



Of Maps and Music

Cultural Syncretism, Prosodic Experimentation &
Ecological Awareness in the Poetry of Robert Bringhurst

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PhD Thesis Director: Prof. Bernhard Dietz Guerrero

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of
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TÍTULO: *Of maps and music cultural syncretism, prosodic experimentation & ecological awareness in the poetry of robert bringhurst*

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TÍTULO DE LA TESIS:

OF MAPS AND MUSIC. CULTURAL SYNCRETISM, PROSODIC EXPERIMENTATION AND ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT BRINGHURST

DOCTORANDA:

LEONOR MARÍA MARTÍNEZ SERRANO

INFORME RAZONADO DEL DIRECTOR DE LA TESIS

(Se hará mención a la evolución y desarrollo de la tesis, así como a trabajos y publicaciones derivados de la misma.)

La doctoranda ha llevado a cabo un trabajo de enorme mérito, cuya amplitud, exhaustividad, buen juicio y esmero sobrepasan con creces las expectativas y requerimientos inherentes a una tesis doctoral. Su aportación es también novedosa y hasta de una considerable originalidad, toda vez que implica un estudio global, tan completo como pormenorizado, del conjunto de la obra, profunda y compleja, que debemos al talento de un destacado poeta canadiense; a un creador que conceptuamos del máximo rango, por mucho que pueda desde la ecuanimidad parecer injustamente relegado en razón de ciertos azares de la moda, la miopía lectora o el prejuicio ideológico. Ciertamente se trata de una exégesis sin parangón en la bibliografía actualmente existente. Por ello consideramos que la tesis posee un valor mensurable de dimensión inequívocamente internacional. Ese factor se ve reforzado por el hecho de hallarse redactada en inglés, haciendo gala de una corrección expresiva y también de una claridad expositiva bastante notables. Datos a los que debemos sumar la extensísima bibliografía empleada, que por sí sola constituye un indicio del rigor y de la ambición epistemológica con que se ha operado.

Esta tesis doctoral representa el trabajo de muchos años. Detrás de ella no es difícil adivinar el incansable acopio de fuentes, muchas de ellas de ardua localización y en ocasiones el producto de fecundas estancias en el extranjero; las interminables jornadas de lectura, estudio y reflexión; la delicada y respetuosa compenetración espiritual con el universo poético, retórico, filosófico y cultural del autor analizado; y el desarrollo de un discurso hermenéutico y axiológico propio, empeñado en salvaguardar la independencia intelectual, el sentido crítico y, por descontado, la fiabilidad filológica. Esta feraz lentitud en el proceso de elaboración, unido al alto sentido de autoexigencia característico de la aspirante al grado de doctor, ha determinado sin duda para bien que el estudio incorpore los rasgos que saltan a la vista, como por ejemplo su inusitada extensión, el volumen ocupado por las notas a pie de página, la rica sugestividad intertextual y el pulso diestro y maduro con el que atentamente se pasa revista al canon poético de Robert Bringhurst.

Estamos ante lo que cabría denominar “una tesis de autor”. Esto es, un texto irrefutablemente académico que, a la vez, no renuncia a expresarse en la primera persona del singular. Dicha circunstancia se evidencia de principio a fin y constituye un condicionante que resulta imposible orillar, si como entendemos nosotros se acepta, sin advertir en ello renuncia, inferioridad o desdoro, que en el ámbito de las llamadas ciencias del espíritu existe y seguirá subsistiendo, en determinados contextos y para determinados tipos de indagación, un núcleo duro de subjetividad y empatía interior, de proyección honestamente dialógica de la propia personalidad. En el caso que nos ocupa, consideramos que el autor tan servicialmente elucidado podrá llegar a sentirse satisfecho ante los resultados, puesto que su producción literaria, lejos de haber servido como coartada para una faena de aliño o de taxidermia formal, ha encontrado en esta memoria de tesis una glosa fundamentada, justa y pertinente. Un tratamiento serio, consonante con su objeto. En consecuencia, no podemos sino felicitarnos y adelantar nuestra felicitación a Doña Leonor María Martínez Serrano, por creer firmemente en la solvencia de su perspectiva y en la calidad contrastable de su realización.

Para terminar, hacemos notar que las publicaciones derivadas del presente trabajo con anterioridad a su lectura son muy escasas. No entendemos que tal cosa suponga un defecto, al responder antes bien al paradigma largo tiempo vigente y consideramos que no por entero periclitado, en virtud del cual lo inédito no está necesariamente reñido con lo meritorio, en especial cuando media el propósito de levantar una arquitectura unitaria, de escribir un libro.

Por todo ello, se autoriza la presentación de la tesis doctoral.

Córdoba, a 22 de febrero de 2012.

Fdo.: Bernhard Dietz Guerrero.

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Prologue

Words from Professor Bernd Dietz catalyzed this thesis years ago. It has taken me many hours and days to read, to meditate, and to try to write down what I have found out about Robert Bringhurst's poetry over the years. I am extremely slow when it comes to reading poems carefully and thinking deeply about them with all the care and all the love they deserve. This is the reason why this dissertation has been such a long time in the making. Some parts were written in a state of frenzy, wakefulness and alertness of mind; others were written in a state of peace and tranquillity. No one knows enough to undertake a PhD thesis like this, but generous help has made good much ignorance. At any rate, I write not as a scholar, for I am not one, but as an explorer back from a long voyage eager to tell what she has found in other exotic lands. Thus, my determination is to instil in others a sense of the worth of Bringhurst's poetry. What follows is then a reading that comes armed (or rather disarmed) with a readiness to respond to the work's distinctive utterance and is prepared to accept the consequences of doing so – a reading of Bringhurst's poetry with the intention of responding to the lessons he has to impart with a maximum of intensity.

What I love foremost about Bringhurst's work is precisely the intellectual, moral, spiritual and humanistic integrity he admires in the sages of antiquity, both from the Western and Eastern traditions. This archaic sense of integrity which is intensely humane pervades the whole of his literary output, his entire *oeuvre*, which transcends all disciplinary boundaries and brings together human knowledge into an organic whole of subtle ramifications. Though I am a lover of language and words myself, I am well aware that there are no fit words to express my most sincere gratefulness to Robert Bringhurst himself, for his kind generosity and the largeness of his heart. Let me borrow Jan Zwicky's words from her introduction to *Plato as Artist* (2009) to make the aim of what follows clear to myself and to others. The purpose of this dissertation, then, is simply that: to record my astonishment at the beauty of these made things which are Bringhurst's works; to praise the beauty of his mind as well his thought and his music; to express my delight and wonder, and my most sincere gratitude in having had the immense privilege to devote a good portion of my time to converse with his poetry in solitude for hours on end; to attempt to clarify, for myself and for those who might happen to read these words, what continues to perplex me, and perhaps must till the end of my stay on Earth. And yet I have no real hope of being absolutely accurate in approaching the manifold, subtle nuances in Bringhurst's work, which is vaster than whatever I might say about it.

Throughout our thesis, we have used several abbreviations, especially in footnotes:

SL – *The Shipwright's Log*

C – *Cadastral*

B – *Bergschrund*

BW – *The Beauty of the Weapons*

PM/PM – *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*

TC – *The Calling*

SP – *Selected Poems*

INTRODUCTION

Robert Bringhurst: Tradition, Modernity & The Unity of All Poetry of All Ages

I · Robert Bringhurst: The Man, his Life & his Work

Born on 16 October 1946 in Los Angeles as the only son of Canadian parents, Marion Large and George Bringhurst, Robert Bringhurst¹ is one of Canada's most respected poets, a skilled linguist, a serious philosopher, an accomplished typographer and book designer, a remarkable translator and a probing cultural historian. His childhood was not conventional, for his parents moved with their only child from one place to another in the border provinces and states between Western Canada and the United States, so that Bringhurst was raised in the mountain and desert regions of Utah, Montana, Wyoming, Alberta, and British Columbia,² elemental landscapes that are a pervasive presence in many of his poems. He moved with his parents to Alberta, Canada, in 1952, but since 1972 he has lived on the British Columbia coast. Bringhurst has been described as being an independent scholar, one working intently and with relentless energy on the edges of academia and of society, but he is best described as a true Renaissance humanist with a round education in multiple disciplines. In fact, in the 1960s he followed his own personal intellectual itinerary in a number of universities, studying widely in a variety of disciplines – Architecture, Linguistics and Physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1963-64, 1970-71), Philosophy and Oriental Languages at the University of Utah (1964-65), and Arabic language and Islamic history at the Defense Language Institute, Monterey, California (1966-67) – before taking a BA in Comparative Literature from Indiana University (1973) and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia (1975).

¹ For essential bio-bibliographical information on Robert Bringhurst, we have drawn on a number of sources: (1) S.89 Gary Geddes' critical summary accompanying anthology selections of "Robert Bringhurst", in *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Two*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988: 527-528. (2) S.105 Russell Brown et al., critical and biographical summary accompanying anthology selections of "Robert Bringhurst", in *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990: 695. (3) S.145 Reginald Berry's entry on "Bringhurst, Robert", in Ian Hamilton, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994: 67-68. (4) S.154 James Harrison' entry on "Bringhurst, Robert" in Eugene Benson & L.W. Conolly, ed., *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, London: Routledge, 1994: vol. 1, pp. 148-149. (5) S.188 Geoff Hancock's entry on "Bringhurst, Robert" in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, 2nd ed., edited by Eugene Benson & William Toye, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997: 143-144. (6) S.240a Gary Geddes' critical summary accompanying anthology selections of "Robert Bringhurst" in *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Three*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001: 388-389. (7) S.256 Iain Higgins' entry on "Bringhurst, Robert" in W.H. New, ed., *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002: 152-154.

² In "Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation", a ground-breaking essay included in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringhurst reminisces his early years in those mountains: "I was born in the post-Depression diaspora at the close of the Second World War, the only child of itinerant parents – ambitious father, obedient mother – and raised in the mountains of western North America, moving often and liking it well. I remember especially the Absaroka Ranges in Montana, the Valley of the Little Bighorn and the Wind River Mountains and the southern Absarokas in Wyoming, the Maligne Mountains and the Goat Range in Alberta, and the Virgin River country – my Mormon great-grandfather's mountains – in southern Utah. In later years, I've felt myself at home in a thousand named and nameless places in that long spine of mountains, steppe and desert which I've walked, in bits and pieces, most of the way from Yukon to Peru. Much as I've loved the few cities I've lived in – Boston, Beirut, London, Vancouver – I've never been at ease for long in urban spaces." Ibid., pp. 100-101.

Bringhurst is truly a citizen of the world, a cosmopolitan, widely-travelled author who has spent extended periods of his lifetime in Lebanon, Peru, and Japan, and, after 1972, in British Columbia. A general overview of his career will give an idea of the breadth of his personal geography and intense experiences around the world: he worked as journalist in Beirut, Lebanon (1965-66) and in Boston, MA (1970-71); as tourist guide in Israel and Palestine (1967-68) and as law clerk in Panama Canal Zone (1968-69); as visiting lecturer (1975-77) and as lecturer (1979-1980) at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver (British Columbia); as poet-in-residence at the School of Fine Arts at The Banff Centre, Banff (Alberta) in 1983 and as writer-in-residence for the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia in 1984; as adjunct lecturer at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, in 1983-1984; as poet-in-residence at the Ojibway and Cree Cultural Centre Writers' Workshops in Atitokan & Espanola (Ontario) in 1985; as writer-in-residence at the University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg (Manitoba) in 1986; as Canada/Scotland Exchange Fellow and writer-in-residence at the University of Edinburgh (Scotland) in 1989-90; as Ashley Fellow³ at Trent University, Peterborough (Ontario) in 1994; as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario,⁴ London (Ontario) in 1998-99; as conjunct professor at the Frost Centre for Native Studies and Canadian Studies at Trent University in 1998; as Philips Fund Research Fellow, American Philosophical Society in 2000. Furthermore, Bringhurst has been a visiting scholar at different universities in Europe and the United States, and he regularly lectures internationally on poetry, on Haida literature and visual art, on the native oral literatures of North America, on typography and book design. Among the many honours he has been awarded, it is worth mentioning the Macmillan Prize for Poetry in 1975, the Alcuin Society Design Awards in 1984 and 1985, the Canadian Broadcasting

³ Sean Kane published an article entitled "Ashley Fellow Begins Residence" in *Arthur* (Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario) 28.15 (January 1994): 3. This article announces Bringhurst's arrival at Trent University as Ashley Fellow and predicts the subject matter of his lectures: "Robert Bringhurst, the British Columbia poet and cultural historian, has begun his two-month term as Trent University's Ashley Fellow for 1994. The Fellowship, made possible by a bequest of the later Professor Ashley, allows a noted scholar to be brought each year to the university, to participate in the life of one of Trent's colleges, to work with the academic departments, and give a series of public lectures."

⁴ Two newspaper articles were published in *Western News* announcing Bringhurst's sojourn as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario. The first, an anonymous brief article reporting Bringhurst's impending arrival as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario, was entitled "Poet Writer-in-Residence" and published in *Western News* (University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario) 34.24 (September 24, 1998): 7. The author writes: "Canadian poet Robert Bringhurst will be Western's writer-in-residence in the Department of English for 1998-99. Bringhurst will be arriving at the end of September and will spend time seeing students and reviewing the work of any interested, budding writers. Although describing himself as a poet, Bringhurst has written prose as well as stage productions and works for multiple voices. In 1992 the CBC aired his one-hour documentary, *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*, directed by Alan Clapp. His work has been widely anthologised. [...] This is the English department's 26th year of sponsoring a writer-in-residence. The program is funded by the James A. and Marjorie M. Spenceley Lectureship and Literature in Literature fund as well as by the Canada Council for the Arts." The second article, authored by Sandee Wong, "Western's writer-in-residence provides safe environment for budding authors", also published in *Western News* (London, Ontario) 35.12 (1 April 1999): 11, records what looks like a partial account of an interview occasioned by Bringhurst's tenure as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario: "'I enjoy the ambience,'" says Bringhurst of university life. "I enjoy dealing with students, but I don't want to have to grade papers. I don't want to have to go to committee meetings. I don't want to have to teach a full course load year after year, or any year. This is a relationship with the University that allows me to get what the University can offer me and to give it some of what I can offer in return." The writer-in-residence program offers a safe space for budding writers to have their work reviewed and critiqued. The English department has sponsored a writer-in-residence for the past 26 years. [...] Bringhurst is also the writer-in-residence for the London Public Library. LPL applied for the program in conjunction with UWO's English department." Of Bringhurst's university studies, the article's author says: "The self-described poet has spent much of his academic life studying language and linguistics. He has also studied philosophy, literature, physics and architecture. To him, "University is like a big candy store. The shelves are lined with interesting things." He spent ten years – "by no means too long" – getting his bachelor's degree in comparative literature."

Corporation Poetry Prize for 1985, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1987-88, the Edward Sapir Prize in 2004, the Lieutenant Governor's Award for Literary Excellence in 2005, and an Honorary Degree⁵ awarded by the University College of Fraser Valley in 2006.⁶

Bringhurst is a widely-travelled erudite, a polyglot scholar, a multilingual polymath, and a tireless student of languages. In fact, he has been a lover of human languages all his life. Bearing in mind that he has spent a number of years in the Middle East, Europe, and Latin America, it is not surprising that he should read and translate from half a dozen ancient and modern languages, including Greek, Latin, Chinese, Arabic, French, German, Spanish. He spent ten years mastering Arabic and, though he refers self-deprecatingly to his "little Greek and less Chinese"⁷ he quotes and translates with ease from a wide array of classical and modern languages and, indeed, he began learning Haida, with the further intention, 'no matter how preposterous and impossible it might be – to learn all the words and all the grammars of the world', as he points out in the prose statement in the foreword to *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995). Since then, he has studied the indigenous languages and cultures of North America and learnt other native languages of North America, such as Cree, Navajo and Ojibwa. Thus, he has turned his attention to indigenous North American languages and cultures whose pre-industrial, anti-imperial thinkers (together with those from the Aboriginal Australian, Buddhist and early Chinese and Greek cultures) form an intellectual Third World from which, in Bringhurst's view, we have more to learn than they have from us. He reads what he calls 'European and even colonial North American poets', but finds more real poetry in the work of biologists and anthropologists, the true poets of today in his view. His brilliance as a translator from the Haida language

⁵ See the newspaper article entitled "Quadra Island Author Awarded Honorary Degree", published in *Campbell River Mirror* (Campbell River, B.C.), June 16, 2006: A16. This is a lengthy news release evidently issued by the University College of the Fraser Valley. The reasons why he was awarded the honorary degree are various, not just for the simple fact that "for the past 30 years, the eclectic Bringhurst has distinguished himself as poet, translator, and typographer," but also because he is "one of only a small number of Canadian poets who enjoy a bona fide international reputation" and so it is only fair that university should "recognize the extraordinary contribution he has made to literature and knowledge in general." Furthermore, "he speaks Haida, Spanish, Arabic, French, German, and has taught himself to read Old English, Greek, and Chinese." As a devoted student of the native cultures of North America, "he was a long-time artistic collaborator with the late Haida carver Bill Reid." Internationally, he has got a solid reputation as a typographer, and "his books on the art and craft of typography are hailed as among the finest contemporary works on the subject of fine press printing." What is more, "his magnificent three-volume work comprising translations of classical Haida mythology is recognized as one of the seminal documents in contemporary Native North American Studies" and his "scholarly publication *Prosodies of Meaning: Literary Form in Native North America* has enhanced his international reputation as one of the most insightful literary anthropologists extant." He is also internationally known for *The Elements of Typographic Style*, his use of language is impeccable, and with more than 30 books already written, he is "a true Renaissance man".

⁶ An entry devoted to Bringhurst in *International Who's Who in Poetry* (edited by Ernest Kay, International Bibliographical Centre, Cambridge, England) for the first time in the 5th edition (1977-78) reads as follows: "B., R. b. 16 Oct. 1946. Poet. Education: MIT; Univ. of Utah; BA, Ind. Univ., 1973; MFA, Univ. of BC, Can., 1975. Married Miki Cannon Sheffield. Positions held: Guest Ed., *Contemporary Literature in Translation*, 1974, 1976; Vis. Lectr., Univ. of BC, Dept. of Creative Writing, 1975-77; Contr. Ed. to var. Univ. presses, small presses & mags. Published works: *The Shipwright's Log*, 1972; *Cadastre*, 1973; *Deuteronomy*, 1974; *Eight Objects*, 1975; *Bergschrund*, 1975. Contributor to: *Poetry*; *Arion*; *Malabar Review*; *Kayak*; *Queen's Quarterly*; *Prism International*; *Mundus Artium*; *Contemporary Poetry in Translation*; *Ontario Review*, etc. Honours: Macmillan Prize for Poetry, 1975; Can. Coun. Arts Grant, 1975-76. Address: c/o Sono Nis Press, 1745, Blanshard St., Victoria, BC, Canada." (p. 68) Subsequent editions of *Who's Who in Poetry* expand the entry devoted to the author: seventh edition (1993/94), p. 43 (expanded); ninth edition (1999/2000), p. 39; tenth edition (2001/2002), p. 71; eleventh edition (2003), p. 44; twelfth edition (2004), p. 46; thirteenth edition (2005), pp. 45-46; fourteenth edition (2007), pp. 51-52. It is from the seventh edition that we have lifted the pieces of information regarding the honours awarded to Bringhurst.

⁷ "Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation", *ibid.*, p. 104.

can be seen in the three volumes of the monumental Classical Haida Mythtellers trilogy published by Douglas & McIntyre in 1999-2001.

Though Robert Bringhurst is a polymath, his first vocation is as a talented poet. He is the author of a prolific work that comprises books of poetry and prose essays elegantly written in perfect English. His command of the language is impeccable, the profundity of his thought simply admirable. The fertility of his invention knows of no limits and he is an indefatigable worker. This, coupled with the wide range of interests that fascinate him, accounts for the impressive body of work he has written over the last forty years. His *oeuvre* comprises works that fall into three distinct categories: (1) his volumes of poetry (short jewel-like lyrics of utter concision, dramatic monologues, polyphonic poems, myth-like narratives), (2) his scholarly work on the indigenous oral literatures of the First Nations of North America (particularly the classical literature and visual arts of the Haida) as a linguist, cultural historian and translator, and (3) his work on typography, language and ecological linguistics. Bringhurst's facets as poet, translator, cultural historian, linguist and typographer are inseparable though, for his intensely penetrating and beautiful mind cannot be compartmentalized. His omnivorous intelligence turns the world into an inexhaustible place of wonder that holds the promise of surprise all the time. It is indeed our presupposition that for Bringhurst to be the great typographer and book designer he is, he must be first of all a great linguist, someone keenly interested in human languages, a lover of language in the first place. The beautiful paradox at the heart of his work as a poet is that he favours speech over writing, that he conceives the poems that make up his "living repertory" as more the product of oral composition than writing, and yet he is a consummate typographer interested in the purely material or solid form of language. In the end, poetry precedes everything else and subsumes all his disparate interests under a precious *Gestalt*.

Bringhurst's career as a poet started early in the 1970s with the publication of his first poetry collections. His first two volumes – *The Shipwright's Log* (1972) and *Cadastre* (1973) – present the poet as territorial recorder, coming to terms with the world and trying to find a poetic voice truly his own. These were followed by *Pythagoras* (a Kanchenjunga Press broadside published in 1974) and *Eight Objects* (an eight-part sequence on the Presocratic philosophers, 1975), which marked the beginning of a true work in progress that culminated in the publication of *The Old in Their Knowing* in 2005, a suite of lyric meditations that captures the thinking and singing of the ancient Greek poet-philosophers. Bringhurst's first ground-breaking book of poems was entitled *Bergschrund* (1975); it compiled all the major poems from the two earliest poetry collections as well as those scattered in little literary magazines, finely-wrought broadsides and chapbooks to date. But the 1970s also witnessed the publication of three accomplished, moving dramatic monologues in beautiful limited-edition chapbooks: the Bible-inspired poems entitled *Deuteronomy* (1974) and *Jacob Singing* (1977), spoken respectively by Moses and Jacob preparing to die, and *The Stonecutter's Horses* (1979), on the last will and testament of the Italian poet-scholar Francesco Petrarca.

The 1980s and 1990s were prolific years for Bringhurst's poetry as well. During these decades the poet strengthens his commitment to a socially and environmentally centred avant-garde art. Also, he reiterates the privileged position of speech over the written word and devotes himself to the study of the First Nations, in particular the visual art and oral literature of the Haida. Thus, *Tzuhalem's Mountain. A Sonata in Three Movements* (1982) concerns "a hunchbacked, sausage-mottled, dead Coast Salish Indian named Tzuhalem" who lived with his wives and children on a mountain named after him, and the

long narrative poem *Tending the Fire: An Unparable of the Relations of Rabbits & Dogs & Old Women, &c.* (1985) recreates a creation-myth by Old Woman in which humans are given their attributes thanks to the generous intercession of Dog. Bringhurst's selected poems, *The Beauty of the Weapons: Selected Poems 1972-1982* (1982), anthologizes the major poems to 1982, whereas *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986) collects the subsequent poems with two important autobiographical essays ("Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation" and "Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre"). Characterized by a rich diversity and heterogeneity, the poems collected in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* endorse multiplicity rather than unity of voice; especially powerful is the sequence entitled "The Lyell Island Variations", based on poems by major poets of the Western canon like Rainer Maria Rilke, Pablo Neruda, Paul Valéry or René Char. Included in *Pieces* is the suite of dramatic impersonations devoted to the Oriental sages or Buddhist monk-thinkers, which would be also *a work in progress* till its finely-wrought publication as *The Book of Silences* (2001) by Ninja Press. In *The Blue Roofs of Japan: A Score for Interpenetrating Voices* (1986), Bringhurst undertakes a visually breathtaking experiment with typography: where 'voices' overlap, so do lines, one voice the light-blue ink shadow of the other. This experiment for two voices is the beginning of Bringhurst's charting or mapping of new territory – that of polyphonic poems, or poems for several voices. It was followed by *Conversations with a Toad* (1987), an accordion-like *livre d'artiste* designed by Éditions Lucie Lambert and a complex poem in ten sections for three voices. It was later revised in *The Calling* and in *Selected Poems*, where different ink colours are used to signal the different voices – *homo sapiens* (black ink), *homo narrans* (blue ink), *bufo boreas* (silent throughout).

The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995 (1995) further investigates the challenge of making poems through which several voices sing collaboratively to convey a complex message. The wide breadth of Bringhurst's work encompasses Native dialects, Chinese characters, and a multitude of meditative practices. This time Bringhurst takes the idea to its logical conclusion by producing another complex polyphonic poem, *New World Suite No. 3. A Poem in Four Movements for Three Voices* (published in a deluxe edition by the Centre for the Arts of the Book in 2005), an extraordinary tribute to the human voice which threads profundity of thought, ecological concerns and prosodic experimentation into a unique tapestry inspired by Glenn Gould's *Solitude Trilogy* (1967-1977). Another major accomplishment of Bringhurst is *Elements* (with drawings by Ulf Nilsen), published by Kuboaa Press in 1995, a complex meditation on the ultimate classical elements (water, earth, air and fire) that make up the world, possibly based on the example of the ancient Greek *physikoi* (the Presocratics of the sixth century BCE). With the arrival of the new century and new millennium, Bringhurst's poetic endeavors bloomed into full maturity and productivity. The first decade of the third millennium has witnessed the publication of another complex polyphonic and polyglot poem, *Ursa Major* (2003/2009), a dramatic poem on the moving myth of the Great Bear based on Greek, Roman and Cree sources, for several voices speaking classical Greek, Latin, Cree and English. Two sequences that had been a work in progress for a long time saw the light of day in special, finely-wrought editions: *The Book of Silences* (2001) and *The Old in Their Knowing* (2005). *New World Suite N° 3. A Poem in Four Movements for Three Voices* was also published in a special edition in 2005. *Parmenides. The Fragments* (Editions Koch, 2003) brought together the extant fragments of the Greek philosopher in an ambitious edition, conceived as the natural companion to "Parmenides", a central piece on a fundamental philosopher included in *The Old in Their Knowing*. More recently, Bringhurst has published another beautiful broadside, *First Meditation on Time* (Greenboathouse, 2008), as well as a new volume encompassing the best of his poetic output: *Selected Poems* (2009, Gaspereau Press; 2011, Copper Canyon Press).

Bringhurst is also a skilled linguist, a consummate translator and a probing cultural historian who has done research for many years in the field of the native cultures of North America, focusing particularly on their visual art and their oral literatures. The early 1980s marked the beginning of a life-long interest in the oral literature and visual arts of the Haida, a First Nation people living in Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands), an archipelago off the west coast of British Columbia. Bill Reid, the famous Haida master carver, and Bringhurst became close friends at a decisive moment in the poet's literary career's development. From Reid he learnt how to love best the legacy of a native people that has come to mean so much to him as a cultural historian, linguist, translator and poet – as a humanist concerned to study humankind in its manifold expressions. Bringhurst started to learn Haida on his own, producing his own dictionary and struggling to understand the transcriptions made by John Swanton of Haida myths and stories at the turn of the 20th century. Thus, Bringhurst's life-long passion with the Haida and their culture (and with the oral literatures of the First Nations) has produced an impressive body of work. In 1984 he collaborated with Haida artist Bill Reid to produce *The Raven Steals the Light*, consisting of ten episodes from Haida mythology illustrated by Reid's superb drawings of Raven and other mythological creatures. Collaborative work with Reid would also crystallize in the publication of *The Black Canoe: Bill Reid and the Spirit of Haida Gwaii* (with photographs by Ulli Steltzer) in 1991 (2nd, augmented ed. 1992), which received the Bill Duthie Bookseller's Choice Award in 1992, a magnificent essay on Reid's master work considered a classic of aboriginal art history. These two titles were followed by *Solitary Raven. The Selected Writings of Bill Reid* (2000) and *Solitary Raven: The Essential Writings of Bill Reid* (2nd expanded edition, 2009), both edited by Bringhurst, a tribute to the life and work of the great Haida artist. With Catherine McClellan et al., Bringhurst also edited and wrote portions of *Part of the Land, Part of the Water: A History of the Yukon Indians* (1987) and he also wrote a foreword for *Gágin̄dul.àt: Brought Forth to Reconfirm: The Legacy of a Taku River Tlingit Clan* (1993), by Elizabeth Nyman and Jeff Leer. More recently, he has contributed a prologue to François Mandeville's *This Is What They Say: Stories*, translated from Chipewyan by Ron Scollon (2009).

Bringhurst's keen interest in and devotion to Haida literature led to the impressive trilogy *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers* (1999-2001) – an ambitious study of the Haida and their world, followed by translations of Ghandl and Skaay. Bringhurst's major contribution to the study of the First Nations of North America so far is indeed his monumental trilogy *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers*, consisting of three volumes: *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World* (1999), nominated for a Governor General's Award; *Nine Visits to the Mythworld. Ghandl of the Qayabl Llaanas*, nominated for the Griffin Poetry Prize (2000); and *Being in Being. The Collected Works of a Master Haida Mythteller. Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay* (2001). As suggested above, he translated *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* and *Being in Being* directly from Haida texts originally phonetically transcribed by John Swanton (a young American anthropologist) on the Northwest Coast of North America in 1900. Among the legendary mythtellers were a blind man in his fifties by the name of Ghandl and Skaay, who proved to be a superb mythteller. By translating the sophisticated narrative poems of Ghandl and Skaay in sinewy language, Bringhurst rescued a cultural treasure on a par with Homer's epic poems from the mists of time and from the oblivion to which the transcriptions of oral literatures of the native people of North America seem to be condemned in library archives across America. These poems coming from an unfamiliar imaginative world have been studied by specialists more for its anthropological interest than its artistry, but Bringhurst's acute formal intelligence and command of the original language reveal poetry of vivacity and stature in myths that are a form of knowing the ultimate essence of reality in the hands of master tellers

endowed with a personal style. Together with the Presocratics and the Oriental sages, the great mythtellers of oral literature constitute another essential cornerstone in Bringhurst's personal canon. What all three had in common is a sort of intellectual and moral integrity, an archaic sense that humans are not the centre of the universe, but a tiny part in the living mesh of things. Furthermore, the Haida trilogy is accompanied by two major scholarly works on the oral literatures of North America – i.e., *Native American Oral Literatures and the Unity of the Humanities* (Garnett Sedgewick Memorial Lecture, 1998) and *Prosodies of Meaning: Literary Form in Native North America* (Belcourt Lecture, 2004). Other related titles are *Translating Haida Poetry: An Interview with Robert Bringhurst*, by Therese Rigaud (2002) and Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay, *Siixcha / Floating Overhead: The Qquuna Cycle 3.3.* (2007), a revised version of Skaay's text.

An authority on letterforms, limited editions, antiquarian books, and book design, Robert Bringhurst has also produced an impressive body of work on typography, language and the visual arts. Thus, in 1983 he edited *Visions: Contemporary Art in Canada* (with Geoffrey James, Russell Keziere & Doris Shadbolt), a major work on Canadian visual art since 1945. Among his earliest publications on book design and typography are *Ocean/Paper/Stone. The Catalogue of an Exhibition of Printed Objects which Chronicle More than a Century of Literary Publishing in British Columbia. Compiled by Robert Bringhurst* (1984), a history of fine art publishing in British Columbia and a catalogue important for establishing the primacy of B.C. as a centre for creative writing since the 1950s, as well as the monograph *Shovels, Shoes and the Slow Rotation of Letters. A Feuilleton in Honour of John Dreyfus* (1986), and *Pebble Pond Errata Slip: a Codicil to Ocean Paper Stone* (1987). The late 1980s and the 1990s were a prolific period for Bringhurst, who focused more and more on scholarly publications on typography. He became a contributing editor to the prestigious *Fine Print: A Review for the Arts of the Book* (1985-1990) and contributed a number of essays to different publications, such as Robert Fones' *Historiated Letters* (1994, including Bringhurst's essay "Literal Meaning") and *Peter Koch, Printer: Cowboy Surrealists, Maverick Poets & Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (1995). These were followed by *Boats Is Saintlier than Captains: Thirteen Ways of Looking at Morality, Language, and Design* (1997), a meditation on design in several sections in a beautifully edited book by Edition Rhino, as well as other collaborative ventures, such as *The Form of the Book. Essays on the Morality of Good Design* (1991) by Jan Tschichold, a tribute to Swiss modernist typographer, translated from the German by Hajo Haderer and edited with an introduction by Robert Bringhurst, and, with Warren Chappell, *A Short History of the Printed Word* (1999), an original work from 1970 revised and updated by Bringhurst. However, the major contribution in the field of typography is *The Elements of Typographic Style* (1st edition, 1992; 2nd edition, 1997/1999; 3rd edition, 2004), the typographer's Bible, a reference book for typographers all around the world and a classic in its field.

Over the last decade, the body of prose work of Robert Bringhurst on ecological linguistics, the preeminence of speech over writing, on poetry and nature, on nature and being, and on book design has been simply overwhelming. The author has progressively moved towards a more integrated view of the world where it does not make sense to compartmentalize reality into orderly clear-cut realms, for *being* is just one, the pervasive presence beneath everything we teach or try to apprehend, and poetry is in the very texture of the real. In this respect, Bringhurst's beautifully designed book *The Solid Form of Language. An Essay on Writing and Meaning* (2004) delves into the creative tensions between oral language and written script. In *Carving the Elements: A Companion to the Fragments of Parmenides* (2004), by Bringhurst et al., conceived as the companion volume of *Parmenides. The Fragments* (2003), the authors meditate on how best to embody an ancient text in its appropriate typographical form. His companion prose volumes *The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen*

Talks (2006; re-titled *The Tree of Meaning: Language, Mind and Ecology* by Counterpoint in 2009) and *Everywhere Being is Dancing: Twenty Pieces of Thinking* (2007) bring together his major lectures and essays on a wide range of related topics, as they contemplate the connections between poetry, language, nature and philosophy in elegantly written prose that is a pleasure to read. In 2002 he contributed two important essays (“Thinking and Singing” and “The Philosophy of Poetry and the Trashing of Doctor Empedokles”) to the volume *Thinking and Singing. Poetry and the Practice of Philosophy*, edited by Tim Lilburn and including essays by Robert Bringhurst with Dennis Lee, Tim Lilburn, Don McKay, and Jan Zwicky. In 2004 he contributed another beautiful piece, “Shouldering Civilization: The Private Search for Public Good”, an essay on typographic history with special reference to the work of Barbarian Press, to *Hoi Barbaroi; a Quarter-Century at Barbarian Press, with Essays by Invitation & a Photographic Essay by David Evans* (2004), edited by Crispin Elsted, and 2005 witnessed the publication of *And, Much More, Not Ourselves: The Work of Jan & Crispin Elsted*. Other recent titles are *The Typographic Mind* (2006) and *Wild Language* (2006); an essay based on Bringhurst’s keynote lecture at the Codex Symposium held at UC Berkeley in 2007, “Spiritual Geometry: The Book as a Work of Art”, published in *Book Art Object* (2008), edited by David Jury; *Why There Are Pages and Why They Must Turn* (2008), part of *Codex Monograph Series +1*, including two more essays by Peter Koch and Alan Loney, respectively; *The Surface of Meaning: Books and Book Design in Canada* (2009); and *What Is Reading For* (2011).

Needless to say, Bringhurst has produced innumerable other prose pieces, essays and reviews scattered in literary magazines and journals that have not been collected anywhere else, not even in his comprehensive prose volumes *The Tree of Meaning* and *Everywhere Being Is Dancing*, which bring together his major essays. Among those precious essays are, for instance, “Breathing Through the Feet: an Autobiographical Meditation” and “Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre” (published in book form at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, 1986), but also “Off the Road: Journeys in the Past, Present and Future of Canadian Literature”,⁸ published in *Margin 7* (1988): 82–93, “That Also Is You. Some Classics of Native Canadian Literature”,⁹ in *Canadian Literature* 124–5 (Spring 1990: 32–47), and “Raven Travelling: Page One: A Lost Haida Text by Skaai of the Qquuna Qiighawaai, Transcribed at Skidegate in October 1900 by John Swanton, Edited & Translated by Robert Bringhurst”, in *Canadian Literature* 144 (1995): 98–111. Other important prose writings include “At Home in the Difficult World” in *Tasks of Passion: Dennis Lee at Mid-Career*, ed. Karen Mulhallen (1982): 57-81; “Finding the Place” in *Ocean/Paper/Stone* (1984): 15-32, his valuable catalogue of literary publishing in British Columbia; and “A Story as Sharp as a Knife, Part 3: The Polyhistorical Mind”, *Canadian Studies* 29.2 (Summer 1994): 165-175). These are only instances. Other essays and shorter prose pieces of indisputable value are even rarer and more difficult to find. At any rate, a detailed bibliography of Bringhurst’s work is provided at the end of our dissertation.

Robert Bringhurst is a serious author, intensely committed to the calling of his art. He thinks deeply and beautifully too; he has got a rare *claritas* of mind. It is only natural that he should be a perfectionist. A common practice with Bringhurst since the beginning of his literary career has been the publication of his poems and prose pieces in literary magazines and journals, in the form of limited-edition broadsides, chapbooks or well-wrought publications before they eventually find their way into a book. This, of course, is closely

⁸ “Off the Road: Journeys in the Past, Present and Future of Canadian Literature” was reprinted in *Best Canadian Essays 1989*, ed. Douglas Fetherling (1989): 185-194.

⁹ “This Also Is You: Some Classics of Native Canadian Literature” was reprinted in *Native Writers and Canadian Writing*, ed. W.H. New, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990: 32-47.

connected to Bringhurst's own notion that all his writing is actually a work in progress of gigantic proportions that he has been revising and polishing upon time and again in search of the ideal or definitive textual incarnation. His work is born out of the voice rather than of writing, even if his words ultimately manage to find their solid embodiment into beautiful writing. Or, to put it differently, Bringhurst's poems and prose meditations thrive on living air or speech, and spend a long time looking for their proper oral and written incarnation, as it were. His habit of revising, sometimes extensively, his own work as being made of little parts that form an organic whole or *Gestalt* makes any exhaustive attempt at chronology a difficult task. Many of his poems or essays saw the light of day for the first time in prestigious literary magazines or in the form of lectures delivered at universities around the world, were later revised as they were included in a book, even further revised in subsequent textual incarnations (in magazines, other authors' books and anthologies).

Studying any single poem or prose piece is therefore a complex enterprise. If Bringhurst values technique as the test of an author's sincerity, "as evidence of his commitment to something more than a private audience with the gods",¹⁰ clarity, precision and faithfulness to the facts are the test of any student of literature who aims at making some modest contribution in a given field of study. Therefore, we have read carefully all the primary work of the author, as well as most of the secondary sources listed in the bibliography of Robert Bringhurst at the end of this thesis. Bringhurst's poems are living organisms, endowed with a life of their own and subject to perpetual metamorphosis all the time, so much so that, throughout our dissertation, we have tried to trace the editorial history of every single poem and noted down relevant textual variants, normally in footnotes, as customary scholarly practice prescribes. Similarly, we have tried to track down all the relevant and informative criticism available to date that might shed some light on the proper understanding of Bringhurst's work. To the best of our knowledge, despite the impressive, overwhelming bulk of valuable writing he has produced, no book-length study of Robert Bringhurst's work has been completed so far. There are hundreds of reviews and essays published in little magazines, newspapers and scholarly journals; there are entries in companions and encyclopaedias on Canadian literature, as well as critical commentaries accompanying anthology selections in important compilations of Canadian poetry, short stories and essays; there are even translations of Bringhurst's poems, essays and books into several modern languages (Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Greek, Czech, Chinese, Dutch, Icelandic, Latvian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Polish, Russian, Serbo-Croatian and Swedish). In addition, some doctoral theses have been published, none of which focuses exclusively on Robert Bringhurst's poetry:

- (1) Elisa Morera de la Vall, *The Trickster: A Recurring Figure in Commonwealth Literature*. Dissertation submitted at the Universitat Central de Barcelona in 1994. It consists of two parts: part one deals with African trickster tales in the novels of Chinua Achebe; part two deals with Mordechai Richler's use of *The Raven Steals the Light* in his novel *Solomon Gurski Was Here*.
- (2) Johanna Hiemstra, *The Storyteller and Indigenous Canadian Oral Narratives: A Study of the Relationship of Contemporary Storytellers to the Remembered Indigenous Oral Narratives*. M.A. thesis submitted at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, 1995. It concerns the study of three mythtellers: Esther Jacko, Louis Bird and Robert Bringhurst.
- (3) Nicholas P.R. Bradley, *Ecology and Knowledge in the Poetry of Pacific North America*. Dissertation submitted at the University of Toronto in 2006. This thesis discusses "the works of five poets, each affiliated to some extent with the west coast of North America: Robinson

¹⁰ "Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation", *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, p. 106.

Jeffers, Gary Snyder, Don McKay, Jan Zwicky, and Robert Bringhurst.... I demonstrate first that Jeffers and Snyder depict a world marked by intricate interrelationships and dependencies; they attempt to explore the essence of the world by escaping an anthropocentric point of view.... In turn I demonstrate that Bringhurst incorporates into his poetry elements of various mythologies and Buddhist philosophy in order to create a poetics of radical anti-anthropocentrism. I conclude by discussing the question of political efficacy in contemporary nature poetry.”

Our contribution to the existing bibliography on Robert Bringhurst’s work is then a comprehensive study of his entire poetic corpus, in search of patterns and keys for a proper understanding of his place in the context of world poetry. It is our assumption that Bringhurst belongs among a literary generation of Canadian poets (Dennis Lee, Jan Zwicky, Tim Lilburn and Don McKay) who share similar concerns and the same awe-inspiring landscape of the West Coast, but his voice is distinctly unique, his command of the English language masterly, his sharpness of mind and intelligence impressive, his knowledge of other literary traditions and languages unparalleled, and the profundity of thought and the ambitious scope of his work unsurpassed by any of his fellow contemporaries.¹¹ In one sense, he is a true heir (possibly one of the last heirs) to the High Modernist poets: Ezra Pound (the acknowledged master), T. S. Eliot, William Butler Yeats, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams. But in another sense, he is an heir to the best tradition of great world poetry, one that seeks truth, beauty and eternity in what it accomplishes. His poetry is atemporal and universal inasmuch as it is concerned with something transcending the private sphere of the human. The human and the non-human are all inextricably linked into what he calls *being* or *poetry*, which is indestructible and sublime, and precedes us humans and nonhumans alike. The fundamental lesson that he teaches us throughout the entire work of a whole lifetime is that poetry has nothing quintessentially to do with words, that it is an attribute of *being*, and that poetry, like philosophy and science, is but one mode of knowing reality. Valuable poems are those that stand the test of being placed next to trees, grass, stones, birds or streams and being able to pay homage to *what is*.

And last, but not least, we have done our best to write our thesis in simple, clear, understandable language. We have struggled with words for hours on end, trying to make them communicate what we intended them to convey. Poetry, thinking and singing are no easy subjects to discuss after all; writing in not so clumsy language is not easy either. Style, which is an indisputable part of one’s personality, is of the essence when it comes to tackling the all-important matters of poetry and being, speech and mind, human knowledge and ancestors, love and compassion. This is what our dissertation is all about: a tentative (and humble) approximation to the work of a beautiful mind that has spent a whole lifetime thinking deeply *of* and *for* us humans as belonging among something grander than ourselves which is called *being*. A long time ago, Bringhurst said he wished to make poems that Ezra Pound might have admired if he had had a chance to read them aloud; we wish we could have fulfilled the even more modest task of writing a PhD thesis that Robert

¹¹ That Robert Bringhurst is one of the best poets on the Canadian and international scene, or one of the most respected Canadian poets in the world, is made clear by words like these: “Bringhurst’s admirers, whether fellow poets (such as Spender, John Newlove, and Al Purdy) or poet-critics (Peter Sanger and Iain Higgins, his most ardent readers), have been effusive in their praise. Guy Davenport, for example, called Bringhurst “Canada’s best poet” and “a first rate poet, and like none other.” *Selected Poems* is an utterly convincing demonstration of the aptness of such praise.” See Nicholas Bradley’s review of *Selected Poems* (2009), published in *The Malahat Review* 169 (Winter 2009): 97-102. See, in particular, p. 101. Bradley adds, “Replete with mountain songs and songs of what Wallace Stevens called “the end of the mind,” *Selected Poems* is an essential book.” *Ibid.*, p. 102.

Bringhurst might admire. At any rate, there is at least passion, humility, gratitude and strength in the pages that follow, written in a language which is not our mother tongue. He has given us plenty of gifts to all his fellow human beings; this is our personal gift to him.

II · Tradition, Erudition & the Practice of Translation

Robert Bringhurst belongs to a literary generation of Canadian poets living and writing in the second half of the twentieth century and in the early decades of the twenty-first century. His poetic generation is the so-called Group of Five – i.e., Jan Zwicky, Don McKay, Dennis Lee and Tim Lilburn. All of them share the same compulsion towards intellectualization, the same keen interest in poetry as a mode of getting to know what is going at all in the world, as a form of coping with and penetrating the ultimate essence of things, as if they all were searching after an irreducible core of meaning at the heart of the cosmos. Other subtle poetic affiliations of Bringhurst include Kerry Shawn Keys, Michael J. Yates, Roo Borson, Crispin Elsted, Robin Skelton, Christopher Dedwney, Peter Sanger and American poet Gary Snyder, for whose *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village* (2007), a detailed anthropological study of a well-known Haida myth by Ghandl, Bringhurst wrote a brilliantly deft foreword. With Gary Snyder he shares an interest in the Far East, in Oriental literatures, in the Buddhist monks and sages. Snyder himself translated a handful of Han Shan's poems in his *Cold Mountain Poems*, published for the first time in *Evergreen Review* no. 6 in 1958. For his part, Bringhurst devotes a wonderful piece to this Oriental poet in his sequence of lyric meditations entitled *The Book of Silences* (2001). In any case, with all of the West Coast poets Bringhurst shares the same elemental landscape – one made up of mountains and stones, streams, rivers and lakes, birds and innumerable other animal species, grass, lichen, moss and trees. The forest is of paramount importance to them; the vast expanses covered with different tree species around which complex ecosystems unfold naturally in harmony is an inexhaustible source of inspiration to them. In *This Is My Country, What's Yours?: A Literary Atlas of Canada*, Noah Richler suggests that Canada is a big forest:

Canada is a forest. [...] ... this new metaphor, this change in our thinking, is what's needed. The idea of the forest encourages a change in our imaginative conception of Canada that is true to the spirit of the land and the people who are on it. It is a sensibility that Robert Bringhurst brought to my attention by Heriot Bay, where it struck me that the root of Canadian thinking was grounded in this other metaphor of woods. Cities now have a preponderance in Canadian life, but this does not mean that lessons are not to be drawn from the example of these less humanly populated lands. The forest, remember, was Man's first house. The "multiculturalism" that we assume defines our age existed in Nature long before we spoke of it as a Canadian virtue. Heterogeneity is a *natural*, not a political state.¹²

To Northrop Frye, author of the classic *The Bush Garden. Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (1971) and Margaret Atwood, author of *Survival. A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), Canada was a place of wilderness, an overwhelmingly hostile natural world, a monster, a blank space of gloomy or uncanny connotations.¹³ To Atwood, the

¹² See Noah Richler, *This Is My Country, What's Yours?: A Literary Atlas of Canada*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006: 48–54, 82–83, 459. Chapter 2, "Stories and What They Do," is based largely on a reading of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* and on interviews and correspondence with Bringhurst. See pp. 458–459.

¹³ In his "Preface to an Uncollected Anthology" Northrop Frye writes: "It is not a nation but an environment that makes an impact on poets, and poetry can deal only with the imaginative aspect of that environment. A country with almost no Atlantic seaboard, which for most of its history has existed in practically one

central preoccupations of Canadian poetry and fiction are survival and victims.¹⁴ Frye identifies the central theme of Canadian poetry as being the fact that “life struggles and suffers in a nature which is blankly indifferent to it,” just on account of “the frightening loneliness of a huge and thinly-settled country.” What the poet sees when he turns to nature is “a stolid unconsciousness.”¹⁵ And he concludes his essay “Canada and Its Poetry” with these enlightening words:

To sum up, Canadian poetry is at its best a poetry of incubus and *cauchemar*, the source of which is the unusually exposed contact of the poet with nature which Canada provides. Nature is seen by the poet, first as unconsciousness, then as a kind of existence which is cruel and meaningless, then as the source of the cruelty and subconscious stampeding within the human mind. As compared with American poets, there has been comparatively little, outside Carman, of the cult of the rugged outdoor life which idealizes nature and tries to accept it. Nature is consistently sinister and menacing in Canadian poetry. And here and there we find glints of a vision beyond nature, a refusal to be bullied by space and time, an affirmation of the supremacy of intelligence and humanity over stupid power.¹⁶

However, Frye also writes in the same essay these prophetic words: “One is surprised to find how few really good Canadian poets have thought that getting out of cities into God’s great outdoor really brings one closer to the sources of inspiration.”¹⁷ These words apply to Bringhurst, no doubt. He is well aware that there is much to learn from stones, trees and birds. Poetry is out there and poems are nothing but a form of capturing it through recognizably human words. Now, Noah Richler informs us that “Bringhurst lives in the forest, he breathes the forest. It is there his spirits soar.”¹⁸ And he goes on to tell us that “In the world as Bringhurst sees it, the big exists alongside the small, and the forest that appeared merely dense to me was, in his view, positively teeming with life forms that were busily interdependent. An ecosystem in which humans, too, played their part.”¹⁹ The forest provides the poet with a living example of what it means to live in a polyphonic world, a world of biological diversity and spontaneous multiplicity where a relationship of mutual dependence is established among its dwellers:

A multitude of voices is the sine qua non of our continuing to be,” said Bringhurst. “The forest continues to exist *because* it is a multifarious organism. If it is reduced to a monoculture, then it ceases to be self-sustaining. It becomes an artificial plantation that can only keep going by the studious application of more and more fertilizer and more and more human interference, because in a proper ecology the

dimension; a country divided by two languages and great stretches of wilderness, so that its frontier is a circumference rather than a boundary; a country with huge rivers and islands that most of its natives have never seen [...]: this is the environment that Canadian poets have to grapple with, and many of the imaginative problems it presents have no counterpart in the United States, or anywhere else.” See Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden. Essays on the Canadian Imagination*, Concord (Ontario): House of Anansi Press, 1971 (1995, introduction by Linda Hutcheon), p. 166.

¹⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Survival. A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996 (first published by Anansi, 1972). Atwood writes: “A preoccupation with one’s survival is necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival. In earlier writers these obstacles are external – the land, the climate, and so forth. In later writers the obstacles tend to become both harder to identify and more internal; they are no longer obstacles to physical survival but obstacles to what we may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being.” (p. 33).

¹⁵ Northrop Frye, *ibid.*, pp. 140-141.

¹⁶ Northrop Frye, *ibid.*, 143-144.

¹⁷ Northrop Frye, *ibid.*, pp. 138-139.

¹⁸ Noah Richler, *ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁹ Noah Richler, *ibid.*, p. 50.

parts feed each other and feed *on* each other. The whole sustains itself by never being committed to one form.²⁰

To Bringhurst, and to many of his contemporary fellow poets, Nature is not a monster, not a hostile place. When Bringhurst goes to the mountains or to the woods, he comes back whole to his study. He listens to the teeming forms of life he finds there with open ears; he looks at the varied world he finds there with open eyes. He knows how to pay attention, how to breathe through the feet. What he finds in Nature is poetry, which precedes human speech and human perception. The world does not need *us* to keep on existing, even if we egoistic humans might think we are absolutely indispensable. Mark Dickinson claims that “an ecological renaissance” is under way in Canada right now, especially among the “Group of Five”.²¹ Dickinson’s essay is important for it claims that Bringhurst belongs among a group of four poets that are also concerned with thinking and singing through poetry as a way of accessing a more organic form of truth. And, indeed, the essays they contributed to *Thinking and Singing* (edited by Tim Lilburn in 2002) all betray an interest in Nature, knowledge, being, metaphor²² and wisdom. All of them appear to be poet-philosophers concerned to ask fundamental questions “about how we perceive and think and relate to non-human nature, questions that encourage us to look beyond the language of sustainability and reconsider the basic facts of our very existence. Instead of Northrop Frye’s iconic “Where is here?” they ask, “What is here?” and “How to be here?” To them, a livable future depends on [...] tackling the difficult work of crawling out from under a constricting account of reality.”²³ And yet Bringhurst, Zwicky, Lee, McKay and Lilburn form no school of poetry, they do not conform to a particular aesthetic stance. Their poetry is characterized by a wide range of cultural references, particularly to philosophical traditions almost forgotten in the West:

As poets, they remain hard to categorize or classify. They aren’t a school of poetry, or a movement conforming to a particular aesthetic stance. There is no manifesto

²⁰ Noah Richler, *ibid.*, p. 459. And Richler adds: “The forest is about balance, and thinking through co-existence. [...] And the forest, like the city, has the promise of surprise. It is a place of wonder, of security – and of danger too, if one does not heed certain basic rules.” *Ibid.*, p. 459.

²¹ See Mark Dickinson’s “Canadian Primal: Five Poet-Thinkers Redefine Our Relationship to Nature”, *The Walrus* (Toronto) 6.5 (June 2009): 62-65. Essay on the “Group of Five” (Lee, McKay, Bringhurst, Zwicky, and Lilburn) who appear in Tim Lilburn’s anthology *Thinking and Singing*. Dickinson claims the following: “There’s an ecological renaissance under way in Canada right now, but chances are you haven’t heard of it, because it is flowering in one of the most ignored and feared regions of the high arts: poetry. Its chief proponents – Robert Bringhurst, Dennis Lee, Tim Lilburn, Don McKay, and Jan Zwicky, all major Canadian poets – have together earned around a dozen nominations for Governor General’s Literary Awards, in addition to numerous other accolades, such as the prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize. As rewarding as their work is, it has yet to be discovered by a wider audience.” Nicholas P.R. Bradley, in a dissertation entitled *Ecology and Knowledge in the Poetry of Pacific North America* submitted at University of Toronto (2006), discusses “the works of five poets, each affiliated to some extent with the west coast of North America: Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder, Don McKay, Jan Zwicky, and Robert Bringhurst.” He demonstrates that “Bringhurst incorporates into his poetry elements of various mythologies and Buddhist philosophy in order to create a poetics of radical anti-anthropocentrism.”

