

The Language of Music: Representations of Music in Fiction or Why I Write

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Abstract

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This essay takes up the question of the different methods fiction writers use to represent music in their works. This inquiry prompts a meditation on the relationship between literature and music, the differing and overlapping goals of each, and what this relationship might mean for the practicing artist (literary or musical). The piece contends, after grappling with these questions, that it is the linguistic nature of fiction that gives it more fundamental access to the elements of the human experience. This observation brings the essay to a more personal sphere, in which the thinking done earlier in the essay is brought to bear on my own rejection of musicianship in favor of writing fiction.

As an undergraduate, I enrolled in a course entitled “Hybrid Poetics” with little idea of what the class might offer. It ended up being a course in genre-bending, equal parts rigorous study of genre theory, readings of contemporary poetry and prose in which generic conventions were somehow troubled or subverted, and the workshopping of an extended creative project with similar aesthetic goals. The professor, a youngish poet fresh from SUNY Buffalo’s Poetics doctoral program with a special obsession with Marianne Moore and a tweed sport coat that was entirely too big for him, invited me to his office to talk about my plans for the project and writing more generally. When I arrived, an image taped to his office door immediately caught my attention. It was a photograph, which the professor had obviously printed from a Google image search, of John Coltrane on stage. Inside his office were more such photographs, nearly all of Coltrane (one, I remember specifically, of Charlie Parker). This, I thought, would surely give us something to talk about—we had something in common: an interest in jazz.

When I sat down, I was nearly as tall seated as he was standing, though his spiked hair made him look considerably taller than he actually was. He sat down too, pushed his horn-rimmed spectacles up the bridge of his nose, and asked me when and how I became interested in writing fiction—a question to which I had by then already developed a stock reply. I told him that for the entirety of my adolescence I’d wanted to be a professional musician. In high school, I didn’t do any of my schoolwork and had no social life whatever. I would wake up several hours before I had to catch the bus to school to sit in my room with the door closed, set the click of my metronome to its appropriate speed, and practice playing the guitar until the bus came. Upon getting home from school, I would do the same until I had to go to sleep. Any writing exercise or self-directed project I was assigned, I related to my music in some form—if it could not be so related, I simply didn’t do it and failed the assignment. I decided, then, I would audition to

become a student at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, and practiced my audition piece with religious fervor. Then, by bookstore happenstance (I truly cannot remember why I picked it up off the shelf), I encountered a novel by Nadine Gordimer, *The House Gun*. I felt, in my professor's office, and still feel now, several years later, a little pretentious describing it this way, but after reading Gordimer's first chapter, I had the closest thing to an epiphanic experience I've ever had. What she, in three brief pages, is able to achieve with language dwarfed, to my mind, anything that I could ever accomplish with the twelve notes of the chromatic scale. My experience with this novel, with its language, was more profound than any literary experience I'd had by that point in my life, and probably than any musical experience too. I didn't touch my guitar for six months. I read everything I could, from Dickens to Delillo. I even tried to write a few bad short stories. And I was hooked. Of course, my Berklee audition was a disaster as a consequence of having not practiced for months, a disaster about which I was secretly relieved, and that, I concluded my anecdote in the professor's office, was how I ended up studying literature at MCLA.

"That's such an interesting reversal," the professor said, at least in effect.

"How do you mean?"

"So often, one thinks of writing as a back up plan for someone who couldn't cut it as a musician. But in your case, it sounds like you could have cut it as a musician but chose writing anyway." I had never considered that, but on reflection, thought he was right. Whether or not I actually could have succeeded as a musician is, by now, moot, but that literature won out for me is clear. We went on to discuss his attempt at a career as a jazz fusion keyboardist and our mutual love of Nathaniel Mackey's poetry and prose.

I recount this anecdote as a way of contextualizing the problem this essay will explore. The relationship between writing and music is one component of that problem. The failed-musician-turned-writer is an image with which American culture is abundantly familiar. The clichéd and infuriating aphorism, “Those who cannot do teach,” revised slightly, is a clear expression of the dominant view: Those who cannot play music write about music. Critics and literary artists alike are guilty of this way of thinking. At a public Q&A at Duke University in celebration of his novel *Orfeo*, Richard Powers declared that: “I am a frustrated musician myself. I think that had I been good enough, I probably would have tried to walk the walk.” That his novel is a pristine aesthetic achievement in itself, of course, remains curiously unmentioned—he had to settle for writing because music, his true love, was outside of his feeble grasp. Many of his books include music as one of their subjects, I suppose, because he just had to fit it in somewhere, the vestigial shadow of his dream career.

I, like most human beings (dare I say all?), am enamored of music. More than fiction, poetry, painting, or even cinema, music is the most beloved art form in the world. On a first date, one might reasonably ask one’s interlocutor “Do you like novels?” or “Do you like sculpture?” but could not imagine asking “Do you like music?”—the question one always asks is: “What kind of music do you like?” Music transcends the boundaries between race, class, gender, culture, and even language. As George Steiner, a critic whose writings on literature and language have long been important to me, mentions in a 2010 lecture in Amsterdam, “Music seems to me, more than literature, the great force, the hope of a transcendent possibility.” Part, I suspect, of this power in music lies in its freedom from some of the constraints of other arts—music is neither representational nor linguistic. As Oliver Sacks points out in his 2007 book *Musicophilia*,

“Music, uniquely among the arts, is both completely abstract and profoundly emotional.” Music, thus, trades in something far more mysterious.

Despite all of this, it would be a mistake to subordinate literature to music on these grounds. As my anecdote about *The House Gun* evinces, it has been my experience that literature has been a more profoundly powerful force in my life and has produced more thrilling aesthetic episodes for me. Subordination cannot adequately capture the complexities of the relationship between these two art forms. Since literature is comprised of language and music is totally extralinguistic (for my purposes, I refer only to absolute music, though voiced music, a hybrid form that fuses music and a specific kind of folk poetry, is a fascinating layer of additional complexity), their interplay prompts fundamental questions about the natures of each form. Literary representation of music, a linguistic representation of that which is extralinguistic and extrarepresentational, showcases and investigates these problems by its very nature. As a fiction writer whose life has been shaped by music in more ways than one, I am interested in the techniques writers use to create this investigation, and how they (we) can push it forward. I am additionally interested, though, in what pushing it forward, as it were, reveals about the role of language in art.

Clumsy as ever, but entertaining (perhaps even charming) in its own unique and ham-handed way, H.P. Lovecraft’s short story “The Music of Erich Zann” offers one example of a technique a writer might employ to depict music—it is, however, in my view, the crudest and most unsatisfying technique. In his signature Lovecraftian style, the idiosyncratic and mysterious writer depicts the music of his story precisely by not depicting it. Adjectives and epithets abound throughout the work, but at no point does our narrator offer even a modest attempt at describing the music. Such phrases as “I heard strange music” and “I was haunted by the weirdness of his

music” are the full extent to which the narrator gives us access to Erich Zann’s playing as he hears it. Lovecraft, as almost always, exploits this in an attempt to create a mysterious and foreboding atmosphere. What he ends up doing instead is leaving the reader (or, at least, me) feeling as though he’s been robbed of the experience of hearing the titular music. Whether this is an attempt at a specific aesthetic strategy or a veneer for a mediocre writer’s inability to describe music is difficult to discern. What is clear, though, is that if contemporary fiction is to engage effectively with music as a subject, it cannot be via this technique.

