

Singing with the Frogs

1

In September 1996, a small group of poets, students and scholars met at Trent University, in Peterborough, Ontario, for what I think was the first colloquium ever held to address the practice of literary polyphony. Our hosts were Sean Kane and Stephen Brown. Our moderator was Stan Dragland. Our guest of honor was Dennis Lee. The other invited speakers and performers were Roo Borson, Kim Maltman, Don McKay, Jan Zwicky and Clare Goulet. Nine months later, I am still repeating some of the things I said there, still recanting others, and still learning what I learned.

The basic terms here—polyphony, monophony, homophony—are all names for musical phenomena, and music more than anything will teach us what they mean. All the arts are specialties, but all the arts are one. No branch will fruit for long when it is severed from the tree.

Polyphonic music is music in which two or more interrelated but independent statements are made at the same time, creating a statement that none of these statements makes on its own. The statements that are made may imitate each other (as they do in a canon or a fugue), or they may go their separate ways with one eye on each other (as they usually do in a motet). But they retain their independence either way. Their relation is that of coequals, not of musical servant and lord. That coequality is *why* what they say can exceed the sum of the parts.

Polyphony, in short, is singing more than one song, playing more than one tune, telling more than one story, at once. It is music that insists on multiplicity—instead of uniformity on the one side or chaos on the other.

Listening to two or three or four interrelated but independent melodies at once has an immediate effect. “You can see their minds expand!” Jan

Zwicky says—speaking as poet, violinist, teacher and philosopher all at once. Polyphony creates a kind of musical and intellectual space absent from music of all other kinds.

Playing separate melodies in sequence does not create polyphony. Playing one melody supported by accompaniment, no matter how complex, doesn't create polyphony either. Music that consists of one melody at once with its accompaniment—one statement at a time, with harmonic supports and defenses—is not polyphonic nor monophonic either. It is *homophonic* music.

There are polyphonic scores for modern dance and for ballet, but in the dance hall and ballroom sense, polyphony is not the stuff to dance to. Its multiplicity of statement interferes with the two stock themes of loneliness and fusion and with most of the other stock emotions pop music now conveys.

In fact, though it surrounds us all, many people living now have evidently never listened to polyphony. Much present music seems designed to drown it out instead of making it more audible. Most of what pours out of tape decks and radios now in every corner of the world—pop music, rock music, country music, twentieth-century folk music, opera, and most of the classical hit parade—is homophonic music. One melody sounds at a time, and is varied or developed or repeated over time, while all the other voices shore it up or hold its coat or hold its hand.

Most of the polyphonic repertoire in the European tradition is written for small ensembles of skilled singers, for chamber groups, and finally for soloists skilled enough with lute or keyboard to play two tunes at once. The greater part of this repertoire was written during the Renaissance. Its heyday ends where many people's sense of European musical history begins: with the work of J.S. Bach.

Polyphonic music and homophonic music are different in design, different in construction, and different in effect, though the boundary between them is frequently a wide and fuzzy line. It can be difficult to say precisely at which point a secondary voice asserts its independence or gives it up again—and yet the difference overall is one no listener can miss.

I have heard very intelligent people suggest that every poem is polyphonic—because a poem is a simultaneity of syntax, breath rhythm, speech rhythm, rhetoric, metaphor, the interplay of phonemes against morphemes, and all that. This isn't wrong, but it misses the point. An aria played on a solo violin is likewise a simultaneity of rhythm, intonation, musical syntax, dynamics, and so on. But that one melodic line, no matter how richly

intoned or inflected, does not create the perceptual space and the sense of multiplicity that real polyphony does. Roland Barthes obscures the point as well when he defines theatricality as *une véritable polyphonie informationelle*. Polyphony does not mean merely information density or information overload. It does not mean *une épaisseur de signes*, “a thickness [or stupidity] of signs,” to borrow Barthes’s deliberate phrase (1964: 258). It means a space-creating dance of insistent and persistent multiplicities. The fuel of polyphony is time, from which it makes the space it needs.

Polyphony, like other borrowed words—*color*, *surface*, *shadow*, *tempo*, *frame* and even *voice*—is certain to acquire new and different *shades* or *hues* of meaning as a literary term. But if we use the word too loosely, we may find we only use it when it’s not the word we need. Then we will have to coin another to mean what it once meant—unless we lose its meaning too.

2

What is a polyphonic poem? It is a poem that is kin in some substantial way to polyphonic music. It is a cohabitation of voices. A poem that (to borrow two good verbs from Dennis Lee) *enacts* and *embodies* plurality and space as well as (or instead of) timelessness and unity. A poem in which what-is cannot forget its multiplicity. A poem in which no one—not the poet, not the reader, not the leader, and not God—holds homophonic sway.