²² According to Frye, the most important shaping principle of an individual poem is metaphor, which, in its radical form, is “a statement of identity: this is that, A is B. Metaphor is at its purest and most primitive in myth, where we have immediate and total identifications” *The Bush Garden*, p. 179. Jan Zwicky has written an important book-length essay entitled *Wisdom & Metaphor* (2003) on metaphor as a mode of knowing reality and of formulating the truth of subtle connections that bring disparate things together. In her important *Lyric Philosophy* (1992) she explores the way poetry and philosophy are inextricably linked to one another in humans’ epistemological confrontation with the world. More recently, in *Plato as Artist* (2009), she dwells on the literary artistry of one of Plato’s major dialogues (*Meno*).

²³ Mark Dickinson’s “Canadian Primal: Five Poet-Thinkers Redefine Our Relationship to Nature”, *The Walrus* (Toronto) 6.5 (June 2009): 62-65.

or program, no chief ideologue, no overarching theory. Their poetry isn't "ecological" because they refer to sharp-shinned hawks or bird's nest lichen. Complicating matters, they continually refer to a number of disparate philosophical traditions that are largely forgotten in the West – Presocratic Greek thought, the wisdom of Taoist and Buddhist Asia, native North American oral literature, medieval Christian mysticism – along with classical musicians, continental philosophers, and even Bob Dylan. Reading them is, in short, akin to learning Chinese: deeper understanding requires knowledge of a web of cultural references and intellectual ancestors.²⁴

Two crucial anthologies by Tim Lilburn bring all five poets together – *Poetry and Knowing* (1995) and *Thinking and Singing* (2002). What they have in common is that they are poet-thinkers, but the fact that they are all “university educated and philosophically engaged” does not mean that they simply juxtapose philosophical ideas lifted from different sources into the living fabric of poems. Each of them has found their own voice, their own way of making poems in “a way of writing that can be said to think poetically through a dance of ideas, images, sounds, and feelings that enact connectedness”. Each of them finds in poetry their purest form of thinking deeply, beautifully and intensely. When this kind of thinking takes place, something happens, and that something is poetry according to Bringhurst. Mark Dickinson claims that this is a major undertaking, for they bring *thinking* and *singing* together. Whereas the former has traditionally been associated with cool reason and the analytic mode characteristic of rational thought and science, the latter is more related to the realm of emotions, ethics, beliefs and values. However, these thinking and singing poets have managed to fuse both together into a unique integrated prism. In the whole process, they have stumbled upon a fluid mode of thinking in which metaphor has turned out to be of the essence to their own poetics. Words are multilayered entities, repositories of complex meaning that unveil the subtle connections at the heart of the world, and so the interconnectedness of reality as a continuum is emulated by the words on the page. The multiplicity of resonances associated to words as well as “the binding properties of metaphor” shed light on the innermost recesses of reality, which is fluid, changeable, beautifully complex. They use poetry to think and to sing the textures and rhythms of the world.²⁵

In another sense, Robert Bringhurst is not just merely a Canadian poet writing in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. He is a High Modernist poet, an heir to Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams. He writes with the whole weight of tradition upon his shoulders, in his bones. Like his Modernist predecessors, he is in search after the universal, after great poetry capable of transcending spatial and temporal barriers. For poetry to be able to do this, it has to explore deeply realms other than the exclusively human, for *music which is too human is not human enough*. To Bringhurst's mind, tradition is not a burden, but a treasure. His poems form part of something grander than his own poetic corpus or entire oeuvre. They are a contribution to an ongoing reservoir where only the best that has been thought and said belongs. But the personal canon of Bringhurst is not confined to an Eurocentric or Western tradition alone. He embraces the oral literatures of the First Nations of North America, which are full of wisdom and a sound knowledge of the essence of things. And he also embraces the thinking of the earliest sages of Western philosophy as embodied by the Presocratic poet-philosophers, whose beautiful minds were incapable of

²⁴ Mark Dickinson's “Canadian Primal: Five Poet-Thinkers Redefine Our Relationship to Nature”, *The Walrus* (Toronto) 6.5 (June 2009): 62-65.

²⁵ Mark Dickinson's “Canadian Primal: Five Poet-Thinkers Redefine Our Relationship to Nature”, *The Walrus* (Toronto) 6.5 (June 2009): 62-65.

compartmentalizing poetry, philosophy and science into separate, unconnected categories, as well as the thinking and the singing of the Oriental sages – Buddhist monk-scholars who lived in India, China and Japan a long time ago. What Bringhurst aims to do is to rescue these tattered fragments of wisdom from the past and to preserve them in portable, fluid poems that are kayaks he can share with his fellow human beings. That is why he says his poems are his gifts to humankind.

In the framework of a historical conscience which is this broad, thousands of years in the history of humankind are nothing to Bringhurst: Homer, the Presocratics (Herakleitos, Pythagoras, Empedokles, Parmenides and Demokritos, among them), the Oriental sages (Nagarjuna, Sengzhao, Saraha, Dogen and Hakuin, for instance), Ovid, Lucretius, biblical figures like Moses or Jacob, Imr al-Qais, Francesco Petrarca, Thoreau, Emerson and Melville, Ghandl and Skaay, Martin Heidegger, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens and Rainer Maria Rilke, García Lorca and Pablo Neruda, Boas, Swanton, Sapir, Bloomfield, Dell Hymes, Bill Reid, Northrop Frye, linguists, contemporary scientists and anthropologists are all coexistent on the same atemporal plane as it were. The use of allusions and intertextuality in a sort of *recombinatory poetics* are recurrent strategies in Bringhurst's poetry; they are reminders that his poems fit into a larger scheme. This wide-ranging tradition encompassing different authors and periods, the best that has been thought and said in the past, is multicultural and multilingual, and so learning other languages is of paramount importance to Bringhurst's ambitious enterprise. The importance of translating from other languages is simply incommensurable as well, for the practice of translation allows the author to get in contact with the literary mind embedded in other languages.

Originality is largely a matter of returning to origins, of studying and imitating the masters and great poets of the past. Indeed, his own personal project is ambitious enough: apart from wanting to learn "all the words and grammars in the world," as he announces in the foreword to *The Calling* (1995), he is trying to capture the best of human knowledge, the most profound insights into the essence of reality that humankind has attained over the centuries. Poems offer him the possibility to capture the poetry of *what is*, even though he is well aware that there are other alternative paths leading to the heart of things. Science and philosophy are such other paths: they are ways of speaking to the world, ways of comprehending reality. In his poems, poetry, science and philosophy belong together or go hand in hand as it were. In any case, poetry is not self-expression in Bringhurst's view. He has got a keen interest in *what is*, in what exists, in fundamental or ultimate questions, for the world is much more interesting than egoistic human beings that tend to see themselves as the centre of the universe. Thus, Bringhurst places himself squarely in a tradition that conceives of poetry as a mode of knowing characterized by objectivity and impersonality, not as narcissistic self-expression. The use of the dramatic monologue in such poems as those on the biblical figures of the Pentateuch – Moses in *Deuteronomy* (1974) and Jacob in *Jacob Singing* (1977) –, or in the long poem on Petrarch preparing to die in *The Stonecutter's Horses* (1979), or even in the shorter dramatic impersonations of the Oriental sages in *The Book of Silences* (2001), is reminiscent of Robert Browning and Ezra Pound's defense of objectivity, detachment, emotional non-involvement. It allows Bringhurst to revisit the minds of great human beings that gained a valuable insight into reality, though the emphasis is not on psychological investigation or penetration as is the case with Browning, for instance.

Beyond the Canadian scene, Bringhurst's poetic affiliations as Modernist poet make him an heir to the best of High Modernism (Pound, Eliot, Yeats, Stevens, Williams) in its

concern with history, culture and tradition. In his fascination with Nature and the perception of the world, it is our presumption that he is closely related to Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and, more recently, to such American poets as Gary Snyder, A.R. Ammons and John Ashbery. But of all these poets, Pound is the real model, the ultimate acknowledged master. Pound taught Bringham the love of other languages and of literary traditions other than Western ones, the importance of translating and of studying prosody (the sonic texture of words), the value of technique in a poet's craftsmanship, the need to seek the company of past masters, and the seriousness of a poet's calling. Great poetry has to be produced at any cost; it does not matter much who does the writing. But Bringham went even beyond Pound's achievements. Like the master, he has learnt classical and modern languages, he reads in and translates from other literary traditions, he travels widely in a wide world where he feels at home anywhere he happens to be, he writes elegant prose pieces and essays that are a pleasure to read, he thinks deeply and beautifully to produce poems that honour the gods, humans and nonhumans, and the world at large. But, unlike the master, Bringham is a polymath with a round education in a wide range of disciplines and he is interested in the impressive body of oral literature of the native peoples of North America, he has learnt several native languages and translated the classical literature of the Haida, as well as pieces from other languages like Navajo or Cree. What is more, he has mastered the art of typography and has become a respected scholar on the international scene. He has produced over 30 books of poetry and prose, meditations on language, poetry and philosophy, thinking and singing, writing and speech, ecological linguistics, pre-Socratic and eastern philosophy, typography and book design, translation and the visual arts, and on the indigenous oral literatures of North America. His is an omnivorous curiosity; his is a beautiful mind that can think deeply, intensely, vehemently and beautifully. But at the bottom, or at the basis, of his personal enterprise is the Modernist intimation that poetry is a serious aesthetic experience, a form of knowing reality, a secular *work in progress* of the human spirit based on a multicultural and polyglot tradition, a way of touching truth and eternity, a way also of capturing beauty, a challenge to time, a form of getting to know humankind and celebrating the mystery inherent in *what is*. This is no dispensable agenda, no minor achievement.

When T.S. Eliot composed *The Waste Land* and it eventually saw the light of day in 1922, he was not completely aware that he had produced a masterwork that would have a tremendous impact on subsequent poets writing in English. It was the Modernist poem *par excellence*, as well as a sort of Modernist manifesto, along with the influential essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), written three years earlier. The elemental lesson Eliot taught was that tradition is 'the juice of the past' and the lifeblood of poetry, and that tradition leaves nothing *en route*. The originality of this complex poetic enterprise as embodied in *The Waste Land* is that, by deploying allusions, references, echoes, quotes and notes, the author aims towards the total poem. The erudition and intertextuality at the heart of Eliot's poem evoke a disorienting simultaneity and invoke a tradition in which the best that has been written and thought in the past appears to coexist simultaneously on the same plane. Thus, European literature and culture (Ovid, Wagner) and Western philosophy (St. Augustine) appear side by side next to Eastern literature and philosophy (Buddha, Sanskrit). This sheer multiplicity of literary and philosophical traditions is invoked to summon up some form of universal truth common to humankind in its entirety. *The Waste Land* must have taught Bringham the importance of tradition. But there is much more to Eliot's complex poem – i.e., the Babel-like dimension of *The Waste Land*, the fact that it is a polyglot, multilingual or plurilingual poem. Modern languages (English, Italian, French, German) and classical languages (Sanskrit, the sacred language of the *Veda* and the *Upanishads*, and Latin) are threaded into the living tapestry of this poem that seeks to touch

the original *logos*, as it were. This is the total poem comprising or embracing all human languages in an attempt to convey the truth of humankind, to penetrate the essence and nature of things, to bring about salvation amid the stark barrenness of the ‘waste land’ of Western civilization after World War I. And the words of Eliot’s poem seek to convey the music of poetry, intended to pervade the senses and the intellect before the reader actually attains a rational apprehension of the poem. The musicality of free verse was no minor achievement either. On the other hand, there was also a crucial religious dimension to *The Waste Land* that is to be understood against the historical background in which the poem saw the light of day. The impact of World War I on the European consciousness brought about a sense of spiritual barrenness and the intimation that a terrible waste land had been widespread throughout Europe on the aftermath of the Great War. ‘I can connect nothing with nothing’: nothing makes sense anymore; the luring attraction of chaos and the fearful symmetry of order coalesce in the poet’s mind in the face of the unspeakable horror of the war. In this respect, *The Waste Land* is a sort of chant on the bloody war which was the Great War. “The War suffocates me,” says Eliot. But it is not meant as ‘prophetic statement’ according to the poet. The religious dimension and failed or loveless encounters that punctuate this Modernist poem point to a spiritual message of utter desolation at the break-up of the Judeo-Christian past. This is an unoptimistic, un-Christian and un-American poem. Amid a desperate spiritual quest, in the face of an absent God, the poet feels that salvation can be provided by alternative religious traditions (Buddhism). The flesh has been rent also from the spirit, as the loveless, violent failed sexual unions seem to suggest throughout the poem.

The literary milieu where Eliot’s poem was born is also worth considering. The rise of an audience for Modernist writing was a long process. In the USA American magazines fostered ‘bland escapism’ and ‘Imagist stylization’, whereas in Europe the vagueness and derivativeness of late Victorian and Post-Romantic poetics dominated the scene. There was certainly an excess of sentimentalism, associated to vacuous or ‘empty’ words, to ornate stylization. The avant-garde movements (Imagism, Vorticism, Surrealism) and the several – *isms* of the early decades of the twentieth century were a reaction to the poetry being produced in the pre-Modernist era in general, characterized largely by vagueness, appeals to nature and to God and Platonic idealism. Amid the post-‘90s decadence, there was a keen awareness of the sophistication of UK poetry vs. the barbarism of USA. Against this background, something happened: the eclipse of serious poetry by fiction, conceived as a portrayal of ‘real life’. Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce produced their impressive novels and started delving into the stream of consciousness of their characters. Amid these circumstances, there took place the growth of literacy and rise of an audience willing to listen to a new kind of muscular, erudite, difficult poetry, appealing not only to sentiment, but mostly to the intellect. In this context, Eliot’s contributions were of paramount importance: (1) the music-hall syncopation and pub vulgarity, the informal style of the layman and the ordinary voices of quotidian existence, the conversational tone and the rhythms of everyday speech were incorporated into poetry to tackle profound issues (beauty, truth, eternity); (2) the depiction of sordid urban scenes or urban scenes of modern life, thus enlarging the boundaries of the *materia poetica* traditionally explored by poetry; (3) a meditation on consciousness and its aridities, on the gloomy and sombre spiritual bareness of the world, on the naked soul responding to the horror, uncertainty and anxiety that prevailed after the Great War; (4) the love of precision, close observation, intelligence, objectivity and the actual recording of chiaroscuro reality; (5) the collapse of metaphysical assumptions regarding the unity of the soul, which was a reaction against Romantic self-expression, against vague sentimentalism, against ‘vacuity’; and (6) the impact of this new modern poetry on the traditional values, respectability and morality of upper-class audiences. In a nutshell, the poetics of High Modernism embraced

the use of such devices or strategies as fragmentation, discontinuity, juxtaposition, collage, ambiguity, irony, gaps, complexity, impersonality, intelligence, imagination, obscurity, objectivity, apparent 'incoherence', random or discrete series, disarrangement, dismemberment, disjointment, allusion, references and intertextuality as a reaction against Romantic self-expression and an unbearable excess of sentimentalism, as an escape from feeling and personality. After all, what Eliot and Pound were after was a poetry of intense concentration of heart, mind and imagination.

Bringhurst has learnt much from the High Modernists and so the elemental lessons of Eliot and Pound can be best summarized as follows:

- (1) *Great poetry can come only out of true reverence for and knowledge of tradition.* Going back to the origins means making poems with the whole burden of tradition in one's bones and it entails embracing a cultural syncretism marked by an intense respect for the ancients as the first source of knowledge and deep insights into the essence of reality. The Bible, the Presocratics, the huge Greek and Latin legacy, the teachings of Buddhism, and the lessons of the oral literatures of the First Nations of North America all form part of Bringhurst's personal canon or *vademecum*. They are the air he breathes in and the living nutriment he breathes into his own poems. A fascinating sense of cultural syncretism and simultaneity brings a wide range of traditions (literary and philosophical) into a complex and beautiful vortex that testifies to the erudition, interest in everything pertaining to humankind and love of knowledge of Bringhurst, a true humanist to whom nothing human is alien. To be able to tackle such a rich simultaneity of sources is one of the attributes of his sharp mind and acute intellect. However, this tendency towards intellectualization does not mean that there is no emotion in his poems. Thought and emotion are fused together into a perfectly harmonious whole in his poems.
- (2) *The poet is a bard, seer, thinker, singer, scientist and historian of human conscience.* The serious poet committed to the high calling of poetry is not just familiar with the technique of his craft (following Pound, Bringhurst says that he values technique as the test of an author's sincerity), but he has also mastered *the art of bearing, of listening*. Pound was "*il miglior fabbro*" according to Eliot in his dedication of *The Waste Land*, but he was also endowed with a rare, precious *claritas* of mind in search of words rich in music, beauty, intellectual meditation, profundity of thought, clarity of vision and truth. Pound and Eliot meant their serious poetry as a challenge to mere subjectivity and self-expression. They were more interested in a complex poetry marked by objectivity, intertextuality, pervaded by echoes from past voices – those of the masters from different literary traditions. Eliot and Pound insisted on the importance of prosody, music and meaning in poetry. Music is of the essence to Bringhurst's work: the creative shift towards polyphonic poems is only natural in a man who, from the very beginning of his literary career, writes with the whole burden of tradition in his bones, who has an amazing capacity and subtle ear to capture the echoes coming from the sages of the past, living in different places and speaking different languages. In this respect, *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986) signals the beginning of the mapping of new territory. It was followed by *Conversations with a Toad* (1987), *New World Suite No. 3* (1995/2005) and *Ursa Major* (2003/2009), a polylingual, multicultural poem reminiscent of *Finnegans Wake* by Joyce. Myth was also an element Bringhurst would investigate in his poetry. W.B. Yeats was in love with the Irish and Celtic heritage, T.S. Eliot resorted to the use of a revival myth in *The Waste Land*, and Bringhurst would turn to the wisdom embedded in the mythology of the First Nations, including the oral literature of the Haida and of other indigenous people of North America.
- (3) *Poetry is voice is breath is 'spontaneous' music.* This means that poetry comes out from the body through the feet and the hands in constant touch or interaction with the world, with reality, which is the ultimate source of human knowledge as it provides the raw materials for the inquisitive senses (perception) and the mind (reasoning, dissecting and conceptualizing) to

get to know the world. The poet is at home in the world, in the mind and in the body. Body, speech and mind is indeed a potent, recurrent equation at the heart of Bringham's poetry. The rhythms of poetry are the natural rhythms of Nature and the world somehow, for we find rhythm and pattern in the natural world – in the singing of birds and frogs, in the outline of mountains on the horizon, in the ecosystems gathering around trees in the woods, in the succession of day and night, of the seasons, etc. The notion of the precedence and pre-eminence of oral/aural/spoken over written language (speech over writing) is central to Bringham's poetry in spite of his passion for typography and his serious concern with form and the solid existence of books as beautifully-wrought artefacts or works of art. His passionate interest in form also stems from Pound.

The parallelisms, similarities and affinities between Pound and Bringham have already been evoked or invoked above. Both had a voracious appetite for knowledge and both were interested in other literary traditions, in the music of words, in the profundity of Oriental wisdom, in the intellectual and artistic legacy of oral literatures, and in translation as a source of enrichment of their poetry. The thought occurs that the excitement experienced by Bringham as he found page one of *Raven Travelling* in the archives of an American library must have been akin to that experienced by Pound as he held in his hands the Fenollosa papers, which unveiled to him the 'iconic' intricacy and profundity of thought hidden in the Chinese characters. It must have been similar to the one experienced by Petrarch as he found the lost letters *Ad Atticum* by Cicero, or the one experienced by the Renaissance humanist Gian Francesco Poggio Bracciolini as he found the lost text of *De rerum natura* by Lucretius in 1417. To Pound's infatuation with Chinese poetry and with the poetry of the troubadours and Cavalcanti (*il dolce stil nuovo*), Bringham responded with an intense passion for Haida poetry. Those were crucial discoveries to both men and scholars. Fenollosa's insights into the written Chinese character meant much to Pound, at least what stumbling quite by accident upon the first page of a monumental myth-poem by Skaay meant to Bringham. As far as tradition is concerned, whereas Pound was interested in Homer and in the vast Graeco-Roman literary legacy, in Cavalcanti and Italian poetry, in the poetry of the troubadours, the shift in the case of Bringham was from the Bible and Western literature towards Arabic poetry, towards Oriental literature and philosophy, towards the oral literature of the Haida and other indigenous people of North America. They shared the same interest in the Orient though. And it is a nice surprise to find out, upon re-reading *Walden*, that Thoreau was also interested in India and its ancestral wisdom. In his beautiful essay "Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation", Bringham speaks of the day he almost met Pound on his way to Lebanon:

Another teacher I never met, and who knew a lot about breathing, was Ezra Pound. But Pound also exemplifies the extraordinary factiousness, the imbalance, the self-righteousness and paranoia, and the fearful patriotism and pride of Euramerican civilization. When I was younger, I carried his books with me everywhere, and in 1965, on my way to Beirut, I went to Italy to see him. But as I neared the house I realized I had nothing whatever to tell him and nothing very interesting to ask him either, so I walked on. The thought that he might have something to tell *me* seems not to have entered my mind. In those days, I believed that a man could put everything and then some into his books, and that another man could come along later and dig it all out again.²⁶

Pound casts a long shadow across Bringham's entire work. He is the inescapable presence beneath it. In Bringham's *ars poetica* there are some fundamental tenets that are

²⁶ Bringham, "Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation", in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, pp. 104-105.

worth analyzing, one of the most elemental of which is the notion that *Wörter bleiben*, i.e., that poetry comes out of Nature itself – out of trees, mountains, stones, streams, birds. This is a sort of spontaneous self-generation of strong Romantic reminiscences. Poetry is out there as part of the texture of the living mesh of things and the only thing the poet has to do is pay attention and transcribe what he hears and sees into beautiful artefacts called ‘poems’. Of course, the poet is in need of a mathematical accuracy of language to be able to make the transcription as faithful and beautiful as possible. In this respect, a potent equation at the centre of Bringham’s poetry is that of body (often evoked by references to the heart and to bones), speech (voice, breath or spoken words) and mind. The poems are born in the breath, in the air emanating from the lungs and modulated by the speech apparatus. Pound also knew a lot about breathing, about the music inherent in great poetry, and about prosody as a technical part central to the craft of making poems that any poet with serious aspirations should have a perfect command of. The master used to make a distinction between *melopoeia* (the music, rhythm and sound of the words in a poem appealing to the ear), *phanopoeia* (the images or visual elements addressed to the eye) and *logopoeia* (‘the dance of the intellect among words’, or, to put it differently, the ideas associated to the words, the intelligence or thought treasured in a poem addressed to the mind). Now, Bringham’s poetry brings all three ingredients together: there is music, there are eloquent images, and there is an astonishing richness of ideas in his poems. This can be possibly best conveyed through Arthur Rimbaud’s words: “*J’assiste à l’éclosion de ma pensée: je la regarde, je l’écoute.*”

Beyond the Canadian context, and even beyond High Modernism, Robert Bringham is a poet of all times. Away from the epistemological debate at the heart of the cultural paradigms of Modernism vs. Postmodernism, closely related to postcolonialism and the issue of identity, his most profound affiliations are with the roots of what Goethe called *Weltliteratur*, which, in our train of thought, is an endless *work in progress*, a secular enterprise of epic proportions that affirms the persistence of wisdom of the ancients (the best minds) of all ages and traditions across temporal and spatial boundaries. Styles and directions in art do not last forever, but Bringham belongs to the tradition announced and hailed by Ezra Pound in his poem “Dum Capitulum Scandet” in his *Lustra*:

How many will come after me
 singing as well as I sing, none better;
 telling the heart of their truth
 as I have told them to tell it;
 Fruit of my seed,
 O my unnameable children.
 Know then that I loved you from afore-time,
 Clear speakers, naked in the sun, untrammelled.²⁷

At any rate, cultural plurality and cultural syncretism are essential to understand what Bringham aims to accomplish in his work. ‘Plurality’ is a key word, as Bringham writes with the whole of tradition in his bones; the lessons of the sages from all ages (the ancient Greek poet-philosophers known as the Presocratics, the Oriental philosophers, and the Haida poets and myhtellers) and the insights found in modern and in classical languages (both European and Native American) become simultaneous or coexistent in an instant, in the fleeting moment of the present. In Bringham’s view, the poet is almost a living repository of all the intuitions and insights of all the clear and lucid minds that have

²⁷ Ezra Pound, *Personae. The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*, revised edition prepared by Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz, New York: New Directions, 1990, p. 96.

thought deeply and beautifully before him, that have breathed poetry before him. This may well account for what could be called the ‘ventriloquism’ of Bringhurst’s dramatic monologues or dramatic impersonations, of his *recombinatory poetics*. At the same time, there is a serious concern with the myth-making attitude inherent in humans as a species, and, of course, with music, with words and with poetry as emanating from the body itself through breath itself. Bringhurst is also keenly interested in the very materiality of words as chains of letters and the typographic design of books as artefacts, in the solid form of language and the essential rudiments of writing. For Herder and Croce language was poetry, to begin with. The pre-eminence of speech over writing in our logocentric Western civilization can be traced back to the Babel episode as recounted in book 11 of Genesis, but also to Plato’s distrust of writing. The thought occurs that Bringhurst is searching for an *Ursprache*, an original language in which speech is undoubtedly prior to writing, and in which words go straightforward to the essence of things, while unveiling their inner core or nature in the very act of naming things and creatures in the world. Bringhurst goes back to the lessons of the mythmaking mind of the Greeks and the Haida, to the gnomic riddles of Oriental philosophers and Buddhist monks, to the poems and philosophical fragments of the Presocratics, in the hope that he might find some clues there. That is the reason why Bringhurst is so concerned with trying to unveil and get to the one single truth in the universe: to find out the interconnectedness of all things, past, present and future; to uncover the unity of all things in spite of the plurality, many-sidedness and transience of earthly phenomena and the incessant flux of flowing reality. Poetic words, when spoken, are capable of transcending appearances and of getting into the pristine nature and innocence of things.

