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Rock music lyrics as postmodern poetry: Gentle Giant 'Realization'

1. Introduction: Rock music and rock music poetry

In this paper, I talk about the text *Realization* of the British rock band Gentle Giant, which has released records in the period from 1970 to 1980. First, I will trace the story of Gentle Giant. Then I will turn to a particular text of this band, *Realization*. In doing so, I will first try to prove the existence of this text and determine its limits. Then I will go into the basic structure of this text and discuss some of the thematic focuses that I will address in the chapters *In a glass house*, *The game*, und *Goodbye*. In effect, my aim is to argue that Derek Shulman, a member of Gentle Giant, is among the most important postmodern lyricists of the 20th century.

Lyrics of rock music are not at the centre of the scientific preoccupation with literary texts. Seriously taken poetry is first and foremost written poetry. This applies at least to contemporary poetry, less to old forms of poetry. I would like to plead for rock music in general and rock music lyrics in particular to be regarded as an art form to be taken seriously in cultural studies. If postmodernism is first and foremost a historical epoch, it can undoubtedly be said that rock music is one of the genres that has experienced the greatest boom in this epoch. If the term postmodernism is to be defined more in content than in history, one should at least be prepared to concede the grade *postmodern* to some works of rock music. The band Gentle Giant then belongs to the first candidates.

Rock music is a form of popular culture that began in the mid-1950s in the USA with rock'n'roll, associated with names like Bill Haley, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly. Sociologically, this was particularly promoted by the fact that young people from that time onwards had a serious purchasing power, and they used it not for the least for music. Popular music for the younger generation very quickly became an important economic factor. This music served, among other things, to give identity to groups of people and to differentiate the younger generation from other generations. I use the term *rock music* as a generic term for various forms of popular music. In this regard, a subspecies of rock music is pop music, which has a particularly broad impact and, with Tibor Kneif (1978: 158) speaking, can be regarded as the 'aesthetic lowland' of rock music. Clear boundaries, however, are always difficult to draw when it comes to questions of this kind.

Since the early 1960s, the musical paradigm of rock music supplied significant lyrical contributions. For this development, Bob Dylan in particular was groundbreaking with songs like *Blowin' in the wind* (1963) or *Like a Rolling Stone* (1965). The importance of Dylan as a lyricist is still recognized today. Obviously, the lyricism of rock music can be literarily relevant. With regard to the works of Bob Dylan, the lyrics are clearly in the foreground, the music is of secondary importance. But this is not typical for rock music in

general. Predominantly, the music stands in the foreground, even if rock music is vocal music more often than not. But perhaps more important is the style of singing compared to what words are sung.

2. The story of Gentle Giant

Gentle Giant was created from the remains of the pop band Simon Dupree & the Big Sound which was a typical flower-power band of the late 60's. They were especially successful in Great Britain and had a single hit in the top ten, namely *Kites* in 1967. At the same time, the band was a product of managers of the music industry; they had to go a way that was dictated by others. Actually, they saw themselves as a Rhythm & Blues band but were pushed towards psychedelic music. They earned a lot of money with this kind of popular music but could not develop themselves in a way they imagined. For example, the name of the band was prescribed by the management. None of the members was named Simon Dupree.

In 1969, three members of the pop band Simon Dupree & the Big Sound founded Gentle Giant, namely the brothers Phil Shulman, Derek Shulman and Ray Shulman. They were joined by Kerry Minnear, who had a classical degree in composition and piano, and blues guitarist Gary Green, as well as by a drummer who was replaced twice in the early years, though. From the middle of 1972, the rock drummer John Weathers took over this position.

The Shulman brothers broke away from pop music with their new project and turned to more sophisticated rock music. From the end of the 1960s onwards, a musical style developed – particularly in Great Britain – that is characterized by the integration of diverse musical traditions and the shift to more complex musical structures. The pioneers of this new trend were, of course, the Beatles with their departure from simple rock'n'roll and beat patterns in 1966, even though they themselves are not part of this new so-called progressive rock music. As more and more professionally trained musicians pushed into popular music, this music was influenced by classical music and jazz and developed its own complex musical structures. Progressive rock music is an attempt to incorporate high art into mass culture, a thoroughly postmodern enterprise. In the first half of the 1970s, progressive rock music was one of the dominant and commercially most successful genres of rock music.

In progressive rock music, the music clearly dominates the lyrics. This can be seen, for example, in the fact that there are often expansive instrumental passages. However, a number of progressive rock bands have tried to find a balance between musical and lyrical complexity. I would like to argue that Gentle Giant has come to a particularly successful balance between music and lyrics (this also includes the covers of the records). In the reception, however, this special merit is not perceived so clearly and Gentle Giant are valued primarily for their musical achievements.