In his 1910 novel *Gertrude*, Hermann Hesse describes practicing one’s instrument as trying “to wrestle strenuously and resolutely with the secrets of form as if with fiends.” Of course, one could use this phrase to describe the process of making any art. But the wrestling, in this novel, is with music as pure form as well as with music’s emotional content as it encapsulates the emotional contents of the narrator’s increasingly fraught relationships. In this way, Hesse establishes a complex and multifarious approach to the literary representation of music. One curious absence, though, is an actual description of what the music sounds like. Take the following examples. Upon reading a composition of the narrator’s (note the dynamic tension between text and music as microcosmically operative in the act of reading, rather than playing, a musical composition), a music teacher of his responds thus:

“There is something in it, without any doubt, and you may well achieve something. To be quite honest, I thought you were already more mature and tranquil. I did not really credit you with such a passionate nature. I expected something quieter and more pleasing, something more technically correct which could have been judged technically. But your work is not good technically, so I can say little about that. It is an audacious attempt, the merit of which I am unable to judge, but as your teacher I cannot praise it.”

The biography of the narrator, which has already been revealed by the time this passage appears, accounts for these features of his composition. These features, referred to by references to vague emotional states that the formal properties of the music evidently reflect or inspire in its listener, describe the music only by way of emotional analog—as a literary device, this works very well, as it allows a writer to create tonal resonances between the emotional states of both character and reader by way of the emotional descriptors used to represent the music. But as an actual attempt at representing music, it falls flat—one doesn't have any idea what the composition sounds like, only that it is indicative of a passionate and immature composer and that it significantly lacks technical merit. The passage in which Kuhn, the narrator, first writes this composition is no different in this way, despite its arresting beauty. “In the quiet of one evening” on a mountainside, where Kuhn has been spending much of his time trying to regain the lost passion of his youth, he experiences “the almost glasslike brightness and transparency of feelings where everything appeared without a mask, where things were no longer labeled sorrow or happiness, but everything signified strength and sound and creative release,” and from it is able to compose music in his head, that he cannot write down just yet.

This approach is not unique to *Gertrude*. Indeed, one of my very favorite examples of representing music fictionally employs the same technique. In one of the most stunning passages of prose I've ever encountered, the closing section of James Baldwin's “Sonny's Blues,” we see a similar approach play out, in which there is a confluence of spirit between music, musician, and audience, and it is the confluence that represents the sound of the music. One critical difference between what Baldwin does here and what Hesse does in *Gertrude* is that, for Baldwin, the physical manipulation of the instrument is the point at which the music's creator imbues it with the emotional core of his being. This story is about improvisation and

performance, rather than composition, and as much about the listener as it is about the player. The narrator reveals this explicitly when he says “He has to fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life, his own.” Of course, the musical idiom out of which Baldwin writes is markedly different from that out of which Hesse writes. For that and other reasons, the materiality of music making is central for Baldwin. But materiality is only part of the picture, as the passages that refer to it refer also to the ways in which the musician “began to make it his” by imbuing the music with his own—the word “feeling” seems entirely inadequate. And yet, this radical individuality fails to capture the essence of music for Baldwin as well. Audience plays a central role in the way this story thinks about music, and it is the dialectical relationship between these two elements that comprise the philosophy of music Baldwin presents: “I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did.”

Like *Gertrude*, “Sonny’s Blues” imports powerful emotions from a character’s backstory into the music the character produces; the difference, however, is that this story establishes, on a deep level, the complicated dynamics of sociality and individuality in music. As a literary move, this is astonishing, as it encapsulates one of what I perceive to be the core functions of fiction: imagining and investigating the competing individual and social tendencies of the human being. Observing this feature of both jazz and fiction precipitated my writing of a short story in which a collective first-person voice narrates the story of an exceptional jazz soloist—in an attempt at mucking through this issue, I had my narrator address the question directly: “Our playing improved with his, because jazz is as much about community, about fraternity, as it is about individuality. That’s the old paradox, right? The jazzman versus the jazz band.”

That line of thinking prompts in me curiosity about not just the differing techniques authors employ to represent music in their fictions, but the differing ends to which they do that. In some cases, (the stories, for instance, in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Nocturnes*) fiction about music is only about music on the most superficial level—that is to say that music is the platform on which the story explores its larger themes. Stories of this kind are about music in the same way that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is about painting or that *Housekeeping* is about housekeeping. Of course, this fact does not preclude these fictions from being great. On the contrary, many of them are great indeed. But it does preclude them from contributing meaningfully to conversations about the philosophy of music. It is my contention that works of fiction that engage with music on a deeper level, whose form and thematics are comprised of musical material, contribute substantively to what we talk about when we talk about music, while simultaneously revealing something important about the nature of fiction and the nature of language.

