

Roman Letters for John Coltrane

Since we've been alone I have listened to John Coltrane. Writing these words, I hear 'listen' with a quasi-italic *tenuto* because I feel that something in Coltrane's music has disclosed itself to me, or that something in me has opened up to it anew. This something divulges no great secret, no penetrating insight, no analytical clarity. It heralds no aesthetic epiphany and does not arrive with thunderclap or eureka. Rather, I experience it as a changed relationship. I find it difficult to describe, though my desire to is strong. I turn it over in my mind, yet the prospect of holding it in understanding feels at once increasingly necessary and impossible. And while I cannot grasp its fluid shape, or even brush its floating message in a bottle, I find that, sifting, I approach it by negation.

There is a certain airy detachment to this new relationship. Not the detachment of cold fascination, leering, acquisitive – that thin upper air with which my ear is so familiar. Neither would I describe it as one of levity, though there is a sense of hovering, or a quieting of gravitational contention, of which one becomes only gradually aware. And I know that I have never really listened to music this way, as a participant. Here there is no seduction, no shock. No siren coo, no stilled displacement, no manic Mozart playtime in the cloudtops. It does not act on me nor I on it. But patiently, opening itself, it draws me into a relation.

I first sensed it while revisiting his *Ascension*. Shortly thereafter in *Meditations*, then *Expression*, though over these months this new modality I am trying to describe has suffused my relationship to all of his music. But why did it begin here, at the end, with this his last and most elusive kind of music? I play it on the piano, or bend my thought along its curve, study it from different angles, and it crumbles like sun-scorched clay or choss. I scour the ravages of rock. Yet here I find no ecstasy of falling. No self-reflexive whirring of an anxious mind. I cannot possess it and it cannot possess me – so I listen. And within its crash and tumult, I hear a wild warmth and brightness. An incessant burgeoning, whose howling accretions give of the same soft light as their dissolving waves. No gush, but an indifferent riverbabble of becoming, the ceaseless initiating of a lived relation.

That these expressions inhabit a space between Coltrane and music seems to communicate some aspect of what I glimpse. That this is not *his* music, though the variegated flora of his imagination are indelibly particular and his own. Rather, that what emerges is a reciprocity, an exchange between a music and a being. And while this sentiment is not unique to these most ephemeral, unbroken later forms, or really to Coltrane at all, it has a particular resonance across his body of work: compositions as harmonic runes or mantras of elliptic melody, familiar songs as objects of meditation, their music the effulgent green of moss that grows on ruins. Whether wrought or repurposed, these stone structures are not the substance of their expressions, but rather, themselves relations, they become conduits of new ones: between the musicians that carry them, between changing moods and rhythmic quickenings, between my conscious breathing and the crepitating car-speaker. All of these relationships now seem to me living and charged with significance. Though I would not have been able to feel or articulate this, without the aid of a music that expresses so freely and directly this unencumbered relationship between an individual and music as a whole. Isolated, so to speak, in that blind space of pure relation.

Maybe there is an opacity to this music, through which one must wade. Not an aloofness, the kind of thing that belongs to so much music of a similar busyness or density. Something more like the obscurity of a dark canvas, or a window that leads you away to a harmony of different hues. Not the silence of a closed door, nor the shiver of unknowing or impending. Not the terror of a something breaking through. Though one could listen this way too. And I would have listened this way before. Through its fricative slushing, through the taxonomy of its palpable noises, through its kinesthetic machinations. I would have listened with my spine. But the opacity that I want to describe is not one of concealment or delicious mystification, but rather, one of encounter. Here are no gutted expectations. No shocking metamorphosis, no trough of irresistible violence suspended in the tender interval of a drumroll or anacrusis. Rather, a kind of quiet exclusiveness, that begins with the guarded indifference of circumspection, the first uneasy breaths taken upon entering an unfamiliar space. This captures more precisely the quality of airiness I have sought to describe: an air of sublimated anticipation, of precipitation vanquished by an answering voice.

I have always understood ending to be the essential shape of music. A sort of simultaneous finality, in which one can grasp a porous duration and roll it up as a scroll, or freeze it and survey it as a sculpture, or hold in one invented instance, its peaks and valleys, its calms and storms, and claim them, fold and press them in a book, and thereby assert some kind of victory over the arrow or doldrums of undifferentiated time. And there is certainly cataclysm in this music, in its endlessly unfolding, subtle shades of lyric chaos, in their matryoshkas of subliminal reveal. And yet here I sense no looming judgement, no cloudswept doom, no irretrievability of a falling axe. Nor that sweet synthetic silence of a world escaped. Here are consequences, inexorable as they are indifferent, and causality, without compression and without punishing line, behaving, and speaking, with the calm equanimity of a slackened jaw.

Then there's that cryptic quote of his about starting in the middle of a sentence and moving in both directions at once, which runs concentric circles in my mind's inner ear. But this is music without conceit, without subterranean canons or magic Escher spirals, without that sort of gardened serenity behind which the tick of machinery lurks. There is nothing delusive in this free, agrestal music. And even in its earlier, more cultivated states, its elided tonalities, its quicksilver changes, feel discovered rather than contrived: recklessly vital, even incidental in their form, to the soundless hum of a living relation.

But that quote won't leave me alone. That it comes from an artist whose self-professed mission was to help humanity free itself from its hang-ups is equal parts baffling and fascinating. Or maybe it's because I'm still looking for clues. And Coltrane really pours water over that old witchy thing about artists being or not being their work or vice versa. That thing that one can openly dismiss but privately coddle as a source of maintaining or preserving some iota of that sacred illusion of wholeness, whichever way one concocts it. Maybe we deep-freeze it in language or embalm it in self-addressed envelopes. After all, letters, Roman or otherwise, are a useful way of avoiding public-facing pronouncements.

Another gasp from a dusty closet: no resignation in this music. No *submission to the moment*, wherein you let that moment seize you, do with you what it will – or become its feral scavenger, salivating for sinew and scrap. Cruel authorial submission; the good Old Testament stuff:

brimming with belief and aboutness, theme and *idée fixe*, that seizes, shocks, possesses, screams, enralls – and above all – exorcizes a deep sounding of that same addicting silence at the end: our makeshift universal, the bonehollow aftersong of a rattled cage.

A paradox: when this music is *yours*, there is a kind of psychosacred anonymity to it. The anonymity of rerun Prometheus, bringing back his little tinderbox, wrested from some combination of a personal heaven or hell. But here is no such fire: neither Icarus with broken toes, nor Michelangelo muscled on a Disney Adonis, no demiurge who awes with vistas or Grand Inquisitor to lift the veil, no over-incubated atavists and none of that genetically modified frankensilence, that chasm of insatiable ideation that pries apart object and subject, whose eros throbs in direct proportion to the circumference of its gutted cavity, that cathects by its appetite, where in the ugly ache of collective listening there lives the sense that for one unbreathing moment we may incorporate and claw it all, before it disperses into hopeless inscrutability, and we crawl again, hungering, through the pit.

I know because I've listened to this silence. I've felt its viscous seep. I've listened with my teeth and with my stomach acid. And I know because I've devoured you. I've bitten out your throat and asked you to sing. And now I want to tell this all to you, to palpate it again, and with this cache of empty impulses I've plundered for description, extract from you one last note. And now I've stained this last relation, inviolate. Will you join them under the floorboards? Or will we stay and find the courage to crumble and babble as Coltrane might, if he spoke in Roman letters.

Arcana X, Tzadik, February 2022