The self-titled first album of Gentle Giant was released in 1970. The most conspicuous thing here is playing with their own name. The name *Gentle Giant* indicates two sides of the creative process, since the band produced very powerful and loud music on the one hand,

but also gentle, lyrical music on the other. The cover of the first album shows a drawn giant, a motif that was later used as the band's identification mark. On the back of the cover, one can see that the giant is holding the band in his hands. On the enclosed cover text, the story of this giant is told. It is said that he heard the band's music and soon was extremely enthusiastic about it. The first track of the album is called *Giant* and can be understood as a title song of the record or even as a programmatic statement of the band in general.

Like other bands of progressive rock music, Gentle Giant concentrated on the LP market and only in later years also released singles for the charts. It is also typical that (with only one exception) they recorded only songs they composed themselves. Unlike many other progressive bands, however, Gentle Giant played shorter pieces of music, which are rarely longer than five minutes. The longest track (included in the first record) *Nothing at all* is 9 minutes long. Other bands considered it a predicate for their progressiveness to have songs in their program that fill an entire record side, i.e. are at least 20 minutes long. Moreover, Gentle Giant's music is strictly composed and not improvised as in e.g. jazz. The band showed with their music the ability to use polyphonic and contrapuntal composition techniques, something that was rather unusual for the rock music of the time and was actually reserved for educational music. However, such experimental excursions are something that a progressive rock band at that time could see well, so that the band is clearly progressive, but not out of the ordinary. They used influences from many areas of rock music as well as from art music and especially adopted elements of medieval music, thus providing a postmodern mixture of quotations and borrowings of very different styles. Besides the usual instruments for rock music - guitar, bass, drums and keyboards - they also played cello, violin, saxophone, trumpet or even recorder as well as a number of percussion instruments. Furthermore, all members of the band sang, at least accompanying, and two members acted as lead singers, the first lead singer Derek Shulman having a very powerful voice, while the second lead singer Kerry Minnear has a tender, soft voice. All this contributes to the musical diversity of Gentle Giant. In the rock music press, this led to the fact that it was not clear to many which drawer Gentle Giant should be put in. Many did not want to regard the band as a rock band at all.

In 1971, the second album with the title *Acquiring the taste* was released. However, it is unclear who has found what taste here. Possibly, the title of the record is aimed at the audience and expresses the hope that the audience will find a taste for Gentle Giant. To match this, the cover shows a tongue stretched out a long way. Looking at only the front of the cover, it is not quite clear what the outstretched tongue will lick off immediately (it looks like a woman's butt; see Stump (2005: 39)). A look at the inside of the cover reveals that the object in question is merely a peach. There is also a programmatic statement on the cover, which was later often quoted to describe the philosophy of Gentle Giant:

"It is our goal to expand the frontiers of contemporary popular music at the risk of being very unpopular. We have recorded each composition with the one thought – that it should be unique, adventurous and fascinating."

Gentle Giant did justice to this program with their second album and undoubtedly later. Particularly, they were very unpopular, especially in their home country Great Britain. For the success of a rock band, it was and still is most important to be successful in Great Britain and the USA. This success has an effect on other countries. Gentle Giant had no success in Great Britain and only moderate success in the USA. The situation was different in Canada, Italy and Germany, where Gentle Giant were quite successful in the 1970s.

This lack of popularity is mainly reflected in the sales figures of records. In Great Britain, Gentle Giant did not make it among the first hundred and in the USA only three of their eleven studio albums achieved such a success, the 48th place being the highest of all (cf. Strong 2004). In absolute terms, however, this means that Gentle Giant sold three million records in North America by 1980. These are figures that are inconceivable in the imagination of authors of written poetry.

Acquiring the taste provides a good example of how progressive rock music has attempted to become demanding in terms of lyrics as well, namely by leaning on important works of literature (cf. Stump 2005: 80). If a band already has the word *Giant* in its name, it is obvious to take the most important giants of literature as a model. In the song *Pantagruel's Nativity*, they sing about the birth of the giant Pantagruel, referring to the early modern French poet François Rabelais. This theme is taken up again on the first piece of the fourth album, when the arrival of the giant Panurg is sung about, and already on the cover of the first album it is described that the girlfriend of the giant mentioned there is the daughter of Gargantua.

Another possibility to adjust the textual complexity to the musical complexity is the concept album. Since *Sergeant Pepper* of the Beatles (1967) it has become chic to produce albums that are no longer a random collection of individual songs, but where the lyrics belong together in some way, at best telling a continuous story. Important examples of epic rock operas are *Tommy* by The Who (1969), *The lamb lies down on Broadway* by Genesis (1975) and *The Wall* by Pink Floyd (1979). Gentle Giant's third album, released in 1972, is a concept album of this kind. It tells the life stories of three friends. Accordingly, the album is called *Three Friends*. The told story is quite banal and rather not postmodern: In school, the three boys are friends, later they part ways, one becomes a worker, one becomes an employee and one becomes (of course) an artist. That is how life plays. Such a fatalistic and completely apolitical approach was perceived as disappointing at the time (cf. Sounds 1982: 358).