The concepts of homophony and polyphony, and their underlying principles of harmony and counterpoint, are taught in every school around the world that teaches the European musical canon. But there are many more polyphonies than that. In Indonesia, India and Africa there are rich and deep indigenous traditions of polyphonic music. Inuit *katajjaq* (throat-song) is polyphonic too. What native North American music was like before the Europeans came is now not easy to find out, but the earliest recordings prove that it was often polyrhythmic. Much of it, in other words, was polyphonic music in which every voice but one is restricted to percussion. (Rhythmic more than melodic independence of the parts, according to Simha Arom, is the structural foundation of Central African polyphony as well.)

3

The “invention” of polyphony can be a problematic turn of phrase, like the “discovery” of America. It simply isn’t true that either music or polyphony is confined to the human realm. The assertion that it is—still often made—

is all too reminiscent of the once-familiar claims that art and poetry or culture and morality are exclusively the property of city-dwelling Christians with a certain shade of skin.

Songbirds sing. That is fact and not a metaphor. They sing, and in the forest every morning, when a dozen or a hundred or a thousand individuals of six or ten or twenty different species sing at once, that is polyphonic music. What city dwellers frequently call “silence” is the ebb and flow of birdsong and the calls of hawks and ravens, marmots, pikas, deer mice, singing voles, the drone of gnats and bees and bee flies, and the sounds of wind and rain and running water. The world is a polyphonic place. The polyphonic music and the polyphonic poetry and fiction humans make is an answer to that world. It is mimicry of what-is, as much as it is statements of what might be.

I am a rank amateur musician, with only a little experience playing jazz, European chamber work, and Indonesian gamelan. But night after night in Indonesia I have walked between the village, where the humans boomed and chirped with their bogglingly complex polyphonic tuned percussion, and the rice fields, where the frogs, just as earnestly and skillfully, were polyphonically croaking. Nothing but human arrogance allows us to insist that these activities be given different names. Bird songs, like human songs, are learned. They are cultural traditions. If some parameters of birdsong and frogsong are genetically preprogrammed in ways the string quartet, sonata and gamelan are not, so what? Bird *flight* too is genetically preprogrammed in ways that human flight is not. Does that entitle us to say that only we can really fly, and birds cannot?

If I'm allowed three musical wishes, two of them are these: I hope to learn to sing one half of a few *katajjait* myself; I also hope to meet the thinker from Pond Inlet (quoted but, alas, not named by Saladin d'Anglure) who said that humans learned the *sounds* of these songs from wild geese but learned the *meanings* of the sounds from the aurora.

4

Music, dancing, storytelling, poetry are means by which we can and do embrace and participate in being, not tricks by which we prove our independence from or our superiority to it. Intrinsically, I think, the more power-hungry forms of homophonic music shut the polyphonic truth of the world out. This seems to me the case regardless whether the power comes from an amplifier, an orchestra pit or a military band. And intrinsically, I think,

polyphonic literature and music acknowledge and celebrate plurality, simultaneity, the continuing coexistence of independent melodies and rhythms, points of view and trains of thought.

In homophonic music, lovely though some of it is, and written by geniuses, as some of it certainly is, only the leader has any substantial freedom of action. Melodies may follow one another, but they cannot coexist. Where the leader's voice leads, the accompanist's must follow. The laws of harmony demand that every tone or note or body have its own space or its own time or both. If two notes want the same space at the same time, the two must fuse and lose their independence, or one must move harmonically aside.

Polyphonic space is non-Newtonian or non-Aristotelian or both. In polyphonic art, two bodies can indeed occupy the same space at the same time without ceasing to be two. Two melodies, or three, or eight, can live their separate lives, with equal pay for equal work, and still eat at the same table and sleep in the same bed.

There are in consequence no polyphonic fanfares. Music played to celebrate the glory of the state or the triumph of the hero is always homophonic. But the equation is not simple. It is plainly not the case that every piece of homophonic music is politically unhealthy, nor that polyphonic music will put an end to war, religious bigotry or sexual oppression.

Most of the repertoire of Renaissance polyphony consists of musical settings of Christian texts. Many of these works are meditations on the trinity and on other enduring conundrums of coexistence: carnal and spiritual, sacred and secular, grief and forgiveness, weakness and strength, the church and the state. I would prefer a pagan polyphony—but that, after all, I am free to create, and I find the example of Christian polyphony quite helpful to that end.

I also cannot shake the sense that polyphonic literature, for me at least, is somehow now more urgent than polyphonic music. There is, I suppose, a simple reason for that: I see much more to speak of than to sing of in the self-entranced and self-destructive culture by which we are engulfed. Polyphony, like poetry, exists in many forms. Not all of it is sung; not all of it is lyric.

5

Literature, say Socrates and Plato and Archibald MacLeish and Northrop Frye, is absolutely mute. I say so too. I say it speaks but doesn't talk. It is the gestural, or musical, not verbal, use of words. Music is to literature as poetry is to prose, and each is, in its own way, eloquent and mute.

The difference between polyphonic literature and polyphonic music is that literature in general—dumb and untalkative though it is—speaks louder than it sings. The languages of music, like the languages of literature, have grammars, but the languages of literature have dictionaries too. No lexicon or thesaurus will tell you the meaning of C-sharp. That seems to me the only crucial difference between literature and music. Music is what literature becomes when it escapes from under the dictionary; literature is music that must wear that web of reference and that weight of definition almost everywhere it goes.

We are taught, of course, to write with a single pencil, in one voice at a time, the same way we are taught to speak and sing, because one mouth is all we have. If writing were *instrumental* rather than *vocal*—if we spoke with our two hands, the way musicians play the lute or the piano—we could write as a good lutenist or pianist can play: in two, and on occasion even three or four distinct voices at once.

But could we read it? Could we hear it? Trained musicians read motets and fugues with ease, and even nonmusicians learn to hear and sometimes understand them.

We have, in fact, a lot of practice hearing polyphonic speech. It surrounds us in the woods, and it surrounds us in the street and the café. It's what we hear wherever we can listen to the world. It's also what we hear where people speak with neither fealty nor fear, and where their speech is not drowned out by their machines.

If we wrote poetry the way Josquin des Prez and Nicolas Gombert—two masters of polyphony—wrote music, we could write for four or eight. The mind is *capable* of that plurality. We are capable of polyphonic thought and polyphonic speech, as polyphonic music proves. We are capable, that is, of multiplicity of mind in a healthy form. Why is it that the only multiplicity of mind in fashion now is a crippling disease? Polyphony made audible is music. Schizophrenia made audible is noise.

6

Cantata, sonata and toccata, like villanelle and sonnet, have become the names of forms. Some artists (Beethoven, Rilke) find them useful to dismantle and rebuild, while others find them useful to ignore. But the names point first of all not to differences in structure but to distinctions of instrumentation: *cantatas* to be sung; *sonatas* to be sounded (with such things as bows and horns); *toccatas* to be played by touching keys or valves or plucking

strings. Compositions of this kind for speaking voice, I guess, should be *parlatas*, but that is not a word I want to coin. I am happier, most of the time, thinking of language in instrumental and gestural terms. Sonata and toccata are incongruous terms for works that are meant to be spoken, yet these names suit me fine. Something Don McKay said at the Polyphony Colloquium helped me understand why this is so. I quote here from the short working paper he sent around to other participants just before the colloquium convened:

I take it to be obvious to anyone who raises nose from book: language is completely inadequate to the real. . . .

Poetry is language used with an awareness of the poverty of language. . . . Poetry remembers that language is shaped air; it remembers ashes to ashes, dust to dust, wind to wind; it knows we don't own what we know. It knows the world is, after all, unnameable, so it listens hard before it speaks, and wraps that listening into the linguistic act.

Dennis Lee, who plays a mean piano when he isn't writing poems, says that when he writes he feels the poem, or the cadence out of which the poem comes, largely in his forearms. One might think that a poet with a tactile or somatic sense of poetry would feel the poem in his mouth or in the fingers that he wraps around the pen. Perhaps some do. I think, myself, that poetry is a *langue sans parole*, sometimes disguised as pure *parole*. I think that I do not *write* poems at all. I think that I gesticulate with beakless lips and wave my stunted limbs.

7

In the twentieth century Hermann Broch, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky, William Gass and no doubt many others have knowingly embodied musical forms in their prose and their poems. Some have been drawn to the structural principles and techniques of string quartets and piano sonatas. Others—Joyce, Pound and Zukofsky, for instance—were attracted to the polyphonic structures of the fugue. How well they succeeded at composing polyphonic literature is a question I will sidestep for the moment. It is important to me that they tried. And it is important to me that composers reached for literary forms at the same time. Samuel Barber's *Essays for Orchestra* and Charles Ives's *Four Transcriptions from Emerson* are of a piece with T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Hermann Broch's big prose sonatas.

Unknown to these writers, the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin had decided in the 1920s that polyphony in literature begins with Dostoevsky. Bakhtin's brief book arguing this thesis was published in St Petersburg (then Leningrad) in 1929. Soon after that, Bakhtin was arrested and imprisoned, as Dostoevsky had been eighty years before. His reputation and his ideas vanished with him. But Bakhtin, like Dostoevsky, was saved by a reprieve. He published his book again, after heavy revision, in Moscow in 1963. By then, unknown to Bakhtin, the literary use of polyphonic structures was on many European artists' minds, and on the minds of other theorists as well. Claude Lévi-Strauss, to take an interesting example, had begun to teach his students that the structures of myth and of music were fundamentally the same. He attempted in particular to show that Native American myth is structurally akin to the classical music of Europe. He taught that European classical music shows what happens when the structures inherent in myth are denied, by the authority of the church or the iron law of reason, every chance to express themselves in words. The four thick volumes in which Lévi-Strauss unfolded this idea were published between 1964 and 1971.

