, those sweet, blue spaces in between...

Yes, indeed, this is some kind
of luxurious structure,
an architectural legacy

ascending, descending, with pliable plateaus
for ease of breathing, handling,
relaxing, building, dancing, laughing,
praying, creating, embracing, enhancing;

a structure as solid, fluid, strong,
translucent, luminous, freeing,
and bracing
as the man himself—

Mr. "Blue Monk,"
bringing everything we do,
we see, we know,

into melodious focus

through the blue keys
of his blue piano;

therefore, in this blue region,
with this blue vision, in this blue
body of being
we all know as home,
everything throbs and pulses and glows
with the true, blue beauty of his song:

"Blue Monk!"

Ricochet

Schematic, thematic
variations to be varied,
in rhythm, while working within
the spirit of "Blue Monk"

Ricochet:

Radius:

Radiating:

Reciting: Realizing: Referring: Recapturing: Repercussion:
Revolving: Reflecting: Returning: Reconstituting: Republic:
Reshaping: Restructuring: Reversing: Reclaiming: Religion:
Respecting: Removing: Reforming: Receiving: Reality:
Refining: Reducing: Refreshing: Regenerating: Resource:
Regarding: Relating: Relaxing: Revering: Remembering:
Renewing: Revising: Repairing: Replacing: Residing:
Reviewing: Respecting: Resolving: Reviving: Responsible:
Retaining: Resuming: Revealing: Rehearsing: Resulting:
Restoring: Retrieving: Regaining: Recovering: Relying:
Redeeming: Replying: Reminding: Rewarding: Resounding:

Reverberating:

Remarkably:

Releasing:

Remaining:

Repeating:

WANDA COLEMAN

On Theloniousism

*who allows essence possession/translation into sound/voice
via mech-tech mastery/chrysalises it
who allows the perceptive either entry or regurgitation and/or
transmission/heightening or propulsion into another
realm/space/form/void*

beyond inspiration

I

Everybody tells you that's not allowed/don't do that. Never mind history, it's against the rules (which change the moment *you* get them straight). You are a fraud.

Until Monk music had not gotten deeply into attitude—particularly Black attitudes. Music had not shown its ass. Monk persisted in succeeding at being who he was without compromise, providing listeners with the elementary components of a deep and never ending source of creativity. A kind of poetic sensibility yet to achieve recognition is one which does with language what Monk did with music—as if the two were successfully divorced. [See the headings of Music and Negro Poetry in the Princeton Encyclopedia of *Poetry & Poetics*, edited by Alex Preminger, Princeton University Press.]

MONK, THELONIOUS SPHERE—b. New York City; Composer, piano; though technically a limited pianist, he evolved an extremely personal style and in his best moments produced some of the most provocatively heterodox Jazz of the 1940s.

—Leonard Feather, from *The Encyclopedia of Jazz*,
Horizon Press, 1955

A Working Definition

Theloniousism: ♪♪♪♪♪♪♪♪♪♪♪♪♪♪♪♪ (epistrophe). Accelerated spurts of sound upon the high side of linear or circumlunar thought and/or

attitude; seeing with your ears and hearing with your eyes (who said what?). Its antonym is Marxisticism, a philosophy of art that disallows for genetic psycho-socio influences manifest as sensibility; gangsterism as art; a conscious attempt to level all creativity; ideally, a socio-political constructiveness; but which, in current proponents, results in fashionistic cannibalization.

*you see, i play your game and my game
and win at both
when you play my game you automatically lose*

THE KEY/history + vision + craft = transcendence

it began as a mimic—a comment on racism
a showing off
and became a “thang” unto itself
i.e., went legit

jack-ass music or jive-ass or j-ass or jass or

*

I had a wild rave with this Poet Fellow and during it I had to stop and give him a history lesson on race music and assorted fusions. Black music/language is always taboo until embraced by young whites and through them infused into the Dominant Culture (D.C.). This was true of Jazz and Rock-and-Roll. Specifically we discussed the marriage of Calypso and Blues/R&B and the offspring, Reggae. “Oh, of course!” he said, a bit embarrassed. And while our talk was language centered, there was no effective way to discuss Black language without interjecting Black music. He was discounting The Blues as a viable art form and downgrading the contribution to American language made by Black Americans, expressing his own preference for the “cleaner,” more “distanced” Caribbean approach.

