

9-1-2015

Countersong: Rising or Falling

Jonathan Skinner
University of Warwick

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

 Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Nature and Society Relations Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Skinner, Jonathan (2015) "Countersong: Rising or Falling," *The Goose*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 26.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol14/iss1/26>

This Poetry is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Countersong: Rising or Falling

With each dying

person
a piece of us all
dies

With the construction
of mountains, the
collision of continents

With the ancient
sea floors made of skeletons

With being driven
far inland, worn down and sculpted
by ice and wind

With the decay
of manufacturing

With rapid evolution of ruins
a shift

With investment

With sexual and natural
selection's diverse

With life forms pushing
into rock

With softening, changing
surfaces

With small elites
constructing

With fantasies of difference
identifying

With the masses

With consent

With collusion with violence

With human violence

With and against its own

With other kinds unimaginable

With witnessing the valley covered

With refugee tents

With mechanic manipulation
of time and space

With vibratory communication
between difference
engines

With scale, the miraculous
network of communication

With these skins and surfaces

With endless forms
of repetition

With the lesser imposed on the greater

With covering earth with flows
of bodies
in bursts

With concentration and diffusion

With history pre-imagined, remembered
and forgotten

With failure as survival

With bodies aging, desire young

With kisses turning blue
and fading back
to skin

With unimaginable human trauma
stilled and developed in precious
metals

With particles of a germ colony

With horror of dying

With light slowing and stilling us
until memory

With evaporation and time
transpiring through pores
like moisture

With the sere browns and yellows
of desertification

With the apocalypse
of a language casting
back from no future

With the fantasy of an eternity
climatic, fueled by pasts

With living in the present

Without skill

With footless ninja chops

With traveling into the wilderness or gathering
in numbers

With great personal and planetary cost

With period detail

With foraging, the sweet flavor

With bursts of tiny wild strawberries

With crackling legs of insects

With desire, coursing beneath

With surface, attraction that begets
acceptance
or rejection

With aggression, strength, destruction

With death as a withering
struggle, or taking

With sound to build our mental nests

With predators in
broken windows

With myriad forms of incest
and polymorphous sexuality

With a picture of the world

With background

With clouds, fantastic
landscapes as far as the sky

With kissing
With fingers intertwined

With lingerie hanging from a rear-
view mirror
to dry

With no knowing

With monstrous vision
and resonance

With borders and state
security apparatus

With torture conducted
in secret as
spectacle

With family intersections

With fascination

With persons

With oil everywhere, washing it off
at night, then starting
again

With a group electrocution

With antiquated mechanical
devices

With fire

Without
fire

With moving constantly
over surfaces
of the earth

With livestock

With storms and electrical danger

With rolling cracks of thunder

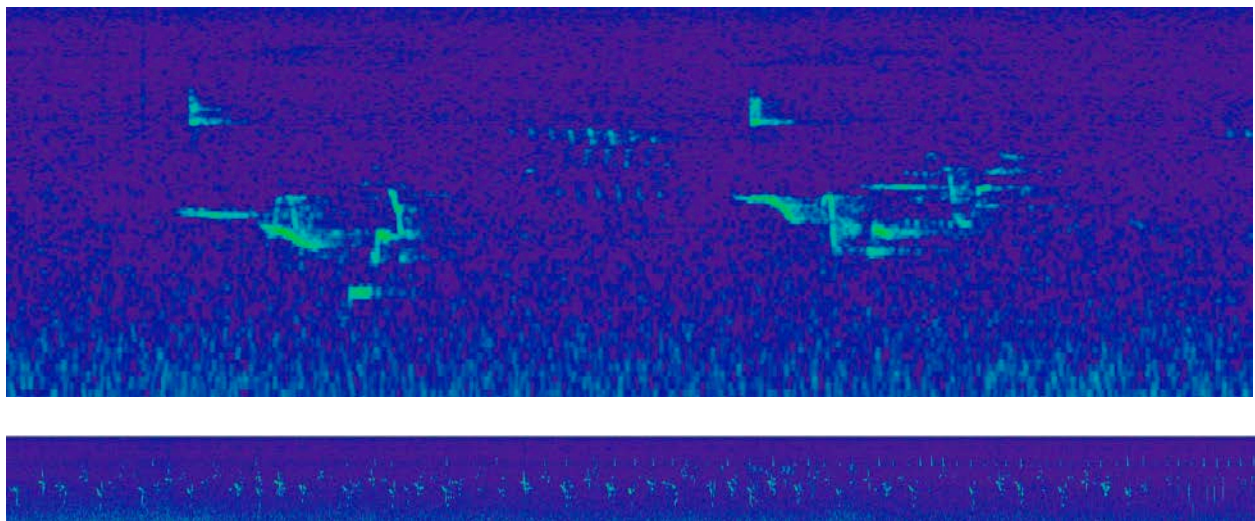
Countersong: Rising or Falling / Notes

I have attempted composing lyrics to the countersinging of two Hermit thrushes (*Catharus guttatus*) recorded while on a backpacking trip in the high mountains of Northern New Mexico. 2015 was the greenest year in well more than a decade, and with the moisture came an abundance of wildflowers, with the wildflowers insects, and with the insects more birds than I remember ever hearing sing in those mountains.