Musically, Gentle Giant reached perfection on the fourth album *Octopus*, also released in 1972. The cover is a drawing by Roger Dean, who at that time was responsible for many covers of progressive rock music, especially Yes, and who was almost a guarantor of commercial success. Gentle Giant, however, was not affected. Lyrically, *Octopus* again offers a collection of separate pieces, whereby besides the already mentioned reference to Rabelais also references to Albert Camus and to the psychoanalyst R.D. Laing can be found here.

After this fourth album, Phil Shulman left the band. He was already 35 years old and about ten years older than the other members of the band. He sacrificed his life as a rock musician on tour for his family. Gentle Giant continued as a quintet and released *In a glass house* in 1973. Their record company, however, did not want to release this work in America due to a lack of commerciality, so it was only available there as an import. This has damaged the band's career to some extent, even though the album sold 150,000 copies in the USA, making it one of the most successful import records of the time.

The following record *The Power and the Glory* is predominantly understood as a political record. It was released in 1974 shortly after the Watergate scandal and was understood as a commentary on abuse of power and corruption. The band never commented on that. In fact, the record had been recorded before the scandal. Still in publications about Gentle Giant from the year 2005, it is stated that this is a concept album which denounces the abuse of power (Stump 2005: 80, 91).

With this album, again, Gentle Giant was denied the breakthrough, which in the eyes of the band was due to the fact that the management was bad. Therefore, the band changed record company and management after this record. This means that the band had to liberate themselves and buy their way out in order to have more support and success with a new record company. In fact, the 1975 album *Free Hand* is Gentle Giant's most commercially successful work. The music, incidentally, is no less complex than on the previous albums.

In 1976, the eighth album *Interview* was released. Commercially it went downhill again from here on. In German rock journalism, however, this work was taken seriously. In 1977, Wolfgang Sandner published a book entitled *Rockmusik: Aspekte zur Geschichte, Ästhetik, Produktion* ('Rock Music: Aspects of History, Aesthetics, Production') in which various authors, partly from a Marxist perspective, scientifically shed light on different aspects of rock music. Thirty pages of this book are dedicated to the analysis of two cornerstones of the development of rock music. The rock'n'roll classic Johnny B. Goode by Chuck Berry from 1958 is taken as an example of the beginning. The LP *Interview* by Gentle Giant is compared as an example of the possible complexity of the present day. In the individual articles, both the musical and the textual structures are compared, with most authors emphasizing the self-reflexive content of both compared texts. Tibor Kneif however, a professor of musicology who was extremely important for the scientific reception of rock music in Germany at the time, saw few concrete statements in the work of Gentle Giant (in Sandner 1977: 168):

"In the six-year history of Gentle Giant, a linear development can be traced [...] This tendency runs from the linguistic vividness that characterizes the first album [...] as well as the subsequent records [...] to the abstract thought lyricism contained in the later 'record works' [...]. The earlier pieces tell just as many stories [...] The listener of later records can expect hints, condensed allusions, even puzzling metaphors, the meaning of which then suddenly turns into meaningless syllable chains."

The next record of Gentle Giant is of a different kind. It is called *Missing Piece* and was released in 1977, the year progressive rock music was swept aside by punk. Punk as a simple and direct expression of music based on at most three chords and a good portion of aggressiveness was the immediate counter-movement to the sophisticated and technically extremely demanding progressive rock music. For all bands of this genre, punk was a threat to react to. The bands that wanted to survive changed their music towards simpler and more accessible structures, making bands like Genesis and Pink Floyd rich, while others soon disbanded. The first page of *Missing Piece* contains such structurally simpler, more straightforward rock music. But it didn't bring the band the breakthrough either.

In 1977, Gentle Giant stopped being on tour all the time. This was because the members of the band grew older and wanted to devote themselves to their families, but also because there was no longer any interest in their music. At first, they only continued to exist as a studio band. In 1978, the record *Giant for a Day* was released, which is unanimously rated by all fans as their musically worst work. This record is an attempt to earn money with pop music. One can still see that it is Gentle Giant, but the independence of the approach and the originality has been lost.

When it was generally thought that the band had disbanded, a last record was released in 1980: *Civilian*. Here Gentle Giant try their hand at a completely different rock genre, namely hard rock. The result is a musically coherent work that many other bands would have liked to see, but for Gentle Giant it was just their swan song, a farewell that did not impress anyone.

