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In Praise of the Human Voice: Robert Bringhurst's *New World Suite No. 3* and Glenn Gould's *The Idea of North*

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Abstract
Canadian poet Robert Bringhurst found the inspiration he needed for his *New World Suite No. 3* (2005), a complex polyphonic poem for three voices in four movements, in the natural polyphony of the Earth and in the vast world of polyphonic music. In the singing of frogs and birds, in monolingual or multilingual daily conversations eavesdropped in the street, Bringhurst finds the perfectly natural source for his polyphonic poems. This paper examines how Canadian pianist Glenn Gould's *The Idea of North*, a peculiar polyphonic documentary, provided him with enough knowledge and skill to produce poetry for multiple voices. *New World Suite No. 3* is a work of not just utter architectural complexity, density of meaning and profundity of thought, but also a homage to the human voice and a reminder that caring for the environment is of the essence if humans are to last on Earth among other species.

Keywords:
Canada, Robert Bringhurst, poetry, polyphony, Glenn Gould, North, ecology, intermediality

Résumé
Le poète canadien Robert Bringhurst a trouvé l'inspiration pour son poème *New World Suite No. 3* (2005), un complexe poème polyphonique pour trois voix et quatre mouvements, dans la polyphonie naturelle de la Terre and dans la musique polyphonique. Dans les chansons des oiseaux et des grenouilles, et dans les conversations monolingues et multilingues qu'on écoute dans la rue tous les jours, Bringhurst trouve des materiels qu'il utilise pour écrire ses poèmes polyphoniques. Ce chapitre analyse comment *The Idea of North*, un documentaire composé par le pianiste canadien Glenn Gould, lui a donné des techniques pour écrire ses poèmes pour deux ou trois voix. *New World Suite No. 3* est un chef-d'oeuvre characterisé par une veritable complexité architectonique, densité semantique et profondité de pensée. Le poème est aussi un hommage à la voix humaine et il nous souvient de la nécessité de protéger la Terre pour continuer à vivre avec des autres spèces.

Mots-clés : Canada, Robert Bringhurst, poésie, polyphonie, Glenn Gould, Nord, écologie, intermédialité

I. The music of what is

Canadian poet, philosopher, linguist, typographer, translator and cultural historian Robert Bringhurst is a 21st-century humanist. He belongs to a tradition that goes back in time to the native people of North America, and further back in time to the Oriental sages of India, China and Japan, and to the ancient Pre-Socratic poet-philosophers. He found the inspiration he needed for his *New World Suite No. 3* (2005), a complex polyphonic poem for three voices in four movements, in the natural polyphony of the Earth and in the vast world of polyphonic music. Bringhurst claims that, even if our eyes are not trained to read several texts at once, our ears are better schooled in the polyphony found in the world of human and nonhuman voices. The world is, after all, a polyphonic (and polyglot) place. In the singing of frogs and birds, in monolingual or multilingual daily conversations eavesdropped in the street where several human voices interact with absolute naturalness, Bringhurst finds the perfectly natural source for his polyphonic poems. But musicians do have much to teach him as well. In "Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue", the afterword to the 2005 edition of his long polyphonic poem, the author explains in detail how the example of musicians as various as Josquin, Bach or Stravinsky, as well as Canadian pianist Glenn Gould's *Solitude Trilogy* (1967–1977), a peculiar documentary as well as "one of the most accomplished and important works of literature ever produced in North America, in any medium or language" (Bringhurst 2005: 11), provided him with enough knowledge and skill to produce poetry for several voices.

Listening to the "thoroughgoing polyphonic texture and subtlety of form" (Bringhurst 2005: 10) of Gould's *The Idea of North* (1967), the first of three compositions in *The Solitude Trilogy*, Bringhurst learnt an immense amount about writing for multiple voices. It is our hunch that this trilogy also taught him much about the North as a space of myth where his humanist, philosophical, literary, environmental and political concerns could flourish. In Bringhurst's complex polyphonic poem, the idea of the North stands for a vaster pristine space or an ecosystem of gigantic dimensions whose very roots must be traced back to pre-industrial societies and to the wisdom incarnate in the native oral literatures of North America. A close analysis of *The Idea of North* may certainly shed light on our understanding of a complex poem like the four-part *New World Suite No. 3*, a work of not just utter architectural complexity, density of meaning and profundity of thought, but also a homage to the human voice and a reminder that caring for the environment is of the essence if *homo sapiens sapiens* is to last on Earth among other nonhuman species.

