

“Unstuck in time”: Harry Partch’s Bilocated Life

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In memory of Bob Gilmore, 1961–2015

Abstract

*In a letter dated to 1960, Harry Partch describes living two lives simultaneously—one in modern America and another in ancient Greece. Furthermore, throughout his life, Partch exhibited striking dualities in both his music and personal life. Partch’s affinity for Greek themes and modalities in his music and music theory is well known, but less known is his feeling of bilocation between Greek and modern life. Using writings by Vonnegut, Woolf, and Stephen Hawking, I examine methods of constructing history that support Partch’s temporal irregularity and, in so doing, foster new ways of understanding Partch and his music. With a particular focus on corporeality within his late work *Revelation in the Courthouse Park*, I explore how Partch leaned on his sense of bilocation to cope with his decidedly outsider status, how that in turn helped him deal with reality, and how biographers might tackle this most perplexing issue.*

“Biography—it is so trivial. The larger world is trivial beyond belief. So let us be less trivial than that larger world.”

—Harry Partch¹

In 1972, Harry Partch was working with filmmaker Stephen Pouliot and financial backer Betty Freeman on the filming of *The Dreamer That Remains*. Pouliot knew Partch—several decades his senior—and had romantic feelings toward him, but those feelings were unrequited. The pinnacle of this love pursuit occurred one evening at the Hitching Post, a San Diego hotel where some of the film crew was staying. Sometime in the middle of the night, Pouliot awakened to angry voices—two distinct voices—coming from Partch’s adjacent room. Yet inside was Partch and no one else. Pouliot woke again the next morning and, upon finding Partch not in his room, left to discuss with a friend Partch’s strange behavior that night. When he returned later, there on his pillow lay Partch’s icepick. Initially unnerved by the sight, Pouliot later interpreted the icepick as a symbol of cutting him out of his life rather than any form of aggression.²

This event was not the first time something of this sort had happened. Partch’s “talking in voices,” as Betty Freeman called these episodes, happened on occasion and were considered by close friends as odd, but nothing too worrisome.³ Indeed,

¹ Bob Gilmore, *Harry Partch: The Biography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), x.

² Stephen Pouliot, phone interview with the author, 28 September 2013. The placement of the icepick has been a matter of debate among those closest to Partch. In an interview, one of his patrons, Betty Freeman, distinctly remembered that the icepick was found pierced through Pouliot’s pillow (Betty Freeman, interview with the author, 27 September 2008). Pouliot, on the other hand, insists that Partch had no ill intent, and that the icepick was found simply lying there. Partch frequently used the icepick to clean out his pipe (the tool being what Pouliot called “his version of a Swiss knife”), so Pouliot’s suggestion of a symbolic act of removal seems merited.

³ Freeman, interview. Gilmore discusses at length these moments of talking in voices. Lou Harrison, for example, claimed Partch frequently used this technique to solve personal problems, and that Partch himself often encouraged others to do the same. See Gilmore, *Harry Partch*, 379.

given the eccentricities of Partch's indelible life and music, such a story seems par for the course. Yet there is something about the image of Partch alone in a hotel room having a conversation with another voice that opens up a world of wonderment and bewilderment, one demanding explanation beyond the scope of mental health diagnoses. Rather, I argue that the reader should take Partch's perplexities at face value, recognizing them as signs pointing the way to a clearer understanding of him and his music.

As evidenced from the scene at the Hitching Post, Partch framed much of his world in terms of dualities. On occasion, he expanded these dualities into a more eccentric display, privileging a distinct impression of bilocation—that his sense of self was created by negotiating unlike or temporally remote elements, which often disrupted linear views of time and history. These sentiments seemed to come from a place of insecure disappointment with the role of music and the place of the artist in modern times.⁴ Taking a cue from Judith Butler, I accept Partch's comments at face value and pursue them out of interest in his performed self. Rather than attempt to convince readers of Partch's propensity to in fact time travel, I use the power of the uttered phrase to illuminate something much more complicated about these perceived dualisms within Partch and his music. What follows here is an exploration of Partch's sense of dualism, in turn showing how scholars might tackle it and other perplexing issues surrounding his vivid imaginary life. I use Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Virginia Woolf's biographical novel *Orlando* as models for writing about temporal irregularity within biography. I also bring into relief recent scholarship on Partch's ideological ties with the hobo culture and suggest ways such a framework might reimagine Partch's fanciful and vivid worldview.

In 1960, Partch composed a brief autobiographical sketch that, in part, recalls a past life as an ancient Greek whose radical ideas led to an early death. However, he now finds himself back on earth with the mission to teach the modern world the virtues of regress.

I am a traditionalist from ancient ages, which is to say that I am a repentant reformer with a transmigratory second chance. In my previous life I stood for (alas!) progress, and my ancient youth was nipped in the bud. I was ahead of my time, obviously. Among other activities, I argued that each individual should dedicate his life to the goal of a sanitary private bathroom.

This was of course too much, both for my ancient fellow-man and the ancient gods, and I was dispatched without even the honor of a public execution. So, numberless millennia later, I find that the kindly gods have relented. I am back in the world, simply because I have learned that man must also understand regress.

Let not one day pass—I now say to myself—when I do not step one significant century backward. And since there are so many full circles (those of time included) in a man's experience, I am firmly convinced that when I have regressed as far as I can possibly go, I

⁴ For specific instances of Partch's concern with the direction of modern music, see, for example, "The Ancient Magic," and "The University and the Creative Arts: Comment," in *Bitter Music: Collected Essays, Introductions, and Librettos*, ed. Thomas McGeary (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

shall have actually arrived at a point some years in the future—July 7, 1971, let’s say, in a spirit of wild prophecy.⁵

Here, Partch considers himself a “traditionalist from ancient ages,” which aligns with long-time friend and assistant Danlee Mitchell’s conviction that Partch was not an eccentric but rather “a Romantic composer” who “writes music that starts somewhere and goes somewhere in a direct line just like the music of Western society.”⁶ The oddity of course stems from his admission of not only living multiple lives at once, but also doing so while moving backward in time.

From such an account, issues arise concerning both construction of biography and construction of the biographical body—which is to say the imagined figure of the biographical subject within the minds of the biographer and subsequent readers. Most biographers choose to fix their subject within a linear or chronological narrative, adhering to a conventional narrative style akin to modern concepts of a dramatic arc. This linear narrative functions well to tell a story; however, linearity of necessity also presents a glorified, false, or otherwise constructed version of reality. In other words, linearity becomes a vehicle for turning story into myth. In some cases, as with Partch, this myth of linearity works in opposition to an individual’s perceived reality. To frame Partch’s life in a way that denies his view of reality seems unjust and falsified. Because he perceived an actual embodiment in separate yet simultaneous lives, telling Partch’s life story involves writing a biography within a biography. How Partch speaks of this body and how audiences and readers experience Partch’s body postmortem thus present a challenge biographers must face.

To begin addressing this historiographical challenge requires an intellectual journey back in time. In 397 A.D., Augustine wrote of living in irreversible linear time and expounded on the constant mediation of the past and future through the prism of the present:

What now is clear and plain is, that neither things to come nor past are. Nor is it properly said, “there be three times, past, present, and to come:” yet perchance it might be properly said, “there be three times; a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future.” For these three do exist in some sort, in the soul, but otherwise do I not see them; present of things past, memory; present of things present, sight; present of things future, expectation.⁷

Using Augustinian terms, what linear biography denies of its subject is any possibility of memory or expectation, confining the person forever only to his or her present. For the reader, the present is constantly shifting, yet for the biographical subject, it is trapped as in an amber globe. Even more, the physical body becomes

⁵ Letter from Partch to Oliver Daniel, 1 June 1960, Box 7, Folder 21, Harry Partch Archive, University of Illinois Library. Quoted by permission. Partch later reworked this essay with the title “Somewhat Spoof,” a curious qualifier that complicates a perhaps otherwise tidy dismissal of his outrageous claims. See Partch, *Bitter Music*, 188–90.

⁶ Danlee Mitchell, interview with the author, 28 September 2008.

⁷ Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. rev. E. B. Pusey (London: Oxford Press, 1843), 239.

a space entrapped by writing itself, conditioned by the biographer to appear and function according to his vision in order to present the most appropriate life story. The biographical body, therefore, much like the biography itself, is the result of an active artistic mind: both the potter's wheel and the chisel and hammer are tools the biographer wields over his subject's body. Yet, as Richard Leppert has noted, "The body is real, but its reality is produced, by cognition, as a representation."⁸ This representation cannot be escaped; even in imagination, the body moves according to the desires of one's mind, desires that can and often do betray reality. It seems fitting, then, for a biographical body to be allowed to transcend the biographer's imagination. Out of necessity to the reader, fictional and real characters alike must engage the body in order to live its history. Some fictional characters, in the hands of their writers, embody the temporal dilemma Partch recognized as his own. It seems relevant, therefore, to take these characters and their realities seriously, and consider ways their fictional biographies might inform the treatment of actual people in actual circumstances.

