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Countersong: Rising or Falling

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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 fingers intertwined
  With kissing

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 Szőke (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). Szőke 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


https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol14/iss1/26