I am interested in fiction that takes up music as its deep subject. Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* is one example of such a novel. Of course, as its title suggests, the novel is a reconfiguration of the well-known Faust story, the most famous versions of which are by Goethe and Christopher Marlowe. Characteristic of Mann's style, Serenus Zeitbloom, the narrator and friend of the main character, tells his story very explicitly—the thematics that are at work in this book are not a matter of subtext, but rather, are explained to us. Critics often cite this as a drawback of Mann's work, but in this particular novel, it is one of his greatest strengths. There is no pretense about the centrality of the book's dramatic situation—rather, via this dramatic situation, the narrator openly meditates on the nature of music. Mann reverses the kind of fiction in which music is a platform on which to explore the story's drama by using the story's drama as a platform on which to explore music. As a former serious musician and a current musical

hobbyist, even I am astonished by the depths of Mann's knowledge of music. The following passage is exemplary of the novel's style, as well as the depth of its erudition:

“Of him [Beethoven] and of the technical principle through which a dominating subjectivity got hold of the musical organization; I mean the development, or working out. The development itself had been a small part of the sonata, a modest republic of subjective illumination and dynamic. With Beethoven it becomes universal, becomes the center of the whole form, which, even where it is supposed to remain conventional, is absorbed by the subjective and is newly created in freedom. The form of variations, something archaic, a residuum, becomes a means by which to infuse new life into form. The principle of development plus variation technique extends over the whole sonata.”

This is only a small taste of the kinds of musings, critical and philosophical, that comprise much of the novel. One will note that the above passage reveals to readers with adequate understanding of classic music the features of the pieces it describes by way of reference to a specific system of vocabulary for discussing music. In this way, it mimics music criticism—the passage isn't a literary representation of music, but rather, an explanation of music in a literary context.

The drama itself, the plot, exists in this novel only to provide a vehicle for this kind of passage. The novel's intellectual exercises, despite their ostensible tangentiality, are the whole point of this book. The musical knowledge on display is multiple in its incarnations. The novel is elusive and allusive, referencing obscure works in great detail. The propensity of its narrator to name drop creates a tone of musical authority, while the immense detail of his references reinforces our perception of his knowledge. This is the next incarnation of how the novel displays its music knowledge—the level at which it grasps music theory and possesses a critical vocabulary for discussion of serious music. Too, the novel takes up the question of the individual in music,

though the question as posed by Mann is less complicated and nuanced than it is for Baldwin. In *Doctor Faustus*, the questions are: what is genius, what forms it, and how does it manifest in musical creativity? Genius is that for which Adrian—the composer who is Zeitbloom’s subject—sells his soul. Whatever I think of *Doctor Faustus*, I wonder whether or not such a book could be written today. Erudition does play a role in some contemporary fiction (I am reminded of W.G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* or Jacques Roubaud’s *The Great Fire of London*), but these contemporary fictions employ their scholastic ruminations to a totally different end. For Mann, the project is to delight in knowledge, to meditate on music, and to understand the nature of genius. Less reductive in its argumentation than, say, a philosophical dialogue of Plato or David Hume, too unsure of itself to be purely an essay, this novel employs its narrative features as a way of opening up the possibilities for ambiguity and ambivalence in rigorous thought. Unlike the novels which precede it in the present essay, from clunky non-descriptions of music, to descriptions of music in service of other goals, Mann’s extraordinary novel is, in a way that is both rigorous and emotionally satisfying, about music—it seeks to understand something about the relationship between music and genius.