A Suspended Eternity

Growing up in the small desert town of Benson, Arizona, Partch experienced a spatial equivalent of time suspended. In his seminal book on Partch, Bob Gilmore reflects on the timelessness of the desert landscape that served as a backdrop during Partch's formative years: "Since his childhood, the desert had represented a constant value—the confrontation with 'the terrible fact of every person's aloneness' and the hope of self-renewal. It would always hold for him a sense of suspended eternity, with the guarantee that each day will be the same, will hold the same 'brilliant promise.'"⁹ This concept of "suspended eternity," with its curious conflation of temporal dichotomies (How does one suspend that which is without time?), seems to acknowledge, at least for Gilmore, an inherent duality for the viewer of the desert landscape: that one can be both in time and outside of its powers at the same moment. This trope of duality recurs throughout Partch's life, and it seems particularly insightful that, given his later feelings of temporal displacement, this dichotomy was perhaps epitomized for him in his earliest years by the Arizona desert. What Partch came to see reflected in the desert was his own existence, a life that was also a form of "suspended eternity"—neither completely restricted by time nor entirely eternal.

A literary equivalent of Partch's perception of his "suspended eternity" is Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist in Kurt Vonnegut's 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Pilgrim, a POW held captive by the Germans around the time of the Dresden bombings, finds himself unceremoniously "unstuck in time."¹⁰ He experiences his life disjointedly and out of order in a seemingly unending cycle of short lived moments that abruptly and uncontrollably emerge. Vonnegut resists the urge to construct his character's

⁸ Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (University of California Press, 1995), xx.

⁹ Gilmore, *Harry Partch*, 129.

¹⁰ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance With Death* (New York: Dell, 1969), 29.

reality within a framework of mental illness. Instead, he unfolds Pilgrim’s propensity to time travel within the story, allowing the reader to draw conclusions free of dismissiveness or stigma and full of wonderment and charm.

Like Billy Pilgrim, it appears that Partch has also become unstuck in time. Unlike Vonnegut’s character, however, Partch is not limited to his existence in this life alone. Whereas Pilgrim is destined to view every moment of his life—including his death—out of order *ad nauseam*, Partch alludes to travels back through history in order to live two distinct lives simultaneously. His lifelong affinity with and musical representation of ancient Greek stories and aesthetic ideals seems to suggest the ease with which he could move between these two existences. This fluidity between past and present obscures Augustine’s concept of separate spheres of time; rather, it seems closer to that told in the opening of T. S. Eliot’s poem “Burnt Norton”:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.¹¹

If Eliot’s poem suggests all spheres of time are wrapped up within one another in an indecipherable way, and if this suggestion is any indication that modern understandings of time have moved beyond Augustine, then it seems that room has already been made at the table for considering a new way of discussing narrative function and linearity.

Such a discussion has been ongoing within literary and scientific circles. James Lundquist suggests that Vonnegut’s use of non-linear narrative and reliance on time travel to tell the story gives Pilgrim’s life something of a subatomic quality. Lundquist writes, “Through the constant movement back and forth in time that constitutes Vonnegut’s narrative, we see Billy becoming his history, existing all at once, as if he is an electron.”¹² In *The ABC of Relativity*, Bertrand Russell also conceives of the existential event in terms of itself, so that a single experience becomes its own history: “An event does not persist and move, like the traditional piece of matter; it merely exists for a little moment then ceases. A piece of matter will thus be resolved into a series of events. . . . The whole series of these events makes up the whole history of the particle, and the particle is regarded as being its history, not some metaphysical entity to which things happen.”¹³ Lundquist takes Russell’s ideas further, suggesting that the path to becoming one’s history—like a particle—requires a knowledge of every “series of these events” working together to form the complex individual: “Billy [Pilgrim] *needs* to travel back and forth in time not only to understand himself but also to endure himself, to become his history. He

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909–1935* (New York: Harcourt, 1936), 213.

¹² James Lundquist, “The ‘New Reality’ of *Slaughterhouse-Five*,” in *Kurt Vonnegut* [1977]; repr. *Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five*, ed. Harold Bloom, Modern Critical Interpretations Series (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001), 46.

¹³ Bertrand Russell, *The ABC of Relativity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1925), 209.

is many personalities, many selves existing together at once.”¹⁴ This final statement echoes Virginia Woolf’s narrator in *Orlando* (to be discussed later), who suggests, “a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand.”¹⁵

Partch, with his rich imaginary life, also seems to embody these temporal anomalies, though perhaps with a more nuanced explanation drawn from his past as a transient—a hobo. For fifteen years—from the fall of 1928 until the spring of 1943—Partch intermittently lived the life of a hobo, following the fruit harvests or performing lawn work along the way. As recent scholarship has attested, these early years spent hoboing significantly shaped Partch’s compositional and philosophical output for the rest of his life. In his important study on hobo culture and American music, Graham Raulerson introduces two lenses through which to view the post-hobo decades of Partch’s life: anarcho-syndicalism and bricolage. By definition, anarcho-syndicalists do not burden themselves with historical matters. Likewise, Raulerson argues that Partch’s conscious efforts to censor, exaggerate, or at times fabricate his own life story reveal hobo-centric tendencies still at play. For example, the convoluted chronology of Partch’s posthumously published journal, *Bitter Music*, highlights his push against historicism, which simultaneously positions Partch as an outsider to the historical record as well as to temporal linearity. Raulerson explains:

The discontinuity of chronology in *Bitter Music* might best be understood as a manifestation of Partch’s ambivalence toward linear time, as demonstrated by his lifelong struggles to come to terms with his past, and by his disdain for the narrative of Western history. In *Bitter Music*, Partch employs a temporal structure that is shattered and disjointed, recalling both the anarcho-syndicalist denial of teleology and the cyclical and spontaneous perceptions of time that permeate hobo life.¹⁶

Raulerson also points to the hobo tendency to view time spatially, rather than teleologically, stating that “hoboes may experience time spontaneously . . . as a string of moments that have little or no relation to one another.”¹⁷ Perhaps Partch absorbed these hobo tendencies of history and time that eventually remerged in the form of a distinctively Partchian bilocality. That is to say, if Partch did perceive

¹⁴ Lundquist, “New Reality,” 50.

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: L. and V. Woolf at the Hogarth Press, 1928), 226. The field of quantum physics offers a fascinating and helpful corollary to these issues. In their recent article “Populating the Landscape: A Top-Down Approach,” Stephen Hawking and Thomas Hertog argue for a shift in particle physics from a conventional “bottom-up approach to physics” to a “top-down approach to cosmology,” where “the histories of the universe depend on the precise question asked.” Thus, what a top-down approach presumes is that there are multiple histories of the universe that extend into our understanding of past and future, and those histories are constantly being negotiated by questions asked—or what is being observed—in our present. While this study on Partch focuses on bilocality and dual existences, Hawking and Hertog’s work supports a much broader and complex model of scientific and historical approach. If their approach proves to be useful, there remains a large and fertile opportunity for further scholarly inquiry not only for Partch scholars, but also for biographers in general. See “Populating the Landscape: A Top-Down Approach,” *Physical Review D* 73/12 (2006): 1–21.

¹⁶ Graham Raulerson, “The Hobo in American Musical Culture” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2011), 113n51.

¹⁷ Raulerson, “The Hobo in American Musical Culture,” 34.

himself in terms of “many selves existing at once,” it seems likely his experiences as a hobo fed directly into those perceptions.

Raulerson’s use of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s 1962 term *bricolage* also brings a fresh understanding of how Partch-the-hobo enveloped the identity of Partch-the-composer. “The hobo mode of bricolage,” Raulerson writes, “involves removing items from their original purposes and putting them to novel uses.”¹⁸ He continues, “A hobo’s clothing, shelter, personal care items, sources of entertainment, and most other material lifestyle elements are typically cobbled together ingeniously from what might be considered in mainstream society to be incongruous elements.”¹⁹ If hobo thought characteristically combines seemingly incompatible or incongruous ideas, then Partch’s sense of bilocation seems but a fanciful continuation of everyday hobo existence. Instead of assembling refuse scraps of cloth, paper, twine, and a myriad of other found material for clothing, Partch donned his own assemblage of disparate times, places, and ancient world views he felt were similarly discarded and equally undervalued by the mainstream musical society. Using Raulerson’s writings as a framework, the roots of this revolt against linearity might then be traced back to Partch’s early years as a hobo, when long-standing traditions and customs of those living among the American transient culture imprinted themselves so strongly upon his intellect as to mold his frame of mind for the rest of his life.

Performing Corporeality

The single most important duality that manifests itself through all Partch’s music is his concept of corporeality, or the visual and aural alignment of body and music. Although his practice of corporeality evolved over his lifetime, the essential elements remain: the unity of temporal and finite body with music. Partch insisted that his musicians practice this “oneness of musician and instrument” during performance:

At no time are the players of my instruments to be unaware that they are on stage, *in the act*. There can be no humdrum playing of notes, in the bored belief that because they are “good” musicians their performance is ipso facto “masterly.” When a player fails to take full advantage of his role in a visual or acting sense, he is muffing his part—in my terms—as thoroughly as if he bungled every note in the score. . . . There is surely some special hell reserved for the player of one of the more dramatic instruments who insists on deporting himself as though he were in tie-and-tails on a symphony orchestra’s platform (such as experimental hanging by the gonads on a treble Kithara string until he relents).²⁰

There is a certain practicality to his stern insistence of corporeality. Partch’s instruments were aesthetically beautiful, yet too bulky not to be seen by the audience during an operatic production. Likewise, corporeality itself dismisses any distinction between musician and instrument. As a result, all players and instruments were kept on stage. As Danlee Mitchell described, “We *were* the music—we were not the color, we were the actual music.”²¹ Given Partch’s unorthodox statements of his

¹⁸ Raulerson, “The Hobo in American Musical Culture,” 22–23n15.

¹⁹ Raulerson, “The Hobo in American Musical Culture,” 23.

²⁰ Quoted in Gilmore, *Harry Partch*, 300.

²¹ Danlee Mitchell, interview with the author, 28 September 2008.

past life, however, it seems corporeality served as yet another trope of being wholly one thing while simultaneously being entirely another.

Using Raulerson's terminology, corporeality also serves to reassemble the disparate into a bricolage. Admittedly, it would appear that the concept of bricolage works against Partch's more principled view on corporeality in that, in Partch's purist vision, the dichotomies corporeality unites were oppositions that never existed in the first place. The refusal to recognize such opposition, however, required Partch first to draw attention to the opposition, and so corporeality itself functions within a bilocality because it must of necessity construct what must be deconstructed.²² Still, corporeality aligns dimensionally opposed entities—including body and music, musician and instrument—in such a way that the musician conveys not only his physical actions, nor only the aural music. Rather, the musician is at once body and music, existing in (at least) two different dimensions simultaneously.

Partch conceived corporeal drama to be a balance between the musical, visual, and aesthetic, a balance he drew from his understanding of ancient custom. He imagined early humans associating the material sound world with magic:

Primitive man found magical sounds in the materials around him—in a reed, a piece of bamboo, a particular piece of wood held in a certain way, or a skin stretched over a gourd or a tortoise shell: some resonating body. He then proceeded to make the object, the vehicle, the instrument, as visually beautiful as he could. His last step was almost automatic: the metamorphosis of the magical sounds and visual beauty into something spiritual. They became fused with his everyday words and experiences—his ritual, drama, religion—thus lending greater meaning to his life. These acts of primitive man become the trinity of this work: magical sounds, visual form and beauty, experience-ritual. . . . One has to go back four hundred years to the Italian Renaissance to find anything like it, and even then the situation is not very similar.²³

This statement reveals Partch's frustration that most Western music had lost what he considered to be fundamental during ancient times. Hence his frequent quip borrowed from Yeats, "I hear with older ears than the musician."²⁴ Partch's recourse, therefore, was to custom-build his instruments, which Gilmore sees as relating modern man with primitive means.²⁵ Partch's instrument building thus gave him complete control over his work—the musical, visual, and aesthetic—in a mid-twentieth-century version of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Indeed, like Wagner before him, Partch too feared the arts were drifting further and further apart and sought to restore their balance as it was in antiquity.²⁶ Such a restoration, though, further amplified Partch's sense of duality, for even as only in union could the arts achieve

²² Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

²³ Quoted in Gilmore, *Harry Partch*, 4.

²⁴ Quoted in Gilmore, *Harry Partch*, 112.

²⁵ Quoted in Gilmore, *Harry Partch*, 216. "By the early 1950s," Gilmore writes, "he had come to feel the act of cleaving an instrument from a piece of wood as a tie to an ancient form of musical magic."

²⁶ Although Partch frequently made reference to Wagner in terms of corporeality, that did not stop him from also distancing himself from what he perceived as Wagner's "purist" motivations regarding musical dramas. In his 1954 introduction to *Oedipus*, Partch writes, "In the wrestling match between Wagner's music drama and his symphony orchestra, Wagner's symphony orchestra (with yeoman help from his arias) gets both shoulders of Wagner's music drama on the floor within five minutes

their purpose, so too could unity of his life with antiquity allow Partch and others, as he says, to “also understand regress.”²⁷

In Virginia Woolf’s 1928 biographical novel *Orlando*, the biographical subject too seems to experience a remarkable duality: for some unexplained reason Orlando wakes up from a long sleep and discovers he has become a woman. Woolf’s narrator is generally unbothered by this sudden change, which adds to its perplexity. Yet the manner in which Orlando’s biographer addresses this strange occurrence contributes to this discussion of dualities:

We may take advantage of this pause in the narrative to make certain statements. Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained . . . practically the same. His memory—but in future we must, for convention’s sake, say “her” for “his,” and “she” for “he”—her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle.²⁸

It is worth noting that Orlando’s self was not changed, but his change of sex, “though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter *their* identity.”²⁹ The narrator’s shift to a plurality of selves here is subtle, but noticeable, as is also the fact that their future selves were not immune from change or alteration. Yet Orlando’s memory of the past was kept intact through this extreme biological transformation. Consequently, Woolf’s narrator posits Orlando’s fantastical existence as being both timeless—as evidenced by their life spanning several centuries—but yet still bound by temporal regulations. In other words, like the past of all mortals, theirs remained unaltered and their future undetermined, but their present state, like Partch’s “suspended eternity,” is unchanging.

It is remarkable that Orlando also has a self-identity shaped by dualisms that enable him to experience two lives at once. Additionally, Woolf’s narrator foreshadows Orlando’s dual existence with a description of Love that even sounds markedly similar to Partch’s concept of corporeality: “For Love . . . has two faces; one white, the other black; two bodies; one smooth, the other hairy. It has two hands, two feet, two tails, two, indeed, of every member and each one is the exact opposite of the other. Yet, so strictly are they joined together that you cannot separate them.”³⁰ This description of the inseparability of opposing forces consequently illustrates a vision of Partch’s corporeality that also considers the union of opposing forces within Partch’s reality.

Further, Woolf’s premise for *Orlando* brings into full relief a most compelling reasoning of Partch’s temporal irregularity: his sexuality. In the BBC documentary *The Outsider: The Story of Harry Partch*, director Darren Chesworth suggests that Partch sought relief from his restrictive home life by forging alliance with ancient

after the curtain rises and for the following two or three hours jumps up and down on the unconscious form. Which is to say, perhaps, that our climate is a purist’s climate.” See Partch, *Bitter Music*, 219.

²⁷ Letter from Partch to Oliver Daniel, 1 June 1960, Harry Partch Archive, University of Illinois Library.

²⁸ Woolf, *Orlando*, 102–3.

²⁹ Woolf, *Orlando*, emphasis added.

³⁰ Woolf, *Orlando*, 86–87.

cultures unburdened with modern sexual limitations. “Partch had realized from an early age that he was gay,” Chesworth states. “His own feelings of existing outside of the traditional norms of society led him to identify with others viewed in the same way, like the Yaqui Indians, who lived in a small enclave not far from his childhood home.”³¹ Although it is unclear the exact influence the surrounding Yaqui community had on Partch, their dualistic understanding of sexuality remains a common theme with other ancient cultures that also drew Partch’s attention. Specifically, the “two-spirit” tradition of some Native American cultures, including the Yaqui Indians, recognizes the presence of two competing spirits within certain individuals with a resulting gender variance that falls outside traditional sexual norms.³² The accepted practice of pederasty in ancient Greece also acknowledged the mutability of sexual preference—that sexual identity was less a label than an act of sexuality itself. These and other ancient cultures appealed to the young Partch on more levels than their fluid understanding of sexual practice, but it seems that, early on, he nonetheless saw within the ancient world an opportunity to explore his truest self (or selves, as the case may be).

Stretching these thoughts onto Raulerson’s hobo-centric framework, a fresh image of Partch surfaces:

[L]ike a sophisticated hobo bricoleur, Partch constructed around himself a cultural world that suited his purposes by selecting aspects of numerous cultures, removing them from their original contexts and purposes, and resituating them in a new whole that, while bearing resemblances to the cultures that originally birthed the borrowed elements, is put to work on an entirely different expressive project.³³

This “different expressive project” in truth remains a summation of Partch’s willful insistence that unity underlies everything and such unity could be achieved through his corporeal musical vision. Partch’s feelings of bilocation, his conscious mandates against linearity, the theoretical development of corporeality, and perhaps even his sexual identity could therefore be framed as a hobo-inspired performance of bricolage.

In Judith Butler’s terms, Partch’s obsession with ancient cultures was a performative impulse—one that allowed him to perform his complex sexual identity by focusing his creative energies on a bilocated music. Indeed, Partch’s remarks on these dualities position him well within the domain of Butler’s assertion that such expressions are “fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” and could be viewed as “an effect and function of

³¹ Darren Chesworth, *The Outsider: The Story of Harry Partch*, BBC, 2002. Partch remained a closeted homosexual throughout his life. His private acceptance and practice of his sexuality, when set against his simultaneous public denial or, at times, adamant refusal to identify as gay, implicates a complex and dual identity not unlike Partch’s other demonstrations of bilocation. Although leading double lives was not uncommon among other homosexual men in the twentieth century, such behavior further nestles Partch within the domain of his many perceived dualities.

³² See, for example, Brian Joseph Gilley, *Becoming Two-Spirit: Gay Identity and Social Acceptance in Indian Country* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

³³ Raulerson, “The Hobo in American Musical Culture,” 104.

a decidedly public and social discourse.”³⁴ In other words, Partch’s talk of non-linearity or bilocation was less describing his reality than performing an identity far more layered with meaning than what could be garnered from a surface statement. In less abstract parlance, the musical world he created allowed him a safe avenue for exploring his understanding of leading a bilocated life and, through his music, Partch performed his life in a manner that offered a respite from his harsh surroundings while also lending him a voice and distinct purpose in this modern world.