Literary polyphony as Bakhtin understands it does not mean simultaneous multiple texts in the literal sense of the phrase. It means the continuous independence of the voices and viewpoints of the characters. We read their speeches and their dialogues line by line and voice by voice in sequence, but their visions live together in our heads, and their theses do not fuse. No final synthesis is attained. What Bakhtin sees in Dostoevsky

is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather *a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world*, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event. (1973: 6-7; 1984: 6)

Bakhtin insists that this plurality is strictly nondramatic. He speaks of Rabelais, Shakespeare, Cervantes and Balzac as precursors of Dostoevsky, but only the latter, he claims, created truly polyphonic literature—and polyphonic theatre, he claims, cannot exist. The theatre, he says,

is by its very nature alien to genuine polyphony; drama may be multileveled, but it cannot contain *multiple worlds*; it permits only one, not several, systems of measurement. (1973: 41 / 1984: 34)

It is true and significant that polyphony differs from dialogue. I think, however, that Elizabethan plays with two or more distinct simultaneous plots are among the clearest and most important examples we have of literary

polyphony. And I think that admitting the existence of polyphony in Shakespeare takes nothing away from the richness of Dostoevsky's fiction.

Sometime in the 1930s, Bakhtin wrote another lengthy essay known as *Slovo v romane*, "Speech in the Novel." This has been translated, pretentiously, as "Discourse in the Novel," but *slovo* is an unpretentious word. A better rendering would be "How People Talk in Novels." Not that the essay is untroubled in the original by pretension of other kinds—for here again, Bakhtin insists that only the novel can be truly polyphonic.

The world of poetry, no matter how many contradictions and insoluble conflicts the poet develops within it, is always illumined by one unitary and indisputable discourse. Contradictions, conflicts and doubts remain in the object, in thoughts, in living experiences—in short, in the subject matter—but they do not enter into the language itself. In poetry, even discourse about doubts must be cast in a discourse that cannot be doubted. (1975: 286 / 1981: 286)

It is hard to understand, reading statements such as this, how Bakhtin has remained so long the darling of contemporary criticism. It is true that he had little opportunity to read the poetry of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and none at all to read the poetry of Dennis Lee. That does not entirely absolve him of his arrogance in claiming no such poetry could possibly exist.

Doubt is not, in any case, the issue. The polyphonic structure of a mass or a chanson or a motet by the poet and composer Guillaume de Machaut or Josquin or Gombert does not require us to doubt a single word in any of its voices. What it does is enable us to hear and accept these voices all at once—and to hear what their simultaneity says that they don't say.

Polyphony is possible in poetry, drama, fiction, and in literary criticism too, though Bakhtin is no example. Like many Russian critics, he stakes out his position and argues it in fervent and combative and exclusionary terms. *Monologic* terms, as he himself would say. Even when praising and preaching polyphony, his practice is intensely homophonic.

8

A few Canadian poets and critics—Jan Zwicky and Northrop Frye are important examples—are or have been trained musicians. They have learned the word polyphony first-hand, in a practical rather than theoretical sense, and in its original, musical context. But the term was rarely used by anyone discussing Canadian literature, so far as I'm aware, before the end of the 1970s. It was then that Dennis Lee began to speak about

polyphony with his own peculiar twist. Both the subject and the word appear in his mock interview “Enacting a Meditation” (1979), and they are central to his essay “Polyphony: Enacting a Meditation” (a different work, despite the similarity in titles) which was published in 1982.

Lee does not demarcate and defend a theoretical position in his essay on polyphony. He accounts as best he can, as a working poet, for his own gut-level and deeper decisions. The result is more a spiritual confession than a literary manifesto, and it is all the more valuable for that. Now that there is a danger of polyphony becoming just another skilled procedure or technique—the hallmark of a Polyphonic School—Lee’s fifteen-year-old hunches serve as powerful reminders of why a multiplicity of voices mattered in the first place.

The discursive voice embodies one narrow human strain, of editorializing urbanity, and excludes all other currents in the speaker’s makeup.

But it is not just the speaker’s personal nature which is straitened by this voice. People and wars and trees and multifarious aspirations all go de-served, within a vocal range that cannot embody their indigenous tonalities. The whole world is shrunk down to a single repertorial wave-length. . . .

...

Polyphony is the art of orchestrating more than one voice across a work.

The polyphonic shift from inflection to inflection, the clash and resonance of vocal timbres from one moment to the next, is what traces out the trajectory of a meditation.

...

The plot of a meditation is enacted by the shifting inflections of the meditative voice.

...

To write polyphonically is to contest ‘poetry’ as it is now written. Perhaps even to repudiate it altogether; to walk off that field, and try to find the real one. (Lee 1982: §53–7)

Lee’s writings on polyphony owe nothing to Bakhtin. One may ask how they could if Canada is really a free country, not a Stalinist regime. But polyphony for Lee, as for Bakhtin, is a matter of huge political import. The reason is laid bare in an earlier essay, “Cadence, Country, Silence,” published in 1973. That essay rests in part on Lee’s close reading of George Grant.

The prime fact about my country as a public space is that in the last 25 years it has become an American colony . . . [and] in a colony, the simple act of writing becomes a problem to itself. (Lee 1973: 38)

The answer to this problem, as Lee knows, is not a revolution in which one voice ousts another. The answer is not to shift the prisoners from one

cell to the next. But what about a space in which the doors are all unlocked and there is no controlling voice? The polyphonic poem for Lee, like the polyphonic novel for Bakhtin, is a space in which to breathe, not just a space in which to speak. Polyphony, he says, “permits an openness to the textures of being which is, for me, the *sine qua non* of writing at all” (1985: 191).

Poets are not the only creatures who think and talk this way. A century ago—before Bakhtin began to hear a real ecology of voices in the novels of Dostoevsky—the biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944) taught that the relation between any living thing and its environment is always contrapuntal. Polyphony in Uexküll’s terms is the quintessential form of the relation between species: life is polyphonic; death is not.

Still, and again, the equation is not simple. It is not that a dominant voice is always bad and a plurality of voices always good. And multiplicity of voice as a spiritual goal is quite a different thing from multiplicity of voice as a technical device. That is why Lee’s writings on polyphony are haunted by the ghost of Ezra Pound—who is, in Lee’s understanding of the term, a great polyphonist himself.

It was as if [Ezra Pound] could go into a room, with a little hammer; strike each particular thing; pick up the frequency it emitted—and register that directly onto the page. (Lee 1985: 206)

The Cantos, Lee admits, is a treasure house of voices. What appalls him is its pointillist, imperative technique. The only way from one voice to the next is to close your eyes and cling to the demented poet’s shoulders while he makes another leap.

Demented or not, that method of construction is one Pound shared with many other artists. The shifts of voice in Béla Bartók’s Sonata for Solo Violin (Sz. 117), and in countless other works of modern music, are equally abrupt. Few poets or composers leap from voice to voice as agilely as Pound; few have his range; but the jump-cut may be the twentieth century’s favorite artistic device.

Polyphony for Lee is a trajectory of voices, intuiting the grain of meditative space. One voice speaks at once, but in finding its trajectory, that voice actually *becomes* other voices as it goes. The self enacts its many selves, or is possessed by many selves, sliding or gliding more often than jumping from one to the next.

But Lee is also a musician, and musicians are familiar with sequential shifts

of voice. They call them *modulation*, not polyphony. Dostoevsky, writing to his brother in 1864, described his own procedure in precisely the same terms: as modulation. Why did Lee choose Bakhtin's loaded (maybe overloaded) word instead of Dostoevsky's? There are, I think, two reasons. First, the essential end result of Lee's shifts from voice to voice is not the shift itself but the accumulating whole, an ecology of voices, and a silent voice that arises from the others, speaking on its own of the plurality of being. Second, Lee's kind of modulation is not the conventional musical kind. It is not modulation from established key to key along an equal-tempered path. It consists of unpredictable, often incremental shifts of tone or voice instead.

That kind of modulation is found in music too, but in music as in literature, it lacks a proper name. It is close to being standard procedure in certain kinds of jazz and in some of the classical music of India. Anyone who listens to John Coltrane or old Ben Webster playing horn can learn to hear it. But in that tradition, no one writes it down—and at the moment, evidently, no one can. Those incremental shifts of voice and tone are musical phenomena for which we have no musical notation.

9

Up to now, we've been discussing *metaphorical* polyphony in literature: polyphonic thought confined within the bounds of monophonic speaking. In the poetry of Ezra Pound and Dennis Lee, and (if we accept Bakhtin's evaluation) in the novels of Dostoevsky, voices may accumulate and finally coexist within the reader's mind, but one voice at once is what confronts us on the page, and one voice at once is what we hear when the work is read aloud. Even in the plays of Shakespeare, one voice at once is what we read and what we usually hear, and for the greater part of any given play, the several plots unfold by turns.

There are, however, literary works in which the polyphonic structure is as literal and real as in any work of polyphonic music. At the risk of sounding like a partisan—and therefore like Bakhtin—I must say that the finest examples I know of true polyphony in literature happen to be Canadian-made. They are, of course, not present in any anthologies, nor are they taught in any conventional course in Canadian literature, yet they are known and admired by students and composers of polyphonic literature in Canada and abroad.

Glenn Gould's three so-called "documentaries"—*The Idea of North* (1967), *The Latecomers* (1969) and *The Quiet in the Land* (1977)—are known

collectively as the *Solitude Trilogy*. All these works are polyphonic through and through, but they are works for polyphonic speaking voices, not compositions written to be sung. They do not, in fact, exist except in the form of acoustic recordings. There are no written scores nor was there ever a coherent live performance. Scores and staged performances could both be created after the fact, but overdubbed and spliced magnetic tape is the real original medium.

The texts of the *Solitude Trilogy* are partly composed by Gould himself, partly contrived (by Gould's asking leading questions or creating situations which his microphone records), and partly found. But the found, contrived and custom-made components are laced with immense precision into stable compositions.