[see audio download: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol14/iss1/26/>]

After a long walk above treeline, enchanted by this rising mist of song, I descended at dusk into the woods to find my campsite, and stumbled onto this singing contest. I had never heard such a tightly wound countersong between birds of this species—I even had to convince myself I wasn't hearing an echo. Yet if you listen closely, you will never note a repetition: "Always they are either rising or falling to a new strain," writes Thoreau (of the Wood thrush, in his journal entry for 22 June, 1851).

Since I was trying out a new wind muff on my old handheld, Marantz PMD-620 digital recorder, the sound is not as loud or as clear as I would have liked. Still, the recording offers enough of a signal for me to generate spectrograms using a demo version of Songscope, an audio analysis software package developed by Wildlife Acoustics. (In the past I have used Raven Lite, freeware available from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, but it is no longer compatible with my current operating system.) By visualizing the signals and slowing them down to half speed, one is able to discern some of the structure of the vocalizations: the opening keynote (up and down a nearly pentatonic scale) and the diversity and harmonic overlaps of the rising, fluty flourishes that follow each opening note. The Bartokian intricacies of these flourishes are barely visible even here.



The second image is a thumbnail spectrogram of the entire, three-minute long recording: it contains about 58 vocalizations or 24 exchanges. My translation extrapolates a bit further, with about 39 exchanges—I found myself splitting some of the longer human phrases between the bird voices. A more refined translation might find a way to indicate, typographically or otherwise, a more rapid enunciation, allowing phrases of variable length to be fit into the same length of time—just as the birds fit an astonishing number of notes into their short, vocal flourishes. Hungarian musicologist and ornithologist Peter Szöke (in his 1969 paper, with W. W. H. Gunn and M. Filip, on “sound microscopy” and “The Musical Microcosm of the Hermit Thrush”) had to slow the Hermit thrush song down 32 times to show how a single vocalization, less than 2 seconds in length, may contain 45-100 or more notes, along with 25-50 or more pitch changes, many of them sounded simultaneously (through the two pipes of the bird’s syrinx). Szöke was so entranced he dubbed Hermit thrush song a “musical microcosm.”

With my current resources (Songscope can only slow the song down to 1/16 its speed, and there is no way to adjust pitch, which becomes necessary to keep the sound within hearing range when it is so slowed, not to mention the limited quality of the recording) there is no way even to begin to enter the musical microcosm of the Hermit thrush song: we are left gazing at the Grand Canyon from 30,000 feet. I was more interested in the overall winding patterns, in the energy and inventiveness of the exchange between these birds, and I hope that my text captures some of that dual or fourfold performance (sung by two pairs of syrinxes). As the intervals between the vocalizations are an important part of the song, I have used the space of the page to sound those silences.

I say I have attempted “composing lyrics,” as this translation is a draft for a project I am calling Birdsong Karaoke. In Birdsong Karaoke, a performance genre, I play back birdsong at half or quarter speed and read or sing along lyrics composed to fit the bird’s tune. The bird is the composer and I am just trying to sing along with my poor human vocal cords. I often fail, but when there is a match, it’s as though I get to be the bird, for a brief instant, and the audience gets to hear birdsong in human language. If all that comes of the experiment is heightened attention to the specifics of these avian performances, then I am happy.

The text, or language, exists wholly within the world of the human: in this case, it was drafted while on a return flight from the Canadian Rockies to London, England. I had orogeny on the mind. I had just watched Wim Wenders’s documentary on the photographer Sebastião Salgado, *Salt of the Earth*; the first stanza is a paraphrase of Salgado’s statement, in the light of his experience photographing human suffering in Rwanda: “With each dying person, a piece of everyone else dies.” As I typed the text, after having listened repeatedly to my recording of the countersong, the “With . . .” refrain must have emerged as a way to sound the repetition and variation of the keynotes. I typed while watching an indie horror film about sexually transmitting haunting called *It Follows*. The text also may have been affected by my co-passenger’s entertainment choice, the action film *Kingsman: The Secret Service*.

I have included the original stereophonic recording, unaltered, only compressed to mp3. It may be faint enough to require turning the volume up all the way, but at least this version retains

the detail of the second bird's responses, which were further away from the microphone. Efforts at manipulating the sound envelope tended to reduce this detail. You may want to listen as you read along, or simply listen, or just read. Throughout the recording, one can hear the dry *Tsik* alarm call of what may be a Dark-eyed junco, wondering what on earth I am up to.

Works Cited

The Salt of the Earth. Dir. Juliano Ribeiro Salgado and Wim Wenders. Decia Films, 2014.

P. Szöke, W. W. H. Gunn and M. Filip, "The Musical Microcosm of the Hermit Thrush: From Athanasius Kircher's Naive Experiments of Musical Transcription of Bird Voice to Sound Microscopy and the Scientific Musical Representation of Bird Song." *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* T. 11, Fasc. 1/4, Bence Szabolsci, Septuagenario (1969), pp. 423-438.

JONATHAN SKINNER is a poet, editor, and critic, best known for founding the journal *ecopoetics*. His poetry collections include *Chip Calls* (Little Red Leaves, 2014), *Birds of Tiff* (BlazeVOX, 2011), *Warblers* (Albion Books, 2010), and *Political Cactus Poems* (Palm Press, 2005). Essays have appeared in *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place* (University of Iowa, 2008), *Ronald Johnson: Life and Works* (National Poetry Foundation, 2008), and *The Ecolanguage Reader* (Portable Press and Yo-Yo Labs and Nightboat Books, 2010). He teaches in the Writing Program and in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick.