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Song & Call: Reflections on the Human Voice

Because it is what I place my first trust in as a storyteller, I have studied the human voice in order to *feel* my way into being a better listener. Through four decades of this effort I have learned most by observing the habits of presence that people with long life experience practice. In the voice of an elderly person we hear the many, many streams of speech (the “prior texts”) that have poured into the person’s own speech over a long span of time. An old voice has more moments of emptiness that are full; it has more moments of fullness struck through with emptiness.

As I’ve explored the dimensions of the human voice I have tried to learn more through study of the examples of literature, drama, music, dance; and through amateur study of the fields of rhetoric, linguistics, speech discourse, philosophy, social science, ethnomethodology, folklore, feminist theory, speech disorders, artificial intelligence, many other fields – and ornithology.

We humans are, after all, like birds in our vocalizations.

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Here is the *song* of the common yellowthroat: *Wee-ter, wee-chertee, wee-chertee, wee -- wee-ter, wee-chertee, wee-chertee, wee!*

And here is the *call* of the common yellowthroat: *Tchet. Tchet.*

When we listen to the common yellowthroat singing, we hear how it casts a spell, places us in the dream-like condition; it is fulfilling because it offers fullness; it is the part of communication that is, first and foremost, transforming, though it is also transacting.

Singing is destabilizing since it offers us more than what we need. When we hear singing in the human voice, we recognize that the person is sound-thinking, that is, following the sound of her thoughts to the next sound. When we hear human speech that moves well beyond saying and, at length, moves further into singing, we feel how the singer is moving inward all the while she is so outwardly expressive. It is astounding how many selves we have! And in even the most momentary singing aspects of our speech we are, as part of our true, radically generous nature, exposing our most secret selves to the world around us. “What’s that?” I ask you about the faint music on the radio. If you say, “It’s like a like a tree making that sound – that giving-way just before breaking it’s like – or not – or it is it *is* like dry leaves rattling everywhere and that sound of it all of it – hurting,” well, you haven’t answered my question, have you? You *have* made me feel something about the music of that person on the radio, Billie Holiday, and, possibly about all music, and, possibly, about radios. You have made me feel what I

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did not feel before, and you have given me a glimpse into *you* – your multiple selves. I might not have had that view of your very ways of being if you had not *sung* to me. Wee-ter, wee-chertee, wee-chertee, wee.

When we listen to the common yellowthroat *calling*, we hear how it wakes us up, defines terms of engagement: my turf – tchet – my nest – tchet – my neck of the woods – tchet – tchet. That “tchet” is compelling because it offers resounding completeness; it is the part of communication that is, first and foremost, transacting, though it is also transforming. It is stabilizing because it offers us just enough, just enough of what we need. When we hear calling in the human voice, we recognize that the person is think-sounding, that is, following the sound of her thoughts to the next thought. “What’s that?” I ask you about the faint music on the radio. If you say, “Holliday. Billie Holliday,” well, you have answered my question clearly and concisely, your tone has given the words expressiveness, and you have intensified my thought. You have given me insight into one dimension of you and into many dimensions of our terms of engagement. I would not have had that insight had you not *called* to me. Tchet. Tchet.

In this marvelous world of song and call, we hear the spectacles and dramas inherent in all triologue and polylogue. We are reminded there is never, really, something we can accurately call dialogue. A third force and a fourth and a fifth, etc, etc. is always present, since we cannot avoid speaking with a voice that is made up of

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multiple voices, and since none of us ever addresses only one other person. We are unavoidably self-addressing in any circumstance in which we seem to be addressing. I sing, “Brette! Brette! It’s good to see you, Brette.” But without saying it openly, I am also *asking* the Brette who knows me so well and loathes me, the old friend Brette who was a loving friend for so many years: “Brette, are you happy to see me?” And deep inside me, I’m singing to the Mc McIlvoy who sees her now, “*What have you done, Mc? Why did you ever ask her that?*” In this last instance, I am cloaking the subtext.

These are spectacles, very large dramas.

And I have repeated her name, you notice -- I’m singing her name -- for me. And I’m singing it for Brette, too. It is good to hear someone sing your own name to you. And I’m singing her name for all of the people Brette and I mutually know who are not here, but who implicitly join our company whenever Brette and I are in each other’s company.

These are dramas, intensifications of ordinary experience.

There is no dialogue between us.

From the first rising inflection to the last falling inflection, in its coherent and incoherent elements, in its large patterns and in its particle-level constructions, our speech creates a polylogue. Our speech dynamically crowds the stage of our lives. We read a single line of speech in James Baldwin’s “Sonny’ Blues” or *Giovanni’s Room*, and

we are newly sensitized to the wonder of the inverse proportion, that is, how the infinite can be found in the infinitesimal. We hear more keenly the chord of the world in someone only singing, "It's good to see you," and calling, "Brette!" and sing-calling "Brette! Brette! It's good to see you, Brette!" It's all there: the drama of sound-thinking, the drama of think-sounding. Storytellers who are really capable of giving these subtle dramas their due must always take care not to overestimate the value of spectacles (the time-honored conventions of capital-D Dramas) found in so many conventional constructions of plot and theme.

In some cases, a single word shifts all the terms of this polylogue. We alter the very tone of another person's voice with a shift in our own tone. If you say, "I can't believe you made us listen to the common yellowthroat and –" and your friend interrupts to say, "*asked* us – *asked* us to listen" and you say, "Tchet!" and your friend laughs and says "No tchet!" a revealing interaction has occurred in which the paradoxes of your relationship are now more apparent. The shift achieved by the lever of "asked" is subtle. Despite our minds and bodies constantly being pulled away from the habits of presence, our hearts are always ready to hear this kind of shift. Singing storytellers pull us away from the deafening distractions in our lives, and they ask us, "Only listen."

Your friend did not correct your opinion that I *made* you listen. With only the word "asked" your friend rekeyed your expression: same music, different key.

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Trying to imitate my tone of voice, you said, “Tchet!” and that rekeyed the tone of the conversation to my tone. Part of the reason you imitated my tone was to mock my rather academic tone, my male-bird tone. Your friend joined you in that mockery. You have both engaged in a regular part of human speech, which is the borrowing (not always mocking – sometimes quite affectionately mimicking) of someone else’s speech. You have engaged in a kind of sound-thinking called “ventriloquation.” In this ventriloquation, you have communicated to each other your attitude toward my presumptions of gender (my gender-lect), and of class and culture (my socio-lect). And now, you and your friend are in a different power/solidarity relation than you were just seventeen words earlier.

How did that happen? In the smallest dramas nested within the drama of your speech, you found what is called “acoustic rapport” and is sometimes called “rhythmic synchrony.” In those smallest dramas you claimed power and gave power over; you renegotiated the solidarity between you, and found new solidarity. When we listen closely to it, how can we feel anything but amazement at the outcomes of our singing and calling?

Related to this phenomenon of acoustic rapport is the matter of kinds of silence, since there is rhythm and broken rhythm in the expressive ways silence marks our speech.

Silence is, after all, an essential part of our sound-thinking and our think-sounding. It creates in us both excited and fearful anticipation. In one of the Sibley's guides to songbirds, I remember reading this simple sentence about hawks: "When they are not screaming, they are mostly silent."

What we do not express matters as much as what we do. Let's say this Thanksgiving our eccentric but beloved cousin has brought, once again, his special homemade biscuits, a very large basket of inedible biscuits. As he does every Thanksgiving, he asks, "Want me to pass 'em around again?" and his question is met with silence, then a nervous remark from one of us about weight-watching, then others joining in about gaining so much weight during the holidays. We *feel* that the little island of silence is affectionate, that it increases connection to our cousin and, so, it increases love among all of us at the table who love him. This is engaging silence.

Let's say a little time passes and he mutters, "I'm sendin' 'em around again now." We can feel that the answering silence is still engaging, but it lasts a beat longer before anything else is said. There is a subtext: O, dear cousin, we sure wish, just for a second, we could disappear, eliminate ourselves from this familiar tableau, not have to hurt your feelings either directly or indirectly. This is an erasing silence.

And now, as everyone is finishing eating, our cousin says, a little indignantly, "Last call for my biscuits." He has done this every Thanksgiving. Every Thanksgiving, he has brought the biscuits no one has been able to eat. He has eternally taken offense.

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And this Thanksgiving he has taken offense again. And, for a moment, so have we. The silence of the group is the longest one yet. It is a protesting silence. It is a protesting silence; but later, after we have all kissed and hugged him with genuine affection, and have not declined his invitation to leave the biscuits for us to have as snacks, after he has gone home, we will remember it as a protesting silence that was, at the very same moment, an erasing silence, and an engaging silence.

When we read the work of a master storyteller like Willa Cather, who presents so many iterations of silence in the scenes and the narration of *O, Pioneers* and *The Professor's House* and *My Mortal Enemy*, we are thankful for her extraordinary respect for both the scale of the expressible and the scale of the inexpressible. When our cousin spoke aloud about his infernal Thanksgiving biscuits, he was expressing so many things for which he has no words; when we were rendered speechless by his actions, gestures, and his speech, we felt the full scale of what we, too, can never express.

I used the example of a familial context because as a storyteller I find that context so infinitely perfect for studying the complexities of the human voice: its silences, its forms of acoustic rapport, its ventriloquations and rekeyings, its gender-lects and socio-lects, its sound-thinkings and think-soundings, its song and call. In our families, we recognize so many opportunities for learning to truly hear the pouring and spilling, the nonsense-making, and what is perhaps the most haunting aspect of the human voice: the cry.