Derek Shulman then entered the music industry and took leading positions in various record companies. For example, he signed Bon Jovi, Dream Theater and a number of other later very successful bands. Ray Shulman became a producer of other bands (including Björk's early band Sugarcubes) and composed music for computer games. The other three members worked on smaller music projects only. Gentle Giant was almost instantly forgotten. In the 1980s, it was difficult to get hold of records by Gentle Giant.

At the beginning of the 1990's, the music market changed. With the advent of the Internet, there was the possibility for fans from different regions of the world to get in touch with each other. In this context, a mailing list *On Reflection* was created, where fans from all over the world could discuss everything that is connected with Gentle Giant. Furthermore, the American fan Daniel Barrett set up the official website for Gentle Giant in 1994 and from 1992 to 1997 the Norwegian Geir Hasnes published five issues of a Gentle Giant fan magazine *Proclamation*. Gentle Giant's albums have been re-released several times on CD since 1989. Furthermore, since 1994 many concert recordings have been released as well as unreleased studio recordings, once as double CD *Under Construction* (1997), once 2004 as a quadruple CD *Scraping the Barrel*. A DVD with concert recordings is also available. Since 2005, there is also a band biography of Paul Stump. From this book, one can learn many details about the band's life, and the music is examined in detail (e.g. in a separate essay by Geir Hasnes), while the lyrics are only considered in passing. If Paul Stump's impression is correct, Gentle Giant have always longed for the big commercial

breakthrough, but management, the record industry and the music scene in general have been unfavourable to them. After all, the band is hipper in 2005 than in the past 25 years. In addition, there are many younger bands who explicitly refer to Gentle Giant and declare them to be significant influences.

3. Realization

I have promised a paper about the text *Realization*. Obviously, there is no record by Gentle Giant that bears this title. Among the approximately 85 individual pieces of Gentle Giant's oeuvre, there is not a single one with this title. *Realization* is at least not a text that can be recognized as such at first glance. Rather, it is only the hypothesis of a text. Under the name *Realization*, I would like to summarize a certain section of the complete works of Gentle Giant. After all, the word *Realization* appears in three different songs of the band, at important places that might indicate that a corresponding text actually contours itself there.

When a band is named Gentle Giant and calls the first track of their first self-titled album *Giant*, one can expect that programmatic statements can be found in this song.

Giant

(Lyrics and music: Shulman/ Shulman/ Shulman/ Minnear)

The birth of a realization
 The rise of a high expectation;
 Emerging successful, defiant;
 Together the parts make a Giant.

This song expresses the experience of the birth of something new, a great expectation. At this point, realization as a self-fulfillment is merely a promise, a hope for the future. The song with the title *Winning*, the penultimate track of the 9th record, offers a retrospective view of a way of life. Here, it is told that realization was found sometime:

Winning

(Lyrics and music: Shulman/ Shulman/ Minnear)

Once he could smile maybe happy
 Fighting for his future and his destinations
 There were his friends he'd rely on
 Everyone had nothing but their aspirations
 Soon dreaming found realization
 Winning was his target with deliberation.

The struggle for the realization of one's own destiny, ambitious plans and dreams soon led to fulfillment. The first track of the 8th record, the title song *Interview*, tells exactly when this moment of realization was:

Interview

(Lyrics and music: Shulman/ Shulman/ Minnear)

Yes it's been hard, going a long time
And we're together even now.
Why do you ask? Surely you know it!
Isn't it clear just when and how.

What can we tell you? At the beginning
Had no direction, any other way.
After the fourth one, realization,
Finding our road, the same as if today.

In this song, the band answers in annoyed tone questions from journalists who always want to know the same thing and who should know the answers already themselves. If one is willing to take the lyrics literally, one learns that the band had no particular direction at the beginning of their career, but 'after the fourth one' they found the way they were looking for and still follow now. 'After the fourth one' I would like to understand that it means the time after the fourth record release. This means that Gentle Giant found their realization from the fifth record.

What could that realization consist of? Musically, there is no qualitative leap between the fourth and fifth records, I think. What has changed, however, is that Phil Shulman, the older of the Shulman brothers, left Gentle Giant after the fourth album *Octopus*. His main function was the textual conception of the songs. From the fifth record on, singer Derek Shulman was responsible for the lyrics. I would like to pursue the hypothesis that the entire work, from the fifth record onwards, represents a unity, especially the lyrics, but also the covers of the records contribute to the overall narrative, as does, of course, the music. Some of the tracks of the first four records can be interpreted in such a way that they also contribute to the text *Realization* in whole or in part, but there are also a number of lyrics that have nothing to do with it. So, the boundaries of the text *Realization* are not quite clear, but the core is fixed. From this perspective, I will now look again at records five to eleven. In particular, I will illuminate such passages where text and music have a common statement.