The book that, to my mind, most successfully carries on this lineage, specifically with respect to music, but also more generally in terms of its erudition, is Nathaniel Mackey’s avant-garde novel sequence entitled *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*. Most famous as a poet, Mackey is, in every medium in which he works, one of the most moving writers I’ve ever encountered. Mackey is interested, in both his poetry and his prose, in what I like to call the poetics of cultural improvisation. In light of the texts I’ve been considering in this investigation thus far, *From a Broken Bottle* seems to be a fusion of the mechanisms via which James Baldwin and Thomas Mann represent music in their fictions, toward an end that dives

deep into the spirit of the project of human culture. The novel is epistolary, consisting of letters from N., a jazz multi-instrumentalist and bandleader, to the mysterious figure the Angel of Dust. The language of the letters is one of their most striking features. In a passage in which N. describes a piece of music he composed after having a startlingly vivid dream, the deftness of Mackey's language is on full display: "This ambiguous or amphibious vacillation between life-giving lamentation on the one hand and death-dealing lamentation on the other led me to incorporate an analogous commingling of, respectively, major and minor keys into 'Dog-Eared Anacrusis.'" One will note the alliteration and rhythmic patterning of the sentence. The passage continues to establish an intricate dream symbol system, by which N. extracted this composition from the dream. The book's engagement with music works on the formal level—in addition to taking up music as its deep subject, this sequence of novels embodies music performatively. Where overrated and simple-minded writers like Jack Kerouac failed, Nathaniel Mackey has succeeded—this novel is an exercise in improvisational prose.

The prose is musical, yes, but it is cerebral and erudite as well. Mackey's careful study of music and avant-garde poetics is not wasted on this project. We encounter phrases like "iconoclastic counterplay of deprivations," and "Afro-apocalyptic, polypercussive cloth." In the world Mackey builds, language—spoken, written, and musical—is the material from which the contours of reality emerge. Mackey's literary imagination is one in which language itself, both as mode of text creation at the level of writing and as mode of reality shaping at the level of phenomenal experience, is the primary feature of literature and life. Music, then, is a method of accessing more deeply the ways language functions, and the ways we (Mackey's voice is a collective voice, emphasizing the communal nature of language) collectively improvise our linguistic surroundings the way a jazz great improvises a solo. The following passage, in which

N. describes a performance of Charles Mingus's composition "Free Cell Block F, 'Tis Nazi U.S.A." exemplifies this:

"Penguin soloed first and I followed—him on alto, me on tenor. He took a preacherly tack which made the most of the possibilities for chastisement the equation of Nazi with not see opened up. Refusing to see, as did looking the other way, came under fire.

Tending less toward rhapsody than rant, he put uptown flair and good feeling aside. He harangued and exhorted and even opted at points for a screw-loose, loquacious plea for open eyes, a return to Kenny's wide-eyed squint. It was Penguin to the limit—a bittersweet, biting sound á la Jimmy Lyons without Jimmy's trepidatious phrasing.

Penguin went for the big, mouthfilling phrase, straightahead but syntactically loose enough to point to particulars where the need arose. The Greensboro killings came up.

The Atlanta child murders came up. The lynching last March in Alabama came up, as did a number of other such 'incidents' people choose not, Penguin pointed out, to see for what they are."

The passage functions via metaphor, ostensibly, (Penguin does not literally say anything at all) but my reading of the passage is that this would be a reductive understanding of it. The

performance N. describes, here, follows the band reciting, in unison, the first paragraph of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which, N. explains, is to "announce an equation of Nazi and not see."

Mackey's inclusion of this detail, though, works on yet another level, signaling the linguistic (dare I say literary) functionality of music within the confines of his kaleidoscopically jazz

inflected world. Too, it torques the reader toward this particular kind of literary politicality or

political literarity. Thus, Penguin's "preacherly tack," his sermon, so to speak, on violence

against black people, his call for new sight, new seeing, ceases to be metaphorical and becomes a

genuine feature of the imagined world of the text. In the same way that he permeates the boundary between music and literature, Mackey permeates the boundary between metaphor and fantasy. But this fantasy, far from being a purely imaginal artifact, is a coalescence of the transcendent features of language, music, and politics. Sermonic language reasserts this emphasis on the transcendent. At Steiner's claim that music remains the only hope for a transcendent possibility, Mackey laughs. Instead, it is improvisation, which is, for him, a necessarily linguistic event.