I had to point out what C.W.E. Bigsby, in his opening essay from *The Black American Writer Volume I: Fiction*, says so perfectly:

The native African feels little or no need to bolster up a self-image which for the most part is not threatened by an alien culture. In America that self-image has been eroded by slavery and the indignities of an unjust social system. In Sartre’s words the black writer has his back up against the wall of authenticity. In his attempt to “reveal the black soul” he has frequently been drawn towards an African past

which seems to have the virtue of conferring on him a distinctive identity, unaffected by the demeaning impact of his American experience. Yet, whatever the stance of the ardent black nationalist there remain only vestigial remnants of African culture. The slave owners were too successful in stamping out indigenous traditions for the contemporary writer to be able to draw on a genuine cultural heritage (outside of the world of music and, perhaps, religion). Thus the black writer intent on revising a sense of identity which has its roots in a distant African past is trapped into creating rather than discovering a usable heritage and into manufacturing usable myths.

I had to add that Black Americans are, in spite of well-meant rhetoric, a *minority* with a different sense of self than Africans and Blacks from the West Indies who see themselves as a clear majority. Not to mention Jamaica having freed its slaves 25 years before America.

Johnny Nash couldn’t ignite the fad of this fusion called Reggae within the Dominant Culture, but his pioneering enabled Bob Marley to capitalize when Eric Clapton and other white profligates made “ska” fashionable and the film *The Harder They Come* put Rasta and its godhead Jah on the American cultural map. I pointed out the tendency of Whites to maniacally appropriate anything *different* (exotic) that smacks of being “in”/hip, citing the insulting extremes of dreadlocks being called a “Bo Derek” (after the White blonde female star of *10*) and Elvis Presley’s theft of Big Mama Thornton’s *Hound Dog* from which he made millions he did not share with her.

Further, I made the case for the dilatory effect some early American legislation had on Black morality and Black music simultaneously—that is, at one time, a Black woman marrying out of her race to a White man escaped slavery and became a freed woman; whereas, a White woman marrying a Black man married into slavery. (Consult your desk copy of Peter M. Bergman’s *The Chronological History of the Negro in America*, Harper & Row, 1969.)

The failure to communicate is not on the part of Blacks, but on the part of Whites who do not wish to understand and/or in understanding simply don’t give the proverbial damn.

Now, skip one paragraph and go back to that sentence concerning slavery. Substitute artist/poet/musician for the word woman and put “economics” in front of slavery. The sense is chilling. To escape economic slavery the Black artist is forced to turn his/her back on Black heritage and adapt to White tastes/sensibilities in order to make money (in this case, money is synonymous with freedom but not power). George Benson and Al Jarreau are currently, if unfairly, cited as examples of this phenomenon—

also known as “selling out.” On the other extreme, a White artist steeped in Black culture without carrying the news back to his/her own cultural neighborhood oftentimes become trapped in obscurity, or is regarded as a freak/aberration (e.g., Teena Marie). Cross-culturalization is yet to be credited as a valid phenomenon (between Blacks and Whites, anyhow) as should be the case in our so-called Melting Pot of a nation. The tendency is to (want to) keep the race pure, be the “race” White American or Black American. The arguments on this point (ethnicity vs. race) are complex and unresolved so I’ll keep it simple: That which identifies as African-American of slave origin is “Black” and that which identifies as “White” is White.

The Black poet/writer cannot make it in establishment literary circles merely on his excellence as a writer unless that excellence is sanctioned/patronized by the proper Whites. One may be as niggerish as one wants as long as one does not deeply bite the hand that makes out the advance checks, distributes the books and pens the reviews. In this respect, the Halls of Ivy are no different from the Alleys of Hollywood. Like the Black musician, the less *ethnic* a Black writer is, the less angry, the more attainable that elusive reward of recognition (if not cash).

Another twist in this cowering of the Black creative psyche is that one is allowed to be as much of a clown and/or racist as one wants because the Dominant Culture has, over recent decades, learned how to effectively neutralize this sort of energy—which is why Black humor succeeds where Black drama fails. Even hatred is palatable as long as it is unreasoning hatred, empty of threat, and having no “army” or “intelligence” to back it up. It is no coincidence that the success of Black artists in America is, almost without exception, linked to the rise and fall of social currents which kaleidoscopically bring “the race problem” into national focus. For the Black artist to succeed as an individual free of this bond is rare.

to notate is to fixate
which is why The Word is a superior power

II

An important somebody comes along and tells the world you’re great—a genius, in fact. The world embraces you. It pretends to understand, but doesn’t—really.