Gould played Bach throughout his life, but the polyphonic textures of the *Solitude Trilogy* are not Bach's textures. They are closer by far to the textures in Gould's own densely polyphonic String Quartet, published in 1957.

I didn't live in North America in 1967 nor in 1969, when the first two parts of the trilogy were broadcast. And I was somewhere in the bush at the time of the third. So I not only missed them all; I heard nothing about them. Entirely by accident, I was in Toronto in 1982, on the night Gould died—but all I knew about him then was that he was a master at elucidating Bach with a piano. In 1986, when the CBC recorded *The Blue Roofs of Japan*—a poem of mine scored for two simultaneous voices—Dennis Lee brought Gould's much more accomplished work to my attention. The only way to hear the trilogy then was acoustic samizdat: pirated tapes of the radio broadcasts, but these were not very hard to obtain. In the three or four years between *The Blue Roofs of Japan* and *The New World Suites*, I did a lot of listening. I began, then, to understand that Gould was the most colossally improbable of all Canadian poets—and that he was, more improbably still, one of the greatest. To say this is also, perhaps, to contest what "poetry" means. I use the word as I must, and not as a name for the quaint little versified or verse-like bursts of verbal nostalgia, amusement and confusion that pass without remark in oral cultures but in literate cultures often get written and printed.

10

For people like me, convinced not of the evil but of the impermanence and finally the irrelevance of industrial technology, the thought that full-fledged polyphonic literature might be dependant on the microphone, the tape deck and the splicing bar is not completely welcome. I am told that no such

worries haunted Gould, but they haunt me. I use the fancy tools when they're here, but only on condition that I live at least part-time in the older world, where I do my work without them.

There is a lot of metaphorical polyphony in the works of preindustrial oral poets—mythtelling poets in particular. A mythology never consists of a series of stories told in a fixed and tidy sequence. A mythology consists, like a science, of potentially innumerable stories that are present to the mind *all at once*. But is there any real and literal polyphonic literature in the preindustrial world, or do we have to go all the way back to the frogs and the songbirds to hear it?

I first learned the answer to this question from Roy Franklin Barton, a gifted anthropologist who died in 1947, leaving on his desk several nearly finished manuscripts based on his life among the Ifugao of northern Luzon.

The culture of the Ifugao, like the culture of their uphill neighbours the Ilongot, survived five centuries of Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and American colonization in the Philippines, and at least half a century of autocolonization by the Filipinos themselves. It was irrevocably altered by the Second World War: the invasion of Luzon by the Japanese, then the American counter-invasion, then Filipino independence and the increased missionization and forced modernization that rapidly followed. A similar story can be told, with local variations, for a hundred languages and cultures dotting the Pacific, from the Solomon Islands to the Aleutians.

Barton saw the older culture of the Ifugao in its final years. He worked in Ifugaoland first in the 1920s, learned the language well, was there again for eight years in the 1930s, and was, to his subsequent regret, still there when the Japanese landed in 1941. In those days, according to Barton, there were "at least 1500 deities known by name, . . . divided into about 40 classes." With that many spirit-beings to name and a similarly rich oral literature used to invoke them, the Ifugao had evolved a practical means for telling a number of stories at once.

Before the myth recitation begins, there is an allotment of the myths among the priests. At a mock-headfeast I saw in Bitu in 1937 over forty myths were recited by 16 priests. Each priest recites his myth simultaneously with the rest and when he has finished one myth, he begins another. The result is a babble in which the words are indistinguishable. Boys or youths sometimes snuggle alongside a priest, turn their ear to him alone so as to listen only to his myth and in this way begin their education for the priesthood. The Ifugao man who is not a priest is an exception.

The myth recitation consists of short phrases barked out by the priest in two

or three musical intonations—those of the young priest probably in a falsetto, those of an elderly priest in a deep rumble. If you should approach one of the little villages in which a myth recitation is going on, you would first hear a faint hum like that of swarming bees. As you come nearer, the hum would grow into a murmur and the murmur would grow into a roar like that of an approaching mob on the stage. Arriving in the village you would note that, despite the fact that [to a foreign ear] the stories were all being lost in a general jumble, there would nevertheless be an audience of women and children sitting underneath neighboring houses, gathered to listen. (Barton 1955: 6–7)

In the days before a feast, Barton says, he sometimes met the mythtellers sitting by the streams, talking with the water. Talking with the water, not lecturing the waves, was the favored method for training the voice. And some became particularly proud of their mythtelling skills and their voices.

