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Disjunct Quatrains

In May of 1986, John Hollander sent a group of what he called "disjunct quatrains" to Elliott Carter, the typescript of a poem that would be published two years later in his collection *Harp Lake*. It was not the first time the two men had discussed a collaboration. In an earlier letter, Hollander had proposed poems from his notional song cycle "Lyrical Interval," the short lines and relatively straightforward syntax of which made them "potentially graspable on first hearing."[1] Behind the offer lies the familiar idea that formal and semantic simplicity serve song best. "More Quatrains from Harp Lake" held the same promise: the lines are pentameter rather than the tetrameter of almost all popular lyrics, but the sentences are relatively simple, and on the page the discrete, four-line blocks look "settable to music (as so few of my poems seem to be)." The form would be friendly to a setting by Schubert. But Hollander also took the trouble to explain the argumentative turn that animates the quatrains, how each halfway through abruptly parts company from itself. It was that self-schism, that irony, that caught Carter's attention.

The form is called a *pantun* (or, from its French adaptations, *pantoum*), and it would be hard to better Hollander's account of how it works. The stanzas are "sort of like FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat*," he explained,

> except that they're even more disjunct—the first two lines seem at first to be about something different from the last two. But they are connected 1) trivially—on the surface—by some bit of association, even a pun or echo of words, and 2) profoundly, after the resonance of the odd relation has set in. They're versions of a Malay form of folk poetry called *pantun*, of which this is a self-descriptive example:
>
> Pantuns in the original Malay
> Are quatrains of two thoughts, but of
> one mind
> Athwart my two pontoons I sail away,
> Yet touching neither, land lies far
> behind.

The self-describing example is the sort of serious exercise that populates Hollander's witty manual of forms, *Rhyme's Reason*.[2] The quatrains from *Harp Lake* are darker acts of ruptured understanding, doing their double work with a suddenness sometimes imagistic, sometimes apothegmatic—then leaving the reader to make sense of their echoing aftermath, the "resonance of the odd relation."

Carter's response is captured in another letter: "The abrupt changes of feeling, thought, and character pose an interesting problem for me and eventually, I hope to get a coherent-incoherent song out of it." That was eight years later, in July of 1994. By then, he had an occasion in mind, a commission for the soprano Lucy Shelton, and a sense of the large shape of a song cycle: "These quatrains will be the long *arioso* that will need a few before it and maybe one after it." He tells Hollander that he has begun to look for other poems to fill out the form ("Finding texts is hard work!"), and by September he can report that he has set three of them, though he is still weighing candidates for the places that remain. Ultimately, he chose five: "And above Black," from *The Night Mirror* (1971) (retitled "High on Our Tower" for the sequence); "Under the Dome," from *Powers of Thirteen* (1983); "Am Klavier," from *Blue Wine* (1979); "More Quatrains from Harp Lake," from *Harp Lake* (1988); and "End of a Chapter," from *In Time and Place* (1986).

The wide range of texts impresses. "I have…struck out on my own amid your volumes," Carter writes in January 1995, and indeed his choices range over almost twenty years of Hollander's career and none was preselected for him by the anthologies. His undergraduate study of English had given him confidence as a reader of poetry, a confidence on display when he sent the poet a draft of the whole cycle:

> Also the order of the songs—to me this seemed the best, starting impetuously, going to the grand, and then to comment about old & new songs and then to the troubling Quatrains and finishing with an emphatic "End…" since so many of the other songs end quietly. I have thought a lot about this and would be happy if you approved of my choices in both cases.

As a composer Carter sought an overarching formal organization that could define musical moments in much the same way that a total narrative conditions any of its particular events. (Literary details

"only take on the peculiar and gripping significance they have," he told an interviewer, "as a result of the manner and order in which they are juxtaposed and combined in the literary time-continuity."[3]) The dynamic, emotional arc of the poems as a group was vital for him. Still it was only one factor in his choice of Hollander's texts. Another was the problem exemplified by the *pantun* itself, those "brief, vividly contrasting quatrains that have an undercurrent of irony and deep anxiety," as he ultimately put it in his program notes.