That we Black people still undergo holocaust makes the plight of our artists much more difficult, much more urgent and much more poignant. Once that artist renounces his/her birthright he/she may cease productivity

because of being cut off from the very Blackness that spawns (one’s certainties or confusions about it). This reality still plagues all Americans of *ethnicity* but is a particularly exquisite pain for Black artists. The pain is articulated at length by Leroi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka) in his prose, including the chatty *Blues People* (1965) and *Black Music* (1968), and in the life stories of some Black musicians. The autobiographies of Billie Holiday and June Jordan are good starting points for the female version.

. . . the Negro writer’s social experience is, despite its bitterness, also an artistic boon. To live continually with prejudice based on the accident of skin color is no superficial experience, and neither is the reaction produced by such constant exposure superficial. There is a depth of intensity to the emotions of Negroes—as demonstrated in “Negro music”—which is largely lacking in white Americans . . . Thus the negro writer, if he does not make the tragic error of trying to imitate his white counterparts, has in his possession the priceless “gift” of thematic intuition . . . He will be able to convey suffering without romanticizing . . .

—William Gardner Smith, “The Negro Writer: Pitfalls and Compensations,” from *The Black American Writer, Volume I: Fiction*

Without romanticizing? Maybe. The trouble with too many of us public Black folk is that we do not inform our work with our history. Perhaps we can’t because that history is, for the most part, still made inaccessible to us. It is no coincidence that an unusually large portion of books available on Black themes of any kind (including reprints) have copyright dates, within two or three years, corresponding to the beginning and end of the Civil Rights Struggle.

*

Compare these three stanzas from Nathaniel Mackey’s “Ghede Poem” (Ghede, the Obean god of death) with two comparable stanzas from Ishmael Reed’s “I Am A Cowboy in the Boat of Ra.” Mackey’s later poem (in this case the latter) appeared in *Alcatraz 2* (Santa Cruz), and Reed’s earlier poem appeared in the Norton Anthology. Not only does Mackey “take off” on Reed’s imagery, bringing it even closer to “home”/Blackness, but he also does an improvisation on Reed’s poetic diction:

I am a cowboy in the boat of Ra,
sidewinders in the saloons of fools

bit my forehead like O
the untrustworthiness of Egyptologists
Who do not know their trips. Who was that
dog-faced man? they asked, the day I rode
from town.

School marms with halitosis cannot see
the Nefertiti fake chipped on the run by slick
germans, the hawk behind Sonny Rollins' head or
the ritual beard of his axe, a longhorn winding
its bells thru the Field of Reeds.

While different in form, Mackey, nevertheless, with or without intent, zaps
us with an electrifying poem as fine as Reed's, with Reed's exact same
rhythm, yet completely on its own without any clues *except* for rhythm:

They call me Ghede. The butts
of "angels" brush my lips.

The soiled asses of "angels"
touch my lips, I
I kiss the gap of their having
gone. They call me Ghede, I
sit, my chair tilted, shin across
thigh.

They call me Ghede
of the Many-Colored Cap, the
Rising Sun. I suck
 breath from this
inner room's midearth's bad air,
 make chair
turn into chariot,
 swing.

Mackey's poem echoes Reed's, a wonderful happenstance which sets
up poetic dialogue on several levels simultaneously. Reed's Cowboy is a
minor deity plotting dubious overthrow, whereas Mackey's Ghede is a
full-fledged God with the powers of life and death. In his play, Mackey
effectively digs deeper to the root of Blackness—yet clearly echoes the
assertion of "I am," a quality Sonia Sanchez identifies as the male voice
in Black poetry, but which can be equally accomplished by the female, as
in my "take off" on Bob Kaufman's rhythms in "Heavy water blues"

(*You Better Believe It*, Paul Bremin, Penguin 1973):

The radio is teaching my gold fish Jujitsu
I am in love with a skindiver who sleeps underwater,
my neighbors are drunken linguists, and I speak butterfly,
Consolidated Edison is threatening to cut off my brain,
the postman keeps putting sex in my mailbox,
My mirror died & can't tell if I still reflect,
I put my eyes on a diet, my tears are gaining too much weight