What makes the individual lyrics of more than 60 songs a uniform text, which textuality criteria are fulfilled in order to make *Realization* perceived as a text at all? As already seen in the word *Realization*, the coherence of the text is created by the fact that certain words or notions or metaphors appear again and again, so that cross-references arise and

developments become visible. The individual songs of *Realization* comment on each other. Some of these metaphors I will take up and try to interpret in the following. In addition, certain themes run like a red thread through the songs, such as friendship, the pursuit of common goals, and failure due to unfavorable external circumstances. The text *Realization* is not epic nor is it autobiographical in nature, but it is lyrical treatment of immediate, authentic and existential experience. It is therefore highly self-reflexive and antimimetic. Whoever lives in a rock band and tries to be successful with this band subordinates his whole life to this business. Then it is obvious and honest to report about these experiences and to handle them in this way. And nothing else happens in *Realization*.

The text becomes relevant when the experiences are communicated in a general form that does not relate to details of the factual background of the experience, even if they can be related to it. Only two songs explicitly speak of the music business (*Interview*, *Another Show*, both from the album *Interview*). All other tracks allow different readings, but they can also be understood as referring to the life of a rock band. In a way, *Realization* is the realization of the ideal of a postmodern text by not revealing its textuality, but making it visible in the process of reception, and by being an open text that allows entry at any point. In this sense, Ray Shulman is cited in the liner notes of *The Missing Piece*: "From the outset, all the different changes in Giant happened for a reason, and every album reflected the mood of the band at the time."

4. In a glass house

First, I look at the fifth record, the work that represents the breakthrough to the realization of Gentle Giant. The title *In a Glass House* alludes to the phrase 'Those who live in glass houses should not throw stones'. The cover shows in black and white the vague outlines of individual musicians, quasi as shadow outlines. (By the way, this is the only time that a photo shows the musicians on the cover of an LP). On the original record, there is a cellophane foil on top. This gives the impression that the band is in a glasshouse behind a fragile facade. Whoever penetrates the record, i.e. whoever listens to the music, visits the band in the glass house. But a glass house means even more: it is a place that can be seen from the outside, where one cannot hide. Being in the glass house, the band reveals their innermost to the public. It is also a place where one can feel trapped, where one cannot easily escape. If one tries, the following happens. That is how this record starts:

The runaway

(Lyrics and music: Shulman/ Shulman/ Minnear)

He is the runaway
 Lie low the wanted man
 Mask his elusive face
 Soon he will getaway
 And free is his future

no more aimless time to spend
 And evading, he's escaping
 Four dirty walls and a bed in a cage
 His home no more.

The record sets in with noise that sounds as if someone threw a stone through glass first, then enlarge the hole. The sound of the breaking glass is then integrated into the music and sets the 6/8 beat of the following song. Then the singer tells us of a runaway who takes off and frees himself from a narrow dwelling. This can be related to the band's experience that Phil Shulman left them. The theme of running away runs through several songs by Gentle Giant. On the previous album *Octopus*, the title *A cry for everyone* showed that running away was pointless. These words come from Phil Shulman (cf. Stump 2005: 165) and may show that he was already thinking about leaving the band, though he had not actually done so.

A Cry for Everyone

(Lyrics and music: Shulman/ Shulman/ Shulman/ Minnear)

Run, why should I run away
 When at the end the only truth certain
 One day everyone dies
 If only to justify life.

If one runs away from a glass house and frees himself, one also damages the glass house and leaves his friends behind. The other songs of *In a Glass House* can be understood to mean that those left behind try to cope with the loss of their fellow player, they try to reposition themselves. After the song about the runaway, the lullaby of an inmate is sung, expressing a fragile narrowness through its purely percussive instrumentation. Then the listener is torn out of the contemplative mood with an energetic *Go!* Following up the song *Funny ways* from the first LP, the band sets off in search of the appropriate way of life. Then they reflect on the growth of experience in the course of growing up and the responsibility associated with it, they dream of a reunion and finally accept the glasshouse as their own circumstances of life with which one has to come to terms. Many of these themes are taken up again on later records where they are reflected from different perspectives.

5. The game

As I have already said, the 6th record of Gentle Giant *The Power and the Glory* is usually understood as a political statement (cf. Stump 2005: 91). I think this is a massive misunderstanding. Of course, the title announces power and glory, but not only politics is characterized by such notions. This record can also be seen as an immediate continuation

of its predecessor. This means, *The Power and the Glory* is part of the *Realization*-narration. After all, the words *power* and *glory* already appear in a previous track, namely in *Pantagruel's Nativity* from the second album. As already mentioned, this song is about a giant, which makes the connection between giants in general and Gentle Giant in particular with the world of power and glory. The music business can also be perceived as a world of power and glory. One can understand this record as illuminating and criticizing the power structures in the music business. A rock band is just a plaything in the hands of the music industry.