Bringhurst has got the intimation that the world is a polyphonic place. Humans inhabit a many-voiced Earth where all creatures seek to mean something. If communication is a universal compulsion shared by all living things, both human and non-

human, then it makes sense to affirm that human beings have no monopoly on meaning or language in a broad sense of the word. Bringhurst himself speaks of *the tree of meaning*, which is an apt metaphor to signify that all beings partake of meaning in the gigantic book of Nature that the world is in the poet's view. But there is much more to this simple metaphor: it points to the fact that meaning emanates from reality itself, that words bloom into existence out of the Earth itself, as if they were tree leaves, or flowers, or grass. Martin Heidegger observed that *die Sprache spricht*,[1] which is to say that language speaks through humans' lips. Or, to put it differently, not only do we speak a language, but also language speaks *us*. Bringhurst says *die Welt spricht*, or *Alles spricht*, or even *die ganze Realität spricht*. This is a most interesting shift, for the poet transcends the solipsistic human view that meaning is something quintessentially human. In his non-anthropocentric view of the world, every single thing *means* or partakes of the inexhaustible feast of meaning. The tree of meaning has grown innumerable branches, which are the human languages spoken by humankind over time, but it has also grown the voices in which nonhuman beings speak to each other and to us. As Bringhurst himself puts it in his book-length meditation *What Is Reading For?*, there is much reading and writing going on in the world, "there are millions of creatures writing meaning on the air and in the earth, crying and calling and gesturing, making trails and leaving tracks" (2011: 17).

So polyphony is a fact of reality, a fact of life. To say that the world speaks to us in many different voices is to acknowledge the plurality of being, or the polyphonic texture of being. The green world teaches Bringhurst something that is even more elementary: the sacredness at the root of *what is*. The world is plural and every single being in it is unique, precious and worthy of consideration. This seems to be the true basis of his ecological awareness, of his intimation that Mother Earth is a subtle ecology of vast dimensions that needs our attention and respect. Most importantly, this is also the basis of his polyphonic poems, which stem directly from natural polyphony, from his awareness that there is a sense of democratic multiplicity inherent in *what is* that poetry should try to emulate. In actual fact, the whole of Bringhurst's poetic output can be seen as enacting a shift from *homophonic* to *polyphonic* poems. He threads the inspiring multitude of voices that he finds in the forest into the living fabric of his own poems, which are a tribute to human speech and to meaning, but also a tribute to *what is*. Poetic polyphony thus arises directly from natural polyphony, from singing with the myriad teeming forms found in Nature. In Bringhurst's own words in his landmark essay "Singing with the Frogs: The Theory and Practice of Literary Polyphony", a polyphonic poem is "a poem that [...] enacts and embodies plurality

1) In *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, Heidegger claims: "das Sein istet, die Welt weltet, die Zeit zeitigt, das Nicht nichtet, *das Ding dingt,* das Ereignis ereignet, die *Sprache spricht" (1985: 30)* and "Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins" (1985: 156).

and space as well as timelessness and unity. A poem in which what-is cannot forget its multiplicity" (2007: 36).

Walter Pater's famous dictum that "all art constantly strives towards the condition of music" seems to be the driving force behind Bringhurst's polyphonic poems. Over the last three decades, Bringhurst has been learning how to tackle polyphony through words. *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986), *Conversations with a Toad* (1987), *New World Suite No. 3* (1995/2005) and *Ursa Major* (2003/2009) constitute the polyphonic constellation of poems in Bringhurst's corpus, as well as true typographic challenges to a man concerned with the solid form of language.[2] All of them are an extended meditation on being, time and poetry – lyrical and philosophical variations on what stays the same in spite of the passage of time. What the different voices speaking simultaneously at times in these poems say exceeds the sum of the parts. Even if they have got their separate agendas, they do contribute to a more complex message. In his poems for several voices, language solidifies into beautifully designed poetry books printed in several colours where the superimposition of voices is an invitation for readers to relish the inexhaustible beauty of the world, to pay attention to what is in front of them and try to make sense of it.