I turn Kaufman's poem inside out, take his horn and blow my own tune,
making my "Heavy Daughter Blues" (*Heavy Daughter Blues*, Black Sparrow
Press, 1987):

the t.v. is teaching my children hibakusha
i am in love with a dopefiend who sleeps under freeways
my neighbors are refugees from S.A.
and I speak negrese

the source is promising to terminate my train
of thought. the postman has put a hex on my P.O. Box
when my mirror cries do my pupils dilate?
i put my dial on quiet, my ears are gaining too much hate

Reed expresses Blackness representationally, relying on cultural reference
points and stringing them together with the rhetorical posturing that goes
with being a cowboy at showdown. Mackey puts forth Blackness organically
and is free of the necessity of embracing rhetoric or posture. He simply is
God, no questions asked. Perhaps Reed's ultimate artistic sacrifice liberates
Mackey. I certainly feel liberated from the need to perform the kind of
awkward intellectualizing apparent in Kaufman's wild sojourn into Beat
surrealism—the loss of self not only in the confusions of ethnic Blackness,
but a more Western existential blackness. Yet Reed and Kaufman serve to
take me "home" in much the same way as Monk's "Round Midnight"
or Ray Charles' androgynous rendering of "I Didn't Know What Time
It Was." Originality of thought? Cool. Originality of execution? Most cool.
[It enrages me that a society which places such a pathological premium
on what is first and new continuously fails to give Black artists proper
due/support. Of course, Dominant Culture artists continue to argue, but
not effectively enough, the ascendance of the mediocre over excellence.

The potential fun in the above game is obvious and obviously unlimited;
and, the apparent elitism/specialization more or less goes with the turf. Thus
one may eat one's poetic cake and have it too. What is central here is that

rhythm refreshed, beyond style and lyricism, ascends once more to its rightful throne along with content and form and copulates with both. That which starts with homage and/or satire, takes on its own independence.

There have been such moments/movements in the Dominant Culture, such as Dada, Beatitude and Pop/Popism/Op. But in terms of sheer bankability, no Black millionaire artists (or widows thereof) emerged from those movements because they are not *ethnically* Black movements. We Afro-American artists are allowed to play the game but we are not allowed to become dealers. To deal is to have power—*control* beyond meager influence. In this respect the Black musician/composer/singer is way out ahead of the Black writer/poet. [Say what one will about Michael Jackson and Prince.] By denying linkage between music and language, and music as language; by effectively denying the Black holocaust, the Black writer/artist is successfully frustrated by the scions of the D.C. By relegating Jazz (and the Jazz principle) to obscurity, the people who give birth to it are kept in a position of economic and cultural inferiority. And the *quality* of one's work has *nuthin'* to do with it.

To recognize is to empower.

III

Now you are somebody. Relax. Recognition at long last sits on your doorstep. You don't have to break your ass anymore, or kiss ass. You are over—you think.

(what a stalk of maize looks like
musically)

The backside becomes an affront, a refusal to reveal or share one's agony/lust (mooning). Turning away in/into aloneness. And so what if you're alone? The unforgiven sin is choosing to be alone by one's self. . . as semiotic perversion is one derived from licking backsides.

dat fulminous note soars no mo

dead beat

a frozen note of attitudinal bliss

entombed

in the catacombs of poet-soul

name inscribed

upon the sacred stellae of ancient tribal worshippers

of diddlypoot

will we hear the sanctimonious snort
from your nostrils no more?
will our eyes never again travel
the mystic mythic tracks of your ectodermic addiction?
will our hearts never again thrill
to the resonant wise-ass of your
existential jonesism?

yes

we have been deprived—jealously
deprived/years gone/no opportunity to
commune with the grand wizard of
woogiedom

yes

we have been cheated (in premeditation)
only to witness America deconstructed
by venereal disease

yes as we sink into the homogenous audio-visual
potato salad

catered by a deaf tongue

*

Monk had made the journey from the obscurity of the Jazz underground to the cover of *Time* by remaining tenaciously true to his own musical vision. He kept playing things the way he heard them, and people eventually discovered that his way of "using notes differently" made beautiful sense. In the process, he helped change the way people thought about music; he contributed a stunning body of compositions to the Jazz repertoire; and he influenced a generation of musicians—not just the pianists and not just the young players like John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins who had worked in his bands, but everyone who heard what he was doing and absorbed his message of freedom and individuality.