The cover of the album shows a playing card. The world of power and glory is a game of chance. In this metaphor, the rock music business is conceived as a game. In a game, the players build on the honesty of their fellow players, but if they are unlucky, they fall into the hands of players who do not keep their promises and play dishonestly. In eleven different songs on six different records, this game metaphor is explicitly addressed and illuminated from different points of view, most clearly on *Playing the game* from *The Power and the glory*. Basically, one can only understand the lyrics from this record in retrospect, when it is possible to regard how the individual themes and metaphors are continued and commented on on subsequent records. The lyrics of this record surely deserve a more detailed analysis.

But the game goes on. The cover of the next record, the 7th one, shows an outstretched hand in the foreground, pointing to the photo of two hands tied together. This photo is standing on a mantelpiece. It is arranged in such a way in which one puts up memory photos of the family and of the past, e.g. wedding photos. In the past, the hands were tied, but now one hand is free. Gentle Giant have freed themselves from the clutches of their management and have now at least partly gained control over their own affairs. But so far, only one hand has been freed. So, the cover shows a development towards a liberation. Some of the songs broach the issue of this development of a liberation from shackles. Regarded in isolation, these shackles may well be understood as referring to a love relationship or a marriage, but in the context of *Realization* they should rather be regarded as a reckoning with the partnership with the management from which Gentle Giant had just broken free.

The first piece *Just the same* picks up on another theme and can prove particularly beautifully how text and music support each other in their message. As already mentioned, in view of the diversity and complexity of Gentle Giant's music, some music journalists did not know which drawer to put this band in. But anyone who does not fit into a drawer will not be discussed. So, it is important to know which genre Gentle Giant belongs to. On the next (8th) record *Interview*, the band gives in the already mentioned title track a very clear and unmistakable answer to this question:

Interview

(Lyrics and music: Shulman/ Shulman/ Minnear)

Want to be seen rock and roll music,
Don't take us something that we're not.

Gentle Giant explicitly inscribe themselves here in the paradigm of rock music, metonymically expressed in the form of the first epoch of rock music, rock'n'roll. On *Just the Same*, they are more subtle. The piece begins again with concrete noises. When one has finally freed one of his hands, he is able to snap his fingers. This finger snap does not set the beat of the song this time (other than on *In a glass house*), because the snap in 6/8 time is taken over by a guitar riff in the unusual 7/8 time. In the lyrics, the speaker expresses the wish that he wants to be perceived as what he really is (*See me, what I am, what I was, what I'll be*), and that he simply does what he wants to do and that in this regard he is like everyone else (*Just the same as anybody else*).

The song is structured according to a classical rock scheme, where first the sequence verse and chorus is present twice, then there is an instrumental middle part and then again verse and chorus. However, the instrumental middle part concretizes in which music category the band thinks they fall and from whom they basically do not differ. In this middle section, three musical styles are quoted. That the music here can be regarded as quotations results from the fact that the music is different from what is otherwise usual for Gentle Giant. The first part offers a guitar riff in 6/8 time that is simply played eight times in a row without showing any development. This points to rather simple rock music. The second part sounds like jazz rock, played in 4/4 time. Unusual is the improvised keyboard. Gentle Giant music is otherwise strictly arranged. The third part in 4/4 time sounds like Pink Floyd, especially keyboards and drums. Pink Floyd are the epitome of progressive rock music of that time. (Interestingly, later in the same year Pink Floyd released *Wish you were here*, a record that also lyrically processed the experiences of a rock band.) The music of Gentle Giant is not the sum of such influences, because Gentle Giant music is different in principle, but in the middle section of *Just the same* the band defines the musical context they feel they belong to. The instrumental music, moreover, is not arbitrary, but makes a statement for itself.

Free Hand's last piece, *Mobile*, strikes a somewhat more explicit note. Here, a life is described that takes place on the road most of the time, rushed from place to place. Thereby, the tone is basically already set for the eighth record, namely *Interview*. The cover of this album shows a slightly cloudy sky and a rainbow in the background. This can be seen as a sign of a general improvement: There is progress with Gentle Giant, but it is not really nice yet. The picture is overlaid by an excerpt from a dictionary entry that explains the word *interview*. In this way, it is pointed out that words are important, perhaps because the textual dimension of Gentle Giant's work has so far been too much in the background in its reception. This is also documented by the above quote by Tibor Kneif, who described Gentle Giant's lyrics as 'abstract thought poetry'. However, the album *Interview* itself has also been seen differently. In the same book containing the article by Kneif, Ulrich Olshausen in the immediately following article (in Sandner 1977: 171) rates

the value of the lyrics on *Interview* much more concretely, even if of course he regards the album textually in isolation and sees no overarching context, which I intend to demonstrate in this article.