Because his polyphonic poems strive towards the condition of music, Bringhurst's work evokes the critical notion of intermediality,[3] which Werner Wolf defines in broad terms as being "any transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media: such transgressions cannot only occur within one work or semiotic complex but also as a consequence of relations or comparisons between different works or semiotic complexes" (2002: 17 and 2011: 3). In other words, transgression "comprises both "intra-" and "extra-compositional" relations between different media" (2011: 3). By "relation" Wolf means "gestation, similarity, combination, or reference including imitation" (2011: 3), from a mainly synchronic perspective and with reference to individual artefacts. Following Wolf's intuition, Irina O. Rakewsky defines intermediality as "a generic term for all those phenomena that (as indicated by the prefix *inter*) in some way take place between media. "Intermedial" therefore designates those configurations which have to do with a crossing of borders between media" (2005: 46).

2) Bringhurst is a poet concerned with typography, which he defines in *The Typographic Mind* as being "the sound of one hand speaking, vivid in the mind's eye, vivid in the mind's ear, and silent as a prayer" (2006: 4).

3) As Werner Wolf explains, the term 'intermediality', which originated in German research, "was coined by Aage Hansen-Löwe in 1983 on the model of intertextuality" (2002: 16). Somewhere else, Wolf dwells on intermediality as being a defining feature of literature: "literature is itself a medium that has not only influenced other media but has, in turn, been influenced and also transmitted by a plurality of media, so that the study of (inter)mediality is actually the study of an essential aspect of literature as such" (2008: 15). Given its interdiscursive nature, literature is "a verbal form of art that can establish a plethora of contacts not only between individual literary works and genres but also to other, non-literary discourses as well as to other arts and has therefore justly been called an 'interdiscourse'" (Wolf 2009: 134).

Bearing in mind Wolf's typology of intermedial forms, Bringhurst's poems for multiple voices exemplify how literature as a medium can refer to other media (music in this case) in various ways (i.e., *intracompositional intermediality*, involving a single semiotic system) and, more specifically, how "formal imitation consists of an attempt at shaping the material of the semiotic complex in question (its signifiers, in some cases also its signifieds) in such a manner that it acquires a formal resemblance to typical features or structures of another medium or heteromedial work" (2011: 6).

As pointed out above, Bringhurst found the inspiration he needed for *New World Suite No. 3* in the natural polyphony of the Earth, but also in the vast world of polyphonic music – i.e., music which simultaneously combines a number of parts, each forming an individual melody and harmonizing with each other. After all, poetry and music have been traditionally viewed as sister arts, as both are considered "auditory, temporal and dynamic art forms" (Scher 1982: 230–231). In "Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue", the author explains in detail how Glenn Gould's *Solitude Trilogy* (1967–1977) and the example of musicians as various as Josquin, Bach or Stravinsky provided him with enough knowledge and skill to produce his own poems for several voices. In this respect, Bringhurst was an autodidact: he went through his own crash course on music and explored Gould's experiment carefully in search of nourishing food for his own poems. In the same landmark essay, Bringhurst writes:

> I had been listening for years, with rising envy, to forms employed by jazz and classical musicians. I'd read a bit of Schönberg and Stravinsky [...] But after writing *The Blue Roofs* I began to listen to music, and to read it, more attentively than I ever had before. Performers from Bill Evans to John Lewis to Glenn Gould, and composers from Steve Reich to J. S. Bach, began to teach me how to deal with divergent, interpenetrating voices. [...] This crash course taught me plenty about structure. It did not, however, answer the question of how to print a polyphonic poem (2005: 4–5).

In terms of Paul Steven Scher's well-known tripartite framework for word and music studies – music and literature, literature in music and music in literature (1982: 226) – which he had already devised in "Notes Toward a Theory of Verbal Music" back in 1970, Bringhurst's polyphonic poem falls within the third category and exemplifies an attempt to use musical structures and techniques in the composition of a literary work. In this respect, the suite as a genre (a set of instrumental compositions, originally in dance style, to be played in succession) provides the poet with the structural model for his *New World Suite No. 3*: four movements going each at a different pace or speed (*moderato*, *andante*, *adagio* and *lento*), in which the musical instruments have been replaced by three human voices (two male and one female in *The Calling* version; violin, viola and cello in the 2005 incarnation of the text). The four-part

structure makes this a lengthy literary work of art full of allusions and echoes from Bringhurst's previous polyphonic poems. The overall effect of the poem depends on musical analogy, not identity, contributing to Bringhurst's overall effort of making the *Suite* a test of the verbal possibilities of human language, *as* language, not anything else, in its attempt at emulating natural and musical polyphony. As Rajewsky rightly observes apropos of the "as if" character of intermedial references, prototypically "a given media-product thematizes, evokes, or imitates elements or structures of another, conventionally distinct medium through the use of its own media-specific means" (2005: 53) and "an intermedial reference can only generate an illusion of another medium's specific practices, [...] [an] illusion that potentially solicits in the recipient of a literary text [...] a sense of filmic, painterly, or musical qualities, or –more generally– a sense of a visual or acoustic presence" (2005: 55).