I have often noted that as a myth-recitation draws to an end, so that voices begin to drop out, some priests are timid and bring their recitations to a hurried close while others, bolder, contrive to prolong their myths, delighting in the chance of making a solo display of their voices and of their energy of recitation. (1955: 7)

It is too late now to hear those stories told as richly as they were in 1937, or to know how they were told 400 years before, or to cross-examine Barton, but I wonder if everyone there found the words as indistinguishable as he did. I think about those feasts among the rice fields now when I am listening to Gould and Josquin, and to Thomas Tallis's motet *Spem in alium*, for forty separate voices. I think about them too when I am listening to Orlando di Lasso's polyphonic setting of the penitential psalms, written about 1560, when the European ships were still discovering the harbours of North and South America, New Guinea, Indonesia, the Philippines—and when those who sailed on the ships were still just beginning to give lessons in the fear of God and the horror of man to half the peoples of the world. I think about the feasts, and I wonder if the words weren't perfectly clear, to those who knew them best, when they were still allowed to hear them.

The equation is not simple, but it holds. All truths are true: the ones that were, the ones that are, the ones we hear, the ones we don't, the ones that will be.

11

It would clarify the nature of polyphony in literature if we knew more precisely what it is not. It is not, on the one hand, monophony or monody: it is not a single voice, whether lyric or narrative, melodic or prosaic, discursive

or dramatic. It is also not homophony. But is there such a thing as homophony in literature? Are there literary works in which one voice leads and others strum the chords or otherwise supply harmonic background? Most songs (using the term in the popular sense) are that exactly. The singer sings the melody; the piano or guitar or orchestra or chorus does the backup. But song in this sense is a hybrid: verbal text coupled with musical composition. Are there any purely literary works that do the same? *The Blue Roofs of Japan* is as much homophonic as polyphonic, in my opinion, but Stan Dragland has pointed out to me a clearer and plainer example. It is found in James Reaney's chapbook *Twelve Letters to a Small Town* (1962).

Not all of Reaney's letters have epistolary form. The eighth is cast as a dialogue between a piano student and teacher. An exercise is set. The student is to play a homophonic composition whose theme is the four seasons. The teacher tries a standard pedagogical technique. She asks the student first to play the lefthand part (the accompaniment), then the righthand part (the melody), and then the two together. All this is written out, or acted out, in words. The accompaniment, because it is just an accompaniment, includes no independent statements. It is written in nonsentences. A brief example will do:

Bud bud budling
Bud bud budling

...

Leafy leafy leafy

Leaf leaf leaf . . . (Reaney 1962; cf. Dragland 1991: 37)

The melody is equally mundane, but it does make statements of a kind. That is, it is written in sentences. Such as:

The spring winds up the town
The spring winds up the town.

After trying out the two parts separately, the student plays them both. Accompaniment and melody go marching in two columns down the page. Reading the text aloud would take two voices, just as playing it, if we could, would take two hands. But one voice speaks the melody, the other speaks the harmony. One voice follows where the other leads.

There is, then, I think, a simple test for polyphony in literature, analogous to the test for its musical counterpart. These are the usual conditions:

- (1) There are two or more voices, which are *or are made to seem* simultaneous. (In imitative polyphony, the voices say more or less the same thing, though they say it out of frequency and phase with one another and may contradict each other in other ways. In independent polyphony, there is not only more than one *voice*; there is more than one *text*. These may be in different languages and move at different tempi or otherwise diverge.)
- (2) At least two of the voices could stand on their own. They have something to say as well as a voice in which to say it. In literary polyphony, this normally means that the voices are *written in sentences*. They aren't saying things such as *oompah oompah oompah* or *me too yes me too*.
- (3) One voice may have many more words than another, but no voice really steals the show. There is no soloist, no star.
- (4) A space is created by these voices, and the space is claimed by a dance or pattern or form. That form does not exist in any of the voices by itself, but it emerges from their conjunction.

12

Polyphony is not a literary or musical technique; it is a complex property of reality which any work of art can emphasize or minimize, or notice or ignore. Palestrina's polyphony is different from Carlo Gesualdo's, and both of these are different from Josquin's. We needn't be surprised if there are equally large differences in polyphonic practice in the literary world. Some of these differences are highly individual, and some are linked to genre. A mass is not a fugue. The Polyphony Colloquium at Trent confined itself to poetry and music, but some of the best polyphonic writing I have seen in recent years is polyphonic fiction.

I have not seen a novel or short story in which the reader is really expected to read more than one prose text at once. So all the polyphonic fiction I'm familiar with is, if you like, metaphorical polyphony. Some of it is nonetheless convincingly polyphonic. This again needn't come as a surprise. Metaphorical polyphony exists in music too. It represents, in fact, an eminent and durable musical tradition.

Metaphorical polyphony means using one voice skillfully enough to suggest the continuous presence of two or more. By alternating voices, a ventriloquist gives the illusion of speaking for two. Metaphorical polyphony

functions by similar means. Music for piano doesn't normally involve metaphorical polyphony. Two hands really can play two tunes at once. So can the lutenist's five right fingers while the others stop the strings. But one voice at once is technically the limit for a bowed string instrument—a violin, a cello, a viola. There are, nevertheless, three fugues in Bach's three sonatas for solo violin, and three corresponding fugues in Britten's three suites for solo cello. Bartók's sonata for solo violin includes a fugue as well. Each fugue has two voices, but the instrument it's written for has one. Each voice has to interrupt the other to be heard. The player has to shuffle back and forth between the voices, articulating each with clarity and force and continuity enough that both are heard—and both retain their independence. The voices interact without depending on each other. Polyphony is not the same as dialogue.