The relationship between music—abstract, non-representational, non-linguistic—and language itself is at the core of Mackey's work, and is, too, at the core of the relationship between music and literature. It is in this way that representations of music in fiction, when they are at their best (not in Lovecraft, for instance) capture the spirit of both forms simultaneously, in a way that neither form could on its own. While the Lovecraft story concerns a dramatic situation that is about music in some peripheral sense but eschews describing it, Hesse and Baldwin describe music with varying degrees of deftness but use their descriptions merely as platforms for their own, extramusical thematic concerns, and Mann takes up music as his deep subject, but only by way of abstract and scholastic discussion of music, as though he were writing a piece of music criticism, Mackey enacts music both in the timbre of his prose and the very nature of the reality his novel constructs.

It would be dishonest to compare my own writing to Mackey's—quality aside, the linguistic world-building project is not my project, and my own fiction, I suspect, is less obviously avant-garde than *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*. And yet, I think, there is something in his work that I seek to achieve in my own—that the relationship between music and literature as art, and the role of that art in the larger world, be central. In a

long short story on which I am currently working, questions of the avant-garde in music (and, hopefully, in the arts more broadly) are central. It is my hope that this project will be an experiment in figuring out whether or not dealing with music as a deep subject is possible to achieve successfully within the confines of realism. Of course, the ultimate achievement or lack thereof of a piece of my own imaginative writing is independent of these theoretical intentions, but the work is, no doubt, indebted to all of the pieces of fiction I have discussed in this essay (even Lovecraft, by way of showing me what not to do).

Metaphoric relationships between music and literature are abundant in the ways we talk about each—one can speak of the way a great composer tells a story with his melodies, or the musical quality with which a great novelist imbues her prose. And yet, upon scrutinizing each of these metaphors, one realizes that they are both literary in character—while the latter metaphor takes a prose passage as its tenor and a piece of music as its vehicle, the former, rather than functioning as an ordinary metaphor, demands of music that it achieve the aims of literature. This subordinates music to literature. The music that I love has profoundly impacted my writing, both imaginative and critical, and my thinking about writing. Pat Martino’s use of repetition, for instance—repeating a single phrase over and over as the accompaniment subtly evolves—is an alternative manifestation of how a word or phrase—one will note, here, how the word “phrase” in music is a linguistic metaphor—changes its meaning when repeated and will ultimately lose its meaning if repeated enough times. This is, of course, an intensely literary phenomenon. So too is Bruce Forman’s injunction that the jazz guitarist must tell a story by way of sequencing and the development of larger patterns in the combination and recombination of those sequences. Despite that—or, perhaps, following from that—no musical experience I have ever had, not seeing Pat Martino or Mike Stern live in concert, not my first time listening to Pharoah Sanders’s

“Aum/Venus/Capricorn/Rising,” not even the most exciting of my improvisational sessions with other musicians, rivals my consistently soul-nourishing experience of reading. If forced to choose between Rachmaninoff and Dickens, between Charlie Parker and Thomas Mann, between Chick Corea and Marilynne Robinson, I would opt for the writer in every instance. That I don’t have to make such a choice is a blessing, but that I would remains a fixture of the way I view these two artforms and their relationship. Perhaps, and it is with the utmost caution that I make this claim: it is my deep preference for art that makes the complexities of our world its explicit subject that is responsible for my failures as a musician. I did not fail music; music, rather, failed me.

Artistic creation, in any medium, contains an infinitude of possibilities—the combination and recombination of the most basic elements of the medium creates literally infinite possible works of art, each with its own unique set of features, its own aesthetic value, its own vantage-point, its own adherence to or rebellion against its own tradition. On the truth of this proposition, I am perplexed by the ability of western music’s twelve notes to stagnate. My earliest experiences with serious reading revealed to me how the combination and recombination of those twelve notes was simply not enough.