III · Being and Knowing: Poetry, Philosophy & Science

Poetry is a mystery. Attempts at defining what literature is, what is it that characterizes literary language, are as old as humanity itself. In fact, what comes first to one’s mind in dealing with literary language²⁸ is the idea of the very difficulty of defining what literature is, as there seems to be no clear-cut boundary between literary and non-literary texts. In fact, literary language is characterized by a common core of language shared with other language varieties as well as a set of features that signal a deviation from everyday, trivial language. Artists use the resources available to all native speakers of a language with singular economy and compression, or simply introducing innovations that at first sight may shock the reader. In this sense, Roman Jakobson, well-known for his classification of the functions of language, points out that, by virtue of the so-called *poetic function*, language in literature is used as *an artistic medium*, for purposes other than mere communication or expression. Literary language is not the spontaneous overflow of the linguistic competence of a language user, but rather a conscious effort or attempt at a special arrangement of words for aesthetic purposes – in pursuit of pleasure, knowledge and the communication of beauty, universal truths and eternity. By eternity we mean the vocation of literary language to remain memorable, to stay the same, to stand the obliterating test of time.

²⁸ For a basic approach to the issue of literary language, see P. Widdowson, *Literature*, London: Routledge, 1999. For different approaches to the study of literature, see such elemental titles as the classic by Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory. An Introduction*, London: Basil Blackwell, 1983; David Daiches’ *Critical Approaches to Literature*, London: Longman, 1981; R. Selden & P. Widdowson, *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1993; H. Blamires, *A History of Literary Criticism*, London: Macmillan, 1991; and P. Rice & P. Waugh (eds.) *Modern Literary Theory. A Reader*, London: Edward Arnold, 1989.

Literature is thus language that is conscious or aware of itself, at least to a certain extent. It involves the careful selection of words (*le mot juste*, as Mallarmé would put it) and the careful arrangement of these words into certain syntactic constructions. Nothing seems to be arbitrary in literature; everything fits into a well-thought pattern where parts are set up in harmonious relationships to the whole. Hence, the conception of the literary work of art as an organic design is as old as humanity, even before literature was set down to writing. Humankind is fond of correspondences, harmony, a sense of completeness and beauty. He who handles words and is engaged in the craftsmanship of literary works is well aware of the potentialities as well as the constraints imposed on him by language. Words sometimes do not come easy and eel-slippery language does not convey right what the writer meant it to convey. On the contrary, words, when aided by inspiration, conspicuous effort and technique, may invoke wholly new alternative worlds the writer invites the reader to explore. The poet is a craftsman who works with words, the *materia poetica* out of which his work emerges after a painful struggle.

Traditionally, literary texts have been identified as such by the explicit features signaling their literary quality, that is to say by the presence of *figures of rhetoric* or so-called *poetic licences* (metaphor, simile, paradox, antithesis, parallelism, etc.). In poetry there is an extra mark of literariness – the use of such patterning devices as metre, rhyme, assonance, alliteration and the very typographical design of the words on the page arranged into separate lines. However, two objections can be made to this. First, the mere accumulation of figures of rhetoric is no guarantee of the literariness of a text, since they are to be found in a number of discourses other than literature, such as in newspaper articles or advertisements. Second, the history of literature has witnessed a pendulum tendency whereby literary periods shift from an artificial, ornate language (note Pope and Dryden in the late eighteenth century) to a language close to everyday speech (as can be seen by the Romantics' return to a common idiom). This entails a movement away from the idea that literature involves a special kind of diction of its own, towards the notion that literature uses the very materials of everyday spoken language. On the other hand, Russian Formalists like Viktor Shklovsky claim that *literariness* (i.e., what makes literature so) is closely connected to the notions of deviation and defamiliarization. It is the task of writers to present the vividness of reality as effectively as possible. For this purpose they must cleanse humans' automatic habits of perception through a process of defamiliarization, that is by presenting readers with reality as seen from an altogether fresh perspective by means of a kind of language that deviates significantly from everyday speech. This new, creative use of familiar language enacts a fresh look upon the world. Literature thus inspires a sense of awe and wonder in adults who have already undergone a process whereby their senses have become atrophied. Reality is uncovered and unveiled while readers are encouraged to cross the threshold of quotidian existence into a realm which defies the laws and strictures of reason, a realm where everything is possible.

Literary genres are established categories of composition, characterized by distinctive language or subject matter. There are three major literary genres: poetry, narrative and drama.²⁹ Each genre incorporates several other subcategories. Thus, poetry

²⁹ In Stephen Dedalus' words, "These forms are: the lyrical form, the form wherein the artist presents his image in immediate relation to himself; the epical form, the form wherein he presents his image in immediate relation to himself and to others; the dramatic form, the form wherein he presents his image in immediate relation to others. [...] The lyrical form is in fact the simplest verbal gesture of an instant of emotion, a rhythmical cry such as ages ago cheered on the man who pulled at the oar or dragged stones up a slope. He who utters it is more conscious of the instant of emotion than of himself as feeling emotion. The simplest epical form is seen emerging out of lyrical literature when the artist prolongs and broods upon himself as the centre of an epical event and this form progresses till the centre of emotional gravity is equidistant from the

encompasses lyric, epic and narrative forms; drama subsumes comedy, tragedy, farce, among others; narrative embraces the novel, the short story, romance, and so on. Poetry is the art of verbal compression and precision – poetry manages to say so much in few words. Poetry is probably the first of the genres to develop in the cradle of humanity. It is man's first impulse to react poetically to the world around him, by mere effusions of emotion in the face of the wonder inspired by the universe, or by more complex mythical and epic explanations of the origins and the mechanisms underlying the universe (such as the rhythm of the seasons, the succession of day and night, or the very presence of natural forces like mountains, rivers and trees). In the beginning, poetry must have been the expression of humankind's wonder in the face of the sense of the unknown, the unsaid and the sublime in Nature.

Before science came to offer a rational explanation of the logic beneath the surface of natural phenomena, humans must have relied on the power of poetry to evoke and invoke, to appease and to instigate alien forces, whether menacing or not, around them. Hence the multiple cosmogonies and myth-making habit of mind common to most primitive peoples. Before the scientific mode of thinking (analytical, rational, Apollonian) could reach maturity, there was a need to satisfy humans' curiosity by means other than purely logical, discursive language. Poetry met that end at the beginning of humanity. Words must have been sensed to hold a closer connection to the things they refer to in the world outside language. With the passing of time and the emergence of civilization and literacy (i.e., the introduction of writing into culture), poetry becomes more sophisticated and institutionalized. No longer is felt the need to explain how gods or spirit beings govern the universe by whim or by logic; no longer do people feel compelled to invent mythical heroes capable of marvellous deeds to save humanity from a bleak destiny. If epic and mythical poetry comes first chronologically, then the time is come for lyricism to emerge to the surface. Once material needs in social communities have been met, once cosmogonies and the community's origins have been traced back to ancient divinities, it is time for the individual poet to look inward and dive into his own self, in search of introspection, in pursuit of an understanding of inner states of mind and moods.

Poetry moves then from serving a social and ritual purpose to consolidating as an inspired craftsmanship that demands from its devotees technique, constancy and talent. The ancient scopos, bards and troubadours, who sang poems to the accompaniment of a musical instrument for the entertainment of a company in a social, public setting, came to be replaced by professional poets that see verse writing as a way of living that demands full time dedication and the observance of certain rules – those sanctioned by tradition. This shift is most palpable with the Romantics, who place the figure of the poet, the 'unacknowledged legislator of the world', at the very centre of the act of literary creation. It is a long way from the first manifestations of poetry in oral form, which was handed down from one generation to another, just relying on set formulae, kennings, alliteration, and a stock of fixed metaphors and conventional line-length. Once literacy is incorporated to

artist himself and from others. The narrative is no longer purely personal. The personality of the artist passes into the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea. [...] The dramatic form is reached when the vitality which has flowed and eddied round each person fills every person with such vital force that he or she assumes a proper and intangible esthetic life. The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak. The esthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and re-projected from the human imagination. The mystery of esthetic, like that of material creation, is accomplished. The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails." See James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, § 5, London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1996, pp. 243-245.

society, the writerly component of poetry is exploited in a variety of ways – the typographical design of the words on the page, line arrangements, visual rhyme and effects, the materiality of language in terms of signifiers. But let us not forget that in the beginning the poetic word was meant to be spoken and listened to, not written and read; that literature was essentially a matter of sounds beautifully arranged to appeal to the inner ear of the audience. The mystery, the ambiguity is always there, lingering mid-air, suspended midway between rational apprehension and intuitive grasping. However, with the passing of time, poetry becomes also more self-reflexive. By this we mean that poetry becomes aware of its own materiality, of the problematic nature of its *materia prima*, that is to say language. Literary works of art come to conform a whole entity, which T.S. Eliot called ‘tradition’, of which they form but a part. Poetry is always written in reaction or response to what has come before. Tradition is thus changing all the time; it cannot remain unaffected once a new item has been incorporated into it. Literature then is also made of literature; present poetry remembers and subsumes, to a certain extent, previous poetry – which is best seen in the case of intertextuality.

As far as the nature of language is concerned, we have already mentioned that literature is language that is aware of itself. In the first stages of literature, language was felt to be a reliable, transparent instrument of poetic communication. In the last few centuries, and particularly in the twentieth century, language and its efficiency as a tool of knowledge and communication have been rendered problematic. This is most clearly palpable in Anglo-American Modernist and Postmodernist literature. Now literature explores the very epistemological challenges posed by language itself. This is a kind of meta-linguistic or metaliterary literature. What seems to be a universal axiom is that poetry seeks novelty, creativity and experimentation through language. It seeks to shake readers’ convictions and make them look at the world anew, from a fresh perspective. What is amazing is that it manages to do so with an extraordinary precision and an astonishing economy of words. Most of the times, connections are left loose for readers to take on an active role in the reading and interpreting process. In addition, a number of devices are used to put forward universal truths, a desire of permanence and a vocation of beauty, which are the three targets great poetry aims at. Rhyme, metre, musicality, rhythm, sound arrangement, typographical design, all serve the purpose of unveiling hidden nuances of the world within and without – the inner landscapes of the human soul and the universe of stark reality. Poetic diction lingers between, at one extreme, an artificial language far removed from quotidian idiom, and, at the other, a language close to people’s everyday speech. Where new words are required, poets bring in what is at stake to fill in the gaps.

Any serious meditation on the art of poetry should begin with profound thinking on the nature and evolution of poetry throughout the history of humankind, as well as on the very anthropological basis or foundations of art. After a reflection on poetry as craftsmanship, inspiration, (self-)expression and exploration, there should come a reflection on the relationships holding between poetry, philosophy and science, and on poetry as a mode of knowing. In all his prose statements accompanying his major selected volumes – *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986) and *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995) – as well as in his major essays in which he articulates his own poetics, Bringhurst has explored all these issues in depth with an amazing clarity of mind. It has taken us a long time to learn that poetry is not words. Words are only the bricks out of which poems are made. This is an elemental lesson Bringhurst has taught us over the years. As Bringhurst points out, “speech rhythms and pauses, vowels and consonants, lexemes and phonemes, propositions and intonations, voices and words [...] are not the poetry. Those are the poem’s linguistic flesh and acoustic skin, but not its essence or its

skeleton.”³⁰ Thinking deeply about the ultimate nature of poetry, Bringhurst stumbles upon the simple fact that poetry is not just the result of arranging words into beautiful patterns. There is poetry outside poems, because poems are just well-wrought artefacts, things made by the hand of man that seek to survive the passing of time and also to honour the gods and the world at large, which is both human and nonhuman. Poetry is something grander and larger than language itself; it is also more sublime, indestructible, eternal. “Poetry has nothing quintessential to do with language,” says Bringhurst. In “Breathing Through the Feet”, he meditates further on the nature of language:

A language is a sort of lifeform, like a discontinuous animal or a symbiotic plant. Dead, it is like the intricate test of a sea urchin or the lifeless shell of a crab. Alive, it is a working form of intelligence, a part of the intellectual gene pool which has taken on specified, localized form. It is not, as many of my colleagues in the literature business like to say, the mother of poetry. Poetry has nothing quintessential to do with language. Language just happens to be the traditional means – but hardly the only available means – by which poetry is touched, in which it is temporarily captured, and through which it is served...³¹

“But if poetry has nothing quintessential to do with language, what does it have to do with?” asks Bringhurst. The answer is simple enough: “it has to do, for one thing, with the other forms of attention.” Attention is precisely what is missing or “absent from our daily lives,” he claims. This is the worst malady of our modern times, when everyone is in a hurry, heading towards some imprecise destination. In this context, *breathing through the feet* is Bringhurst’s way of inviting readers to pay attention to the world with open eyes and open ears. He reminds us that learning is the true or ultimate vocation of the self, of human beings.³² He also reminds us that poetry, philosophy and science are just different forms of paying attention, different approaches to *what is*, to the mystery inherent in the world, to the beauty of this awe-inspiring universe.³³ Hence, he can only posit the ultimate unity of human knowledge: “The arts and the sciences are in their origin one pursuit. [...] ways of listening to and speaking with the world. They are aspects of intelligence. What else is poetry for?” Poetry, philosophy and science are a collaborative venture in which humans build on the findings and insights of their predecessors, drawing nourishment from what has already been accomplished by our ancestors before us. “Science, like art, is founded on

³⁰ See Bringhurst’s essay “Everywhere Being Is Dancing”, included in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing. Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, p. 27.

³¹ Robert Bringhurst, “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), p. 106.

³² In the first century CE, the Roman philosopher Seneca said in his *De vita beata* that all human beings wish to be happy. Similarly, all humans wish to know. That all humans seek to know reality seems a truism; that learning is a human compulsion that is simply inescapable seems to be another truism. In this respect, Aristotle begins his *Metaphysics* with these words (980a 22): “Πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει.” That is to say: “All men naturally desire knowledge.” See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (2 vols.), with an English translation by Hugh Tredennick, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press & London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1980, vol. I, p. 3.

³³ In an unpublished interview we conducted at the *Facultad de Filosofía y Letras* of the University of Córdoba (Spain) on 7 April 2010, Bringhurst meditates on the connections of poetry and science again, and he concludes that they are inextricably linked to one another: “Poetry is like that, too. It’s a kind of astonishment, a kind of awe, a kind of amazement at things. I’ve an awareness of your own insignificance in relation to everything else. I don’t pursue it as a career, you know, and imagine that I am in charge of anything or in control of anything. When I was very young, I was mostly interested in the sciences, and physics in particular. And many people think that physics and poetry have nothing to do with each other, but to me they are in essence the same thing. I mean that what it comes down to in both cases is a real astonishment at and keen interest in the fact that the world exists, an awareness of what an amazing and inexhaustible thing it is. I’m fascinated by the meanings of things, and the relations of things, and the interrelations of things. Poetry is a way of responding to it all.”

wonder. Light is the precondition of vision – and what is light but the radiance of what is? Poetry and the sciences are linked inextricably right there.”³⁴ Now, if poetry, philosophy and science are ways of listening to and speaking with the world, the world in its entirety should be the natural concern of all of them. Poetry is not about narcissistic self-expression, for “Music that is too human is useless. That which is too exclusively human is not human *enough*. Our deepest passions push us way outside ourselves. They lead us to talk about mountains and stars and to know our deep kinship with birds and shellfish and flowers.”³⁵ This is the reason why he wishes to “write poems which breathe through the feet,” because “more real poetry [...] is walking on the ground and breathing.”³⁶ And this is also the reason why he finds sustenance in “the archaic sense of integrity” he senses in the Presocratics, the Oriental sages and the mythtellers of the oral literatures of North America (all of them living in pre-industrial societies where money and jobs are not the priority that they are in our industrial world), who are such an essential part of his own personal canon:

... in the tangled roots of the European tradition lay cultures which must, in significant ways, have resembled the ones that, for three hundred years, we have worked to extinguish throughout North America. The remains of those old, now voiceless, cultures of Europe – from the paintings of Lascaux to the fragments of Empedokles and Herakleitos – though they come to us in pieces, speak of a wholeness which, in our rapacious industrial society, is almost unknown.

I have lived and worked with the discontinuous ghosts of the old philosopher-poets of Greece for a long time, and I admire about those poets in particular their refusal to be compartmentalized. I admire their assumption that poetry, philosophy, physics, biology, ethics and even theology are all one pursuit. I admire, in other words, their moral and spiritual and intellectual integrity. And I admire, by the way, the fact that they were good ecologists, good environmentalists, though they’d have made no sense of that compartment either.

I find the same integrity in many of the philosopher-poets of the Orient – in Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, Saraha, Sengcàn, and in those remarkable Sung dynasty writers, Danxiá and Xuědou (Redcloud and Snowcave). I think I sense it also in St Francis of Assisi, though hardly in the works of those who sailed to the New World in his name. But to me it seems clearest of all in some of the quiet, cornered voices of the native American tradition. It is there to be read in the salvaged scraps of oral literature, and it is still there to be heard in the mouths of a steadily shrinking real world – the lean tracts not yet consumed by an insatiable white society with the stupidest of goals in the world: money and jobs. Not piety, grace, understanding, wisdom, intelligence, truth, beauty, virtue, compassion. None of these. Not a real wealth either, but only factitious wealth; and not a relationship with nor a place in the nonhuman order, but life in a wholly consumptive, introverted scheme: money and jobs.³⁷

³⁴ Robert Bringhurst, “Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre”, *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), p. 111. Of art, Bringhurst says this: “Art is not a house. Art is an opening made in the air. It is seeing and saying and being what is in the world.” *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³⁵ “Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre”, *ibid.*, p. 111. In “Poetry and Thinking”, a later essay included in *The Tree Meaning* (2006), Bringhurst dwells on this same idea: “Poetry, like science, is a way of finding out – by trying to state perceptively and clearly – what exists and what is going on. That is too much for the self to handle. That is why, when you go to work for the poem, you give yourself away. Composing a poem is a way of leaving the self behind and getting involved in something larger.” *The Tree of Meaning*, p. 145.

³⁶ “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, *ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁷ “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, *ibid.*, pp. 108-109. Somewhere else, in “Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre”, Bringhurst says something similar: “... many of the individual mythtellers and singers and philosophers – the artists and scientists, which is what they were – who’ve been important to me *do* speak from those cultures [preindustrial cultures]. These thinkers – Haida and Navajo, Ojibwa and Cree, Aboriginal Australian, Chinese Buddhist and pagan Greek – form an

In the extant tattered fragments of the works by these ancestors coming from different literary and philosophical traditions, Bringhurst finds a valuable, salvageable wisdom that is more sensible and healthier than the sheer nonsense embraced by industrial societies. Therefore, Bringhurst wants his own poems to resemble those of the Presocratics, the Oriental Sages and the Haida mythtellers, whose primitive poems are “concerned with a larger, less egoistic sphere.”³⁸ He wants them to be “not about human beings exclusively, but about the world, and about the painful business of loving and living with the world.”³⁹ This is the reason why his poems are poems about mountains and streams, trees, moss and lichen, air, water and light, birds, stones and stars. His is a poetry concerned with the human and the nonhuman realms alike. As he explains in the breathtaking conclusion to “Breathing Through the Feet”, he keeps “the company, for preference, of the rocks and trees, the loons and the seaducks who at this moment are close out the door” and he addresses directly the reader, to whom he says: “I ignore you, reader, for something larger than you, which includes you or not, as you choose.”⁴⁰ In Bringhurst’s view, poetry is not language then. For him it is a name for something in the very texture of *being*, an attribute of reality. As he puts it, “poetry is in the very texture of being. I hear it from the rocks and trees and the sea I live with and the widgeons who are here all winter every year.”⁴¹

Like science or philosophy, poetry is a mode of knowing, a way of getting to know reality. But the shift that takes place in Bringhurst’s conception of poetry is amazing: poetry is not just a mode of knowing on a par with philosophy or science; more importantly, it is an attribute or aspect of reality, something in the very texture of the world which is also endowed with the capacity to think and to know. As Bringhurst himself puts it as he translates the Chinese word for *poetry*, “Poetry speaks the mindheart of (re)birth, the thought and feeling of creation.”⁴² In “Everywhere Being Is Dancing, Knowing Is Known”, another seminal Bringhurst essay after which his second collection of essays is named, the poet writes down in a passage of beautifully-wrought prose (which exemplifies what Pound meant by *logopoeia*, or the dance of the intellect among words) this fundamental truth:

I don’t know how poetry knows. *What* it knows I also cannot say, though I have heard poetry say it, so I know it in that passive sense. *That* it knows seems to me only a kind of tautology poorly phrased. I would rather say that poetry is one among the many forms of knowing, and maybe it is knowing in the purest form we know. I would rather say that knowing freed from the agenda of possession and control – knowing in the sense of stepping in tune with being, hearing and echoing the music and heartbeat of being – is what we mean by poetry.⁴³

And a bit later he goes on with his meditation on poetry as a pure form of knowing:

What poetry knows, or what it strives to know, is the dancing at the heart of being. That is what the dance knows too, or strives to know – though it is *not a human dance*. What poetry knows is what the dance knows, what music knows, what

intellectual Third World from which I’ve learned, and from which I continue to learn, a great deal. I feel at home –enlivened and rested at once – in their presence, in a way I don’t feel at home among the real-estate agents and entrepreneurs and John Stuart Mill and the demagogues and policemen.” *Ibid.*, p. 119.

³⁸ “Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre”, *ibid.*, p. 113.

³⁹ “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, *ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

⁴⁰ “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, *ibid.*, p. 110.

⁴¹ “Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre”, *ibid.*, p. 117.

⁴² Robert Bringhurst, “Everywhere Being Is Dancing, Knowing Is Known”, in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing, Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, p. 22.

⁴³ “Everywhere Being Is Dancing, Knowing Is Known”, *ibid.*, p. 15.

painting knows. Does poetry know it differently? How separate can knowing be from the language in which it is cradled and nurtured, or in which it is (always imperfectly) enshrined? In poetry the gestures – which are *still only gestures*, not scripture, not fixed text, but gestures, like a dancer’s gestures – keep turning into words, which want to sink back into meaning.

Poetry is knowing. Knowing is moving in tune with being. The implication is that what-is is neither formless nor still – something physics and biology have been telling us for centuries. It is not surprising, then, that these domains of knowing – physics and biology – were inseparable from poetry among the Presocratics, as they are in oral cultures around the world. The three are one to us as well when we give up hope of owning, controlling, and manipulating the world: when we give up the hope of living, like spoiled princelings, apart from the world on what the world provides.⁴⁴

Bringhurst explores the etymology of the words ‘poetry’, ‘poem’ and poet, which are of Greek origin. All three words come from the verb ποιέω, which means ‘to make’. Thus, poetry (ποίησις, ‘making’), poem (ποίημα, ‘something made’) and poet (ποιητής, ‘maker’) take it for granted that poetry is “a form of handiwork, of *making*.”⁴⁵ And yet Homer never uses any of these words to refer to poetry; this is Plato’s language, Bringhurst tells us. The early poets use these words related to making to refer to the craft of smiths or carpenters. But *making* is not something on which humans have a monopoly: other creatures, both animate and inanimate, in this world also *make* things.⁴⁶ Of course, poetry antecedes or precedes language and even human beings. Poetry takes precedence. Bringhurst writes: “Poets make things. True enough. But they don’t make *poetry*, or they don’t make it from nothing. Poetry is present to begin with; it is there, and poets answer it if they can. The poem is the trace of the poet’s *joining in knowing*.” And as to the real use of a poem in this world, he says: “Its one and only use in this world is to honor the gods, the dead, and other nonhumans and humans – to honor being, in other words – and maybe to honor nonbeing as well – by allowing other to join in that knowing.”⁴⁷ To sum up, poetry is an attribute of reality, something in the very texture of the world, and poems are things made by the hand of man to honour *being* and *nonbeing*. Poetry is also knowing, and knowing is moving to the rhythm of *being* as it were. Now, *being* itself thinks, or the world thinks. As Bringhurst puts it in another groundbreaking essay entitled “Poetry and Knowing”, *poetry is thinking, real thinking, and real thinking is poetry*:

⁴⁴ “Everywhere Being Is Dancing, Knowing Is Known”, *ibid.*, p. 16. A bit later in this essay, Bringhurst meditates on knowing as moving to the tune of *being*, and he writes: “Moving to the tune is knowing; trying to move to the tune is thinking. But there is not just one tune to move to, or just one thought to think. A homophonic universe seems as unlikely as a forest with only one tree, one species of grass, one bird, one beast – and just as self-sustaining as a fishbowl with one fish. Even the individual tunes, it seems to me – insofar as one can distinguish the separate threads – have a very complex order, like a mountain range, a forest, or a stream.” *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁵ “Everywhere Being Is Dancing, Knowing Is Known”, *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁶ In “Poetry and Thinking” (a crucial essay included in *The Tree of Meaning*), Bringhurst dwells again on the etymology of these three words: “In early Greek, ποῖν isn’t a word used for feeble-bodied creatures sitting at desks with pencil and paper; ποῖν is what carpenters and ironworkers do. It’s the verb the Homeric poets use to talk about making a sword or a ploughshare or building a house.” And he concludes that poetry is not man-made and that making is something many other creatures do: “Does that imply that poetry is made by human beings? That it only exists because of us? I think, myself that making and doing are activities we share with all the other animals and plants and with plenty other things besides. The wind on the water makes waves, the interaction of earth and sun and moon makes tides, sun coming and going on the water and the air makes clouds, and clouds make rain, and the rain makes rivers, and the rivers feed the lakes and other rivers and the sea from which the sun keeps making clouds, and there is plenty of poetry in that, whether or not there are any human beings here to say in iambic pentameter or rhyming alexandrines that they see it and approve.” *The Tree of Meaning*, pp. 140-141.

⁴⁷ “Everywhere Being Is Dancing, Knowing Is Known”, *ibid.*, p. 18.

Herakleitos says something that might help us get this clear: ζυγόν ἔστι πᾶσι τὸ φρονέειν: “All things think and are linked together by thinking.” Parmenides answers him in verse: τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἔστιν τε καὶ εἶναι: “To be and to have meaning are the same.” These are concise definitions of poetry and brief explanations of how it has come to exist. Poetry is not man-made; it is not pretty words; it is not something hybridized by humans on the farm of human language. Poetry is a quality or aspect of existence. It is the thinking of things.⁴⁸

“Language is one of the methods we use to mime and mirror and admire it, and for that reason poetry, as mirrored in human language, has come to be taught in the English Department,”⁴⁹ Bringhurst rightly tells us. But, upon closer inspection, it turns out that poetry antedates humans, it has been out there longer, “as long, I suppose, as things have been thinking and dreaming themselves, which might be as long as things have existed, or maybe somewhat longer.”⁵⁰ Poetry is somewhat pervasive in the universe, it sprouts alive into full bloom wherever one turns to look:

Sun, moon, mountains and rivers are the writing of being, the literature of what-is. Long before our species was born, the books had been written. The library was here before we were. We live in it. We can add to it, or we can try; we can also subtract from it. We can chop it down, incinerate it, strip mine it, poison it, bury it under our trash. But we didn’t create it, and if we destroy it, we cannot replace it. Literature, culture, pattern aren’t man-made. The culture of the Tao is not man-made, and the culture of *humans* is not man-made; it is just the human part of the culture of the whole.