At any rate, the overall impression of the *Suite* is that of a beautifully woven tapestry where the three voices coalesce into perfect harmony in everything they have to say, with verbal structures attempting to represent musical patterns and effects. In fact, Wolf claims that, in intermedial imitation, which "involves a kind of translation", "the signifiers of the work and/or its structure are affected by the non-dominant medium, since they appear to imitate its quality or structure" (2002: 25). In this respect, Bringhurst appears to be emulating certain techniques of counterpoint by having three different voices speak in conjunction with each other. Each voice goes its own way, but they intertwine and interpenetrate at points where the sum of the parts transcends the meaning of each individual utterance. In his imitation of the suite form, Bringhurst will usually repeat, either exactly or with variation, small parts of his poem (single words, phrases or ideas), emulating repetition and contrast as "the smallest real structural units of both literature and music" and as "the two twin principles of musical form", as Calvin S. Brown points out in chapter IX of his pioneering work *Music and Literature* (1948), on the structural analogies between the two arts. Bringhurst shapes the material of his *Suite* in such a manner that it acquires a formal resemblance to the typical features or structures of another medium, music in this case. Upon closer scrutiny, the structures employed by Bringhurst resemble those of a fugue, a contrapuntal composition in which a short melody or phrase is introduced by one part and successively taken up by others and developed by interweaving the parts. However, in Bringhurst's poem, musical instruments have been replaced by human voices as the stuff of music and melodies have been replaced by words, phrases or ideas that are approached as if from multiple perspectives. The final result is one of not just complexity, density of meaning and profundity of thought, but also of moving music in this homage to the human voice. In this respect, Bringhurst claims that even if our eyes are not trained to read several texts at once, our ears are better schooled in the polyphony found in the world of human voices:

> Which of us hasn't sat in a café listening to two or three adjacent conversations – four or six voices minimum, with others passing through? Which of us hasn't walked a city street and heard a hundred different voices, speaking a dozen different languages, spilling through and over one another? [...] In normal conditions, humans all inherit what it takes to learn multiple languages, catch multiple voices, and hear through the biological fence (2005: 9–10).

II. The human voice as *Materia Poetica*

The Solitude Trilogy (1967–1977) is a collection of three hour-long radio documentaries produced by Glenn Gould (1932–1982) for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. *The Idea of North* was produced in 1967, and two years later, in 1969, came *The Latecomers*, about life in Newfoundland outports and the province's program to encourage residents to urbanize. In 1977 came the third documentary, *The Quiet in the Land*, a portrait of Mennonite life at Red River, near Winnipeg, Manitoba, in which speakers discuss the influence of contemporary society on traditional Mennonite values. The musician produced the documentaries as individual works during a whole decade and then he collected them under the title *The Solitude Trilogy*, reflecting the theme of physical isolation and withdrawal from the world that unites the pieces. The three pieces employ his idiosyncratic technique of simultaneously playing the voices of two or more people, each of whom speaks a monologue to an unheard interviewer. Gould called this method *contrapuntal* [4] radio. Ambient sound (the rumbling of a train, the murmur of the ocean or a church choir) and music are heard in the background as part of the aural experience of this polyphonic composition. In "Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue", Bringhurst dwells on the importance of Gould's example for the kind of polyphonic poetry he was intent on composing himself:

> In 1967, the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould created a work for CBC Radio called *The Idea of North*. In Canada, this is by far the best-known work of polyphonic literature. The strange thing is, it is almost completely unknown *as* a work of polyphonic literature. [...] What sets it fundamentally apart is its thoroughgoing polyphonic texture and subtlety of form.
> *The Idea of North* doesn't exist as a written or printed text, nor did it ever exist, like an ordinary work of oral literature, in the form of a live performance. It was stitched together in a studio by overdubbing and splicing miles of tape. [...] *The Idea of North* is the first of three compositions in this genre that Gould created over a ten-year period. The others are *The Latecomers* (1969) and *The Quiet in the Land* (1977); the three together have come to be called *The Solitude Trilogy*. [...] To me this trilogy is one of the most accomplished and

4) The term *contrapuntal* normally applies to music in which independent melody lines play simultaneously. This type of music, exemplified by Bach, formed the major part of Gould's repertoire.