A swift description of the five poems he chose suggests how he stretched that conceptual and tonal problem, that irony and deep anxiety, across the arc of the sequence from impetuous beginning to emphatic end. The first, "And above Black," is a Stevensian love lyric that worries whether its two lovers are together in a high tower, or parted by deep valleys. (It is indebted to Stevens's "Domination of Black," and to that poet's preoccupation with the dissolving difference between "we" and "I.") The next, "Under the Dome," experiments with the old form of the echo song, which habitually replays the last syllable of each line to undercut its sense. ("What do echoes do when they reply? / *Lie, lie, lie.*") "Am Klavier" is a little essay on accompaniment and counterpoint as figures for love and memory. Each of them raises in its own way problems of doubling and the relation of doubles, of synchrony and independence. Then come the *pantuns* that sent Carter on his hunt for doublings in the first place. Each of the three preceding poems can be understood as a different preparation for the *pantun*'s ironical form. If we allow for the implicit rush of the wind in the first (and perhaps the cry of the peacocks echoing from Stevens), then each also gives the problem a sound. Bringing them all together is an impressive feat of interpretive collation.

Though the motive of all of this interpretive work, of course, was music making. The songs of the sequence that Carter titled *Of Challenge and of Love* have long, often melismatic vocal lines, which are only intermittently concerned to reproduce anything like ordinary speech rhythms. They interact with a piano accompaniment that can be spare and solemn, but is more often intricately contrapuntal. David Schiff's study of Carter identifies the harmonic basis of the songs as hexachordal, a six-note pitch series of a kind Carter used often.[4] Many of the structural effects require study to perceive. Important aspects of the handling of the text, however, are graspable (as Hollander might put it)

at first or second hearing. There is, for example, a cagey relation to musical mimesis, the cycle's nonce-analogies between the movement of the voice and the meaning of the words. That relation can be a matter of mood, when the agitated figures of "High on Our Tower" settle momentarily into slow, solemn intervals as the poem drops from its heights into the dark valleys. It can be more local, when a descending line traces the words "light lies down" in "Am Klavier." But such effects are just as likely to be perverse: later in the same song, the word "rises" gets a steeply falling major seventh; the echoes in "Under the Dome" ("*Lie, lie, lie*" and "*Berate, / Berate*") are marked to be sung at increasing volume instead of fading away. Daniel Albright has observed that Carter is an instinctively deconstructive reader, given to "investigating the ways in which music could resist a text, not in a haphazard or arbitrary manner, but by teasing out the text's internal voices of self-resistance."[5] Such a temperament is well suited to Hollander's. The echoes in "Under the Dome," for example, already defy the genre's expectation of cynical diminuendo: "Hearing and overhearing / My own voice, startled, appalled, instructed, I rejoice."

You could think of such moments as an unpredictable, ambivalent courtship of word and music, and of the possibility that they might be synchronized, arriving at the same place at the same time by their different means. As a matter of rhythm, that courtship is systematically, mutually unrequited. The voice and piano almost never share a moment of attack: usually, the voice leads, the piano follows, and sometimes the setting is dense enough that the distinction of leader and follower is lost. There are only a handful of instances in almost twenty minutes of music when they coincide. The noncoincidence is, moreover, exacting. The soprano Tony Arnold, who has performed the cycle, writes of "the clearing of small spaces, often less than a sixteenth note's duration, in which the singer must precisely place text."[6] These reiterated differences reinforce what is often called the contrapuntal tendency in Carter, his assertion of the independence of the instruments and their voicings. (He deplores "blocklike, terribly simplified structures of time."[7]) The insistence of the effect brings us back to the *pantun* itself:

High on the rocks some Ponderosa pine
  Must overlook the jagged valley's floor.
What then must one have witnessed to divine
  That death is just a side-effect of war?