When you think intensely and beautifully, something happens. That something is called poetry. If you think that way and speak at the same time, poetry gets in your mouth. If people hear you, it gets in their ears. If you think that way and write at the same time, then poetry gets written. But poetry exists in any case. The question is only: are you going to take part, and if so, how?⁵¹

The world itself is thinking: it is thinking mountains, clouds, trees, stones, rivers, birds, humans. Poetry is the language the world is written in, and the world is a vast book of gigantic proportions that poets aim at transcribing or capturing, if only temporarily, in their poems. But poetry is always grander and more sublime than our fallible and limited efforts to momentarily catch it into the well-defined boundaries of a well-wrought artifact made of words. Once again, Bringhurst puts it in enlightening words:

Poetry is what I start to hear when I concede the world’s ability to manage and to understand itself. It is the language of the world: something humans overhear if they are willing to pay attention, and something that the world will teach us to speak, if we allow the world to do so. It is the *wén* of *dào*: a music that we learn to see, to feel, to hear, to smell, and then to think, and then to answer. But not to repeat. Mimesis is not repetition.⁵²

These are all aspects, basic tenets or principles (the essentials) of the poetics of Robert Bringhurst. These are the recurrent ideas at the heart of his poetic thinking, which has got a rare and precious coherence from beginning to end. Poetry has nothing quintessentially to

⁴⁸ Robert Bringhurst, “Poetry and Thinking”, in *The Tree of Meaning. Thirteen Talks*, p. 139.

⁴⁹ “Poetry and Thinking”, *ibid.*, p. 139.

⁵⁰ “Poetry and Thinking”, *ibid.*, p. 140.

⁵¹ “Poetry and Thinking”, *ibid.*, p. 143.

⁵² “Poetry and Thinking”, *ibid.*, p. 145.

do with language, and yet Bringhurst has been a keen student of prosody, of a number of classical and modern languages, of different literary traditions in which he could find nourishment for his own poems. His interest in prosodic experimentation and in the technical part of language (typography) does not obscure his belief in the preeminence of speech over writing. At the very basis of his own poems is breath, the recognizably human body: his poems are more the product of oral composition than of writing, and they are revised and polished over time in search of their ideal, perfect incarnation. The making of poetry is an exacting and demanding discipline: it requires that the poet abandon his self behind and embark on something grander than his egoistic self. Learning what there was to learn from his ancestors and the great masters of the past, revisiting tradition time and again, Bringhurst has found a voice of his own, an impressive wealth of thought, and a way of thinking intensely and beautifully in verse and in prose, in finely-wrought poems and beautiful essays. In bringing poetry, science and philosophy together into a single, unified prism, he posits not just the unity of a subtle world in which everything is related to everything else,⁵³ but also the unity of all human knowledge – an ambitious secular project to which everyone is called on to make their own contribution, no matter how modest it might be. If poetry, science and philosophy lead us towards a more global apprehension of *being*, it is to be expected of Bringhurst's poems that they should be examples of philosophical poetry or poetic philosophy, and that notions from a number of scientific disciplines should be invoked and naturally embedded in the living fabric of his own poems. To him, the world is thinking and singing, *being* is dancing everywhere, and it is humans' responsibility if they are to live to the fullest of human capacity to respond to it by paying attention at least. This is a form of expressing gratitude and respect towards *what-is*, a form of acknowledging that we belong among the human and nonhuman realms of existence that make up the world. In the context of this ecological awareness, the empathetic feeling that we fit in into something larger than our egoistic selves is of the essence.

IV · *Claritas* of Mind: Precision, Simplicity & Prosody

Robert Bringhurst has got a beautiful mind. He is also something of a perfectionist with a true calling and commitment to the art of poetry. In this respect, his astonishing dexterity of technique is arresting. The unitary body of work he has created over 40 years so far is a genuine *work in progress*, a single extended poem endowed with a precious coherence and cohesion. He has produced a wide range of poems that can be roughly grouped under distinct categories: short jewel-like lyrics, dramatic monologues, narrative myth-like poems, polyphonic poems or poems for several voices, extended sequences of philosophical meditations (for instance, those devoted to the Presocratics and to the Oriental sages), a number of translations from both modern and classical languages, such as the early translations included in *Cadastré* (1973), in *Carmina propria et opuscula translata* (1975) and in *The Lyell Island Variations* (1986/2009), as well as his translations from the oral literature of the Haida in his monumental trilogy *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers* (1999-2001). Translation is good practice for a poet; he must struggle with words so as to render the original or source text into an effective counterpart in the target language. In this respect, it is no slight achievement to have brought to life the Haida myths in language which is musical, sinewy and muscular. Translation ceases to be a faithful rendering of the original text and becomes an act of creation in his hands, so that his distinct voice is superimposed

⁵³ He writes: "I hold the very simpleminded view that everything is related to everything else – and that every *one* is related to everyone else, and that every species is related to every other." See "Poetry and Thinking", *The Tree of Meaning*, p. 157.

upon that of the original Haida mythtellers. In a nutshell, his work comprises beautiful poems and beautiful prose pieces. His beautiful poetry and his beautiful prose form a perfect circle pervaded by recurrent (and inextricably linked) thematic concerns such as being, meaning, language, speech and writing, typography, oral literature, painting, the essence of things. But this circle is a true work in progress marked by the continual updating, improvement and revision of earlier incarnations of any single text. Bringhurst is a self-exacting and disciplined author after all, and his work is a complex *Gestalt* seeking further beauty and perfection.

Bringhurst believes in the pre-eminence of voice and speech over writing. This conviction might as well have Platonic affiliations. The oral (and aural) takes precedence over the written. In speaking, the subject is present and words are mouthfuls of live air emanating from the lungs out into the world. Speech is then something that comes out of the mouth. This may account for the composition habits of Bringhurst. Revised and polished over time, his poems are products more of oral composition rather than the fruits of writing, as the prose statements in *The Beauty of the Weapons*, *Pieces of Map*, *Pieces of Music* and *The Calling* make abundantly clear. The living repertory of a man's work is the set of poems that have survived the passing of time and stand the excellence level required by performance before an audience. Bringhurst's poems seek the memorability of *le mot juste*, polished surfaces of breathtaking perfection. Hence his study of prosody, of the compositional habits of both musicians and painters, of the spontaneous rhythms implicit in the world. The music of his poetry is natural and effortless, precisely because he spends a long time listening to the world. His is *a poetics of hearing*. Bringhurst claims that "literature is a struggle with hearing, with listening. The writer needs a stethoscopic ear, and he can – and I prefer that he should – lay it against the stones and wild grasses as well as against his own chest. And the chests, of course, of other human beings."⁵⁴ But, of course, this does not preclude his interest in the technical part of language – typography –, in the solid form of speech, as evidenced by the innumerable publications (essays and books) he has written on this subject. Typography is of the essence for Bringhurst, inseparable from his many other interests and facets as poet, linguist, translator, cultural historian, and book designer. His publications are all marked by a precious, rare beauty; it is a pleasure to hold any of his books in one's hands. No thing in them is the product of a hasty or random decision. After all he is convinced that form exists to honour content, and that the book is a work of art, a beautiful artifact, a work of spiritual geometry, a flexible mirror held up to the world. He is a true, devoted lover of books.

What catches one's attention when first reading Bringhurst's poems and essays is precisely the *claritas* of mind between the lines, the elegance and the clarity of the language he shapes into well-wrought compositions in which every single detail has a place in the overall design. In his prolific literary output we see a lucid mind looking into things, searching for a style marked by stylistic nakedness and precision. The honesty of his mind, his archaic sense of intellectual, moral and spiritual integrity, and the vehemence of his vocation lend his work an air of authority that is disarming and awe-inspiring. Bringhurst is also one of the most learned of contemporary poets, but erudition does not mean obscurity. Bringhurst's poems are an emotional and intellectual challenge for the reader, an opportunity to enlarge their minds and their hearts. We get to hear a genuine voice, distinctly his own, beneath the multiple layers of erudition that surround his work. Bringhurst is not one of those poets who make no demand on the reader. What he enacts in his poems is a *true archaeology of human knowledge* of gigantic proportions. And this, of course, requires knowledge on the part of his readers. Not all readers are prepared to

⁵⁴ "Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre", *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, p. 112.

accept or follow the amount of erudition which pervades his poetic output, or to devote the care to reading them which they demand. Above all, what the poems require is a trained ear, or at least the willingness to be trained. His work is not truly impersonal, but is marked by a sort of emotional detachment instead. In his view of the world, humans are not at the centre of creation; they fit into the larger scheme of things, which also comprises the nonhuman. The great poet is never emotional, claimed Ezra Pound, “if by emotion is meant that he is at the mercy of every passing mood... The only kind of emotion worthy of a poet is the inspirational emotion which energises and strengthens, and which is very remote from the everyday emotion of sloppiness and sentiment.”⁵⁵

Pound had much to teach Bringham indeed, and the poet has professed strong admiration for him. His emphasis was always on form and discipline, and so he pointed out the importance of the study of prosody and of music for the poet. For poetry to approach the condition of music, the poet must master the sonic texture of language, the metric systems of different literary traditions. In one of his “Don’ts for Imagists”, Pound said: “Don’t imagine that the art of poetry is any simpler than the art of music or that you can please the expert before you have spent at least as much effort on the art of verse as the average piano teacher spends on the art of music.”⁵⁶ According to Bringham himself, Pound touched in him an important bent, which was his “prolonged fascination with craftsmanship and technique.” An intensive study of metre constitutes an important element in Bringham’s technique. The original use of language in Bringham’s poems is of such perfection as is only possible for a poet who has studied tirelessly different systems of metric. In fact, he has studied poetry carefully and has made use of his study in his own verse. Thus, in “Breathing Through the Feet” he claims that

With Pound’s example before me, I spent years on the study of metrics. [...] I studied prosodic systems and speech sounds, the acoustic as well as syntactic shaping of language. I focussed for years on the audible half of the craft of polyphony – which in my trade generally means making a music one of whose voices sounds audibly in the throat while the others sound silently, and differently, yet relatedly, in the mind.⁵⁷

And, in the same essay, Bringham dwells on what he has learnt from musicians and painters about compositional patterns: “... it seems to me I have come to learn relatively less from other poets and more from artists of other kinds. I’ve learned more about composition from the late sonatas of Beethoven, more about silence from the late paintings of Borduas, and [...] more about tonality and broken timbre from John Coltrane than from any poet I could name.”⁵⁸ The important influence of music (and musicians) on Bringham’s habits of composition is clearly palpable in his polyphonic poems – i.e., poems for several voices such as *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986), *Conversations with a Toad* (1987), *New World Suite No. 3* (1995/2005) and *Ursa Major* (2003/2009). Learning from musicians whatever lessons they had to teach to make poems resemble music was not something new. Bringham was following in the steps of the Modernists masters, who tried to produce literary structures that resembled musical architectures. The potential inherent in music was simply inexhaustible. Thus, T.S. Eliot wrote *Four Quartets*, Pound tried his hand at the fugue in *The Cantos*, and Joyce essayed complex compositional patterns in his *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* following the blueprint of Homer’s *Odyssey*. But there were many others who sought to capture music through words, such as Louis Zukofsky or Gertrude Stein:

⁵⁵ Quoted by T.S. Eliot in *Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry*, Kessinger Publishing, 2010, p. 16.

⁵⁶ Quoted by T.S. Eliot in *Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry*, Kessinger Publishing, 2010, p. 17.

⁵⁷ “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, *ibid.*, p. 105.

⁵⁸ “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, *ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

This is nothing new, after all. Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Hermann Broch all learned structural lessons from composers. Eliot published poems he called quartets; Pound and Joyce both spoke of writing fugues. This terminology is imprecise, I suppose, but I think there's a good reason why Pound and Joyce chose a Baroque term, fugue, to describe what they were doing. They'd broken the mold of narrative, linear, continuous, picturesque writing – which is like homophony and melody in music – and entered the world of eidetic, agglutinative, discontinuous, chordal writing – which is like harmony and polyphony in music. This is taken to be a modern development, but it draws from the deep roots of poetry. It goes back to the shamans, back to the oldest whistles and horns and percussion.⁵⁹

Furthermore, the rhythms of words and the modulations of the human voice are not indifferent to the world around us. Bringhurst claims that there is much to learn about prosody outside language itself, because the rhythms of verse are based on the physiological rhythms of the human body (the beating heart and the breathing lungs), and these are based on the rhythms of the world – the succession of day and night, of the sun and the moon, of the seasons, but also the polyphony of all the beings that constitute the living mesh of things. Music, painting and the poems produced in other literary traditions offer the poet unique opportunities to explore the interplay of sound and silence, the mechanics of the sonic texture of language. But it seems that the world at large is a many-voiced place where every single being is singing their own song, seeking to mean something and to make a contribution to the fascinating, polyglot, polyphonic book of Nature. The poet's calling prompts him to participate in that inexhaustible feast:

There is a great deal for a poet to learn about prosody from sources outside the language – from poets in other languages, and from sources outside language altogether. From the whinnying of grebes, the singing of Arctic loons, or the horn playing, for instance, of John Coltrane. [...] My narrative poems may not owe much to musical models anyway, but the longer nonnarrative pieces certainly do. I feel at home among the architectures of Beethoven and Coltrane, John Dowland and John Lewis, Alban Berg and Maki Ishii, in a way I don't feel at home among the structures of Pope or Dryden, Milton or Corneille. Maybe my literary ideas are simply so granular, so pulverized, that they've become analogous to eighth notes.⁶⁰

Bringhurst's mastery use of language is out of the question. His language has got the transparency, texture and clarity of crystal. He writes with astonishing simplicity, precision and elegance: the beauty is melted into the phrase and the sound is integral to the vision. He is never obscure, but rich in ideas and subtlety of thought. No word is ever chosen merely for its sound only; each has always its part in producing an impression through language. "Use no superfluous word and no adjective which does not reveal something," said Pound in his "Don'ts for Imagists".⁶¹ The poet is following the Modernist's master injunction. In Bringhurst's poems words have their place in the total effect of a given composition, his images are sharp in outline, and his verse is always definite and concrete. What his poems betray is a mastery which comes of being so well trained that form is an

⁵⁹ "Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre", *ibid.*, p. 116. In "Singing with the Frogs: : The Theory and Practice of Literary Polyphony", *Everywhere Being Is Dancing, Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, p. 42, Bringhurst dwells on the same idea: "In the twentieth century Hermann Broch, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky, William Gass, and no doubt many others have knowingly embodied musical forms in their poetry or prose. Some have been drawn to the structural principles and techniques of string quartets and piano sonatas. Some – Joyce, Pound, and Zukofsky in particular – were attracted to the fugue, which is always polyphonic."

⁶⁰ See "Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre", *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, p. 115.

⁶¹ Quoted by T.S. Eliot in *Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry*, Kessinger Publishing, 2010, p. 17.

instinct and so his work gives the impression of effortless naturalness. Now, language is a difficult material with which to shape poems of lasting value. Words express beauty of sound and visual beauty; they also convey an emotion to the reader, but if this emotion is to become atemporal, to transcend the constraints of time and space, then it has to be truly universal. In this respect, myth and parable offer the poet the possibility to touch the universal. The importance of mythical thinking to the whole literary enterprise of Bringhurst is of the essence too. Some of his poems in this regard, such as *Tzibalem's Mountain* (1982) and *Tending the Fire* (1985), testify to Bringhurst's interest in exploring myth as a means of accessing universal truths pertaining to humankind in its entirety. Myths posit a hypothesis about the ultimate nature of reality; a constellation of myths constitutes a mythology, which is an ecological structure of subtle ramifications that seeks to penetrate the surface of things, the heart of the world. Hence Bringhurst's interest in pre-industrial societies, in the oral literatures of North America, in the polyphony implicit in the world that engages all human and nonhuman beings.

This partly accounts for the central concern at the palpating heart of Bringhurst's poetry: his most essential preoccupation is trying hard to apprehend and capture *being* through words in the form of poems that are his gift to the world. His desire to comprehend, to understand and to know is the basic impulse or drive beneath his entire work. But poems (and the words they are made of) are minimal means to capture *what is*, which is truly vast, indestructible, persistent, universal. If his poems are universal, it is because they concern the real world, because his metaphysics is strictly steeped in the physics of reality. Hence he is more interested in the world at large and its multiple fascinations than in the petty preoccupations and confessions of a narcissistic self. Why turn inwards when there is so much beauty *out there*? But *out there* is also *deep inside*, for there is no clear-cut boundary between body, mind, speech and being in Bringhurst's poetry. In the end, it seems that poetry is not confined to words: it is rather an attribute of reality, it is something in the very texture of reality. Science, philosophy and art are only paths leading humans to the heart of *what is*, ways of talking to *being*, modes of responding to the grandeur of the universe. The recurrent thematic concerns in Bringhurst's poems are then reduced to the world at large (which is human and nonhuman) and to the self responding to reality with the maximum of intensity (with body, mind and speech). In his view of the world, humans form part of a larger continuum of life. He embraces not an anthropocentric conception of reality, but a more democratic view according to which *being* is what matters and finds a myriad of manifestations in all the forms of creation. The mind is all the animals, trees and mountains it has attended, says the poetic voice in "Sunday Morning". The mind is made of all the species in the world, repeats again one of the voices in *Conversations with a Toad*. The mind is the world.

V · Ecological Linguistics: Nature, Language & Polyphony

Language is a living thing for Robert Bringhurst. It grows out of the living soil as it were. And words emanate from the breathing mouth and the writing hand. Meaning is larger and vaster than language, and so words are only one more means of capturing meaning. But humans have no monopoly on meaning either. Every single thing in this world wishes to mean something, seeks to participate in the unstopping feast of meaning. The desire to mean is at the heart of both human and nonhuman beings. If communication is a universal (not an anthropological universal but an ontological quality or attribute of what is), then it is only natural that Bringhurst should have turned his attention to the world at large, and

not confined it to words alone. Stones, mountains, trees and birds have their own language; they do mean something. The thought occurs that the poet's concern with ecological linguistics stems from the fact that he is an avid outdoor man, in love with Nature and all the elements in it. He is also endowed with an acute ear for hearing, a sharp eye for observation, and a beautiful mind to make things subtly connect with one another. His rambles in the mountains and in the woods provide him with enough food for thought and nutriment for his poems. In this, it seems to us that Bringhurst resembles the American Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau. It is impossible not to remember the famous passage of *Walden* (1854) in which the author celebrates life in the woods as an authentic form of living:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.⁶²

It is in the woods, close to the trees, the lichen on their bark, the moss on the stones, that Bringhurst attains his most profound insights into the ultimate nature of reality and poetry. Nature sublime teaches him the elemental lesson of respect for human and nonhuman beings in the universe, or, to put it differently, the sacredness at the root of *what is*. This is the true basis of his ecological awareness and commitment to the preservation of the fragile beauty of the world. Bringhurst reminds us that the world does not need our protection, but our respect, our attention. Paying attention, *breathing through the feet*, is what he knows how to do best of all. This is what lends sinewy muscularity and imaginative force to his vision and to his language. Knowledge of the world begins with a gesture of curiosity, a desire to know, a wish to apprehend *what is*. Poetry, philosophy and science share the same root: wonder in the face of the awe-inspiring beauty and intricate delicacy of the world. At the heart of Bringhurst's work is the primordial encounter between self (as evoked by the recurrent references to *bone, blood and breath*) and the world (as embodied in *mountains, trees, stones, air, light*). Microcosm and macrocosm are reconciled or brought together through the pristine act of perception, whereby humans listen to and speak with the world. Whereas Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood speak of the hostility of the Canadian landscape, of survival amid a space that is indifferent to humans, Bringhurst belongs to a tradition that goes back in time to Henry David Thoreau and to Ralph Waldo Emerson on American soil, even further back to the First Nations of North America, to the Oriental sages and the Presocratics, whose overriding concern was not taking dominion over the world, but listening to what it had to say of value to humans. Their astonishment was environmentally friendly and respectful.

In the woods, Bringhurst finds an inspiring multitude of voices, an ecology of superimposed or interpenetrating voices that are an inspiration for his own polyphonic poems. This ecology of voices is no metaphor at all; it is real, Bringhurst tells us. The world is many-voiced, reality speaks to us in several voices, and so poetry should mirror the polyphonic nature of *being*, this evocative plurality of being. In walking towards his own

⁶² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, New York: Penguin Classics, 1986, p. 135.

poetic maturity, Bringhurst has moved towards experiments in more complex polyphonic poems, from homophonic towards polyphonic poems: *Hachadura* (1975) was conceived as a chaconne for a solo intelligence and a meditation on nothing; the dramatic monologues of the 1970s (*Deuteronomy* 1974, *Jacob Singing* 1977 and *The Stonecutter's Horses* 1979) were just a tentative approach to exploring other people's voices and minds; *Tzibalem's Mountain* (1982) was a sonata in three movements; *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986) was a score for a jazz duet; *Conversations with a Toad* (1987) enacted a meditation on being and ecology spoken by two voices; *New World Suite No. 3* (1995/2005) was a suite in four movements for three voices; *Ursa Major* (2003/2009) was the Babel-like epitome of Bringhurst's polyphony, a polyglot polyphonic poem in five scenes for several voices speaking several languages. All of them are a tribute to the human voice, to human speech, to language and meaning. But above all, they are a tribute to *what is*: we live in a polyphonic world, and so polyphony is an inescapable attribute of reality.⁶³ Poetic polyphony arises directly out of natural polyphony, from the multiplicity of voices Bringhurst hears in the world. Thus, in "Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue", his afterword essay to *New World Suite No. 3*, he writes:

... polyphony, like poetry, is real. In the forest, which is polyphony incarnate, every voice is constantly at risk. Creatures eat each other every hour of the day. They also go on living. The cure for death is birth, not immortality. Because polyphony is real, polyphonic art can represent dimensions of reality that monophonic, homophonic and symphonic structures may leave out. It can represent the spaciousness of space, the rugosity of time, the multiplicity of being, and the speciousness of limiting the options to damnation or eternal life. It can, but it may not. I don't for a moment claim that a work of art must be polyphonic to be good, nor that it will be good so long as it is polyphonic.⁶⁴

In his ground-breaking essay "Singing with the Frogs: The Theory and Practice of Literary Polyphony", Bringhurst explains the concept of polyphony with great lucidity. He claims that polyphony is a real fact, that it exists in the world, and so "it simply isn't true that either music or polyphony is confined to the human realm." We humans live in a polyphonic (or many-voiced) world:

Songbirds sing. That is fact, not metaphor. They sing, and in the forest every morning, when a dozen or a hundred or a thousand individuals of six or ten or twenty different species sing at once, that is polyphonic music. What city dwellers frequently call "silence" is the ebb and flow of birdsong and the calls of hawks and ravens, marmots, pikas, deer mice, singing voles, the drone of gnats and bees and bee flies, and the sounds of wind and rain and running water. The world is a polyphonic place. The polyphonic music, polyphonic poetry, and polyphonic

⁶³ In a letter addressed to Robyn Sarah, dated 15 November 1996, Bringhurst explains that polyphony is inescapable, pervasive, a fact of reality. Also, polyphony and ecology go hand in hand in Bringhurst's concept because Nature itself is the source of his own concept of literary polyphony, the ultimate source of inspiration: "the word polyphony has been used in many ways throughout the centuries, even by musicians. [...] Most musical theorists and historians nowadays use the word polyphony in a strict sense, as a name for the kind of music in which there are multiple voices that are cognizant of each other but independent. In this usage, polyphony is distinguished from both monophony and homophony. At the same time, polyphony is something we can never fully escape, whether we learn to produce it or not. It is a fact of life, a fact of nature. In some sense, it is *the* fact of life. The forest is polyphonic. Cut it down and put a homophonic shopping mall or rock band in its place, and you are certain to pay the price." See Robyn Sarah, *Little Eureka's: A Decade's Thoughts on Poetry*, Emeryville, Ontario: Biblioasis, 2007, p. 221.

⁶⁴ "Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue", *New World Suite No. 3*, p. 9.

fiction humans make are answers to that world. They are mimicry of what-is, as much as they are statements of what might be.⁶⁵

And he defines polyphonic music and polyphonic poetry:

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

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

What is a polyphonic poem? It is a poem that is kin in some substantial way to polyphonic music. It is a cohabitation of voices. It is a poem that (to borrow two good verbs from Dennis Lee) enacts and embodies plurality and space as well as timelessness and unity. A poem in which what-is cannot forget its multiplicity. A poem in which no one – not the poet, not the reader, not the leader, and not God – holds homophonic sway.⁶⁶

In 1998, as Bringhurst's essay "Singing with the Frogs" was published in *Canadian Literature*, Jan Zwicky and Sean Kane responded to the poet's meditation on the concept of polyphony with two penetrating essays. Canadian poet, philosopher and musician Jan Zwicky draws an interesting distinction between polyphony and cacophony⁶⁷ and then concludes that polyphony is a genus of lyric in a passage of intense lucidity:

Polyphony is a genus of lyric, but not all lyric structures are polyphonic. This is because some of the resonant, integrated, space-creating wholes in lyric's family are constituted of elements that are fragments, or abstract ontological axes of some sort [...], rather than self-continuous lines or voices: some good non-strictly-polyphonic poetry, for example, or Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, for another, or Herakleitos' thought. [...] The outstanding question [...] is whether *ecologies* are polyphonies, or "merely" lyric structures. And whether being itself, then, is polyphonic or lyric. You and Uexküll argue the former. I *think* the only reason I'm

⁶⁵ Bringhurst, "Singing with the Frogs: The Theory and Practice of Literary Polyphony", *Everywhere Being Is Dancing. Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, p. 36 and p. 37.

⁶⁶ Bringhurst, "Singing with the Frogs: The Theory and Practice of Literary Polyphony", *ibid.*, p. 33 and p. 36. In "Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue", Bringhurst also dwells on the difference between homophonic and polyphonic music in these enlightening terms: "Homophonic music – the kind that Wagner and Chopin and Verdi wrote, and the kind we mostly hear now on the radio as well as in the concert hall – is often played by many instruments or sung by many voices, but all of them are welded, harmonically and rhythmically, together. A lead voice calls, and all the others follow, or all move together in a swarm. The sound is *homophonic* or *symphonic*. In *polyphonic* music, and in polyphonic speech, the lines are independent. The voices watch out for one another and give each other room, but each one moves through the shared acoustic space at its own speed on its own path. Each, it seems, is doing its own thinking." *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶⁷ "There is, you would agree, a difference between polyphony and cacophony. That is why we have two words, and why polyphony is an art. A random sample of simultaneous, distinct, but self-continuous lines of sound, noise, or utterance (the soundscape of a machine-shop, say, or a kindergarten) is not, in the musical sense of the word, polyphonic. To be polyphonic, the lines must also, at a significant number of points (though not constantly), form a *vertical* aural structure pleasing to the ear. Polyphony, in other words, is [...] quintessentially lyric (in my sense of the word). The difference between a polyphonic structure and cacophony is, precisely, that a polyphonic structure is informed by the eros of coherence while cacophony is not." See Jan Zwicky, "Being, Polyphony, Lyric: An Open Letter to Robert Bringhurst", *Canadian Literature* 156 (Spring 1998), p. 181.

hesitating is that I want to say things like “A lyric mind is one that pursues ecologies of thought” [...] Wittgenstein and Herakleitos are paradigmatically lyric minds.