> important works of literature ever produced in North America, in any medium or language. [...] Gould's work, when I finally encountered it, taught me an immense amount about writing for multiple voices. But again, it did not answer any questions about how to put spoken polyphony on the page, where I habitually work (2005: 10–12).

What Bringhurst must have found truly fascinating about *The Solitude Trilogy* is Gould's treatment of the human voice – the way he approaches the human voice in a musical way.[5] As Kevin Bazzana explains in his biography of the pianist, "The principle of collage was central to art of many kinds in the sixties [...], but of even more relevance was the view, shared by many composers of the day, that the spoken word could be the stuff of music. [...] McLuhan, in a 1965 interview with Gould, remarked that 'the spoken word is music, pure music, at any time. It is a form of singing'" (2003: 303).[6] This must have been an illuminating revelation to Bringhurst, a poet who since the early 1970s had been exploring the prosody and music of poetry from different literary traditions and languages, including Arabic, Sanskrit, Greek and Latin, and who since the mid-1980s embarked on experimentation with poetry for several voices.[7] Gould himself was convinced that he could treat human voices as if they were musical instruments. As Bazzana observes in his biography,

His thinking about editing voices and sound effects was musical – it was all about rhythm, texture, tone, dynamics, pacing, and the strategic, integral use of silence. He would describe structures and effects in his radio programs in musical terms – sonata and rondo, canon and fugue, crescendo and decrescendo – and he referred to his scripts as "scores." [...] And in the process of editing raw interviews into more polished vocal "music" he was often splicing word by word, syllable by syllable... [...] He even took to referring to his radio documentaries by opus numbers, *The Idea of North* being "Op. 1" (2003: 303).

Similarly, in *New World Suite No. 3* we see Robert Bringhurst handling human voice with the same meticulous reverence, as if the two male voices and the female voice

5) In a letter dated 5 April 1971 held at the National Library of Canada, Gould writes: "In my view, the treatment of the human voice as an element of texture should, indeed, always be approached in a musical way." See Joan Hebb, "Glenn Gould, Word Painter", at https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/glenngould/028010–4030.05.08-e.html 10 July 2015.

6) McLuhan's words somehow evoke T. S. Eliot's own musings in his seminal essay "The Music of Poetry": "While poetry attempts to convey something beyond what can be conveyed in prose rhythms, it remains, all the same, one person talking to another; and this is just as true if you sing it, for singing is another way of talking [...] The music of poetry, then, must be a music latent in the common speech of its time. And that means also that it must be latent in the common speech of the poet's *place*" (1969: 31).

7) After all, as Walter Ong notes, "the poem is the living voice of the poet in a particular manifestation, the existential moment par excellence: the aural correlative. For in the poem, we have a process of eternal imagination and emotion becoming the working tongue, lip and larynx –the carnate word– of a physical, yet permanent voice" (1968: 120).

were musical instruments themselves: viola, violin and cello. Printed in different colours in the form of musical staves, their typographical layout on the page indicates whether they are speaking individually or simultaneously. And the *Suite* is in four movements: I *moderato*, "All the Desanctified Places"; II *andante*, "Who is the Flute Player?"; III *adagio*, "The Children of Zhuang Zi Confront the Frozen Saskatchewan River"; and IV *lento*, "Winter Solstice, Cariboo Mountains". As Yvonne Korshak and Robert J. Rubin point out, "As in a polyphonic oratorio, the voices move from solo to singing in combinations with other voices, and so the book holds a score for each voice, the reader's lines in black and those of the other two voices in ochre and blue. When singers perform together, the black overlaps the other color or colors: thus one can listen to the three voices together visually as well as aurally" (2010: 72). The similarities with Gould's approach to human voice as stuff for music for his *Solitude Trilogy* are crystal clear: both the musician and the poet intertwine several voices to evoke the kaleidoscope multiplicity inherent in reality. At a deeper level, thematically speaking, both polyphonic compositions are concerned with exploring a variety of landscapes on the American continent. Both seek to map the world by means of the spoken word, the singing word that is music and poetry at the same time. Whereas Gould's focus is on Canada, Bringhurst takes the reader up and down the whole continent, the New World, and even invokes other places on Earth. In his Babel-like poem, the harmonization of voices evokes the mind-boggling simultaneity of all places and all times in History, in a way not dissimilar from what T. S. Eliot accomplished in *The Waste Land* (1922).[8] Unlike Gould, even if Bringhurst was working with the same medium (words), he was trying to capture verbal polyphony on a printed page. Obviously, how to best represent the superimposition and the interweaving of human voices posed a huge typographical challenge to the poet, and so the different textual incarnations of the poem show Bringhurst struggling with presenting lines in staves and printing the three voices in different colours in an attempt to accurately capture polyphony.