„The record *Interview* by Gentle Giant is a so-called concept album, i.e. the individual parts are all subordinated to an idea. The lyrics deal with the life of the pop musician, his doubts, needs and everyday experiences. So 'content' is written in capital letters in this work, at least bigger than in the average rock record.“

The first song of *Interview* answers, as said above, non-asked questions of a journalist. Because the same questions are asked all the time, also the answers are repeated in the song in increasing annoyed tone. In between, a guitar solo is played twice in a row in a completely identical way. Not only this first song is conceived as an interview, but the whole record is arranged like an interview. In the beginning, one hears the moving of chairs together with music in the background, then preparations for the interview by asking for coffee, next the band introducing itself. Then the interviewer asks what to start with. Next it does not go on with conversations, but with music, namely the song *Interview*. Between the second and third song of both sides of the original LP, questions about the music are asked (but not really answered), and after the final song of the recording, the interviewer thanks the band. In this respect, not only the song *Interview* is an interview, but all songs of the LP are to be understood as part of an interview. With the individual songs, the band gives answers to such questions. All songs are part of the story of Gentle Giant, which I call *Realization*. But they are as fictional as the interview is fictional.

The individual songs of *Interview* reflect the experiences in the rock music business from quite different perspectives in a musically diverse way. An essential topic is the assurance to be authentic and to give a piece of one's own person in the music instead of pretending feelings and being self-satisfied or pretentious, which is what rock journalists actually accused Gentle Giant of and with which the band had to deal. When in the song *Timing* the band asks themselves whether they had the wrong timing when planning their career, it is in such a way that rhythmical patterns overlap in the music that actually do not fit together, that the singer sings the word *timing* of the chorus with different rhythmizations and that the song ends at the wrong place in the beat. The lyrical connection of the works since *In a Glass House* is further clarified by the fact that many earlier themes and metaphors are taken up again on *Interview*.

By the time of the release of *Interview*, the heyday of progressive rock music ended (cf. Stump 2005: 142). Gentle Giant also felt compelled to change their music. While the second side of the following record *The Missing Piece* follows *Interview* musically, the first side offers more commercial, simpler structures. Lyrically, however, the text cycle *Realization* is brought to an end in a grandiose way. This is indicated by the cover, which at first glance is rather meaningless. All there is is a single piece of a puzzle arranged on a large green surface. This is the missing piece mentioned in the record title. On the front side of the cover, it does not become clear what picture the piece belongs to. This becomes clear from the back of the cover. Here, there is the head of the giant that is already familiar from the

first LP of Gentle Giant. This time, the head is present in the form of a puzzle with one last piece missing. This head of the giant has become the logo of the band. Thus, with this record the whole picture of Gentle Giant finally becomes clear.

To show how this record works, I look at a song in more detail. Typical for the lyrics of Gentle Giant is the massive use of personal pronouns, whose concrete reference is not fixed, but has to be matched interpretatively. Thus, the lyrics can be understood in different ways, whereby the reading I make as the one related to the history of the band is certainly only one of several possibilities. In the song *Betcha thought we couldn't do it*, four pronouns already appear in the first line, which are to be interpreted.

Betcha Thought We Couldn't Do It

(Lyrics and music: Shulman/ Shulman/ Minnear)

I bet you thought we couldn't do it.
And if you did we wouldn't try
I bet you thought we couldn't do it.
But if we didn't we would die

We built our house stone by stone.
Little help, we were on our own
Made the town, torn it down.
Now you know, tell me how it feels

I bet you thought we couldn't do it.
And if you did we wouldn't try
I bet you thought we couldn't do it.
But if we didn't we would die

We've been waiting such a long long time.
To fit the pattern, fill the rhyme
Now we can't stick in our old ways.
Now it's out we'll see how you feel.

The two verses tell what the *We* of the song did, namely build a house or a city and tear it down again, try to correspond to a pattern and then give up the old way. At the end of both verses, the addressee is asked to find his opinion about this change. If the construction of a house can be understood as a metaphor for the conception of a career in the rock business - and this follows from an earlier song where this metaphor has been introduced (*The house, the street, the room* from the second album) - then we probably learn in this track that Gentle Giant have broken with their old career and are now trying out something new, out of existential necessity. They hope to meet with positive reactions from the audience.

The text does not tell us what the new looks like. However, the title of the song provides a hint. Here, the high-language form 'I bet you' is replaced by the colloquial form 'Betcha'. So, Gentle Giant might change from a high style register to a lower one. This impression is underlined by the music. The song is pure rock'n'roll, which is based on the popular music of the 1950s. Thereby, Gentle Giant show that they can play rock'n'roll after all, even if the audience may not have believed the band was capable of this music. At the same time they prove that they actually fall into the rock'n'roll category, as they merely stated with words on the previous record.