In any event, we can say this much: a lyric mind is one for which the world lives as a complex, intricately structure, mortal & resonant whole: elapsing through time, that world makes from time the space of what it is. Noise [...] is not sound: sound is coherent, and noise is incoherent.⁶⁸

Bringhurst did not invent polyphony *ex nihilo*, out of the blue. It was out there in the world from the start. He simply opened his ears to what the teeming forms of life had to tell him and then he strove hard to transcribe what he heard. That we live in a plurilingual world seems to be a truism that everybody takes for granted. The tree of meaning has evolved innumerable languages among humans since the cradle of humanity – languages that have been most helpful in preserving the memory of our ancestors and making knowledge possible. The human voice reaches far into the most unfathomable corners of the Earth and into the hidden recesses and interstices of the things that populate this world. Voice is breathing and speech at the same time, something that comes out of the mouth with a view to touching other humans’ minds and hearts, for voice is also meaning. What Bringhurst is absolutely clear about is that humans have no monopoly on meaning, that every single being in this world seeks to *mean* something and to make a contribution to the larger book of Nature. This book is written in a myriad of languages, both human and nonhuman, though most of the times we forget this fundamental fact. Bringhurst’ polyphonic poems stem directly from Nature itself and are superbly crafted works of art nourishing on the lessons of the musicians and of the best poets of innumerable traditions. The study of prosody and music has proved an excellent complement to the lessons the poet learns outdoors, where he spends his time in the company of the trees, the mountains, and the birds. His poems arise out of his voice and seek to imitate the fragile, vulnerable beauty he senses in the world; but they also come out of his body responding to reality with a maximum of intensity. They are his gifts to his fellow human beings and to the world, and so we should be grateful for this very simple fact.

⁶⁸ Jan Zwicky, “Being, Polyphony, Lyric: An Open Letter to Robert Bringhurst”, *Canadian Literature* 156 (Spring 1998), p. 183. For his part, Sean Kane defines polyphony in these terms: “Polyphony: “each voice, each being, singing its own song or story – each speaking its own poem at its own rate, picking its way through the poem of the whole which it helps to create.” This is how I defined natural polyphony in *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, as an endless and unresolving oral pattern – relationships of relationships in states of change. [...] This is natural polyphony. Mythic polyphony, then, refers to the many-voiced compositions that enact this play of oral pattern. I would begin a poetics of polyphony here, in the domain of the oral and in the overheard relationships among living things.” See Sean Kane, “Polyphonic Myth: A Reply to Robert Bringhurst”, *Canadian Literature* 156 (Spring 1998), p. 184.

PART I

The Wisdom of All Ages

Voices of the Ancestors and the Beginnings of a Literary Career

The Shipwright's Log

Or An Atlas of the Difficult World

I · The Beginnings of a Literary Career

Parnassus, the hill dearest to poetry, the mythological home of Apollo and the Muses, is a place difficult to conquer, especially for those poets who seem to arrive late on the literary scene. For most authors, it seems impossible not to entertain a sense of belatedness, a conviction that there might be no room for the poet aspirant. The struggling poet climbs Parnassus, that imagined land where the great poets of all times dwell in a state of enviable bliss, in hopes that his efforts will be rewarded by posterity in the dubious form of immortality. Paradoxically enough, in their need to claim for originality, they tend not to build on the past so much as wipe it away. Oblivious of the illustrious dead, for them the illusion of starting from scratch looks like the best guarantee to be original. On the contrary, for Robert Bringhurst, Parnassus is not a monolithic entity that must be conquered *per se*, but rather a living place made up of the ancestors' bones that must be visited time and again in search of inspiration and new breath. Tradition is a living repertory, an organism that keeps on growing throughout time, across civilizations and boundaries (both historical or temporal and geographical or spatial), building on the serious contributions made by all the great writers that have trodden the Earth under the blue sky. Tradition is a most precious stuff Bringhurst takes with him in his bones: it is the moveable feast and portable stuff out of which the ultimate elegance can be made. The literary ancestors and sages of the past come back to haunt him from the very beginning of his career, to remind him of the utter solitude and intellectual integrity demanded by such a titanic effort as writing poetry out of air, water, stone and past voices.

In the Foreword to *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), sensing the grandiosity of his poetic enterprise, Bringhurst expresses his desire “no matter how preposterous and impossible it might be – to learn all the words and grammars in the world,” while yet recognizing that poetry “precedes them all and can make its way, if it must, with the help of none.”¹ This ambitious, programmatic poetics and dream must have been present already at the very outset of his literary career. In 1972 Bringhurst published what would be his first book of poems in a prolific and protean lifetime devoted to poetry, translation, language, philosophy, typography, anthropology – to human knowledge, in a word –, showing no respect whatsoever for disciplinary boundaries. If anything, he has been crossing boundaries all his life, learning to be at home wherever he happens to be. *Nil humanum mihi alienum puto*. His is a kaleidoscopic, omnivorous and all-embracing mind, to which nothing pertaining to humankind must be alien. This should be only natural in a man who embarked on a personal intellectual pilgrimage in the sixties and seventies. He studied Architecture, Linguistics, and Physics at MIT, and Philosophy and Comparative Literature at the University of Utah, before taking a BA in Comparative Literature from Indiana University (1973) and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia (1975). And yet, despite his diverse interdisciplinary concerns and interests, Bringhurst's most profound vocation is as a poet. In fact, he conceives poetry as being a mode of knowing which is capable of integrating the insights and intuitions of such diverse

¹ See Robert Bringhurst's Foreword to *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), p. 11.

human enterprises as physics, walking, philosophy or breathing. The fruits of this calling are poems that seem to constitute an island of their own amid mainstream late 20th-century Anglo-American poetry. In an impressive essay entitled “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, Bringham dwells on his insularity with respect to the poetics of his contemporaries:

So while most of my colleagues in the Canadian and American poetry racket devote themselves to speaking for and within the colonial culture to which they belong – and which, of course, contains a great deal of profundity and beauty – I have spent my own life learning to speak across and against it. I have tried to pack into my poems all it contained that looked worth stealing, and to resituate that wealth, that salvageable wisdom, in someplace spiritually distinct: some other dimension of the physical space I inhabit, and which the maze of governments, real-estate agencies and development corporations supposes it owns.²

But a man who turns his back upon his fellow contemporaries is not alone. There is a sustaining tradition at least 2,500 years old that remains a constant source of inspiration for a poetic enterprise as serious and ambitious as Bringham’s. Like Ezra Pound, his acknowledged literary ancestor and master, he seems to embrace a cultural poetics that makes him sensitively aware of the world’s linguistic and poetic diversity. Encouraged by his desire to learn “all the words and grammars in the world,” he has learnt several classical, modern and indigenous languages (Arabic, Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, Navajo, Haida and Cree) well enough to translate them. Pound himself translated from several languages as well: Provençal, Old English, Latin, Greek, Italian, Chinese and Egyptian. But only a man with a calling as severe as Bringham, who is so in love with language as the utmost expression of humanity, can undertake such a complex, exacting, and fascinating adventure.

Published in 1972 when Bringham was still an undergraduate, at the age of only 26, *The Shipwright’s Log*³ reveals a young poet proud of his radiant energy, concerned with finding his own poetics and personal voice in relation to the overwhelming Modernist presences of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Basil Bunting, and William Carlos Williams. As the title itself suggests, Bringham’s initial conceptualization of himself and his poetic activity is that of apprentice craftsman and territorial recorder. He is in search after a new kind of objectivity, and against the view that poetry is merely exuberant self-expression. In words reminiscent of those of T. S. Eliot in his celebrated, groundbreaking essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), on the impersonality of poetry, Bringham claims that “It seems to me, though, that my personal history has, and ought to

² “Breathing through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), p. 102.

³ A.1 •• *The Shipwright’s Log*. Bloomington, Indiana Kanchenjunga Press, 1972. 40 p. A few copies in cloth without dustjacket, 18.5 × 22.5 cm; the remainder in paper, 17.5 × 21.5 cm. “Of this first edition, ten copies have been set aside to be bound in boards and full cloth, signed and numbered one through ten. The remainder [250] have been bound in paper covers.” [ISBN 0-913600-00-8.] (See also A.1a.) Contents: • “Limassol”; • “Jebel Saneen, Lebanon” (rpt. in C.27; compare A.13); • “The African Daydream”; • “Sinai”; • “A Form of Surrender”; • “Leafletting the Sentry”; • “The Beauty of the Weapons” (rpt. in B.7, C.3, C.5, and rev. in A.14, A.47, A.92, B.27, B.43, B.78a, C.54); • “Haruspitations in a Whorehouse”; • “Isthmian” (rev. in C.22); • “Self-Portrait: The Sansei Poem” (rpt. as “Self-Portrait for a Sansei Girl” in C.2); • “Three Early Poems”; • “Les Figures de Lissajous”; • “The Sun and Moon” (rev. in A.14, B.27); • “Portrait in Blood” (rpt. in C.27); • “The Shirt”. With one drawing by Patrick Morrison and two by Paco Castillo. A.1a *The Shipwright’s Log*. Second Printing, 1973. Paper, 100 copies. Same as A.1, except for the copyright page. The only anonymous review of *The Shipwright’s Log*, published in *Choice* (Chicago) 10.11 (January 1974): 1714, reads as follows: “Rather ordinary poetry, not really bad, but never really rising above the level of the expected. Similar to Wilbur or Merwin at their flattest.” This review is certainly unfair; it does not do any justice to the perfection of some of the earliest poems of Bringham.

have, rather little do to with my writings. Many of my contemporaries prefer to let the events of their lives set the shapes of their poems.”⁴ Life is not quintessentially what poetry is made up of. Experiences in a lifetime provide the poet with the stuff and matter out of which poems are carved, as from a piece of wood or from stone:

Where I have been, what I have done, gives me the lumber for the poems, but the lumber does not generate the shape. The shape is given to me from somewhere else – unearthed or inherited – or inhaled. [...] Seen in this way, it turns out not to be ‘my life’ at all, but merely my sense of the world I live in, with the emphasis on the world, not on the I who is doing the sensing.⁵

The Shipwright’s Log consists of fifteen poems⁶ of a very different nature. As pointed out above, the young Bringhurst exhibits an amazing mimetic capacity in his search for a personal voice. Even if these early poems are too much on the side of imitation, they show unmistakable glimpses of their own authenticity. Excessively rhetorical, even narcissistic, if compared to later poems by the author, who is always striving for straightforward transparency, crystal-like clarity, these poems betray in their cadences and music the haunting influence of Eliot, Stevens, or even the Bible.⁷ In his investigative soundings of the objective world, he seems to take dictation from both the literary masters of the past and the naturally occurring voices that are to be heard in the mountain and desert landscapes of such exotic settings as Africa or Sinai. Bringhurst does not suffer the sense of belatedness or anxiety of influence that, according to Harold Bloom, concerns most poets aspirant. Stealing from other poets, from the masters of the past, is a practice sanctioned by Pound and Eliot, the acknowledged spiritual mentors of Bringhurst. Pound, “who knew a lot about breathing”, is the ultimate influence on the poet, in fact. In “Breathing Through the Feet”, as he recalls with something of emotional containment the visit he intended to pay to the master in Italy on his way to Lebanon, the young poet, who used to take Pound’s books with him all the time, says

When I was younger, I carried his books with me everywhere, and in 1965, on my way to Beirut, I went to Italy to see him. But as I neared the house I realized I had nothing whatever to tell him and nothing very interesting to ask him either, so I walked on. The thought that he might have something to tell *me* seems not to have entered my mind. In those days, I believed that a man could put everything and then some into his books, and that another man could come along later and dig it all out again.⁸

Reading these early Bringhurst poems, a new – or, rather, ancient but unlighted – part of our experience is given light. His poems constitute a sort of amazing perceptual

⁴ “Breathing through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, *ibid.*, p. 99.

⁵ “Breathing through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, *ibid.*, p. 100.

⁶ Of these 15 poems, four were contributed to periodicals before they were published in book form or after they saw the light of day in *The Shipwright’s Log*, reprinted in 1973 as well. The poems in question, arranged in chronological order, are these: a/ “Self-Portrait: The Sansei Poem” was published as “Self-Portrait for a Sansei Girl” in *Stoney Lonesome* (Bloomington, Indiana) 3 (1972): 13-15; b/ “The Beauty of the Weapons” was published in *Quarry* (Bloomington, Indiana) 2 (Fall 1972): 33-38, and also in *Indiana University Arbutus* (Bloomington, Indiana) (1973): 56; c/ “Portrait in Blood” was published in *Mundus Artium: A Journal of International Literature and the Arts* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) 8.2 ([Winter] 1975): 130-133; and d/ “Jebel Saneen, Lebanon” was also published in *Mundus Artium: A Journal of International Literature and the Arts* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) 8.2 ([Winter] 1975): 130-133.

⁷ In these early Bringhurst poems there are literary echoes from W. B. Yeats’s *Robartes and the Dancer*, from T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, from T. E. Lawrence’s *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and *The Mint*, from Wallace Stevens’s celebrated “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”, from Gwendolyn MacEwen’s poems on dance and on the desert published in *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*.

⁸ “Breathing through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, *ibid.*, pp. 104-105.

archaeology, and they offer unexpected pleasures rare to find elsewhere. Quite often his view of the world he lives in, even if the stress is on the world, not on the *I* that does the sensing, is expressed in language that seems as physical as the things he is talking about. At the interface between the *I* and the world emerges a world of sensations that are objectively verbalized in a muscular, uncompromising language that can hardly be severed from speech. Bringham's poems owe a lot to living utterance and hearing indeed. This is part of the reason why there is such a surprising freshness, naturalness and fluency about his poetic statements, and why to read these poems is to be constantly surprised. This poetry from the heights, with its precious refined air of high authority, comes from a masterly command of a language capable of beautifully dealing with the harsh world of reality. Bringham insists, time and again, on the fact that poetry is not just words, though:

But if poetry has nothing quintessential to do with language, what does it have to do with? It has to do, for one thing, with the other forms of attention. [...] ... attention is precisely what seems to be absent from our daily lives. 'Breathe through your feet' is a gentler, more informative, less self-centred and less frustrated form of the well-known adjuration, 'Pay attention.' It doesn't mean pay attention to me; it just means pay attention.⁹

Concerned with truth, reality and the true essence of things, Bringham, with the ancient sages' voices ringing in his ears, is aware of the wisdom of natural objects. He says: "I hope that my own poems, like those of the Presocratics, [...] are not about human beings exclusively, but about the world, and about the painful business of loving and living with the world."¹⁰ These aesthetically uncompromising poems, which make no gestures or appeals outside themselves, are just an invitation for us to breathe through the feet on earth, to open our eyes and clear our ears to better see and hear what is going on around us in the world. Poetry is ubiquitous after all – it is in the very texture of *being*. And they do so in a beautifully carved language that aspires to the status of transparent precision. The nature of this language resists final interpretations and analytic approaches, for it is just as mysterious and potent as the reality it evokes. A poet with such a severe calling as Bringham is full of the conviction that this struggle of writing this *poetry of finding out* is the intellectually and aesthetically right thing to do in his attempt at grasping the texture of what it means to be alive in a world with a promise of renewed wonder.

There remains the mystery about the origin of poems and about their way of affecting readers for good. Throughout the centuries, influential thinkers and practicing writers have struggled with the hard question of what literature is, but no one seems to have succeeded in pinning down its essence. Poetry resists final explanations, in fact.¹¹ Where does poetry from heights come from? We ignore out of what dark habitation poems emerge. Poems might well be created in a state of heightened consciousness, where the mind is more open and receptive to the unknown out there. The antennas of perception are unfolded and the poet, to quote American author Mark Strand's words in a most delicious essay on the art of poetry, enters "the secret passage that leads out of time into the stillness of what has not yet been named into being, the passage that leads to the

⁹ "Breathing through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation", *ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁰ "Breathing through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation", *ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

¹¹ Derek Attridge, in his groundbreaking and brilliant book *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), claims that "all attempts since the Renaissance to determine the difference between "literary" and "non-literary" language have failed – and that this is a necessary failure, one by which literature as a cultural practice has been continuously constituted", p. 1. In the notes at the back he qualifies this statement and reminds us that it would be even more accurate to "go as far back as Ancient Greece." (p. 147)

birthplace of poems.”¹² The poems of greatest value in our life are those whose emotional urgency gives voice to the inarticulate. If language is the most subtle instrument for expressing thought and emotion, then the language of poetry has amazing ways of articulating emotion and verbalizing knowledge that are not to be found in other modes of discourse and other forms of approaching the world. And yet our experience of literary works consistently and systematically exceeds the limits of rational accounting. In spite of “our inadequate ways of experiencing illumination” (little epiphanies about the transcendental truths about life), the “ways in which the language of poetry makes sense of human experience”¹³ are a source of perpetual wonder and delight.

Strand reminds us that “much of what we love about poems, regardless of their subject, is that they leave us with a sense of renewal, of more life.”¹⁴ Nothing prepares us for a genuine encounter with poetry, with the privileged use of language we find in verse, with its extraordinary ability to unsettle, intoxicate and delight its readers. We open a book of poetry, cross the threshold, and realize that life, the life as we knew it to be, is no longer the same. Something profound has been changed, even if the world keeps on turning, indifferent to this transcendental moment that has changed our view of reality. Yet, when reading poetry we sense that we are in the presence of something truly large, larger than all of us, and that some kind of revelation and illumination is about to be imparted to us mortals. Much of the appeal of poetry lies precisely in its inexhaustible capacity to transcend all kinds of barriers and borders. Poems composed two thousand years ago, in languages other than our mother tongue, have an uncanny ability to move us in unexpected ways. Something beyond our capacity to understand and rationalize compels our interest and our ability to be moved by a poem. Despite their power to enchant, poems always resist all but partial meanings. Human beings live in space and in time after all, and precisely “lyric poetry reminds us that we live in time. It tells us that we are mortal. It celebrates or recognizes moods, ideas, events only as they exist in passing. [...] It is a long memorial, a valedictory to each discrete moment on earth.”¹⁵ However, there is something powerfully suggestive and atemporal about poetry, capable of appealing to men and women living in different temporal and spatial realms:

... not all poems try to remind us of the dark or the unknown at the center of our experience. Some try not to, choosing to speak of what is known, of common experiences in which our humanness is most powerfully felt, experiences that we share with those who lived hundreds of years ago. It is a difficult task – to speak through the poetic and linguistic conventions of a particular time about that which seems not to have changed. Each poem must, to a certain extent, speak for itself, for its own newness – its ties to and distortions of the conventions of the moment. It must make us believe that what we are reading belongs to us even though we know that what it tells us is really old. This is a form of deception that makes it possible for poetry to escape the commonplace.¹⁶

¹² Mark Strand, “A Poet’s Alphabet”, in *The Weather of Words. Poetic Invention*, 2000, p. 11.

¹³ Mark Strand, “Introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1991*”, in *The Weather of Words. Poetic Invention*, 2000, pp. 51-52.

¹⁴ Mark Strand, “A Poet’s Alphabet”, *ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁵ Mark Strand, “A Poet’s Alphabet”, *ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁶ Mark Strand, “Introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1991*”, *ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

II· On the Language of Poetry as Transparent Medium

Poetry is in the very texture of being. Bringhurst reminds us of this essential truth time and again in his sustained effort to apprehend the essence of poetry throughout his career. This extended meditation on poetry and language has crystallized in a number of polished essays, written in a most elegant prose, which explore the connection between poetry, language, philosophy and ecology. A poem is the unassailable expression of what cannot be expressed in any other way, but, in Bringhurst's words, poetry has nothing quintessentially to do with language. While acknowledging that poetry is not just made out of language, the poet has been deeply concerned about exploring the potential and limits of human language as a tool that makes at least human poetry possible. This serious concern with language – speech, silence, voice, words, breath – betrays what could be called a Hebraic or *logocentric compulsion* beneath the surface which can be traced back to the cradle of Western philosophy. The word λόγος is a complex one which encapsulates an array of far from clear-cut senses. It is already implicit in the thinking of the Presocratics and in Plato's philosophy, which contemplates the primacy and superiority of oral over written language, precisely because of the physical presence of the speaking subject in the act of communication.

Poetry is in fact a mode of communication¹⁷ and it seeks to impart some kind of truth which is not just the expression of the measurable, objective facts with which science concerns itself.¹⁸ Truth and beauty are those old companions of the literary; language must be somewhere mid-air in the middle in that potent constellation of concepts. After all, what strikes one as truly surprising about a poem is the uniqueness of the choice in the combination and disposition of words it has made the very moment it was born. At some pre-verbal stage there might have been floating ghosts of words which then crystallize into the particular, concrete poem. Those are the genuinely authentic traits of a poem at first glance. Striving on the edges of language and its resources, the poet comes up with a handful of words which are not lustreless by dint of their use (and abuse) in everyday interaction for purely communicative and pragmatic transactions in human interpersonal relationships. Even if language is instrumental in bringing about changes in the real world in everyday life, words end up being somehow devoid of the transcendental halo they strive to recuperate in poetry. Naked words, which lead a secret life, as pointed out above, are precious in the self-contained, precisely defined limits of a poem. Even familiar words take on a special aura and point out to something else apart from the dictionary meanings

¹⁷ In "Notes of the Craft of Poetry", Mark Strand argues that "a poem is a form of communication, and yet it is acknowledged that poetry invokes aspects of language other than that of communication, most significantly as a variation, though diminished, of a sacred text." *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁸ Derek Attridge, in *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), points out that throughout the twentieth century a huge number of influential thinkers and philosophers (Heidegger, Adorno, Steiner, Walter Benjamin and Derrida, among them) "have attempted to understand artworks in ways that challenge this separation between the domain of the aesthetic and the search for truth. The result of this challenge is that literature *can* once more be seen as participating in the telling of truths, but "truth" is no longer to be understood in the terms which once enabled it to appear as the privileged preserve of science, of the non- or even anti-aesthetic." (p. 14)

they normally have.¹⁹ There is a novel urgency about them in that they demand from us that we savour them quietly on our tongue.²⁰

Poems are also highly solipsistic, narcissistic, and self-referential. Paradoxically enough, they make reference to something outside themselves, to some kind of objective experience that can be pinned down in the world of observable phenomena, but, at the same time, they constantly call attention to their being vessels of meaning which articulate the otherwise inarticulate. There is something about great poetry – and these early poems by Bringhurst are great poetry of sorts – that moves us in ways that we do not quite understand, as if it were communicating more than what it actually says. Inasmuch as they are inexhaustible artefacts, great poems, “capable of carving out such a large psychic space” for themselves

... have a voice, and the formation of that voice, the gathering up of imagined sound into utterance, may be the true occasion for their existence. A poem may be the residue of an inner urgency, one through which the self wishes to register itself, write itself into being, and, finally, to charm another self, the reader, into belief. It may also be something equally elusive — the ghost within every experience that wishes it could be seen or felt, acknowledged as a kind of meaning. It could be a truth so forgiving that it offers up a humanness in which we are able to imagine ourselves. A poem is a place where the conditions of *beyondness* and *withinness* are made palpable, where to imagine is to feel what it is like to be. It allows us to have the life we are denied because we are too busy living. Even more paradoxically, poetry permits us to live in ourselves as if we were just out of reach of ourselves.²¹

The most immediate context for a poem is likely to be the poet’s voice. Poetry dwells mostly in the voice of the poet. And nothing prepares us definitely for the encounter with the kind of language we find in poems. For a poem to be effective, and authentic, the objective world of things and experience must somehow be transcended in the act of literary creation, as if poetry aspired to replacing the real world with a universe of its own while affirming its own primacy and superiority over the world. However, it does not have to be always the case. In Bringhurst’s search after a poetry firmly rooted in the objective world – breathing through the feet, paying attention to every minute detail –, the world does not simply dissolve, but rather asserts itself through the pores of the words deployed by the poet. Eventually, we readers end up with a heightened, because fresh, perception of the universe. For Bringhurst, who embraces a holistic approach to reality, poetry and science are related attempts at interacting with the world, not at substituting it for something else. Both are superb gestures of humankind’s imagination in its attempt to cope with and come to terms with reality, so as to better grasp it, understand it:

The arts and the sciences are in their origin one pursuit. Biology, physics, mathematics, the painting of paintings, the telling of myths, metaphysical reasoning –

¹⁹ For Mark Strand, “poetry, in its figurativeness, its rhythms, endorses a state of verbal suspension. Poetry is language performing at its most beguiling and seductive while being, at the same time, elusive, even seeming to mock one’s desire for reduction, for plain and available order. It is not just that various meanings are preferable to a single dominant meaning; it may be that something beyond “meaning” is being communicated, something that originated not with the poet but in the first dim light of language, in some period of “beforeness.” See his “Introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1991*”, *ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

²⁰ According to Mark Strand, “What is known in a poem is its language; that is, the words it uses. Yet these words seem different in a poem. Even the most familiar will seem strange. In a poem, each word, being equally important, exists in absolute focus... [...] A poem encourages slowness, urges us to savour each word. It is in poetry that the power of language is most palpably felt.” See “Introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1991*”, in *The Weather of Words. Poetic Invention* (2000), p. 47.

²¹ Mark Strand, “On Becoming a Poet”, *ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

all these are ways of listening to and speaking with the world. They are aspects of intelligence. What else is poetry for? [...] Science, like art, is founded on wonder. Light is the precondition of vision – and what is light but the radiance of what is? Poetry and the sciences are linked inextricably right there.²²

There is then no such separation between the epistemological drive behind science, poetry, philosophy, or myth. They have much more in common than might appear at first sight in their ways of making sense of human experience, in that they are truly gigantic achievements of human beings' perception of the essence of things. Thus, objectivity, not self-expression, must be kept at all costs, for Bringhamst wants to produce an authentic work, one firmly rooted in reality, where *being* is not reduced to the human exclusively.

III · Tradition & Language

Poems lead a secret life: they can influence other poems and remain alive in them, just as old poems remain alive in them. This is the essence of literary tradition.²³ Poetry is constantly paying homage to the poetry of the past, building on the preceding poems, and extending that secular tradition into the present and forward into the future.²⁴ It is this other life of poetry which Bringhamst's work continually reminds us of. For him, poetry dwells mostly in the voice of the poet, but also in the voices of the ancient poets and thinkers. Following Eliot and Pound's advice to be original, Bringhamst thinks and writes with the whole burden of the past on his shoulders, or rather, in his bones:

I see no virtue in being original in the cant sense of the word, but only in the obvious sense: I want the work to be authentic; I want it deeply in touch with origins. I don't want to speak for the present moment, to speak 'for my time,' as they say. Time in that sense is a jail we have to break out of. And our time has too many spokesmen already, who see it as paper-thin, who forget that its depth is the past.²⁵

In his search after his own voice, "to be authentically new the poet is obliged to find poetic elements which are authentically old – that is, authentically *his own*. For we do not exist in the new, but in the permanent – where all is both old and new – and it is the poet's task precisely to remind us of this condition."²⁶ In this respect, a poem remains always an inexhaustible and irreducible artefact, made out of ancient pieces of music from old poems that still have some invaluable lesson to teach us. A poem leads ultimately a tautological existence in that "it is itself and is the act by which it is born. It is self-referential and is not necessarily preceded by any known order, except that of other

²² See Bringhamst' essay "Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre", in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), p. 111.