Some moments in human speech are very naturally moments of pouring. We have a sense that a containing occasion and a containing relation shapes that speech. The discourse of a worker to a boss, of a student to a teacher is reflective of a set of constraints. The power differential between boss and worker dictates, for the most part, that at work, in communication about tasks, the boss will do most of the singing *and* most of the calling. Granting that there are exceptions to the rule, that same power differential means that the worker's speech is mostly constative, language expressing what is. The boss's speech is both constative and performative. The boss's language is performative because it can perform things, it can make things happen. The boss's speech is referred to as "high involvement" speech (demanding attention) and the worker's speech is "high consideration" speech (demanding little or no attention). Our various forms of American public discourse have definably narrowed down to "high involvement" speech from one percent of the population and "high consideration" speech from the other ninety-nine percent. In our private discourse it is fortunate that we still make the difficult effort to achieve a dynamic balance between "high consideration" and "high involvement" speech.

I have touched upon aspects of *pouring* in our speech. Some moments in human speech are very naturally moments of *spilling*. We have a sense that a releasing occasion and a releasing relation shapes that speech, as in the examples of the discourse of a client to a therapist and the discourse of college roommates. The speech

for the roommates will be both constative and performative, though to varying degrees. Both people can make things happen in their speech; both can expect high involvement and high consideration. In the context of our families and the family-like intimate groups that we are a part of, there is every imaginable kind of pouring and spilling.

In the company of our family members, a person will move freely from pouring out what “I” feel to spilling out what “we” feel to spilling and pouring out what one faction of “we” feels about another faction of “they.” It is perfectly natural for me to lie to my biscuit-baking cousin: “I don’t care what they say, we like your biscuits – I mean that, we all really do.” In the context of family, the first person voice and the first person plural voice move freely back and forth as part of a process of revealing the Selves, the Self, and the True Self. We keenly perceive our ways of being and our ways of becoming in the unique pourings and spillings of familial interaction.

Whether in a coherent family or a chaotic family, the pouring and spilling will not be held back, the indignities of exposure will not be postponed. Through these pourings and spillings, our various masks must come off, one at a time; our own most persistent central delusion must dissolve; our secret nature must emerge: the inevitability of these educating developments is the very stuff of storytelling.

It is only human for our spilling voice to become, sometimes, our nonsense-making voice: the voice that momentarily undoes the meaning it or another voice has offered. You’ve been witness, I’m sure, to the moment when conversation is on track,

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everyone is talking about the same topic, feeding into the same levels of think-sounding and sound-thinking, and this harmony is interrupted by someone's completely unrelated chaotic spilling out of Too Much Information. It punctures the moment, makes nonsense of our careful sense-making. In our responses to it, new dimensions of our character are revealed. When these moments are most horrifying is when they are most readily suited to comedy; Mark Twain and Eudora Welty captured these moments splendidly.

Sometimes, two people have such uncanny harmony that their processes of instantiation, of completing and filling in and refining and reframing each other's expressions, are as marvelously nonsense-making as the dialogue between a child and her dolls, a child and her imaginary friends, a child utterly infatuated with another child. We observe this in longstanding friendships and marriages and other kinds of extended partnerships. I have had the opportunity to directly observe the co-conscious singing of people in institutional settings, including a maximum-security prison, in which the communication of inmates in the same cell for many years was marked by jargon and coded language, punctuated by deeply intimate silences. These "silential relations" defy identifiable meaning while creating and intensifying our sense of connection. Singing writers understand the ways in which this speech presented in a literary work can be the cause of fearful wonder for the reader.

Out of spilling and pouring speech, out of the many forms of silence, out of the

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crowded stage of our polylogues, what sometimes arrives with terrifying, exhilarating force in a voice is simply a crying out. It is a moment in speech that is more spontaneous than all other moments. In certain cases it takes the form of a long, long rant or a directionless, extended self-emptying of grief or love or fear or ecstasy. In certain instances, it is a single word or phrase. I have read that the poet Dylan Thomas said he began each writing session by putting down the one letter, "O," because of his assumption that all poetry begins and ends there.

The human cry is always present, if we will hear it. Our era has put it into the air in a great chaos of song and call coming from all edges of the world. Some of it is centripetal languaging, finding a center, a point. Some of it is centrifugal languaging, moving outward and outward.

When it is orderly, coherent, centripetal – "I had a job once" – the human cry, the compounded expression of joy and grief, of anchoring memory and lostness, is easy to hear only in passing. "I had a job once! I had a job once. Once, I had a job": only five words, after all, easy for the listener to forget, easy to dismiss.

When it is chaotic, incoherent, inarticulate, centrifugal – "It was, I had, my hands could, my hands would, my arms, people knew once I could, they knew, they knew, I was my job, I mean, I mean..." – when it comes to us in this form, the human cry causes us dynamic agitation with its ambivalence, its elusiveness, its wildness. We find

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ourselves *wishing* but utterly unable to forget that crying-out, to dismiss it. Such cries occur in the fiction of Zora Neale Hurston, John Steinbeck and Toni Morrison. As I read their works I move past mastering ways of knowing; I am learning to *feel* what I know about the human voice.

Resources:

Tannen, Deborah. *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*, Second Edition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Ten Have, Paul. *Doing Conversation Analysis: A Practical Guide*, Second Edition. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007.

Wennerstrom, Ann. *The Music of Everyday Speech: Prosody and Discourse Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Wetherell, Taylor, Yates, Eds. *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*. London: The Open University Press, 2001.