Let us return to Gould's polyphonic work. The first, and most well-known, of the contrapuntal radio documentaries is *The Idea of North*, in which five speakers provide contrasting views of Northern Canada. Among the speakers are Marianne Schroeder (nurse), James Lotz (geographer and anthropologist), Robert A. J. Phillips (government official), Frank Valee (anthropologist), W. V. McLean (retired surveyor) and Glenn Gould himself, representing a cross-section of perspectives on the North. A prologue and epilogue frame the body of *The Idea of North*, which ends with the last movement of Karajan's recording of Sibelius' Symphony no. 5. As Bazzana explains, when it was first broadcast by CBC on 28 December 1967, "*The Idea of North* surprised, challenged, and confused many listeners, but it was still widely praised as ambitious, innovative,

8) "Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal" (Eliot 1954: 65), sings Eliot in "What the Thunder Said", section V of *The Waste Land*, bringing together disparate places on Earth.

poetic, and technically polished – as, indeed, all of Gould's major radio documentaries would be" (2003: 305). What Bringhurst admires about this piece of oral literature is the interweaving of human voices, the polyphonic nature of the whole composition, the multidimensional textures of the human voices simultaneously speaking and overlapping in a deliberate manner. According to Bazzana, "In a sense, Gould sought to recapture that intense engagement with disembodied sounds experienced by the first generation of radio listeners" (2003: 304). At some point in the opening of the documentary, Gould himself provides a crucial clue about the ultimate thematic concern of his polyphonic composition:

> This is Glenn Gould and this programme is called *The Idea of North*. I've long been intrigued by that incredible tapestry of tundra and taiga which constitutes the Arctic and sub-Arctic of our country. I've read about it, written about it, and even pulled up my parka once and gone there. Yet like all but a very few Canadians, I've had no real experience of the North. I've remained, of necessity, an outsider. [...] This programme, however, brings together some remarkable people who have had a direct confrontation with that northern third of Canada, who've lived and worked there and in whose lives the North has played a very vital role.[9]

The five voices in *The Idea of North* embrace different conceptions of what the North represents. They "discuss the subjective 'idea' and the reality of the North. Montage and voice counterpoint are used to express the antagonism and scope of the country, the loneliness and isolation, the warmth of community living, personal reasons for living there, the fear that human nature will gradually take over from the elements as common enemy number one, and the challenge involved in any decision to live there."[10] The only female voice, Marianne Schroeder's, speaks of the pristine expanses of frozen landscapes in the North with subtle lyricism and a moving sense of reverence. But even if Schroeder finds the country fascinating, she cannot help feeling overwhelmed by the sheer vastness of the country. The sense of isolation and vulnerability in the face of the immensity of the natural world, particularly in winter, is conveyed with unusual verbal economy: "And as we flew along the East coast of Hudson's [*sic*] Bay, this flat, flat country frightened me a little, because it seemed endless. We seemed to be going into nowhere" (Watts 1992: 2). However, she also celebrates the joy of being alive amid so much beauty:

9) Gould, *The Idea of North*, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Digital Archives at http://www.cbc.ca/player/Radio/More+Shows/Glenn+Gould+-+The+CBC+Legacy/Audio/1960s/ID/21104474800/ Accessed 10 July 2015. See also the transcript "created for the purpose of private dissertation research" by Mary J. Watts, p. 3.

10) See the brief note about the radio documentary published at the CBC Digital Archives website mentioned in the previous footnote.

> I always think of the long summer days, when the snow had melted and the lakes were open and the geese and ducks had started to fly north. During that time the sun would set, but, when there was still the last shimmer in the sky, I would walk out to one of those lakes and watch those ducks and geese just flying around peacefully or sitting on the water, and I felt that I was almost part of that country, part of that peaceful surrounding, and I wished that it would never end (Watts 1992: 2).