²³ According to T. S. Eliot, in his seminal essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919), tradition "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour" and "not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously." And "the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." See T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, London: Faber and Faber, 1986, p. 14.

²⁴ Mark Strand elaborates on this notion of tradition in "Introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1991*", pp. 49-50, and in "A Poet's Alphabet", in *The Weather of Words. Poetic Invention*, 2000, p. 7.

²⁵ See Bringhamst's "Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre", in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), p. 114. Somewhere else, in "Breathing Through the Feet", the poet enthusiastically confesses a wish: "I'd like to write poetry which the rasp-tongued, mad old master [Pound] might have admired." *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²⁶ Kenneth Koch, *The Art of Poetry*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, p. 66.

poems.”²⁷ Poems are a journey back and forth: brave incursions into the unknown, and a most difficult journey back to that place where words, which certainly lead a secret life, fashion themselves in such a way as to deliver a cogent message to readers about transcendental and profound matters that concern humans from all times and cultures. It may be that “the retention of the absent origin is what is necessary for the continued life of the poem as inexhaustible artefact.”²⁸

In *The Shipwright's Log*, Bringham's reliance on tradition and on the lessons of the ancestors is self-evident from the very title. If we look up both nouns in a dictionary, we learn that a *shipwright* is a person who builds or repairs ships as a job, whereas a *log* is, in this context, an official written account of what happens every day on board a ship. The ship is an element that figures prominently in many literary works of art, and a metaphor full of resonances in the Western tradition. Hence Bringham presents himself as an objective recorder of what is going on around him in the world. These poems may be then the accurate, faithful record of the poet's encounter with the measurable world. In addition, the poet also relies on tradition from the very opening of the book in his use of paratexts and other linguistic thresholds that situate his artwork in a simultaneous constellation of literary works, or in a gigantic palimpsest. Intertextuality is thus an inescapable device in that kind of poetry that seeks originality in the very roots of tradition, in the work of the illustrious dead.

On page 4 of the 1972 first edition, from which all quotations will be taken, we find two quotes from two very different sources arranged in chronological order. The first one is a quote from Alkaios, and it reads Πέτρας καὶ πολίαιας θαλάσσης τέκνον..., which is Greek for “The rock's and the fraymaned sea's child...” As we shall see later on, the sea is a powerful image in the book. As a matter of fact, the first poem in the collection evokes an intensely pictorial and lyrical image of the sea. Also, in quoting from an ancient Greek poet, Bringham is following closely in the steps of the master, Pound, in his fascination about the Greek world.²⁹ From the very outset of his literary career, there is a subterranean Greek thread in Bringham's *oeuvre* that extends itself from these early quotations through certain style exercises in *Cadastré* (1973), the translation of texts by the Presocratics in the broadside entitled *Pythagoras* (1974) and in the chapbook entitled *Eight Objects* (1975), included again in *Bergschrund* (1975) and expanded into a longer sequence under the title “The Old in Their Knowing” in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982) and *The Calling* (1995), to *Parmenides. The Fragments* (2003) and *The Old in Their Knowing* (2005). To a certain extent, this has been a work in progress that spans an arc of time of over thirty years.

Now, what kind of relevance might a poet like Alkaios have for Bringham's purpose in *The Shipwright's Log*? Alkaios, or Alcaeus, was a Greek lyric poet who was born and who died in Mytilene (Lesbos), ca. 620-580 BCE. He was a contemporary of the poet

²⁷ Mark Strand in “Notes on the Craft of Poetry”, *ibid.*, p. 73. In Eliot's phrasing, “what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered”. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, London: Faber and Faber, 1986, p. 15.

²⁸ Mark Strand in “Notes on the Craft of Poetry”, *ibid.*, p. 74.

²⁹ We are thinking here of such poems of Ezra Pound as “The Cloak” and “Homage to Quintus Septimius Florentis Christianus”; “The Coming of War: Actaeon”, “Surgit Fama”, “Δώρα”, “The Return”, “The Tree”, “A Girl”, “April”, “Pan Is Dead”, “Before Sleep”, “Ancora”, “The Faun”, “Cantus planus”, on the ancient pagan gods and the notion of metamorphosis; the Sappho-inspired poems entitled “Papyrus” and “Ἰμέρω”; the Ybicus-inspired poem entitled “The Spring”; and probably “Το καλόν”, all of them collected in the well-known edition of *Personae. The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*, New York: New Directions, 1990.

Sappho, who lived at the same time, in the same city. His poetry was highly esteemed in antiquity, not just because of its musicality and thematic concerns, but on account of its ultimate elegance. Of the original ten books he composed that were compiled by scholars in Alexandria in the 2nd century BCE, only a few fragments survived. He was a favourite model and acknowledged model for the Roman lyric poet Horace in the 1st century BCE, who borrowed and cultivated the alcaic stanza. Alcaeus wrote hymns in honour of the ancient gods and heroes, love poetry, drinking and convivial songs, and politically or socially committed poems as well. Even if his work has managed to survive only in a handful of illuminating fragments, they betray a rare freshness, a precious originality, and the vigour of a poet involved in the socio-political affairs of his natal Mytilene. Curiously enough, one of Alcaeus's most influential images is his allegory of the ship of state, which is to be found in a number of the surviving fragments. Other fragments seem to convey the real atmosphere of everyday life in the Mytilene of the 6th century BCE and deal with ships and rivers, a girls' beauty contest, a flock of widgeon in flight, and the flowers that herald the spring. The thought occurs that Bringhurst must have loved this sense of freshness and wholeness about Alcaeus's poetry, its uncompromising concern with the physicality of things, with the poetry that is in the very texture of the non-human world (not felt to be distinctly apart from the human world) including the most potent elements of nature – the sea, rivers, birds, and flowers. And he must have enjoyed his having declared that the true greatness lies “not in well-fashioned houses, nor in walls, canals, and dockyards, but in men who use whatever Fortune sends them.”³⁰

The second quotation is very different in nature. Lifted from one of Shakespeare's plays, it reads “Jaques: ‘Tis a Greek invocation to call fools into a circle” (*As You Like It*, II: 6). Again it is a quote from one of the literary geniuses of world literature, this time from English literature, not from antiquity. It may be that the writer from Avon is an inescapable figure, a gigantic figure hovering high on the horizon to remind the young writer aspirant that literature is a serious, demanding enterprise. That Bringhurst should cite Shakespeare is somewhat unexpected in a poet who has confessed that he tends to read literary works of art from both exactly the opposite extremes in time: either the very old, ancient texts of the Greek world, the oral literatures of the First Nations of America, and the sages from the Orient, or much contemporary writing being done in the fields of biology, geology, and the natural sciences in general:

I do still read European and even colonial North American poets – primarily those at the two extremes of the history, ancient and modern. But I spend more time reading the works of biologists and anthropologists. I think of them often as the real poets of my age. And I read the remains of the native American oral literature. That, if anything, seems to me the real core of my heritage now.³¹

It is amid the voices of the ancient sages that he seems to find sustenance for his own poetic enterprise. Those voices he listens to so attentively give him no less than the archaic sense of integrity and spiritual wholeness common to the Presocratics, the Oriental sages and the mythtellers of the oral literatures of North America.

³⁰ See the entry on ‘Alcaeus’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. I, p. 318.

³¹ Robert Bringhurst, “Breathing through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, *ibid.*, p. 104.

IV· A Taxonomy of the Poems in *The Shipwright's Log*

There are unambiguously key poems in this collection. For instance, “Sinai” is a central poem in *The Shipwright's Log*, but so are those entitled “The Beauty of the Weapons”, “Self-Portrait: The Sansei Poem”, “Portrait in Blood” and “A Form of Surrender”. Bringham's poems in this first collection of poems can be classed in four groups: the sculpted lyric, the occasional, satiric poem, the long poem, and the reworked myth. In the first place, there is a handful of what could be called *sculpted lyrics*, which are highly reminiscent of the Imagist aesthetics as cultivated by Pound and Williams. By *sculpted lyrics* we mean brief poems that manifest overt musical properties, intended to be read, spoken, or sung, resurrected and embodied by the human voice.³² Under this category fall such poems as “Limassol”, “Jebel Saneen, Lebanon”, “A Form of Surrender”, “Leafletting the Sentry” and “The Beauty of the Weapons”, all of them set in an elemental landscape of mountain and desert and somehow concerned with the irresistible beauty of the weapons and the contradictions to be found in a military world that all too easily relies on the control of the world outside through mechanics and technology. Bringham's own experiences in the Sinai in the wake of the Six Day War, and his own childhood and early adolescence experiences in the mountain and desert regions of Utah, Montana, Wyoming, and Alberta, where he was raised with his parents, might well haunt these well-carved, well-wrought lyric urns. Though deeply attached to these elemental landscapes that were privileged witnesses to the growing mind of the would-be poet, Bringham has also travelled widely and lived for extended periods in Lebanon, Peru, and Japan and, after 1972, in British Columbia, a place he is willing to call *home* – even if he ascetically acknowledges that a true, wise man is said to have no definite home and no definite address, as the Rinzai master claimed a long time ago.

On the other hand, this first category also embraces some more poems: “Self-Portrait: The Sansei Poem” and “Three Early Poems” are two outstanding lyrical pieces where the speaking voice is at pains to verbalize what it means to be alive within a body capable of feeling and emotion. Even if the poet does not approve of the simplistic view that poetry is all about self-expression, and even if he is searching a new kind of objectivity in his work (it is just interesting to note the very title of the book, with its emphasis on recording), this does not prevent the lyrical voice from exploring what we could call the implications of the Cartesian body/mind dualism that has haunted the Western mind since Descartes postulated the divided essence of human beings as consisting of a body and a soul. Nevertheless, it might be useful to cite at this point Bringham's meditation on the use of autobiographical materials in his essay “Breathing through the Feet”. The personal or experiential baggage the poet takes with him is stylized and refined in the act of creation, so that it does not find its way directly or explicitly into the artwork. It does not have to be the case, argues Bringham. In addition, “Les Figures de Lissajous” and “The Shirt”, in their close attention to objective detail, reflect Bringham's fascination with the mystery inherent in the phenomena of the natural world and the quiet, dormant existence of inanimate objects. There is one more poem in this first poetry book which is hard to

³² In Mark Strand's words: “They are usually brief, rarely exceeding a page or two, and have about them a degree of emotional intensity, or an urgency that would account for their having been written at all. At their best, they represent the shadowy, often ephemeral motions of thought and feeling, and do so in ways that are clear and comprehensible. Not only do they fix in language what is often most elusive about our experience, but they convince us of its importance, even its truth. Of all literary genres, the lyric is the least changeable. Its themes are rooted in the continuity of human subjectivity and from antiquity have assumed a connection between privacy and universality. There are countless poems from the past that speak to us with an immediacy time has not diminished, that gauge our humanness as accurately and as passionately as any poem written today.” See Mark Strand, “On Becoming a Poet”, in *The Weather of Words. Poetic Invention*, p. 41.

classify: “Haruspications in a Whorehouse”. Reminiscent of Pound’s and Eliot’s early satirical poems, it looks like occasional, unpretentious verse.

Secondly, there are in *The Shipwright’s Log* several *long poems*, like “The African Daydream”, “Sinai” (a central poem to this collection), “Isthmian” and “Portrait in Blood”. The most pronounced formal features of these poems are their apparent simplicity, their rhetorical nakedness, their circular structure, and their incantatory repetitions. These features account for their fluency, sense of ease and musicality. There is one more long poem, entitled “The Sun and Moon”, which is somehow an anticipation of the subsequent *reworked myths* in his literary career. In Bringham’s poetry, as in that of his Modernist teachers Pound and Eliot, myth is a crucial organizing element. In *Nostalgia for the Absolute* (1974), George Steiner devotes chapter 3 to Lévi-Strauss’s Structural Anthropology, to his notion of myth and its implications for human knowledge. Our poet is not alien to the idea that myth is not just a magnificent gesture of the secular human imagination, but, most importantly, an instrument capable of articulating and making sense of human experience since the very origins of humankind. The haunting presence of Lévi-Strauss can be felt in his later anthropological, literary and translation enterprises. In fact, a few years later, in 1984, Bringham would publish in collaboration with Haida artist Bill Reid *The Raven Steals the Light*, a collection of First Nations stories that form part of a larger corpus of myths. Much later, it would be republished with an introduction by the great Lévi-Strauss. “The Sun and Moon”, in its naïve and uncompromising nature, is a poem both about time and in time, about motion and in motion. It is both linear and circular, and what it suggests is not just the simple diurnal round of night and day, but rather the mythmaking compulsion inherent in the human species, a mythopoeic creature that cannot but construct myths in the face of the grandeur of the universe. Wonder is the origin of science and art, but also of myth. Later in our thesis, we shall return to this issue and its fruitful ramifications: to the sort of security that knowledge brings, to myth as a mode of knowing that integrates many aspects of the cultural life of a human community, and to the myth-making attitude pervading the history of humankind.

What seems to be common to all of the poems in *The Shipwright’s Log* is the basic stuff and assumptions out of which they are made: a new sense of musicality, an unpretentious simplicity, and a willingness to linger in the reader’s ear. These poems thrive on the human voice, come alive through a real performance. Indeed, music and voice are of paramount importance in Bringham’s poetry. In fact, as he suggests in the Foreword to *The Calling*, he conceives of his oeuvre as a *living repertory* or *ambitious work in progress* that is to be revised and actualized time and again, with public readings being their most demanding test. This partly accounts for his mode of publication – first in the form of poems contributed to periodicals, journals or magazines, or in the form of chapbooks or broadsides – and his constant revision in each republication. Perhaps his two first poetry books, namely *The Shipwright’s Log* and *Cadastre*, are the only two instances of well-wrought, finished artefacts. Early in his literary career he moves away from this notion of the finished book of poems towards a more dynamic conception of the book as a temporary repository for his living repertory, emphasizing thus the increasingly oral rather than literary basis of his work. After all, it is as if Bringham’s poems lived in his voice alone, and in the readers’ minds and ears. It is a poetry intended primarily for the ear’s delight, rather than a poetry conceived just for the eye’s pleasure. The poet speaks of his notion of what a poetry reading implies in the following terms:

Readings, performances, have been more important to me. A world in which I never recited poetry, at least to friends or to the hills, would seem to me forlorn. And I’d be bitterly impoverished if I never heard it. But I hear it all the time, not just from human

sources. I mean it when I say poetry is in the very texture of being. I hear it from the rocks and trees and the sea I live with and the widgeons who are here all winter every year. But not to hear a human voice as well, speaking the poetry of humans.... Well, it's all one world...³³

Poetry is *in the very texture of being*. Isn't it fascinating that someone should have the generosity of calling our attention to what looks like a truism? It does not make much sense to draw a barrier between the human and non-human worlds in Bringhurst's poetics, which embraces creation in its multifarious entirety, richness, and variety.

V · Sculpted Lyrics I – *The Mind & the Landscape*

“Limassol” and “Jebel Saneen, Lebanon”, the two opening poems in *The Shipwright's Log*, are companion poems to a certain extent, as they seem to be inspired in Bringhurst's experience in Lebanon, where he lived and learnt Arabic for a period of time. The outstanding prominence of the natural world has strong Romantic reminiscences and reminds us of the places where Bringhurst was raised: the dryness and harshness of Utah in its yellow-and-redness, the mountains and the largeness of the sky in Alberta and Montana, and the rugged terrain in Lebanon. Both poems deal with elemental landscapes that haunt much of Bringhurst's poetry, and with the encounter between the self and the phenomenal world, or, to put it differently, the tense problem of the relationship between the mind and the rest of nature, which, according to Robert Pinsky, is one of the most fundamental aspects of Modernist poetics – the true heir to Romanticism. In his *The Situation of Poetry*, a groundbreaking essay, Pinsky speaks of the persistence of Romanticism in the poetics of Modernism:

Alone, exiled from the rest of the physical world by his consciousness which organizes, reflects and articulates sensory particulars, the Romantic poet regards the natural world nostalgically, across a gulf which apparently can be crossed only by dying, either actually or through some induced oblivion. That gulf is closely related to the gulf between words and things. Various philosophical descriptions might apply to the situation. The broadest of these (if any such description is necessary) stems from the terms “nominalism” and “realism”. Nominalism can be defined loosely as the doctrine that words and concepts are mere names, convenient counters of no inherent reality, though they may be useful means for dealing with the atomistic flux of reality. I understand philosophical realism as the opposite doctrine that universals – and, therefore, concepts and words – embody reality. The Romantic poet tends to look for values to emerge from particular experiences – associated sense perceptions and states of mind at particular moments – and insofar as that is true, he is a nominalist. But insofar as he is a poet he must to some extent be a realist, for those reasons which may bear repeating: words are abstractions, sentences are forms disposing their parts in time, and rhythm is based upon the concept of recurrence or pattern.³⁴

Perception is of the essence in these poems in which we are presented with a perceiving subject trying to grasp the multifarious physical world in its minute details, assimilating the world through the senses, which provide first-hand raw information for the mind to build on. The emphasis is laid primarily on the natural object, on the thing itself, but also on the *I* that does the sensing – or better, the emphasis is on the contrast between

³³ See Bringhurst's essay “Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre”, in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), p. 117.

³⁴ Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry*, 1978, pp. 56-57.

the perceiving *I* and the world. This is transcendental: poetry is concerned then with an epistemological issue – how we humans go about knowing what is going on at all in the world outside ourselves, how the mind manages to grasp a core of meaning inherent in the fugitive phenomena thanks to the raw data provided by the senses. The potent equation poetry/knowledge seems just a natural and obvious corollary.

In “Limassol” enter Bringhurst’s poetry the natural elements recurrent in his entire work – i.e., water, light, and air. It is a wonderful exemplification of the self-contained, autonomous *sculpted lyric*. “*Lumescent pale emerald the sea*”: the opening line is already reminiscent of Imagism, of Pound’s injunction “to go in fear of abstractions” and of William Carlos Williams’ “no ideas but in things” in *Paterson*. The image the lyric offers is one of a frozen moment in time, with almost a picture-like quality to it, this pictorial dimension being enhanced by the proliferating adjectives in the second part of the poem. “Limassol” consists of two stanzas, the first of which introduces a most subtle equation between sea and thought in that the same adjective, ‘lumescent’, is applied to both nouns, *sea* and *thought*. It depicts a world of essences, hence the profusion of nouns here. In this particular conversation with the world, the act of perception and the act of articulation are inextricably one. The perceiving mind is inseparable from the objects in the physical world it seeks to apprehend. The thought occurs that it is precisely the awe-inspiring grandeur of the sea, in its majesty and overwhelming presence, that brings about some sort of illumination into the mind, where *thought moves cleanly, in conduit*, as if in imitation of the ebb and flow of the sea. Somehow the self is extended beyond its clear boundaries, and the mind is the world:

Lumescent pale emerald the sea.
Thought moves cleanly, in conduit,
lumescent in the mind.
The light and air take all the rest away,
the way the South Shore breeze
evaporates the beer’s head.

SL, p. 5.

This first stanza stands in sharp contrast with the second one, where harsh reality enters the poem. The idyllic picture is only apparently disturbed by the irruption of “*bullet-pocks in the pastel walls*” and “*the occasional / scratches on the refilled glass*” into the universe of the poem. The profusion of adjectives helps paint the landscape through words (“*white lighters*”, “*soft swells*”, “*stray images, stray bubbles*” and “*occasional / scratches on the refilled glass*”) and the deployment of lexical repetition and parallelistic structures conveys a sense of calm and circularity that summons the reader back to the quiet at the beginning of the poem. In the end, the whole composition seems to have a mesmerizing power over the reader. At the same time, the perceiving subject is absorbing the world outside and turning it into an inner landscape, while the emphasis remains on the physicality of the world all the time. In this respect, the poem belongs in the Romantic tradition, which embraces the principle of unity in variety, or, to put it differently, the whole-ness and same-ness of everything. If I am what I perceive, and everything is related to everything else, then the self, closely embedded in a vortex of concentric circles, is one with the universe:

Bullet-pocks in the pastel walls
further the effect, in fact –
increase the ease
and informality, set off the smoothness,
like the white lighters anchored in the soft swells,

stray images, stray bubbles, occasional
scratches on the refilled glass.

SL, p. 5.

“Jebel Saneen, Lebanon”³⁵ is a poem that explores a landscape, and the relationship between human beings and the land. In a mode of thought habitual with him, and with a sense of responsiveness to the scrutable past, palpable in the air, it is as if he set an ear on the land’s chest to listen to the stilled voices of the past. Lebanon is a land that just encourages this breathing through the feet, this way of paying attention to what the land has to tell us. Historically, Lebanon is heir to a long succession of Mediterranean cultures – Phoenician, Greek, and Arab – and the site of the oldest human settlements in the world – the Phoenician ports of Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos were dominant centres of trade and culture in the third millennium BCE. The most outstanding feature of the physical geography of Lebanon is precisely its rugged, mountainous terrain. Running parallel to the Mediterranean Sea Coast, the Lebanon Mountains constitute an impressive mountain range about 240 km long, the snowy peaks of which are thought to have given Lebanon its name in antiquity, as *laban* is Aramaic for *white*. Jabal Sanīn (Jebel Saneen in Bringhurst’s poem) is 2,695 metres high and it is the second peak in the country, northeast of Beirut. This is the mountain that gives Bringhurst’s poem its title.

If writing poetry is truly a way of *making the unknown visible*,³⁶ then this poem somehow unearths what lies hidden and latent in the landscape. It does so in three simple sentences infused with the force of parallelism. The talismanic words recurrent in Bringhurst’s poetry are already present here (mountain, sea, bone, blood, stone) to conjure up an image of the world coming back from out of the mists of antiquity:

There is a secret of the mountain and the sea
and of the bone and the unleashed blood
I make with you.
There is a secret of the uncarved stone
and of the lands that make men’s gods
I make with you.
I need your love to make my hate come true.

SL, p. 6.

A poem as straightforward as this one should not present a problem, but it does, since, in its resolute plainness, it resists any final interpretation. To begin with, who is the *you* the speaking voice in the poem is addressing? And, what are we to make of the closing verse line, which offers an altogether unexpected resolution in the form of a paradoxical statement? The air is charged with secrets that human language seems incapable of articulating or verbalizing. But the secret outside, the secret dwelling in the mountains and the sea finds its counterpart in the secret inside – in the bone and the running blood in the body. The body becomes thus an extension of the world at large. Similarly, “*the uncarved stone*” and “*the lands that make men’s gods*” seem to point to something beyond their resolute and stubborn existence. Lebanon, as the site of ancient cultures and witness to different religious traditions, is a land inhabited by men and by gods. Ultimately the gods seem to be

³⁵ “Jebel Saneen, Lebanon” was later published in *Mundus Artium: A Journal of International Literature and the Arts* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) 8.2 ([Winter] 1975): 130-133, along with “Portrait in Blood”, also included in *The Shipwright’s Log*, and “Song of the Summit” and “The Greenland Stone” (both published in *Cadastre*, 1973).

³⁶ Mark Strand, “Notes on the Craft of Poetry”, *ibid.*, p. 71.

an emanation or crystallization of the very natural forces characteristic of this mountainous landscape. After all, throughout history, across civilizations, mountains have been thought to be the home of gods and goddesses. “I need your love to make my hate come true” is a startling statement from a logical point of view. The identity of the *you* addressed throughout the poem remains a mystery, an inscrutable cipher – is it the reader, the mountain in the title, the landscape at large, or the poet himself that the speaking voice is addressing? We simply do not know for sure. When we approach the question of what a particular poem like this means, we are trying to move close to what it brought it into being,³⁷ which must necessarily remain a mystery and a prerequisite for the continued life of the poem as an inexhaustible artefact.

VI · Sculpted Lyrics II – *War and the Beauty of the Weapons*

“A Form of Surrender”, “Leafletting the Sentry” and “The Beauty of the Weapons” are all concerned with the irresistible beauty of the weapons, and inspired again in Bringhurst’s own experiences in Lebanon. In his description of the world outside, there is in Bringhurst’s poetry a blurring expansion of identity, a sort of giving oneself completely to the surrounding landscape – to the sea, to the mountains, to the trees – and to the objects that remain a silent mystery in the world. This is usually accomplished in his merging with the thing observed so as to describe it more convincingly. When he goes beyond ordinary perceptions, this atmosphere of accuracy stays with him. This return to plain physical presence is a quality rare among poets, an expression of resolute down-to-earthness one finds only in poets endowed with intelligence and sensibility in due proportion. It is precisely this fondness for physical, tangible reality that prompts him to affirm in “A Form of Surrender”:

I am too much attached to the tangible voice
and the feel of the muscle of the lung,
fond of the rock
that the hand can touch, fond of the wind
that really rustles in the hair
and dries the damp on the brow.

SL, pp. 19-20.

Here is the poetic persona already breathing through the feet, paying attention to what is around him. And yet, despite the title of this composition, the speaking voice in the poem appears to be rejecting the notion of emotional surrender itself, which is a privilege it cannot afford to enjoy due to outward, pressing circumstances. The first two stanzas of the poem evoke a scenario of war and meaningless destruction that provides a bulk of sensations for the senses. The poetic persona is in a state of numbed consciousness, “*with the mind stuck, / stuck like the burned jeep or the mortared / truck at coordinates whatever.*” The surrender evoked in the title is not possible, just because his mind is expected “*to intersect other men’s flesh*” on the battlefield. Or possibly, because the mind, as if it were one more physical organ in the human body, turns “*like an old man’s tooth, / half alive, loose in the socket.*” The third stanza presents us with a most startling contrast: not only is the poet fond of the very physicality of the voice, of the lung, of the rock and of the wind, but also

Fond enough to grasp

³⁷ Mark Strand, “Notes on the Craft of Poetry”, *ibid.*, p. 70.

at the trigger and the gunstock,
the handle and the rusting hasp
with the shiny lock,
and the feel of the footfall
on the marble, and tread on the grass.

SL, pp. 19-20.

Moved by a passionate, avid desire to live, the poetic persona gives himself up over to the irresistible appeal of the weapons. As there is poetry in the very texture of being alive, he cannot but get involved in the feel of life, under whatever circumstances, grasping a weapon firmly in his hands, while remembering what it feels like to tread on marble or on grass, or to listen to “*one of those songs. / I wanted to be singing.*” Bringhurst’s poem epitomizes the inscrutable brevity to which his multiform consciousness has brought the polymorphous immediate, that is to say, he has constrained the varied richness and sheer bulk of sensations the world offers the attentive human being into the clearly defined limits of a sculpted lyric. *Condensare*, or reducing the multifarious variety implicit in life into a coherent artwork: this is what Bringhurst accomplishes in this poem. However, deep at the heart of the poem dwells the intimation that there is a radical incompatibility between language and the silent world where things appear. Things, objects, may seem almost intolerably enigmatic, even more enigmatic than what we might feel or say about them.³⁸ In the end the poem enters the mute world and partakes of the enigmatic silence of objects, though the attentive reader may discern that, beneath the transparency and musicality of the words on the page, there is an unfailing compromise to *make* poems firmly rooted in objective reality, concerned with giving a rendition as accurate as possible of the concreteness of the world.