Conceiving of Partch in terms of these dualities gives a sharper image of how meaningful his music was to him and, so he hoped, to others as well. “I can only hope my listeners will relax into a tolerant and receptive state, like a patient under hypnosis,” he once wrote, adding, “If you succumb to the hypnosis, you are probably a lot more primitive than you realize; and perhaps you may not have been born in the right age either.”³⁵ If the creation of a music permissible in ancient times offered him the chance also to live a life most permissible in ancient times, then the music he created situated him within a sphere of acceptance the modern world could not provide. Therefore, it helps to keep his concept of corporeality in mind when experiencing his music, knowing that, because body and music are inextricably linked, the act of listening to his music brings the listener closer to Partch the individual.

Bilocation Within *Revelation In The Courthouse Park*

Of all Partch’s works, none resonates as fully this idea of duality and corporeality than *Revelation in the Courthouse Park*, which he began composing in 1959. True to his affinity with Greek subjects, Partch modeled the operatic plot after Euripides’s *The Bacchae*, which tells the punishment of King Pentheus of Thebes and his mother Agave at the hands of the young god Dionysus for their refusal to worship him. Here Partch draws parallels between the excesses of *The Bacchae* and the Dionysian frenzy found in modern times by also extending the plot to include the lives of Dion, Sonny, and his mom in contemporary America. Given the connection Partch sensed between corporeality and Dionysus (“He talked a lot about Dionysus, the quintessential corporealist,” writes Ben Johnston), setting this story seems all the more suitable.³⁶

This suitability, however, is made manifest on a deeper level. While examining the trope of wandering in ancient Greek culture, Silvia Montiglio notes that, of all the Olympian gods, Dionysus is the only one “who suffers in his wandering like a mortal.”³⁷ Indeed, Dionysus is often referred to as the “Wanderer.” Dionysus’s wanderings are captured in *The Bacchae*, wherein a general sense of restlessness

³⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* ([1990] London: Routledge, 1999), 173.

³⁵ Partch, *Bitter Music*, 220.

³⁶ Ben Johnston, “The Corporealism of Harry Partch,” *Perspectives of New Music* 13/2 (Spring–Summer 1975): 90.

³⁷ Silvia Montiglio, *Wandering in Ancient Greek Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 73.

triggers his constant movement in and out of the narrative and ultimately prevents him from choosing and claiming a native land. Montiglio claims that Dionysus's title as Wanderer was more than an indication of his physical meanderings, however, but is indicative of his uncertain identity:

But to call Dionysus the Wanderer is not just to evoke the god's continual movement from place to place. The legend of Dionysus's wanderings also accounts for perceptions about the god as both a native of Greece and a foreigner. . . . Myth explains such perceptions by grounding them in the god's own biography: Dionysus roamed the world, whereby he absorbed foreignness. Because he wandered out of Greece, he "became" a stranger.³⁸

Dionysus's wanderings out of Greece left himself and others unsure of his identity, a character trait that certainly would not have been lost on Partch, whose own wanderings throughout his life both literally as a hobo and figuratively as a composer of experimental music often characterize his life story.³⁹ That Dionysus could paradoxically occupy a dual identity of both native and stranger because of his propensity to wander seems to offer Partch a figure—a god, no less—on which he could easily project his own self-perceptions of duality.

Or, as some evidence suggests, did Partch find more likeness in the Sonny/Pentheus character? The ambiguity of his feelings toward Dionysus and Sonny is revealing considering his impulse to duality. As W. Anthony Sheppard notes, "Partch appears torn between embracing the Dionysian celebration of the body and condemning the group mentality and mediocrity that it so often entails."⁴⁰ Partch's perception of Sonny as "a symbol of nothing so much as a lost soul, one who does not or cannot conform to the world he was born to" seems autobiographically self-satisfying.⁴¹ Yet Sonny is a figure thematically in opposition to the god's image of excess. As Sheppard suggests, it may be that Partch identified with both Dionysus and Sonny because he saw aspects of himself within these mutually opposed characters. This idea, of course, only further supports the premise of Partch's bilocation. "While Partch remained an outsider and nonconformist in the Sonny/Pentheus mode," Sheppard argues, "he necessarily assumed something of the role of a Dionysian leader of the revels for the realization of his music theater visions."⁴² Similarly, Andrew Granade argues that this same tendency manifested itself in Partch's ambivalence to New York's musical cognoscenti: "[Partch's] unique situation of being an Other, one of 'the folk' that so attracted intellectuals during the Depression and Second World War, but also a member of the intellectual elite by way of his musical/theoretical knowledge and Guggenheim support, allowed him

³⁸ Montiglio, *Wandering in Ancient Greek Culture*, 73.

