

The Idea of Community: Glenn Gould's *Solitude Trilogy*

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Introduction

This paper seeks to do two things. Firstly, it aims to give a critical introduction to Gould's seminal radio works, the *Solitude Trilogy*, (1967-1977). I will outline the overarching concerns and techniques of the trilogy, bringing in Gould's own comments on the endeavour as well as literature on the subject, which will contextualise the works. After this, I will argue that literature on the trilogy has tended to be too narrow in focussing on a single work, *The Idea of North* and a single theme, solitude. I argue this occludes an important aspect of trilogy, namely how it variously articulates a rich web of philosophical, social, geographical and spiritual tensions around the idea of community.

The *Solitude Trilogy*

For those unfamiliar with Gould's works an outline is necessary in order to situate the works. The *Solitude Trilogy* is a series of one-hour radio documentaries by the Canadian musician Glenn Gould (1932-1982), assisted by technician Lorne Tulk. They possess the collective theme, according to one reviewer, of 'withdrawal from the world' (Lehman 1997, p.156) and were produced over a period of ten years from 1967 to 1977. While possessing overlapping themes, the individual works develop a tableaux of considerations, for example in *The Idea of North* (1967) there is a preponderance on the human need to make meaning from landscape and direction, in this case, the Canadian north. *The Latecomers* (1969) explores the tension between abstract institutions and concrete communities by looking at the fate of small Newfoundland communities after confederation in 1949. Finally, *The Quiet in the Land* (1977) gives an account of fading religious communities in the context of urbanisation of Mennonites in Canada.

The trilogy represents the incunabulum of 'contrapuntal radio'. To understand what this means, one first has to be familiar with contrapuntal music, which the *Rough Guide to Classical Music* defines as, '[t]he placing of two or more parts or voices against each other in such a way that they have both harmonic coherence and a degree of independence' (Clark and Staines (eds.), 2005, p.627). However, counterpoint is not simply a musical idea, it is an idea about dramatising elements through a series of conflicts and unities, achieving balance by doing so. It is this contrapuntal style which is utilised in the context of frequently overlapping voices to achieve a sense of dialogue and ideological conflict between those voices and within the work itself. For example, in the opening of *The Latecomers*, voices are introduced discussing the idea of solitude and the future of the communities in which they live. The

voices contrast in terms of perspective, but such contrast is dramatised by the contrapuntal style of presentation of those voices.

Gould's comments on counterpoint are instructive here. For example, in an interview which accompanied the digital remasters of the *Goldberg Variations*, Gould claimed his interests centred on contrapuntal music, which he described in the following terms: 'it's music where one, I think, implicitly acknowledges the essential equality of those [musical] ideas. And I think it follows from that that with really complex contrapuntal textures one does need a certain deliberation, a certain deliberateness' (Gould, 1981).

This is a useful way in which to consider Gould's radio works. First, Gould speaks of an equality that characterises different lines in a piece of contrapuntal music. This is mirrored in his radio technique, where overlapping voices offer the listener a number of routes through the works, the counterpoint emphasising the ployglossic or polyphonic nature of the works themselves. Gould once stated: 'That's why I find radio documentary especially so very fascinating because one can make a statement about the human condition, by virtue of the way in which you can define it, through using human voice' (Hozer and Rayment 2010).

Such a technique which espouses equality of elements though is not straightforwardly achieved and what Gould calls the 'deliberateness' of counterpoint flags up the idea that such an apparent equality is in fact hard won by a composer, or in the case of the trilogy, the interviewer and editor, Gould himself. This is given credence by Lorne Tulk, who in an interview for the Glenn Gould Foundation commented on Gould as an interviewer, claiming 'Glenn was the kind of interviewer, who, when asking a question – which might take five or ten minutes – would explain (with elaborate details) what he expected. In fact, he practically gave the answer that he wanted to hear!' (Johnson, 2010). This affects one's view of the works as artistic in the sense of being purposefully made to achieve a variety of effects and also suggests that the open-ended nature of the themes is partly explained by Gould's selection of individuals to interview and the highly directive nature of the interview process itself.

As well as counterpoint, another important aspect is the use of sonic background to endow the works with a general setting. In the case of *The Latecomers*, the ebbing of waves on a shoreline creates a topographical image of place. This suggestion is built up in familiar radio-play style where the generalised pure sound is complimented by specific speech and dialogue which endues an image of Newfoundland to the listener. For example, one respondent, a grizzled and somewhat sententious Newfoundlander, reflects upon the unique qualities of his home:

I've been around a considerable lot, but the sights and sounds of Newfoundland are not in these places. You feel like a stranger there; because you're not getting the same air, you're not getting the same

atmosphere. And when I say atmosphere, I'm not talking about buildings and glorious things. I'm talking about- just the air- the aroma, the smell of Newfoundland (*The Latecomers*, 1969)¹.

In a basic way then, the works can be characterised by the use of an aural bedrock which functions topographically and a contrapuntal technique of overlapping, conflicting voices or 'lines' in both the musical and attitudinal sense. As one commentator has described *The Idea of North*, 'the documentary unfolds in multiplicities and divergent streams of thinking—deliberately so, as Gould's counterpoint of simultaneous but nonidentical motives shapes both the techniques of the documentary's production and its discursive content' (McNeilly, 1996, p.87).

Having now given some account of the general nature of the works, I move on to consider what the works express about the idea of community.

The Idea of Community

In scholarly work on the trilogy, there is a disproportionate focus on both the theme of solitude and on *The Idea of North* as a particular work. For example, Sallis describes the works as being about the 'effects of solitude and isolation upon individuals and groups' (Sallis, 2005, p.113) and Mantere claims that '[t]he North, in his [Gould's] aesthetic thought served from the very beginning as a metaphor for things Gould regarded as indispensable to his music-making: isolation, loneliness' (Mantere, 2005, p.86). To add to this impression of the centrality of a single theme and a single work over the whole trilogy, Mary Ann Caws recently claimed that 'all three concern the idea not just of northerness, but of the solitude that it demands' (Caws, 2013, p.38). The list could go on².

Such claims are understandable and credible. For one, Gould's naming of the works as collectively the 'Solitude Trilogy' is no accident; the works do indeed consider the human need for solitude, contemplation and isolation. Secondly, *The Idea of North* is the first fully articulated example of Gould's innovative approach to radio and also contains an introduction from Gould himself which has guided scholarly interpretation. This is how Gould introduces *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. And the North has remained for me a convenient place to dream about, spin tall tales about, and, in the end, avoid (Gould, 1967).

¹ All quotations are transcribed by the author.

² See also a recent interview with Lorne Tulk, assistant to Glenn Gould on the series: 'Glenn presented the The Solitude Trilogy using three forms of isolation: 'The Idea of North' explored a kind of geographical isolation, where you're physically alone and often by yourself; 'The Latecomers' on the other hand, involved a communal kind of isolation, where whole communities exist in isolation from one another; 'The Quiet in the Land' had to do with more of a religious or spiritual type of isolation, where people are isolated by choice and for a specific reason' (Johnson, 2010, online).

One commentator has claimed that ‘Gould transforms the Arctic into a Conradian terra incognita’ (Hjartarson, 1996, p.75) and this is evident from the start. As with works such as *Heart of Darkness*, *Moby Dick* or *Don Quixote*, there is a concern with the act of meaning-making itself and recognition that humans, as opposed to directions, oceans, windmills or jungles, make meaning. Insofar as Gould remains an ‘outsider’, the north remains a place to ‘dream about’, which is presumably why it needs to be sedulously avoided.

However, I argue that this emphasis on isolation results in a lack of attention to a theme, that while not as ostensible as that of isolation, is as conceptually necessary. That is the idea of community. By ‘community’, I mean a group of people with strong ideological ties who are self-governing in some particular way, be this political, moral or economic. Isolation is a concept related to being among people, of being in societies and of being in communities. Indeed, one often uses the terms ‘isolated’ and ‘solitary’ to describe separation from societies, communities and groups and I would argue that due to the conceptual links between isolation and community, the trilogy has much to express about the idea of community that has not been given attention. I now want to consider some of the ways in which this is the case.

To begin with *The Idea of North*, one of the interviewees discusses the differences between urban living and living in the north:

When you’re living in a big city in the south you can always retreat when you fail in your relations with society, you can just go away and nobody really knows the difference. You can’t go away when you’re in a little village a thousand miles from nowhere and couple of weeks from the next plane, high in the arctic....So all sorts of curious things happen. In some ways you may have gone to the north to get away from society and you find yourself far closer to it then you’ve ever been in your life (Gould, 1967).

Here, we can see the conflation of two ideas existing under the term ‘society’. The first ‘society’, the one from which ‘you can always retreat’, is characterised by ease of separation from that society and by the absence of mutuality in responsibility between its members: when one goes, ‘nobody really knows the difference’. One can call this society, ‘individualist society’.

The second version of society is one where people are largely known to each other and there is mutuality in responsibility for one another. This is what was previously described as a ‘community in isolation’ and indeed, it fits very well my definition of a ‘community’.

This conceptual tension between notions of society and isolation are touchingly indicative of the human predilection to ‘dream’ and ‘spin tall tales’ about other places and situations, places and situations better than our own, places and situations that are likely to fail to meet our expectations. This explains why the interviewee recognises the sudden surprising pressure- ‘you find yourself far closer’- being the expectations others can put upon you, expectations that in turn the individual can respond to positively

or negatively. Plausibly, the speaker left individualist society disliking the anonymity it forces on one, but nevertheless, he left as an *individualist*, unprepared for the demands of community.

The ‘individualist society’ and ‘community’ divide here is another axis around which isolation and community can be understood. Indeed, this suggests that isolation is a predicate that can be placed on individuals and groups, but the term will always refer to an object’s distance *from* certain groups. This being the case, if one moves away from a group or community, one does not necessarily add the predicate ‘isolated’. This is well exemplified in *The Latecomers*, where one interviewee touches, somewhat sardonically, on the idea that isolation is a matter of distance in cultural sophistication:

Well if I may be permitted to say, that’s a greatly exaggerated word. It’s a word, if you don’t mind, I would not hear expressed again. Because we people on this island of Newfoundland do not for one moment consider ourselves isolated in any way. Ah, if we are a year behind Toronto could I not say that Toronto is two years behind New York, as New York, a year behind the times with Paris when it comes to style and styling? I am not greatly impressed by fashion, nor am I a part of fashion (Gould, 1969).

The view of what constitutes isolation here is considered by the respondent to a matter of the self-identification of the community (‘this island of Newfoundland’) as opposed to any objective geographical or cultural distance or difference between places. The philosophical point has merit, for any given group will always bear a countless number of spatio-temporal relations with other conurbations and so it is difficult to explain isolation or community without understanding the self-perception of groups and individuals. Communities on the Aran Islands might see themselves as distant from the big city of Dublin, but they are far closer to Dublin than they are Manila or Mexico city, from which they are unlikely to feel distant.

However while the philosophical point has merit, the conclusion that people ‘do not feel isolated’ is empirically questionable. Many characters within work recognise the pressures from the ‘outside world’ and crave the diversity, excitement and opportunity that big cities living can offer. Indeed, a significant minority of the interviewees are Newfoundlanders who complain variously: ‘I see no future in Newfoundland’, ‘[t]here is no fantastically exciting night nightlife’, ‘[n]ow that I’d probably like to leave, it’s too late’, ‘[t]he traditional phrase was that Newfoundland is at the end of the line’ (Gould, 1969).

This brings us to an important issue about communities in the trilogy: Museum communities. By ‘museum communities’ I mean the desire to preserve distinctive communities by those who hold an essentialist understanding of them and the communities themselves which are the object of this desire. Putative museum communities might be the Gealtachts of Ireland or some segregationist religious communities.

This idea plays to the centre of the tensions in the idea of community and can be seen when one former Newfoundlander discusses the recentralisation programme which followed the confederation of Newfoundland with Canada in 1949:

St Joseph's today is a dead community... It's a victim primarily of the recentralisation programme which the government has introduced over the past few years. It's very hard for me to be dispassionate about this and objective, because I've been involved and at the same time, haven't been involved, because I made my decision to leave St Joseph's twenty years ago. I suppose I see it through slightly rose-tinted glasses, now (Gould, 1969).

