

All simultaneous times
all places of the imagination
all forms of expression
are NEW.

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RHYTHM-A-NING

**Philip Whalen's Rhythmic Inventions:
Thelonious Monk, Calligraphy and Zen
Principles**

RHYTHM-A-NING

Philip Whalen's Rhythmic Inventions: Thelonious Monk, Calligraphy and Zen Principles

"...the biggest kicks in music is Rhythmic Invention; the tune is the easy part, etc. WHICH, I hope, is what my poetry is, if anybody had ears to hear, feet to tap. Chaucer, Skelton, Ben Jonson, Dryden, Pope, Shelley, Blake, Hopkins, Yeats"

Philip Zenshin Whalen: From a journal: 11:IX: 67

*

Since You Asked Me

This poetry is a picture or graph of a mind moving, which is a world body being here and now which is history . . . and you. Or think about the Wilson Cloud-chamber, not ideograms, not poetic beauty; bald-faced didacticism moving as Dr. Johnson commands all poetry should, from the particular to the general . . .

My life has been spent in the midst of heroic landscapes which never overwhelmed me and yet I live in a single room in the city—the room a lens focusing on a sheet of paper. Or the inside of your head. How do you like your world?

Philip Zenshin Whalen, *Memoirs of an Interglacial Age* (49)

*

"[Whalen] is a greatly learned man, more in the mainstream of international avant-garde literature, . . . a man of profound insights and the most delicate discriminations. It all seems so effortless, you never notice it until it has stolen up and captivated you, the highly wrought music of his verse. It all sounds so casual and conversational, . . ."

Kenneth Rexroth, *With Eye and Ear* (211)

INTRODUCTION

Hymnus Ad Patrem Sinensis embodies three of Whalen's interests—first, his adaptation and/or assimilation of blues or jazz techniques. Whalen's rhythmic experimentations are evident in his manipulations of accent and tone via shifts in diction, syntax and grammar, his unique morphing of meter for syncopation inside regular measures, and his use of the line lengths, enjambment and spacing to speed or retard time. A Thelonious Monk composition, *Rhythm-a-ning*, was chosen as a title to highlight Whalen and Monk's shared idiosyncratic skills for rhythmic improvisations.

Second, Whalen adapts and/or assimilates Chinese, Japanese and Buddhist artistic principles, such as brush practice its aesthetics and epistemology. "This poetry is a picture or graph of a mind moving, which is a world body being here and now which is history . . . and you." This artistic credo mirrors *Shodo*, the way of the brush, where changing relationships of man, heaven and earth are experienced *live* in painting and calligraphy.

And third, his adaptation and/or assimilation of Zen concepts of compassion occur within Whalen's ruminations on our human passions and our teachers—but with humor. His brush sketch of two Chinese Zenbos with its hilarious sleeping tiger, three wine cups, wine cask and plum blossom float above his idiosyncratic Italic pen calligraphic version of *Hymnus* and exhibits the confluence of these three interests.

RHYTHM-A-NING

Whalen's short lyric poetry offers us several characteristics: his rhythmic musicality, his startling imagery, and his remarkable and often comic freedom of his diction and vocabulary. His ability to shift vocal gears—from mutters to acerbic social commentary up to joyous prophecies—creates his irascible and mercurial Zen monk personae: we experience closely this character's wide range of his best and worse moods.

Whalen's pioneering inventions were founded on his traditional lyric forms such as the ode, epigram, hymn, or ballad. Traditional subjects, such as praise of past poets, epigrammatic portraits, pleas to the muse and witty renditions of lovesick blues, tested his powers of innovation. Just as one of Whalen's favorite musicians, Thelonious Monk, re-arranged church, big band, Tin Pan Alley and Harlem stride music for his own artistic ends, Whalen felt free to adapt and restructure freely his poetic models. Whalen's originality, humor and musical ability allowed him to shadow, parody or mime previous metrical conventions as he places them in new frames and combos. In his youth Whalen played piano, read music and studied music theory. Although in an interview he modestly downplayed this training, he admitted that on the organ he still played Bach, Buxtehude, Sweelinck and Frescobaldi. What interested Whalen was

“ . . . what form in time is, which is what music actually does. . . even in a Bach *Invention* or in the *Well-Tempered Clavier* you get this, or I eventually got around to where I was feeling these shapes or forms arranged and moving in certain ways and at the same time making a composition. . . ”

(*Off the Wall* 16-17)

These forms in time include counterpoint, harmony, syn-copation and improvisational rhythmic techniques. In his writing he couples those skills with low to high diction, Buddhist koans, American folk sayings and/or popular songs, Tin Pan Alley burlesques and/or vaudeville routines. (See Endnote for samples of the appreciative fascination of Monk by Whalen and his artist friends in the 1950s.)