And yet a strange thing began happening around the time of these Jazz Workshop performances. Some people began to put Monk down, not because he was too different, but because he wasn't different enough. Specifically, a few

impatient souls began to complain that when they went to see Monk perform, they heard the same old stuff. . . He wasn't writing new tunes. He wasn't growing.

—Peter Keepnews' liner notes, *Monk*:

Thelonious Monk—Live At the Jazz Workshop
(Columbia C2 83269, Reissue)

Classical music infused with the Drum (a music which also functions as a language) and violated by the Holler (religion—particularly Obeah) cums Jazz in all its probable and improbable variations. Tightness and rhythmic stricture plus stimulation to an erogenous zone equals release equals expression. Whereas over-stimulation results in: 1) Numbness. 2) Irritation. 3) Infection. 4) Sepsis. 5) Necrosis. 6) Hello, Death (see Ted Joans' "The .38").

When the Jazz principle is applied, growth becomes irrelevant after one attains mastery. When applied to performance, growth ceases only when the improvisations themselves become fixed, ceasing to be actual improvisations but instead become mere arrangements and/or interpretations/comments upon. The nature of improvisation is spontaneous infusion/renewal—not *repetition* or geometric progression/ascension. Max Swartz of San Francisco's Mission district dares apply the Jazz principle with great success and great failure all in the space of a performance, usually accompanied by bass or saxophone. He's published little, expressing disdain for fixation on paper. Kamau Daaoud is the foremost L.A. proponent of this, although he periodically self-publishes small books of his "jazzualizations." Thus one could, as Monk did, play the same song (or write the same poem) repeatedly throughout a set and yet continually renew it/rebirth it/present different aspects without (if you are lucky) boring listeners who see with their ears. Blindness is, in this respect, deafness (aka double trouble). And, needless to say, the tone deaf will, of course, be bored.

In relation to what I do as a Black/Afro-American *po-et woman* who believes her people are a first, a unique if tortured cultural/world event, I could and do swear that the Dominant Culture flagrantly denies my people-language (again, the Holler and the Drum) and refuses to recognize the nature of Afro-American duality established by W.E.B. Dubois in his writings as far back as 1903. There is a deliberate and on-going failure on the part of the government to officially recognize that a holocaust continues for Black Americans. The passage of the 14th Amendment to *their* Constitution and our glorious struggle for Civil Rights did not resolve our problem.

As has been pointed out previously, the D.C. craves its Black underclass upon which it vampirishly feeds, though it is careful to never quite kill off its victim; rather, keeps it minimally alive, enough to provide sufficient and

periodic infusions of blood/excitement/challenge/richness/deviance. Which is why Blacks and Amerindians will never be allowed the same privileges as, say, first generation emigres (certainly not without substantial and bloody social revolution). Our businesses are not patronized unless they are deemed safe/nonthreatening or "in." The Communications Media continue to present an America in which slavery never happened or has been adequately and officially atoned for. [For example, the video travesty of Alex Haley's *Roots* lay in the rumor that two of the "White" stars were paid salaries equal to what the *entire* Black cast was paid, and the fact that only two Black writers were hired to work on and "blacken" scripts written by Whites.]

We live in a nation without proper context.

IV

Everybody complains. They are tired of you doin' your same old moldy thang (nevah mind dat thang made yo' famous, Shamus) when are you gonna do somethin' new? Even dyin', particularly of a drug overdose, is unoriginal.

It is possible for an impoverished writer to escape poverty through making use of that poverty in his work. For a white woman to escape the economic confines of an oppressive sexism by making use of her sexuality is possible. But for a Black American writer to escape Blackness through the use of that Blackness in his/her work is not possible. To escape, one must be able to, in effect, *write white*.

—conversational music—

During her career, Billie Holiday never won a *Down Beat* poll for best singer/vocalist.

##

Speaking of furnished rooms, suppose Classical/traditional writing and/or music were compared to an apartment (compartmentalization). The Classical apartment is very lovely. You can paint it. You can move things around in it. You can buy new furniture and lay down new floors. It is still the same apartment.