But that doesn't mean that Gentle Giant has now become a band that plays classic rock'n'roll. A look at the wider context reveals additional dimensions of meaning. After all, the track is the third one on the record and not the first one. The first song *Two weeks in Spain* reports how someone recovers from a stressful life by spending two weeks on holiday in Spain, which proves to be not enough for full recovery. The second song *I'm turning around* sounds like an ordinary pop song, a ballad, and would have had the potential to become a big hit if the circumstances had been better. Lyrically, the song is to be understood, as common for a pop ballad, as a love song: The singer tells his partner that he has the feeling that he has received too little from the other and that he is now taking a new path. I would like to see this as an evaluation of the relationship between Gentle Giant and their audience. They don't feel sufficiently accepted and therefore take a new direction, play a different game.

This new game is popular rock music instead of progressive rock music, and this includes ballads and rock'n'roll equally. The discussed track *Betcha thought we couldn't do it* can be understood as a justification why Gentle Giant turned to popular rock music. The fourth piece *Who do you think you are* describes the life of a person as a minor star among big stars, as a look into some putative future. The last song of the first side *Mountain Time* is about a date on the top of a mountain. Lyrically, this follows the metaphor of mountain climbing already introduced on the first record (in *Why not?*): A career in a band is like climbing a mountain in a group. The participants do not have to love each other, but they have to stick together to reach their shared goal. Now Gentle Giant have arrived. *Mountain time* also musically follows *Why not?*, since both pieces are influenced by soul music, which is otherwise not to be observed in the music of Gentle Giant. Also on the second side of the record, there is a song about having arrived, namely the already quoted song *Winning*, in which in retrospect on a way of life it is stated that in the end it was not decisive to win but to fight for something.

6. Goodbye

The last track on *The Missing Piece* with the title *For Nobody* again begins with the motif of running away. This time, it is the first-person narrator who turns away, disappointed and misunderstood. Basically, Gentle Giant could have ceased to exist at this point, because all sides of the band up to the last piece have become evident, the picture is complete. But there are two more records that continue the story of *Realization*. The cover of the next

record *Giant for a day* is more of a joke. Depicted is the well-known giant, but in a simplified, more poppy drawing, and cover prompts to cut out the face and put on a mask. In this way, the average fan can be a giant for a day. On the back of the cover a number of winners is pictured (boxer, beauty pageant, jockey, football team), all wearing the mask. For Gentle Giant being a giant now means to belong to the winners, to have made the commercial breakthrough. At least for a moment. The music is correspondingly simple. Again, there is a rock'n'roll song and a ballad, as well as various other kinds of popular music of the time. Also, the lyrics are simpler by dealing with friendship and thanking each other for their support, even if the songs continue to resume some metaphors and themes from earlier songs. Finally, everything fits into the story of *Realization*.

Interestingly, the farewell song *It's only goodbye* is only the penultimate song of this record, so that the farewell of Gentle Giant is not yet sung about here. Rather, the last title *Rock Climber* refers again to the metaphor of mountaineering, whereby the word *rock* here can be a piece of stone as well as rock music.

The farewell from the music business is carried out on the last record *Civilian*. The name of the band can be read on the cover in yellow and the title of the record in red, whereby the letters of the title originate from the letters of the band. Gentle Giant change to Civilian, transforming themselves into civilians, disappearing from the rock business. The picture of the front cover shows a large crowd of people, with the individual people having no faces. The face has always been an important metaphor for Gentle Giant, the band has shown the audience their face, their innermost, they have used the face of the giant as a logo and put it on as a mask. Now they disappear into a faceless crowd.

They also become more anonymous musically, turning to a new genre, American hard rock (this is the only record the band has recorded in the USA). All influences of classical and medieval music have disappeared, only the typical rock instruments are used, and the musical structures are straightforward. The lyrics are about life in the modern metropolis and about anonymity in the masses. The game continues here without illusions, but memories of more peaceful times remain. The last song *Heroes no more*, which comes from the sessions of *Civilian* and fits musically perfectly into this LP but was only added when the record was re-released in 1997, looks back on the heroes who are now only souvenirs, while others play the game for them, in which they are no longer allowed to participate.

This concludes the story of Gentle Giant. I hope that I was able to give a little insight into postmodern features of rock music lyrics. I also hope, of course, that I can contribute to Gentle Giant's long-term recognition in the rock music paradigm. Most of all I hope that the lyrics of Gentle Giant will be given more attention and that Derek Shulman will be perceived as an important lyricist of postmodernism.

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