HYMNUS AD PATREM SINENSIS

I praise those ancient Chinamen
Who left me a few words,
Usually a pointless joke or a silly question
A line of poetry drunkenly scrawled on the margin
of a quick splashed picture - bug, leaf,
cariacature of Teacher -
On paper held together now by little more than ink
& their own strength brushed momentarily over it

Their world and several others since
Gone to hell in a handbasket, they knew it -
Cheered as it whizzed by -
& conked out among the busted spring rain cherryblossom winejars
Happy to have saved us all.

31:VIII:58

A CLOSE READING

Hymnus Ad Patrem Sinensis

I praise those ancient Chinamen
Who left me a few words,
Usually a pointless joke or a silly question
A line of poetry drunkenly scrawled on the margin
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& conked out among the busted spring rain cherry blossom winejars
Happy to have saved us all

3 : VIII : 58

The poem starts with the formulaic phrase, “ I praise . . .” a standard for Latin or Greek hymns and/or odes. However off-hand and colloquial this poem sounds, its rhythmic changes are remarkably complex and bear a close reading to confirm what Rexroth claims is “the highly wrought music of his verse.” In *Cultural Amnesia* Clive James reminds us in an essay on American jazz, “For syncopation to exist, there must be a regular pulse.” Throughout this poem Whalen improvises syncopations off a ballad’s iambic tetrameter, trimeter, and also off iambic pentameters, often concealing and rearranging these cadenced metrical structures within enjambed lines. Whalen’s enjambment of cadences creates contrapuntal improvisations and metrical compressions against their primary rhythms.

Whalen opens with an unrhymed English ballad four/three measure, a four-beat iambic first line the stresses on every other syllable. (Stressed syllables in **bold**)

I **praise** those **an-cient Chi-na-men**

He follows with a three beat variation of that iambic line, changing the stresses at the third and sixth and seventh syllables with two anapests and a syncope foot of one single stress.

Who left **me** with a few **words**

These rhythmic variations to the couplet create syncopation off the iambic foot: every other accented syllable changing to every third syllable accented before ending on a single stress “**words**”—the first of several metrical compressions that Whalen uses to cut new rhythms.

Then an aside doubles and condenses the four beat/three beat pattern into one line. The first four stresses shifting from a trochee followed by three iambs, followed with a caesura and then the second half after the caesura he syncopates the last three iambic feet with three trochees.

U-su-al-ly a pointless joke / or a silly question

The tone of a nicely haphazard afterthought conceals a complex pattern. The accented last syllables in “**U-su-al-ly**” creates an inversion for an internal rhyme by an unstressed or weak last syllable rhyme on “**or a sil-ly**” and so this internal rhyme also produces syncopation.

Zen art’s penchant for demonstrating impermanence is described in the next three lines while simultaneously Whalen’s rhythms extemporize by compressing the meters, their quantitative duration and tempo. The fourth line opens with iambs; then it reverses on the fourth accent to a trochee and back to a single stress **-ly** for an irregular iambic pentameter. These two words echoes the syncopated internal rhyme “usually/or a silly” before it.

A line of po-e-try drunk-en-ly / scrawled

The words **po-e-try** and **drunk-en-ly** create an internal end rhyme with similar iambic accent patterns. However “**po**” a short vowel and “**drunk**” a long vowel slows down the line, despite the light “**try**” and “**ly**” rhymes.

Then Whalen’s mimetic rhythm drags the tempo down further into a bleary alky moment when, after the caesura, the long vowel “**scrawled**” signals a variation from the blank verse of the first cadence. Whalen’s three accelerating pentameter cadences are simultaneously compressed by enjambments and short choppy diction. (Underlined words are assonantal unstressed or stressed rhymes.)