This is part of a beautifully fraught and self-conscious reflection on the interviewee's sense of identity and home, even though that 'home' has become largely ossified by the 'rose-tinted' perception offered by distance and time. Here we can see the possibility of defending the *idea* of community at the expense of a specific community, the result of which can be the ossification of those communities themselves and the diminution of their autonomy. Another Newfoundlander describes it in this way: '[i]n other words you're preserving a community to satisfy your own desires. It's just a very distorted attitude' (Gould, 1969).

Museum communities though need not solely be the object of outside conservation, as communities do have the ability to make decisions about their own future and dynamics. A museum's conservator can be in-house. This tension is reflected when one of the Mennonite respondents recounts a debate about 'being in the world but not of it', a phrase concerning how Christians should interact with wider society. He recalls: 'they [the Mennonites] wanted to be in the world but not of it. Whereas the younger theologian was saying that this is not what it means. That one in fact must be in the world geographically and being in the world, not sell out to the world in which one is' (Gould, 1977). Depending on emphasis, following this principle can lead to the strict segregation of a religious community, seen in some Mennonite, Mormon and Amish configurations. On the other hand, the principle can lead to what one respondent refers to as 'breaking up the Ghettos' (*The Quiet in the Land*, 1977) in order to evangelise the world. This is explained in the following way:

The view that our parents have, that we are in the world and yet not of the world, this is changing, we are becoming more involved. But I would think that Mennonites will always remain somewhat separate, that they will never really, completely, be able to identify with any of the countries or places they will be living in. They will adapt to a certain degree- and of course if they're going to live in Spain, they'll speak Spanish, I grant you that. You adapt yourself to the situation you're living in, and still remember whose child you are (Gould, 1977).

The problem that is made patent in *The Quiet in the Land*, is that opening oneself *to* the world runs the risk of becoming *of* the world, evident in Mennonite respondents who recognise their worldliness: 'One of the things that I see happening in the Mennonite group is a growing materialism. I like to think that

I'm not a materialist, I hope I'm not' (Gould, 1977). More tellingly, one respondent admits, 'I find myself under considerable pressure from the fashions around me. I'm attracted to them and I must say I have a guilty conscience very often when I start adopting them' (Gould, 1977). These reflections are accompanied by a backdrop of Janis Joplin's, 'Oh Lord, Won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz', which fittingly articulates a crass materialism where for example the theological concept of 'deliverance' is transmuted into the possession of a prestigious commodity (a car). This becomes bitterly ironic when set against Mennonite respondents struggling with how the pressures of consumer capitalism conflict and even subsume their faith community.

The problem appears to be this. In seeking to be more than a museum community, Mennonites have exposed themselves to influences which they have sometimes failed to resist. This might suggest that strict separation is justified, but then one runs the risk of a community becoming ossified. At its extreme, separation leaves a community without reference points by which they might judge their success as a community, at least in the case where they are minimally aware of an 'outside world'. Whenever there is an outside world, there is an inside world and the potential for claustrophobia is present.

This not only suggests that community is never a given, it also points to the possibility that actions aimed at preserving communities carry with them more than a mere possibility of communal dissolution. To mangle Marx, it might be said that communities are often their own gravediggers, whether they become less or more isolated.

In this brief consideration of community, what I hope to have shown is that the works contain a rich tapestry of explicit and implicit tensions around given themes. I have argued that the *Solitude Trilogy* collectively raises a number of tensions around the idea of community: how communities can be considered isolated, and the notion of museum communities and the fuzzy distinction between communities and societies. Uniting all these tensions is a dialectic of the immanent power of communities in dialogue contrasted with forces and influences from extra-communal sources. If it were simply the case that 'the world', inevitably quashed communities, then any action to maintain communities would be fruitless and they would already have ceased to exist. On the other hand, if the integrity of communities was guaranteed by the alert defensiveness of their members, then any sense of genuine threat and change would be unfathomable.

In the deliberateness of Gould's approach he not only picks out tensions and ideas; the contrapuntal approach dramatises them too. What is valuable about the works, in both form and content, is that they offer tools to think with, tools with which the listener can use to investigate the definitions, metaphysics, politics and futures of specific communities and of course, the idea of community.

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