Once, on some other recounting of my transition from music to literature as my main passion, the person with whom I was speaking asked an incredulous question that bothered me for a reason I did not fully understand at the time. She asked (I paraphrase): Why not tell stories with music? After having it as a memory for several years, I have made progress toward understanding the offense I took. Firstly, and least importantly, the question subordinates literature to music, which, given what was then my recent change in attitude toward both, undoubtedly was a partial cause of my irritation. But much more substantively, the question

fundamentally misunderstands both artforms. To speak of a story in music is to metaphorize, and this metaphor grants to music a power it does not—cannot, in principle—possess. While some have characterized music’s lack of mimesis as its method for achieving a purer form of human feeling than the mimetic arts, it is precisely music’s non-mimetic form that prevents it from grounding those feelings in the world.

The fiction that I love most—*From a Broken Bottle* is one example—captures the essence of music, but situates it in a corporeal context. Within this observation is the explanation for literature’s primacy in my life. While literature and music generally have different aims, the very best of the former can achieve the aims of the latter. This does not work in reverse. Music cannot, by its very nature, operate on the level of literature. But in the world, for instance, that Mackey’s novel constructs, the metaphoric description of prose as musical ceases to be metaphor. Like the other fictions I have investigated, Mackey’s novel describes music and, as I have already established, takes this description further by enacting music performatively. But careful reading of and rigorous thinking about this performative enactment reveals something much deeper. Virtually any passage in the novel is apposite for this analysis: “What I called clamp-lilac eelpot access in my lecture/libretto has turned a new page in the band’s book. We’ve fallen in with a flow we always knew was there, though not as viscerally as we know it now. We’ve again been apprised of an echoic whirl, warned against pre-emptive equivalence.” This trio of sentences exemplifies Mackey’s project and, by extension, the project of much of the fiction that moves me. These sentences function on the level of associational logic, the opening words (these sentences begin one of N.’s letters) signaling an emphasis on the naming of concepts, followed by the names themselves, scarcely comprehensible compound words that, in addition to whatever associational meaning one can fruitfully drum up, operate sonically. A

careful reader will note that these names appear in a “lecture/libretto,” a fusion of two forms of communication, one interested in the dissemination of content by way of the semantic meaning of words, the other interested in access to feeling by way of the resonances of sounds. Mackey explains his project. Then, knowledge and the visceral enter our field of view. Knowledge and the visceral, the domains of literature, wrench us free from the constraints of music. And then we return to sound in an “echoic whir,” which Mackey makes explicit, which forces us to create, not a “pre-emptive equivalence,” but a considered one. In three sentences plucked arbitrarily from the text, Mackey achieves the aims both of literature and of music—the case of this novel is particularly interesting, as its deep subject is music, which results in a more obvious and self-conscious muscio-literary effect. But the same, in less obvious terms, can be said of Virginia Woolf or Henry James, Peter Handke or Nadine Gordimer, of any great writer, irrespective of whether or not they explicitly take up music.

As a literary artist who writes obsessively about music, Nathaniel Mackey is often asked about whether or not he is a musician himself. In a 1991 interview for *Callaloo Journal*, he answered thusly: “Why I didn’t take up an instrument and become a musician remains a mystery to me but I didn’t and that has to do with circumstantial things which are just circumstantial things.” In my own case, there were, of course, “circumstantial things” that contributed to my ending up choosing the path I have. But it would be a naïve and uncritical mistake to say that the features of the arts themselves had nothing to do with it. My conception of the artist is, like Mackey’s, that of the obsessive, one who focuses all of her energy on getting the project exactly how she wants it, one for whom there is no greater passion than the honing of the craft. For me, that energy can only be singular—I had to choose where it would go. It is for that reason that music will only ever be a hobby. Critics can impose whatever metaphors they like on music to

make it into something that engages deeply with the features of the world as they are. But to me, it does not and cannot. Fiction can and does.

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