**A line of poetry drunkenly /scrawled on the margin of a quick
splashed picture/—bug, leaf,
caricature of Teacher/**

These three submerged blank verse lines are sparked with assonantal rhymes of **quick, pic-** and **-ic**. To my ear these last two pentameter cadences end in jazzy percussive high hat cymbal sound mimed by the three internal “**-ur/-ture/-er**” feminine or unaccented rhymes. Whalen concurrently alternates a very complex, volatile and rapid construction/expansion with a deconstruction/condensation of poetic measures here.

Both the poem’s aural and visual presentations recall Martin Williams’s remarks on Thelonious Monk’s similarly rhythmic expansions and contractions and what this technique achieves.

“on ‘Five Spot Blues’ . . . an archaic triplet figure is elaborated within a traditional framework. It is perhaps a measure of Monk's talent that he is willing to undertake something so totally unpretentious. And yet in his solos, he stretches out that little triplet motif, then abruptly condenses it into half the space it is supposed to occupy, embellishes it until it is almost lost, then rediscovers it and restores its unapologetic simplicity. Almost anyone with an ear for melody and rhythm could follow him exactly, I think, yet in its small way ‘Five Spot Blues’ is also a measure of his sense of order, of his rhythmic virtuosity, his originality, and his greatness.”

(Williams, quoted in Gourse 193-194)

Williams’ description applies to Whalen’s opening six lines and explicates some of his percussive and compressive strategies, sonically.

To shift to the Italic version, visually in Whalen’s eccentric calligraphy these three lines compress and hump up—losing any sense of the proper right angle guideline for Italic script. And these shortened lines also are embellished with festive ascending letters (f, k, l sh, l, f and h) and descending letters (q, p, p g, f, and f). And just for a visual emphasis Whalen scribes a disproportionately tall plain T on Teacher, a brief serif at its foot, a nod and a wink to a formal Italic calligraphy’s normal swash serif capital letters. Of course, just as Monk was able to play “Five Spot Blues” straight, Whalen was perfectly capable of performing a standard calligraphic version, with properly proportioned letters in straight lines and accepted angles. But these calligraphic irregularities perform as a jazz improv while also embodying the asymmetric Zen aesthetic.

For Zen brush works D.T. Suzuki says the art must radiate *mugaku no koto* or “a thing of no learning” which is produced by the state of “no-mind (*mushin*) or of no thought (*munen*).” (100) An acolyte artist’s long training first produces multiple

copies of great calligraphic works and this ideally allows the acolyte to access that artist's spirit without any trace of training. As D.T. Suzuki notes, the performance of a Zen sword master or artist arises from "the fluidity of mentation and the lightning rapidity of action." (117)

Whalen's brush cartoon of the two sages with three wine cups lounging behind a drowsy or drunk tiger (with a suspiciously dragon-like snout and a drunk expression) radiates Zen fluidity of perceptions with rapid brushwork, while the rhythms of his Italic calligraphy also embody those traits as the poet himself announces in his poem that strategy ("quick splashed picture"). Whalen's celebratory poem, painting and calligraphy visually glow with *mushin*; Whalen's "mind moving . . . is a world body" could stand as an alternate translation of *Shodo*.

What is worth also noting stylistically is that literal translations of Chinese verse characters often may be rendered as "bug, leaf, caricature Teacher" before adding any usual English articles and/or prepositions.

"a/the bug, a/the leaf, a/the caricature of a/the/my/our Teacher"

Such run-on shortcuts in English also recall the percussive musical phrasing and blocky syncopated rhythms of Thelonious Monk. Monk may improvise on a Tin Pan Alley melody, say "Between The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea" by rearranging a few notes or chords from a measure of Harold Arlen's song. He drops the rest of the song's melodic phrasing or chord resolutions so he may enter into improvisations off selected notes and/or chords, doubling, tripling or sustaining them to fill out the usual bars. Writing out their lyrics as Monk plays them, something like this cadenced four/three ballad pattern emerges (sustained notes or chords in **Bold CAPS**):

Be**TWEEN** the/ the devil **AND**/between the **DE-/ DEVIL** and//
devil deep **BLUE/ BLUE** sea **SEA**

Martin Williams, in *The Thelonious Monk Reader*, describes this technique thusly: "The core of Monk's style is a rhythmic virtuosity. He is a master of displaced accents, shifting meters, shaded delays, and anticipations. There he is a master of effective pause and of meaningfully employed space, rest and silence. Fundamentally his practices in harmony and line are organized around his insights into rhythm." (van der Bliek 216)

Each pause, hesitation or thunderous sustained chord at

end of a measure become aural blinks, where the mind clears and/or resets, in the same way a cut in film signals change. Like Whalen, Monk's improvisational skill creates new ways of hearing an old tune and marks off new measures of rhythmic intensity and duration.