Time and again throughout *The Idea of North*, Schroeder comments on the sense of belonging to a recognizably human community: "One could realize the value of another human being" (Watts 1992: 8) and "Sometimes I've been lonelier in a city than I ever was in the North" (Watts 1992: 11). Overwhelmed by the sheer vastness of the physical North, geographer and anthropologist James Lotz also dwells on the importance of human bonds, which give warmth and protection in the face of a world that does not care:

> I was in many respects solitary, but in a strange way the North has made me more sort of gregarious 'cause the North does show you exactly how much you rely on your fellow man, what the sense of community means. The sense of community in the North, unlike in the South, is a matter of life and death. The thing about the North of course in personal terms is that in the North you feel it's so big, it's so vast, it's so immense, it cares so little (Watts 1992: 8–9).

Similarly, Robert A. J. Phillips, the government official, emphasizes the concept of human community amid a hostile environment: "In some ways you may have gone to the North to get away from society and you find yourself far closer to it than you've ever been in your life" (Watts 1992: 7–8).[11] For his part, sociologist Frank Valee dwells on the fear of getting lost amid a vast space where there are no reliable signs to guide one's navigating through space: "I was so afraid to get lost that the environment around me while being vast in the physical sense, one could see theoretically for a thousand miles there was nothing in the way to block your view" (Watts 1992: 9). And William V. McLean, a retired surveyor who serves as a narrator and helps Gould to understand how "one can best attain an idea of North" (Watts 1992: 3), conceives of Nature as being an enemy:

> ... the common enemy of both of us whether it's now or yesterday or forever [...] is mother nature, mother nature. [...] the North is the war [...] ... there was a time, believe me, in living

11) In his "Conclusion" to *Literary History of Canada*, Northrop Frye contends precisely that "A feature of Canadian life is [...] the paradox of vast empty spaces and lack of privacy, with no defences against the prying or avaricious eye" (1995: 223).

> memory again, when humans used to combine against mother nature. Not, not only because they had to, but because in a sense there was a cleanness, a sureness, or a definiteness about coming up with mother nature that is lacking in our rootless pavements, in our big city anonymity (Watts 1992: 18).[12]

III. Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music

As Henri Lefebvre points out, "space is never empty: it always embodies a meaning" (2010: 23). It is not a blank slate or *tabula rasa* upon which human consciousness inscribes meanings. Space is already rich in meanings, emanating from the living and non-living forms that populate it and from a dense layering of cultural signification conferred to it over time by human communities. Landscapes are open books and an invitation for human beings to interpret them. With technological growth on an unprecedented scale unknown in history, the 20th century brought new forms of transport and increasing physical mobility, "altering humans' experience of movement through space, and perceptions of relationships between space and time (also theorized by physicists, philosophers and psychologists, who would speak of inner space)" (Anderson 2012: 114). One expects to find some kind of correlation between outer and inner spaces, between the pure physicality of the world and the interior geographies of the self, for literary representations of space and mobility are frequently both literal and figurative. What we see in Glenn Gould's *The Idea of North* is a bundle of human minds coming to terms with a landscape they find hard to decipher, and a genius, Gould, transforming the overwhelming presence of the natural world into a work of art of lasting value. Because the world is far from being a monolithic entity, he has to resort to the use of polyphony and to multiple perspectives to try to capture the essence of what he has got in front of his eyes and his ears, in the hope that the depiction might be more faithful to the real.

Robert Bringhurst is also concerned with exploring space and cultural identity in his polyphonic poem *New World Suite No. 3*, which harmonizes polyphony, ecology and philosophy. The title itself makes sense as long as we juxtapose both the term *suite* (the musical genre used as structural model for the poem's composition) and *New World*, which stands for America as a whole. In bringing into a coherent *Gestalt* such disparate elements as a sustained philosophical meditation on time and being, fragments from the history of humankind such as the arrival of European settlers in the New World and the beginning of the scientific

12) In *Survival*, Margaret Atwood claims that "bare survival in the face of "hostile" elements and/or natives" (1996: 32) is the symbol that best defines Canada. "In earlier writers," she goes on, "these obstacles to survival are external – the land, the climate, and so forth" (1996: 33). Obviously, the sense of hostility and utter nakedness is further accentuated in the North, as can be seen in Gould's radio documentary.

revolution with Copernicus or Galileo Galilei, tattered visions of urbanscapes and ancient sites of the First Nations of America, mythical accounts of constellations in the sky, or an ardent vindication of the ecological integrity of breathing Earth, Bringhurst is offering us an accurate depiction of the world he lives in, our world, which is unity and plurality at the same time. This is one of the reasons why polyphony seems to be the only appropriate means of catching the many-sidedness and interconnectedness of this world.