A Jazz apartment has modular/movable walls, it is an environment allowing for the predictable to coexist with the unpredictable; ape the Classical then suddenly break loose into variation to the point of unrecognizability; i.e., new, alien, and always as renewable as the occupant (artist/creator) desires—limited only by the occupant's pocketbook/imagination.

Hahaha.

The act of recording creativity in progress fixates it, depriving it, inevitably, of maximum emotional immediacy—yet, simultaneously freezing/encapsulating as unspeakable fertility awaiting the thaw of proper receptivity and rebirth/recreation, etcetera.

If one defines art as memory, then Black music (or music infused with/infected by blackness) gives me *my* memory. And as much as I might enjoy/appreciate other musics, they cannot open the treasure box of my memory; they do not stimulate my “muse” nor do they provide me vision.

Not that the classics/Classical music is not beautiful; I would no more deny Bach’s greatness than I would deny James Brown’s—I shouldn’t have to. But Bach does not give me back myself. He does not take me home. My home is no more Europe than Africa, though both figure in my heritage. Home is not the libraries, museums, offices or concert halls where I most often encountered this kind of music (cold stony environments). Classical music doesn’t take me to any one of the dozens of funky little flesh-teeming joints where I struggled to escape poverty during my young womanhood. It cannot take me to the emotional peaks and valleys of Los Angeles’ Black community from which I spring.

It does, however, evoke the superior attitudes of “across town”; of white school teachers, of librarians shushing me viciously with their index fingers, of stiffly stuffed gowns and tuxedos applauding politely, of the blond blue-eyed Christ staring dazedly over his flock from the backs of pastel Sunday School cards. No matter how accomplished, how beautiful and true this music is, it evokes the *ugly lying* spectre of racism.

Thus the social consciousness of music becomes social memory. Poetry, too, is equally social memory/consciousness. Rhythms are the conduits of memory/linkages to time and place in the very real sense that they allow me, as a writer, to recreate the past in excruciating detail and clarity. To tap into and summon up that which might, otherwise, be lost forever.

Instantaneous dialog occurs between those who recognize the same or similar rhythmic history; as much as those who live through a particularly stormy or horrific historical event.

The poet hears the saxophonist. The poet may imitate the sax—the actual sounds made with words, may imitate the moves and sways of a particular saxophonist; may record the evocations made by that saxophonist at that moment; may describe the images and/or feelings/associations which arise. In the oral presentation of the poem, the poet may become/reveal all or any of the above thus bringing the communication to one sort of conclusion—adding or subtracting from the total experience given the mastery of his/her gift. Thus music becomes text.

When the poem itself is set to an actual music, as a lyric, or read to the

accompaniment (improvised or rehearsed) of a sax before an audience, the process is brought full cycle to begin again.

The medium of music chrysalises the present allowing future access. The poet/writer may draw on it to release information, shape it creatively, rebirth/make it live and breathe with immediacy of just having happened (the poem) or reshape it as a social nourishment, a vital aspect of life as experience (the story). In this way *my* music gives me back *myself*.

My most private moment of musical love manifests itself as an orgasm.

Conclusions

Fixation is death temporarily.

At a recent poetry reading featuring Black poets from the community of Watts, I listened rapt to their voices, which included my own. We were diverse in every respect, including economics. But after two solid hours our voices seemed to converge as though we were all writing/reading fragments of the same long poem/history.

Simply put, Theloniousism is the Jazz Principle applied to verse.

The perverse pursuit of THE NEW in the Dominant Culture (biological aspects aside) without full recognition of the ravages of racism/xenophobia upon its infrastructure, leads to creative bankruptcy; a circumstance/environment which allows THE BOGUS to seize power on all levels.

Literature is not only political, it is politics supremely—at its most vicious and most vigorous, and is, therefore, to be prized—utterly.

A Dominant Culture writer/poet can afford to play literary games, because, in doing so, the stakes, while extremely high, can be written off. Sooner or later there will be another game in which to indulge. But the Afro-American poet/writer gambles everything when he splits his psyche in order to win at this game. Should he/she achieve success, it is inevitably devalued by tokenism on the one hand, and a demand that the artist provide a solution to the burdens of racism on the other. To obtain (not to mention maintain) said success, the price is either death or relentless war. Death may take any form, the economic or the creative, the literal or the figurative. And if it is to be war, bittersweetly, it will be a war that even when won is automatically lost.