After Whalen's agile "*bug, leaf, caricature*" excursion into extended and fluid improvisation, he returns to the pulse of a four-three iambic cadenced couplet in the seventh line, but again without the lineation of a ballad couplet.

on **pa**-per **held** to-**geth**-er **now** / by **lit**-tle **more** than **ink**
& their **own strength brushed** / **momentarily over it**

Then the eighth line's first cadence places three stresses among five syllables, by jamming three accents together last, an anapest and a spondee. Then the second cadence or measure is straight iambic. The eighth line's cadence pattern reverses the ballad couplet meter to three/four accompanied by consonantal and assonantal alliteration between both lines: **more**, **own**, **mo-**, and **over**.

& their **own strength brushed** / **momentarily over it**

How exactly these accents are distributed by metrical feet is problematic even though this eighth line is not at all difficult to say. The oral performance of this line depends on the reader sensing how the tempo/speed builds up in the previous lines "*bug, leaf, caricature*" and where the reader feeling a percussive rhythm of accents or pauses falls, rather than a reading following the standard accents in a dictionary. With the following nine through eleven lines Whalen also achieves a blurred or bent-note dissonance, via assonantal overtones in **ink** and **strength**, **since** and **whizzed**, (which strikes my ear as very much a Thelonious Monk move, fluidly varying overtones via intensity and duration). Leslie Gourse describes how Monk arrived at producing such effects for his music.

"Some musicians marveled at Monk's use of dissonance—for example, he would play two notes simultaneously to suggest the sound of the higher note in a chord, or overtone, and two more notes that did the same thing, and on and on, sometimes augmented by Monk's use of the pedals. Monk made seemingly simple changes in chords to achieve his signature sound, for example, a C7 chord with flat 9 would normally be played as C-B flat with the left hand, and E-G-D flat with the right hand. But

Monk played C-D flat with his left hand, with the two dissonant notes eight-and-a-half notes apart, fighting with each other, dominating the chord and creating his signature sound.”

(151)

Whalen’s progression of “**ink**” “**ength**” “**ince**” and “**izzed**” performs in a congruent fashion to Monk’s technique for dissonant notes, and their casual off-kilter domination also defines Whalen’s sound.

In lines nine to eleven Whalen’s pace picks up with returning to blank verse but then by enjambment condensing tetrameter and trimeter cadences as the poem rushes to its close.

Their **world** & several others **since**
Gone to **hell** in a **handbasket**, // **they knew it**—
Cheered as it **whizzed by**—

Much like a musical quote or show tune sample that Monk might introduce inside an improvisation, Whalen quotes a proverb (“**Gone to hell in a handbasket**”) that relies on alliteration while he adds two more speedy asides or digressions. He again condenses a ballad four/three couplet into the tenth line via a caesura, compressing the iambic pattern even more—if you may allow that the phrase “**they knew it**” is three consecutive stressed syllables. Technically this effect is a common one in blues and jazz, especially with singers. For example, in her “Billie’s Blues” the composer/singer Billie Holiday sometimes phrases her couplet “Some **people tell me baby you / built for speed.**”

These compressed three sustained accents in Whalen’s tenth line prepares the reader for the same double and triple-stress effects in the twelfth line. There, at that time with the wonderful American slang “conk” and “conked” (“to strike on the head (conk) with a weapon or bludgeon and rendered senseless” was a 1950s usage. (*Dictionary of American Underworld Lingo*, 48), Whalen opens out the poem to its second rush of improvised translationese.

Conked out among the busted spring rain cherry blossom
winejars

This line seems hurried yet also dense, as its rhythm has ten accented syllables jammed among five unaccented syllables without any cadenced caesuras. It has *no* internal rhymes and

one bubbly **bu-blo** alliterative effect. Each of the words stands out alone, and this to my eye and ear again imitates characters in a line of Chinese poetry. The adjective **busted** is placed before two more ambiguous modifying phrases **spring rain** and **cherry blossom** and then we get to their subject, **winejars**. In English this strategy makes the line end even more a rushed literal translation off the top of someone's head.