The thoughtful pine on its high vantage seems, in the first two lines, to have an ennobling detachment; the next two ask what grim knowledge comes with taking such a distance from history (whether "one" is an innocent prophet or an imperious general). Admiration for lonely stoicism and horror at organized mass sacrifice shiver against one another. Carter sets the lines about the pine in a relatively continuous melody, unusually rhetorical for him; the ensuing question is broken into staccato bursts, isolated words interrupted by strong chords. The irony of the *pantun* is exacerbated by the dissociated texture as well as the grosser musical contrast between its halves.

Irony: if one of its features is doubleness, another implicit but less often remarked upon feature is its simultaneity or synchronization. Saying one thing and meaning another has no special effect if they simply happen in series. That is just changing your mind. Some ironies are achieved by speaking on different channels at the same time, mouthing a platitude and cocking an eyebrow; but some must depend on a succession of words that are nevertheless apprehended together. The *pantun* activates this problem, observing a clean separation between its sequential parts that makes for a richly dissonant aftermath. Something like that effect—"the resonance of the odd relation," as Hollander puts it—could be said to be a fundamental problem for Carter. He has a technical investment in strong rhythmic and harmonic independence, but what matters to him above all is the adding up of musical experience in time, even into the total narrative that the cycle describes:

> For whereas the painter is working dealing with a flat, static surface, the musician is working with a constantly flowing stream of sound—so that how you make the stream flow and what obstacles you put in to stop it from flowing or to modify the flow, and so on, become fundamental…. It's rather hard to do this because we're not accustomed to thinking of a temporal succession in one big operation.[8]

Carter had a fondness for that word "flow," but it seems weak for the demands of his music, too self-reconciled and too tame. "Irony" might do better. It has promise for capturing the problems of objective succession and subjective experience that preoccupy him when he thinks about time, the series of distinct musical moments, like notes, and their overlap (even architecture) in consciousness.[9] How would our understanding of his music change if we substituted "irony" for "harmony," not just as a register of tone but as a basic framework for describing the simultaneity and the persistence of pitches? The right irony would not be undermining nor even necessarily critical, but in the most basic way it would be a way of sustaining compound knowledge in time, surrendering to neither of the twin luxuries of reconciliation and dissociation.

The sequence comes to its "emphatic End" with a brief prose poem from *In Time and Place*. In its entirety:

> …But when true Beauty does finally come crashing at us through the stretched paper of the picturesque, we can wonder how we had for so long been able to remain distracted from its absence.

This last poem has its own take on doubleness: no longer the tangling together of before and after, epitomized by the ironic echo, it offers instead a carnival stage show that tears mere prettiness aside to replace it with sudden Beauty. Is that replacement an answer? A final rescue from irony, as though it had served its purpose and birthed out of its restless dialectic a final ravishing clarity? But as Carter scores the poem, the asynchronous attacks of the rest of the cycle persist unabated. The writing is sparest, even pointillistic, at the melodramatic climax. The music becomes self-important, with an almost silent-movie tremolo in the left hand, only at the very last, when we wonder doubtfully what we could have been thinking all that time. For harmony, read irony.

NOTES

1/ The letters quoted in this essay are all contained in the Elliott Carter archive at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, Switzerland. They are printed in full on pages 154–160 of this issue.
2/ *Rhyme's Reason* includes a description of the *pantun*, or *pantoum* as he spells is there (following the French), with five auto-descriptive quatrains. John Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 43–44.
3/ Allen Edwards, *Flawed Words and Stubborn Sounds: A Conversation with Elliott Carter* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 93.
4/ David Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 166.
5/ Daniel Albright, "Elliott Carter and the Poets: Listening to, Listening Through," in *Music Speaks* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 106.
6/ Tony Arnold, "Digging Deeper: Singing the Music of Elliott Carter," *Newmusicbox* (blog), December 21, 2011, http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/digging-deeper-singing-the-music-of-elliott-carter/. An expanded version of this essay can be found on pages 161–171 of this issue.
7/ Edwards, 37.
8/ Ibid., 37.
9/ See "Music and the Time Screen" and "Time Lecture," in *Collected Essays and Lectures, 1937–1995*, ed. Jonathan W. Bernard (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1997), 262–80; 313–18.

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