This again is polyphonic *thinking* embodied within monophonic *speaking*. Something similar occurs in plays like *Twelfth Night*, where two related plots unfold in alternating scenes.

Many of the stories of Guy Davenport are richly polyphonic in this sense. Several plots, threads or voices interweave. They may or may not touch at any point in the story. And just as in a Renaissance motet, one voice may be focussed on the sacred and another on the secular.

"The Meadow" is the first of several linked stories forming Davenport's sixth book of fiction, *The Jules Verne Steam Balloon* (1987). Three voices speak by turns here, in addition to the voices of the characters. The tenor voice is gleefully attentive to the sex life of several adolescents on a camping trip, unchaperoned. The bass—the cantus firmus—is a botanist, every bit as ardent in his way, who is noting in meticulous detail everything he can about the lives of flowering plants. The third voice—alto or soprano, I suppose—reports the actions of three very brainy, young and hyperactive angels known as Quark, Tumble and Buckeye. They are travelling by steam balloon, scouting out the scene and now and then reporting to a listener whose name we never learn.

What *happens* in the story? Not much more than happens in a song. But this is three songs. That is what happens. This is three songs sung together so they fit to make a fourth song, unlike any song a monophonic ear has ever heard.

In the elevated floor around the altar in the Baptistery at Pisa, something similar occurs. Laid in the mosaic are repeating sets of geometric lattices.

Each is built from four sets of fivefold interlocking figures. The pattern they create—a long organic crystal, orthoclastic and hexagonal in symmetry, shimmering in its two-dimensional bed—does not exist in any of the figures, sets or lattices themselves. It exists in their conjunction: there alone. I do not know the name of the artist who created this mosaic. It was not evidently Deotisalvi, the Baptistery architect, nor Guido da Como, who built the font. The Baptistery's records suggest that the elevated floor was built around the time the roof was closed, toward the end of the fourteenth century. If so, the mosaic was laid about the time Guillaume de Machaut was writing his equally crystalline motets, polyphonic songs and hockets, and his intricately geometric four-voice mass.

The coincidence of music, crystallography and fiction is nothing strange to Davenport, who in one of his stories calls one of Mozart's quartets (K 575) "a polyhedral fragrance of light."

13

Forms, and therefore meanings, are achieved through the conjunction of other forms and meanings. That principle is basic to biology and chemistry and physics and the history of art. In polyphonic structures, the conjunction is *nondestructive*. The component forms and meanings survive—within and beside and beneath and on top of the meanings and forms their conjunction creates.

Some of the oldest known artworks on the planet were rediscovered in December 1994 in a cave in the Ardèche—between the Rhône and the Cévennes in southern France. The site has since been named for one of the speleologists who found it, Jean-Marie Chauvet. If the published radiocarbon dates are correct, the paintings at Chauvet are 30,000 years of age: twice as old as the oldest dated paintings in Lascaux and Altamira.

There are a number of large murals in the cave. One of the most impressive, to judge from the reproductions (Chauvet et al 1996: 106–114), is the Lion Panel. Several dozen figures—lions, mammoths, bison, rhinoceros and horses—are rendered with great clarity in black, white and red on the undulating tawny limestone wall. The figures are in clusters. Patterns form where the outlines overlap. The result is both emphatically pictorial and powerfully abstract.

This is visual polyphony. It is the oldest known method for doing static, two-dimensional justice to moving forms in three-dimensional space. It

was displaced, as a basic method, at a later date by geometrical perspective. But geometrical perspective has no working counterpart in music. Polyphony, therefore, remains the fundamental means in music of creating and elucidating space. (And visual polyphony persists, even within the realm of perspectival painting. It remains, I think, the quintessential means of representing or embodying a quintessential fact: that forms can coexist, creating space, and forms are born where others intersect.)

The mind, say good ethologists, including Konrad Lorenz, is just as biologically explicable—as *natural*, that is—as any other organ, like the liver or the forepaw or the fin, and its phylogeny can be just as clearly traced. We learn to think—not just as individuals but as species, and as genera and families of species—by accumulating sensory experience of three-dimensional space. That experience is achieved by several means, including echolocation, binocular vision and voluntary motion. (Involuntary motion yields far less feedback information.) The mind, in fact, consists of abstract patterns formed from concrete sensory perceptions. A work of polyphonic art—the Lion Panel, for example—has better things to do than represent a mental state; it represents the ground of mind itself.

These days, when I think about Glenn Gould fitting voices into voices in a basement in Toronto, I also often think about the hunter-painter-gatherers who made the murals of Chauvet. I think the painters might have liked to hear the pianist-turned-poet play some Bach, and that the painters in their turn might have shown us quite a bit about the subtleties of polyphonic speaking.

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