This line also induces Monk-like hesitations or suspensions of cohesive rhythm, inducing repeated glitches in the sonic meaning/measure while we mentally reset which noun or noun cluster takes what modifier. The words also shed syntax and break up into just sounds. Gourse quotes Martin Williams on Monk's artistic use of this phenomenon:

“Besides its highly original rhythmic subtleties, there is the question of Monk's quite advanced harmonic ear, which has led one critic to say that 'he has pushed jazz to the brink of atonality.' I am not sure that the term 'harmony' is accurate with Monk: he seems much more interested in sound and in original and arresting combinations of sounds than in harmony per se. “
(192)

Whalen suspends our syntactical harmonic comprehension in a similar way that Monk repeats, splits, and fragments chords and measures from the pop song phrases, displacing accents and suspending their resolutions for very similar sonic effects as Whalen gets with his floating syntax.

busted spring	between the
busted rain	the devil and
busted spring rain	between the de-
busted cherry	devil and
busted cherry blossom	devil deep blue blue
busted winejars	blue sea sea

“Happy to have saved us all” fast forwards us into the style of Zen koans, where the conclusions often exist in another dimension from the body of the story. Salvation never makes the Buddhist top ten lists of things to do, because Buddhas don't save Buddhas. In other words, everyone has Buddha-mind, so there are no candidates for salvation. In this case, not so much as a leap of faith is required of the reader or listener as *mushin*—a lightning liberation from mental obstacles (ignorance or delusion) so there is only a *now*.

To end on a stylistic note, that last line of Whalen reminds me of a poem by sword master Tesshu, who was especially skilled in Zen poetry and painting. He once wrote on a bamboo fan these sage words of advice.

as soon as the flies retreat
the mosquitoes advance
don't miss the June bargain sales!
Translated by John Stevens
The Sword of No-Sword (67)

With a witty insouciance Tesshu reminds us that our present reality is kept firmly in mind—but not your subconscious gossip mind—in your ordinary mind. The task is to attend to each day's minute particulars. To receive such a quotidian command from a Zen master in expectation of something far grander may just be the shock to enlighten one and flood the student's mind with the big picture of Buddhahood.

And I believe it is just such productions as Tesshu provided his patron that Whalen has in mind to praise, imitate, improvise on and embody with his *Hymnus Ad Patrem Sinensis*. By doing so we may be happy and delighted each time we hear or read his Hymn (or Tesshu's Spring Sales poem).

Nothing lasts save our ability to inhabit those moments, perhaps leave a poetic or calligraphic version, and thereby our perpetual joy in these arts has liberated us all. As Whalen's colleague at the Hartford Street Zen Center, Issan Dorsey, once said when asked by a student, "Shuso, as Buddhists, we vow to save all sentient beings. Why do we do that?"

"We save them for later." (Schneider 120)

Endnotes

Whalen's acquaintances shared his appreciation for Thelonious Monk. On January 27, 1960 Whalen's friend, poet Lew Welch, writes to Whalen about what an inspiration and mentor Monk was for him as a writer. In what sounds like a continuation of an ongoing discussion between them, Welch states

To get back to the writing: when I took Ann to hear Thelonious [Monk] I had a tremendous affirmation. His hardness, his willingness to pause and wait. His absolute disdain of transitions and developments. The mind THERE, working." (Welch, 181)

Grover Sales, Whalen and Welch's friend, reviewed Monk's 1959 gig at the Blackhawk in San Francisco. He wrote that Monk had ". . . taken the blues and altered them, transmogrified them and bestowed upon them brazenly new harmonic and rhythmic dimensions." (Sales, quoted in van der Blik, 103)

Whalen's poem, "The Ode To Music" dedicated to composer Morton Subotnik, sets forth his passion for music's powers of liberation and for Thelonious Monk's total commitment. Whalen's friend, Allen Ginsberg, provides a quote.

What do I know or care about life and death
My concern is to arrange immediate BREAKTHROUGH
Into this heaven where we live
as music

fingers that hear it as it happens
as it is being made, Thelonious Monk
"has the music going on all the time," AG told me
"You hear it while he's at the piano,
you see him listening to it when he's out walking around
it's going all the time."
(*Everyday*, 39)

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