³⁹ Raulerson also draws this parallel: "As a hobo, Partch had the experience of simultaneously living inside of and apart from American society, and as a composer he experienced the same thing in regard to Western musical culture." Raulerson, "The Hobo in American Musical Culture," 147–48.

⁴⁰ W. Anthony Sheppard, "Bitter Rituals for a Lost Nation: Partch's *Revelation in the Courthouse Park* and Bernstein's *Mass*," *Musical Quarterly* 80/3 (Autumn 1996): 478.

⁴¹ Partch, *Bitter Music*, 246.

⁴² Sheppard, "Bitter Rituals," 479.

to bridge the gap between the two groups.”⁴³ Raulerson and Granade’s insights into various hobo ideologies seem particularly apt in this light. Thus, the autobiographical grafting of Dionysus and Sonny seems symptomatic of Partch’s bilocality and indeed a bricolage of mythical proportions.

Partch chose to set Euripides’s story as unfolding in the present and the past simultaneously: half of *Revelation* is set at a palace in ancient Greece whereas the other is in a courthouse park in modern America. Such staging requires the principal actors to assume dual identities. The actor playing Dionysus in ancient times plays the contemporary Dion as well, the actress playing Agave also plays the Mom, and the actor portraying Pentheus also plays Sonny. That is, the actors literally embody Partch’s perception of bilocation. Not only is the audience thus compelled to perceive the opera exclusively in terms of dualities, but it also allows Partch to see himself in Dionysus, a figure capable of being accepted both in modern America and ancient times, as well as Sonny, “a lost soul . . . who does not or cannot conform to the world he was born to.”⁴⁴ If we recall Lundquist’s understanding of Vonnegut’s narrative treatment of moving through time, that through such a process “we see Billy becoming his history, existing all at once, as if he is an electron,” then perhaps, for Partch, aligning himself with the wandering god, portraying his story shifting through time, and then projecting his resultant nonconformity and aloneness on Sonny was a way through which his history could be realized, even if only within his imagined musical world.

A world like Partch’s is far too rich to remain unexplored. As Virginia Woolf writes, “Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners.”⁴⁵ Peering into these odd corners of Partch’s life illuminates his feelings of being unstuck in time and also magnifies aspects of both Partch and his music that further embeds the one within the other. After all, to create art in an embodied form—one with the power of transcendence—seems to be Partch’s ultimate concern. In his words, “How many millennia backward (or forward) must we go? to find art in a meaningful role? to find statesmen and artists in love with each other? Live and know.”⁴⁶

“The theatrical aspect of his work,” writes Brian Harlan, “is unequivocally the most fundamental, and without exaggeration one might say that Partch lived his work,” adding that consequently, therefore, “any attempt to portray his life as history is fraught with challenges.”⁴⁷ Challenges indeed. Perhaps Partch did not live two lives at once; perhaps fantasizing a life long ago was a coping mechanism, providing him some hope for his life’s mission; or perhaps the essence of his claims stems

⁴³ Samuel Andrew Granade II, “I Was a Bum Once Myself: Harry Partch, *U.S. Highball*, and the Dust Bowl in the American Imagination” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Champaign–Urbana, 2005), 137.

⁴⁴ Bob Gilmore and Danlee Mitchell interpret *Revelation in the Courthouse Park* as a “personal allegory,” although both view the opera as representing tensions between Partch and his mother rather than in terms of dual existences. See Gilmore, *Harry Partch*, 280.

⁴⁵ Woolf, *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942), 195.

⁴⁶ Letter from Partch to Oliver Daniel, 1 June 1960, Harry Partch Archive, University of Illinois Library.

⁴⁷ Brian Harlan, “One Voice: A Reconciliation of Harry Partch’s Disparate Theories” (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 2007), 52.

from some psychological turmoil. No matter the explanation, as Stephen Pouliot argues, those who knew him best couldn't deny his sage-like otherworldliness: "In a positive way, I always thought of Harry as a sort of sorcerer. He was filled with the wisdom of the ages that went back to the Romans and the Greeks. There was this 'otherness' to Harry that *nobody* could deny."⁴⁸ Whatever magical place Partch found himself in, however these realities were realized, the impression of transcendence was unmistakable. "Sometimes, I felt that's where I was," Pouliot adds. "Walking along the beach [with Partch], it was San Diego in the twentieth century but there were just moments that you felt, well [I] could be back on some island in Greece walking with this musical philosopher."⁴⁹ If historians choose to take at face value the most acceptable traits of their subject, it seems exceedingly prudent to value the perplexities and mysteries of that subject as well, lest we too mistake travels with a musical philosopher for a simple walk on the beach.

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⁴⁸ Stephen Pouliot, phone interview with the author, 28 September 2013.

⁴⁹ Pouliot interview.

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