Music, human voices and maps are all key ingredients in the making of the *Suite*, for cultural and historical syncretism – or *cultural layering and folding*, as Bringhurst calls it – is another remarkable feature of this complex poem. *New World Suite No. 3* is rich in geographical references to places as diverse as ancient sites on the American continent, modern metropolises and names of pitmines. In "Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue", Bringhurst explains the exact geographical setting for each of the four movements:

> Maps as well as voices are braided together in the *Suite*. The names of Aztec, Mayan and Inca sites (Tenochtitlan, Tikal, Cuzco, Pisaq) turn up side by side with the names of ancient North American settlements – some in British Columbia (Ttanuu, Kitwancool) and others in New Mexico (Chaco Canyon, Acoma, Gila, Frijoles). Threaded in with these are the names of some pitmines and cities. The first movement includes some recollections of a desecrated landscape in the Amazonian Basin, side by side with memories of a village in northern Manitoba. The second movement is set in the Hopi country. The third adopts the voices of Chinese immigrants to Saskatchewan. The fourth, based on a mid-winter walk in central British Columbia, superimposes the figures of two hunters, Orion and Prajapati, who are two interpretations of the same constellation: one inherited from Greece, the other from northern India (2005: 13–14).

For Bringhurst, *New World Suite No. 3* is not only a grossly simplified portrait of the land in which he lives, but also a grossly simplified set of allusions to the damage done in the New World since the time of the earlier settlers, as well as a gesture of gratitude in the face of the piecemeal richness of memory and tradition that still somehow survives on the living American soil. It makes perfect sense that, in the long and incantatory litany of names he makes the voices speak aloud throughout the poem, the poet should invoke the names of modern cities and ancient sites as if in an attempt to salvage whatever fragments of wisdom might help heal the wounds of the whimpering Earth – raped by the greed of conquerors, not wholly aware of the sacredness of the ground they tread upon nor of the pain inflicted on our only home and *the others* – animals and trees that also have an inalienable right to live peacefully on Earth.

Movement IV, "Winter Solstice, Cariboo Mountains", is precisely based on a mid-winter walk[13] in central British Columbia, home to the poet, with its mountains rich in caribou, naked before the immensity of the Pacific Ocean. Bringhurst is not just an avid outdoorsman alert to nuances of meaning found in the book of Nature – to being dancing in daylight or in the night sky. He is also aware of the cultural layering surrounding constellations, those geometrical patterns in the night sky that have held an immense fascination for humans' imagination since antiquity. The movement superimposes the figures of two hunters, Orion and Prajapati, who are two interpretations of the same constellation, one lifted from Greek mythology and the other from northern India. Thus, in staves 3 to 6, the Orion and Ursa Major myths are juxtaposed with impressive linguistic economy; both share striking parallelisms, for, to begin with, a hunter is stalking preys that are not quite what they seem: "In the night sky, Orion, / disguised as a deer, is out stalking Aldebaran, / the doe, his daughter, forever" (2009: 228). And: "Arcturus, spearing the Great Bear of heaven, sees / in her eyes, now and always, the eyes of his mother" (2009: 22). The first cluster of stars brings together Orion, Aldebaran and, indirectly, the Pleiades; the second cluster of stars reunites mother and son, Ursa Major (the Great Bear) and Arcturus (the bear-guard). By juxtaposing two constellations and two myths together, a rare and precious density of meaning is conveyed to the reader alert to the ripples of meaning emanating from words as if in concentric circles. After all, *New World Suite No. 3* is possibly the most complex of all of Bringhurst's polyphonic poems and a probing meditation on being, History, myth and ecology. It is also an accomplished vindication of the need for humans to take care of this fragile Earth, our only world and our only home.

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13) Bringhurst is heir to H. D. Thoreau. In "Walking", the Transcendentalist speaks of the noble *art of walking*, which he associates to the free man. His essay is an unforgettable apology of Nature: "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, – to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society" (1906: 205).

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