“Leafletting” is another such example of sculpted lyric, also exploring the ways in which the mind comes to terms with reality and makes sense of experience. Bringhurst’s severe calling and deepest devotion to the nature of the craft he practices, poetry, sanctioned by a tradition which can be traced back to antiquity, or better, to the origins of humanity, are no doubt beneath the elaborated craftsmanship in this poem. The poem consists of three simple, straightforward questions. The repetition of the same *wh*-word at the beginning of them all, and the parallelism implicit in them, seem a repudiation of forward motion, of temporality, and, finally, of some kind of resolution. The only thing happening in this poem seems to be the unfolding of the pure *thinking* of the mind in spite of its attempts not to think:

What shadow falls across the sheen
of the enamelled mind
like flowers falling on these graves?
What movement in that mind
like polished bone, that organ of his poise?
What accidents of thought weave
round the numbered footsteps,

³⁸ Apropos the strangeness inherent in things, the great and discerning Hugh Kenner, points out: “What are they doing here? Why do broken rims crumble here in the desert? What is the wind doing? I will show you fear in a handful of dust... When objects have invaded the universe the sage grows mute, as did Newton, who does not enlighten us with sayings but with silent symbols. And when a sensibility has grown attuned, as had Wordsworth’s, to the domain of quiet objects (no motion have they now, no force), then a man may seem like a huge stone, or like a sea-beast, or like a cloud...” See H. Kenner, *The Pound Era*, pp. 25-26. This might partly account for the state of apparent insensitiveness or numbness the poetic persona seems to be experiencing in this poem.

murmur in the measured pulse, bleed
quietly behind
the anodized nerve-ends of the eyes
guarding the graves of the dismembered
and the undiscovered dead?

SL, p. 21.

What is being performed here is an anatomy of the mind at a precise, frozen moment in time. The object under scrutiny seems to be the sentry's mind. If there is a point to this poem, it is that sometimes true occasions and places for poetry are internal in the first place, in the light of the sheer bulk of sensations we get from the world outside. The incessant, brooding life of the mind seems to be simply inscrutable and inescapable. *Shadow*, *movement* and *accidents* are all categories that belong to the physical world which, nonetheless, are projected onto the mind. Ultimately the 'accidents of thought' that weave 'round the numbered footsteps', as if they had a life of their own, reflect the will's subterranean determination to empathize humanely with the lot of those who lie in the graves, awaiting discovery, and maybe some kind of justice. As can be seen from the nasal alliteration in "*round the numbered footsteps, / murmur in the measured pulse*," the pervading sensation is one of concealment and emotional containment, for the self seems to be anaesthetized in the face of calamity and pain. The plain repetition of the formulation of all three questions would serve as proof of the initial resistance of the mind to be moved by the reality outside. Eventually the body in its entirety (the pulse, blood, nerve-ends, eyes) conspires to make the mind cry over the dead in the graves, even if this crying does not imply an explicit shedding of tears. And the poem's resolute plainness seems a rebuke to making of it anything more than it is.

VII· Sculpted Lyrics III – *Love Poetry*

“Self-Portrait: The Sansei Poem”

Reading “Self-Portrait: The Sansei Poem”, it is impossible not to remember what Ezra Pound said about the quality of great poetry: poetry should have at least the qualities of well-written prose. Bringhurst's poetry has the simplicity, clarity, and precision of good, well-wrought prose – which is also to be found for the reader's enjoyment in his essays on language, typography, ecology, poetry and philosophy. To a certain extent, Bringhurst's luminous mind has transferred the excitement and meridian clarity of well-written prose to his poetry. The sense of nakedness is eloquent in itself. In its apparent simplicity this poem is thus related to the kind of pure, clear, conscious prose we find in *The Tree of Meaning* (2006) or in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing* (2007), to quote just the two most recent collections of prose writings by the poet. Bringhurst's devotion is, after all, to language, to a kind of spiritual honesty and integrity in which perceptual and intellectual precision has its counterpart in verbal or linguistic precision. Concision, an unfailing vocation to truth and beauty – the great traditional companions of poetry throughout the history of humankind – constitute, we believe, the core of the morality in Bringhurst's conception of what art can do to enhance our vision of reality.

“Self-Portrait: The Sansei Poem”, originally published under the title “Self-Portrait for a Sansei Girl”,³⁹ gives an impression of inhumanity and of the warmest humanity at the same time. Bringham makes no effort to vanish here, the first-person pronoun *I* meaning the person who is elsewhere called *ego scriptor cantilenae* by his acknowledged master Pound. This is almost a confessional poem, written in exactly the same words a confessional poet would use. Paradoxically enough, this is a most impersonal poem, which strives not to be a confessional poem after all. T. S. Eliot, another acknowledged, all-pervading presence in these poems, was the theorist of impersonality in poetry and gave the Flaubertian aloofness its definitive formulation. In “Self-Portrait” we witness a refusal to give oneself over to sentimentalism when dealing with the subject of love in poetry. The intellect comes back in his poetry, as part of the very texture of the verbal artefacts which these sculpted lyric poems seem to embody. And yet we are well aware that, for Bringham, poems, which are semantically charged air, live in the transience of breath. All their intellectual atmosphere is not at odds with the sense of grasp on actuality, though. *A poem should not mean but be*. After all, Bringham’s early poems seem concerned with the immediacy of perception, hence the indisputable vigour of his language:

The arms do not enfold,
they are segmented bone,
cartilage, firm flesh;
they embrace
in strength and empty spaces,
take pleasure in the form and shape.

The hands do not caress,
they are knuckle and nerve cord,
ligament and artery and vein,
the hungry hollow
and the sculpting edge.

SL, p. 30.

Bringham’s sensitivity to detailed sculptured forms is apparent here. This poem owes everything to observation from deep within the mind, not just to the sensing done through the senses by the perceiving *I*. In following Pound’s injunction to go in fear of abstractions, Bringham is intent on grasping actual things as they are. In his search after concision, the portentous master gave basic instructions as to how to reduce the whole art to the bare essentials: “a. concision, or style, or saying what you mean in the fewest and clearest words; and b. the actual necessity for creating or constructing something; of presenting an image, or enough images of concrete things arranged to stir the reader”.⁴⁰ In much the same way Pound prized Sappho for just the concision and chisel-edge of exactness of her surviving, luminous fragments,⁴¹ Bringham admires this same drive toward concision in the master. Bringham’s language makes one aware not only of what it says, but also of language itself – of the word as a word among words – as great poetry does, or should. Of course, musicality, as well as perceptual and intellectual accuracy, goes along with it.

³⁹ Published for the first time in *Stoney Lonesome* (Bloomington, Indiana) 3 (1972): 13-15.

⁴⁰ Quoted by Hugh Kenner in *The Pound Era*, p. 61.

⁴¹ Hugh Kenner speaks of the kind of attention fragments exact from a responsive reader: “a gathering of the responsive faculties into the space of a tiny blue flame” (p. 60). This ultimate elegance Pound admired in a poetry reduced to tattered fragments he explored in *Lustra* (1915), in Canto 5, in *Mauberley*, and then, a quarter-century later, in Cantos 74 and 80 in *The Pisan Cantos* (see p. 60 and p. 71 of *The Pound Era*).

Part of the simplicity of the language is achieved by what could be called an *assertive mode of speaking*, which relies on recourse to the verb *to be*, enumeration, and repetition – of words, of syntactical structures (parallelism) and of sounds (alliteration and rhyme). If there is an outstanding point about this poem, it is that it builds on the uncanny mechanism of metonymy: the lover is ultimately reduced to a sort of down-to-earthness and the physicality of the body – *arms* and *hands* that refuse to do what they are expected to do when one is in love. They do not enfold or caress, fond as they are of the very materials of which life is made out of, of the grasp on actuality. *Arms* and *hands* are the focus in each of the two stanzas that make up the poem, and they are, in turn, reduced to the flagrant materialism of the body: they are made up of nothing more than bone, cartilage, flesh, knuckle, nerve cord, ligament, and vein. The intrinsic musicality in the poem builds precisely on enumeration, repetition and subtle patterns of vowel sounds repeated in middle and end-position.⁴² The complex and subtle sound architecture in the poem leaves nothing *en route*, and somehow enhances the physical dimension of the mortal body in a material world. These arms and hands are not made for love, we are being probably told, as they were made rather for touching and apprehending the world in its *form and shape* instead. And the world is larger than you or me, even larger and grander in its multifarious beauty than whatever we might feel or say about it.



“Three Early Poems”

“Three Early Poems” build a context of simplicity, quietness, directness and poise for themselves. The great Hugh Kenner says that “a work of art is someone’s act of attention, evoking ours; there have been great feats of attention.”⁴³ It seems to us that these three early pieces are good examples of what Kenner means by “someone’s act of attention”. The poems are interested in a contemplative state of mind or the ability to see in the dark. The first of the three early poems is a night piece which opens with lines reminiscent of Wallace Stevens. It relies heavily on a kinaesthetic dimension which builds on sense impressions collected in what looks like a precarious tranquillity. Its music derives from an imagination that can be thrilled at every instant in a world that has more than enough food for the senses; and its language is completely accurate once again. There is no sense of vagueness or mistiness or imprecision about what the senses record and the mind transcribes into this *shipwright’s log*. The result is a parataxis of sharp-cut perceptions. Bringhurst alliterates the perceptions into two distinct groups – those intended for the sense of smell and those intended for hearing – but preserves their identity as separate acts of the senses and the mind, mapped onto separate words and musical notes. The collision of the senses with the incomprehensible world of things offers a myriad impressions to the eye and the ear. An atlas of the difficult and beautiful world begins with the sense of smell:

Magnolias in moonlight and magnolias and other
 unnameable, innumerable
 blossoms back of the dark air
 bear down with inimitable weight,

⁴² There are several clusters of vowel sounds repeated over and over again throughout the poem. On the one hand, there are three basic rhyme patterns: i. *enfold*, *bone*, *hollow*, and *cord* share a similar diphthong and vowel sound; ii. *flesh*, *caress*, and *edge* are a significant constellation on the /e/ sound; iii. *embrace*, *spaces*, *shape*, and *vein* share the diphthong /ei/. On the other hand, there are eloquent examples of alliteration – *firm-flesh*, *knuckle-nerve*, and *hungry-hollow* – which enhance the musicality of the poem throughout.

⁴³ See Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 53.

satiate and still excite
intoxicating hungers.

SL, p. 31.

The music seems the result of the humming alliteration based on the repetition of the nasal consonant sounds /m/ and /n/,⁴⁴ and of the lines not being finished grammatically, owing to enjambment and run-on verse lines. Hence the sense of a line is picked up by the next. The reader cannot simply read the poem straightaway as one utterance, in one breath, but must keep moving forward, driven by the similarity and harmony of sounds from one line to the next. The prosody helps create the content, and the opposite is also true: the content creates the prosody. The music is fetched not from the scene before the perceiving subject but from the mind confronted with the world outside. Deep inside is the intimation that there is an unfathomable gap between language and reality. And yet the poems crystallize the fine orchestration of smells and sounds and thought in the night.

A very different kind of music we find in the second stanza, where a short meditation on time is essayed. Unlike the first stanza, there is here just one verb, around which gravitate the rest of the words. “*The pulse, the tides, the clocks, / the calendar, the cadence of the years*” fuse together *in crescendo* in a long subject of a simple sentence. In poetry the eye of vision sees systems of connectedness; some thing may not be another thing, but it somehow resembles it or has the same structure. This is what Hugh Kenner would call a *homeomorphic* way of thinking.⁴⁵ What we witness is the meshing together of the body, the mind and the world, in time, which is the matter out of which human experiences seem to be made. If this is a real act of attention, in which the perceiving *I* in the poem is paying attention – breathing through the feet –, then it culminates in the realization that the self and the surrounding world that is home are inseparable, and that time is “incarnate in my feet”. Apropos this mind/landscape relationship, these words from Pound’s Canto 92 seem most relevant and illuminating in this context:

... but the Divine Mind is abundant
unceasing
improvisatore
Omniformis
unstill

After this interlude, punctuated not by describing adjectives but rather by proliferating nouns – which is to say, *essences* as apprehended by the mind –, the third stanza takes us back to the world of the senses. This is a stanza *for* and *about* the ear. Three out of the six verbs in it are one and the same: *echo*. The footfalls of the speaking persona echo from afar: “on the cracked cement”, “in the scented street”, “through the unseen petals”. Then, at some point in time, they invade the mind with enigmatic “ancient lamentations” that resist any straightforward interpretation:

The footfalls on the cracked cement
echo in the scented street and echo,
echo through the unseen petals, cross
the grass and grip my head
in thighs of wind and rhythms

⁴⁴ Notice the constellation of words in the first stanza in which nasals are repeated binding the words together: *magnolias, moonlight, unnameable, innumerable, blossoms, inimitable, intoxicating*.

⁴⁵ See Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 33.

out of ancient lamentations I have never understood.

SL, p. 31.

Notice again the enjambment in end-line position, the alliteration of the sound /g/ in *grass* and *grip*; the subtle repetition of the sound /k/ in *cracked*, *echo*, *cross*; and the assonance in *street-unseen* or *grip-wind-rhythms*. The complex sound architecture denotes a mastery of prosody and all the potential it has to offer the young poet. Beyond the elaborated craftsmanship in the poem there seems to be an evocation of how quietness is an intrinsic part of poetry, and of how there might be various kinds of quietness: the quietness of a night scene like the one evoked in these lines, the silence and quiet one may feel in the presence of something that seems beautiful or important. The closing line of this first poem is highly reminiscent of Pound's "sound: as of the nightingale too far off to be heard" (Canto 20), the cadences and the spirit of which it seems to share: the sound yields the vision, a sudden insight into the essence of things. Therefore, there is more than a simple inspection of the surrounding landscape, late at night; there is ecstatic rapture. The word *lamentations* radiates in apposition to *ancient* curious concentric circles that point to the weight of tradition on Bringham's poems from the very beginning of his literary career. Language creates its characteristic force fields and signifies much more than it might appear at first sight.

The second early poem displays a circularity which is inseparable from the love theme it explores. In the mixture of impersonality, aloofness and yet personal involvement, it is strongly reminiscent of "Self-Portrait". In the opening lines, we are plunged right into the present, in the *now* of a love relationship that is on the edge of extinction. The first stanza speaks of the strength and weakness that seem to be inevitable wherever love is at stake: "*the odd strength sequel / to the weakness sequel.*" By contrast, the second stanza takes us back to the past, when love was something pure, and fragile and strong at the same time:

We were younger and the image of a bird
seemed somehow stronger.
In our wingless way, we flew.
We knew a form of
 strength already in the touch,
had sense of something on the run,
and yet so little intuition
of the easy crouch
of lithe metaphysical muscle,
of love
 like the long body of a leopard
lying between.

SL, p. 32.

The image of the bird is perfect for a definition of love that knows no limits, no fears, no uncertainty. The ultimate impression is that love in youth, in its innocence and reliance on touch, is invincible and vulnerable simultaneously: "*We knew a form of / strength already in the touch.*" Touch is omnipotent at this stage: that single word, *touch*, governs concentric circles in the poem, its pure sound played against the surrounding lexical texture. But *and yet* constitutes a crucial turning-point in the poem: there is something gloomy hovering in the air. However, the joy of love is incompatible with a sense of awareness of what the future might bring, even if something is in abeyance, just round the corner. The "easy crouch / of /the metaphysical/ musc/e" (notice the unexpected adjectival combinations) and "the long

body of a leopard / lying between” (notice the insistent alliteration of /l/ in both quotes) have ominous resonances about them. The leopard is not a creature of the air, like the bird, nor an innocent or inoffensive animal, but a predator instead. Even if the impression is one of flexibility owing to the leopard’s lustrous skin and long body, it comes as something of a surprise that it should lie *between* the lovers. By a perfect linguistic alchemy the poet accomplishes much in this poem. Needless to say, the bird and leopard are the bird and the leopard, but they also stand for something else. Whereas the former is associated to the innocence and vulnerability and strength of youth, early love, the latter seems to evoke images of something menacing and alien to love itself. Destruction may come from within or from without, but the obstacle is already there, right in the middle. The last stanza seems to confirm this reading: love is wounded to death and the speaking voice feels a fierce need to leave. It seems there is some dignity implicit in the act of leaving what has no future ahead:

The touch now
 again,
 again largely old-fashioned but at least
 again the odd old strength of leaving.

SL, p. 32.

Sometimes great poetry comes to this: in a world defined by impenetrable objects, a poem can become an elaborate verbal structure where no objects can intrude, where only the mind might dwell at its ease. The third of the “Three Early Poems” is a most illuminating example of what we intend to mean by this. Beneath its well-wrought brilliant surfaces, and beneath its different manifestations of what repetition might achieve in terms of prosody and musicality (parallelism, anaphora, alliteration), the poem is concerned with fire, goddesses, and mountains – a most curious juxtaposition. The refining fire is not much unlike ice in its sculpting power; the goddess “gives good dreams”; and the mountain, the traditional dwelling place or embodiment of spirit beings and gods in antiquity across epochs, cultures and civilizations, grows the body and the mind – of the poet, we are tempted to add, well aware that Bringhurst spent a lot of time in his youth climbing mountains to be closer to the sky, while keeping his feet pressing firmly against the earth:

No fire but the finest
 whets the wits like ice,
 no woman but the goddess
 gives good dreams.

No mountain but the greatest grows
 the muscle in the blood
 that beats the brain
 out through the body like a blade.

That goddesses and gales make
 my habit of that joy,
 roar down the nerve,
 carve out the synapse like a vein.

SL, p. 33.

That such words as *muscle*, *blood*, *brain* and *body* are discoverable in each other's neighbourhood is to us an expressive fact. These constellated words in the poet's transparent language are a poignant cluster of key, talismanic words that are recurrent in Bringham's poems from the very beginning of his literary career. Furthermore, they are bound to one another by alliteration, which pervades the whole poem – *fire-finest, whets-wots-woman, goddess-gives-good-greatest-grows-goddesses-gales, mountain-muscle, blood-beat-breain-body-blade* – and helps create a prosody of meaning that enters the mind first and foremost through the ear rather than through the eye.

VIII · Sculpted Lyrics IV – *Amid a World of Objects*

“Les Figures de Lissajous”

Poems somehow exist outside of history, with the strange extra-temporal persistence of objects in space. Therefore, poetry is also more philosophical than history, as discerning Aristotle said a long time ago in his *Poetics*, one of the founding texts of Literary Criticism in the Western tradition. This is the case with “Les Figures de Lissajous”, a poem outside of the province of time, yet concerned with motion, which is the essence of all living things in this world. Bringham's early poems give the impression of being fragments carved out from reality itself in their entirety, their crystalline words evoking an aesthetic worked out under the sign of the Modernist masters and, more specifically, Imagism. *No ideas but in things*, said William Carlos Williams. There must be some kind of truth inherent in the objects that fill the world. And this is what the poet is after here: looking for a language that goes straight into the heart of things. But objects in space remain somehow opaque and resist the inquisitive eye of the spectator. There seems to exist a radical incompatibility between language and the silent world where objects appear, tempting humans to interpret them beyond themselves, as objects in space are a sort of memory system.

“Les Figures de Lissajous”, a French-titled poem, opens with a short biographical note about Jules Lissajous, the French physicist who was born in Versailles (1822-1880) who “studied the composition of vibratory movements through optical procedures.”⁴⁶ The very title and preceding para-textual threshold betray Bringham's fascination with the past – the human feats in the discovery and conquest of truth, which is proteic, manysided or multifaceted – and with the mysterious halo surrounding physical phenomena. When we approach the meaning of the poem, we realize that we are getting closer to the place where poems come from, which must remain obscure and ambiguous if the poem is to retain an everlasting appeal for future generations. The pervading tone of the poem is one of objectivity, as the content looks like an impersonal account of a physical experiment conducted by Lissajous himself. The mystery surrounding the phenomenon under scrutiny is grand: how to pin down motion through optical procedures:

Son et lumière,
the tuned steel shook
the shattered mirror and the figure
reappeared. The light wrote out
the orbit of the nonexistent star.

SL, p. 34.

⁴⁶ The original text in French reads as follows: “Jules Lissajous, “physicien français, né à Versailles (1822-1880), qui étudia la composition des mouvements vibratoires par un procédé optique”.

Bringhurst seems to enjoy the vision of a world in flux, incessantly changing. Moving shapes and shadows are recorded with a passionate generosity of attention. In the context of a *metaphysics of the glimpse*,⁴⁷ poetry preserves precious things glimpsed. It seems to us there are several ways of getting at the truth. Science, philosophy and art seem to offer paths of their own for the human intellect and sensibility. Art and truth are difficult to dissociate. Things are not always what they seem to be, and the fullest perception of reality is not available to human reason alone, or to our completely awakened consciousness. Sometimes it seems that certain parts of what we consider to be the truth are best communicated by works of art, and not by scientific statements, formulae or algebraic formulations, in their univocal semantics, impersonal tone, and objectivity.

Whereas many poets have had an inclination towards the irrational and the unconscious in their search after the truth – away from cool reasoning and close observation of details, towards dream and vision as more secure paths to what is hidden and apparently invisible –, Bringhurst seems to remain on the side of the intellect. His approach is of an intellectual nature; his poetic enterprise resembles science to a certain extent. If poetry is worth writing and pondering over, he thinks, it is because it has something important to say about life, some ultimate truths to impart about the human condition and the nature of the world. In the echo-chamber of his mind there is always an acute self-consciousness about poetry, a wondering about what it is, about whether there is anything real about it. The resulting verbal artefacts are self-contained, well-wrought urns of a Keatsian mode, and yet written in the luminous language of the ordinary man, in common speech. Sometimes the tone of this poetry has something in common with the tone of revelation – lyrical, (dis)passionate, unified. Moments of insight abound in Bringhurst’s poetry throughout. Many of his poems culminate in static insight, rather than in static enigma, in moments of transcendent stillness, and “Les Figures de Lissajous” is no exception:

Silence written on a vanished staff.
Look,
how accurate the hieroglyph.

The voice and the book of reference are
the voice of reference and the book.

SL, p. 34.

The closing stanzas are not devoid of relevant information. They embody what looks like an epiphany: Lissajous’ experiment manages to translate from one code into another, that is to say motion is captured by light in a frozen moment in time. The language of the revelation is ancient, like hieroglyphs, but the accuracy is simply astonishing. The paradoxical, or better tautological, tone of the closing lines is that of a visionary insight into the essence of things. This is *gnomic language* – one aimed at discovering and grasping what lies hidden, invisible, beneath the surface.



⁴⁷ Hugh Kenner speaks of “the metaphysics of the glimpse” (p. 70) and “the aesthetic of glimpses” (p. 71) in *The Pound Era*.

“The Shirt”

Bringhurst’s poems are poems composed by a person in touch with the living details of reality. Therefore, while striving to stay closely in touch with the physicality of the world, they manage to create an illusion of self-contained verbal artefacts, perfect linguistic balloons in their aloofness. What is more, they are a poor man’s art. Great poetry usually comes in mean, simple vestments, as if simplicity were the mark of greatness in such a complex enterprise as poetry writing. Bringhurst is seemingly fascinated by a great variety of experiences, and he is able to be precise and intellectual, to be ecstatic and lyrical, to write about anything he wants. In this case, in a poem entitled “The Shirt”, he writes about a prosaic enough object, and in so doing, he discovers the mystery hidden in the commonplace. In this he resembles the master William Carlos Williams, who writes about ordinary things that are right in front of us, using the language spoken in everyday interaction. What makes this poem so odd and exciting is that it can catch the music of a man alive in his speech, in his time, in a world of which he is aware all the time, with his hands on the buttons of a shirt, his feet on the ground, and his imagination dwelling somewhere beyond the surface of things. Let us discard for the time being, therefore, the crazy idea of art replacing life. The poem is plain and elegant at the same time, a true heir to the Imagist poems in the best tradition of Pound and Williams.

“The Shirt” consists of three, quite symmetrical stanzas. The first one is made up of three simple sentences describing the shirt in a dispassionate, objective manner. Again we are reminded of Williams’ *no ideas but in things*. The sense of decay that is to appear later in the poem is conveyed already in the first sentence: “*The collar and left cuff / are coming in half.*” The second stanza dwells on the uneasy relationship between the self and the shirt:

His fingers come to terms
with the loose buttons
without ease,
with grudged concentration,
and his arms no longer
like to swing back for the sleeves.

SL, p. 40.

Notice the subtle repetition, enhancing the sense of uneasiness that pervades this stanza. In lines reminiscent of the cadences of Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, we witness the psychological strain accompanying such a commonplace gesture as that of putting on and buttoning a shirt up. The individual’s “grudged concentration” leads only naturally to the sense of physical decay which is being explored in the third stanza. A very *sui generis* metamorphosis is being enacted here, but it has nothing whatsoever to do with the splendour of antiquity as seen in Daphne’s metamorphosis into a laurel tree. The man’s skin becomes the bark of a tree, which “*changes from oak to birch / where the shirt frays, / at his wrists and neck.*” Everything is slowly deteriorating, moving on towards the final annihilation. The deterioration of the shirt is eloquent in that it evokes the intimation we all have deep inside of human fragility and vulnerability – in the face of the passing of time and the disillusion brought about by hurting experiences. The end of the poem is one of ecstatic enigma in this case: “*Lately he tends to prefer / a little more starch,*” as if to suggest that decay can be somehow disguised under the cloak of invigorating starch.

IX · Long Poems I – *Landscapes of the Soul*

The drive towards greater simplicity is palpable in Bringhurst's poetry from the very beginning of his literary career. That his early poetry is poorly dressed is a sign that ornamental or rhetorical wealth is absolutely unnecessary and dispensable to the vocation of serious, great poetry. This is exactly the kind of sparseness and transparent language, devoid of rhetorical excesses, that we find in such long poems (anticipatory of his later poems) as "The African Daydream", "Sinai", "Isthmian", "Portrait in Blood" and "The Sun and Moon". The first three poems seem to have the same theme or subject matter in common: the landscape, usually exotic settings from Africa and the Middle East. Deep inside there are autobiographical echoes, stuff out of which the poet has refined and transmuted a core of meaning into his poems. Stylistically, this early poetic voice is marked by what could be called *a Biblical rhetoric* and *an almost Whitmanesque fondness for democratic enumeration*, encompassing reality in its multifarious diversity and richness. The systematic use of parallelism, repetition, paradox and tautology, as well as the abundant syntactic constructions fond of extended and procrastinated noun phrases, remind us that all poetry is formal in that it exists within limits, inherited from tradition or imposed by language itself, as poetry is made, among other things, out of words. Mark Strand reminds us of a most useful distinction: that between formal poetry and free verse. Some literary theorists argue:

... that there is formal poetry and poetry without form – free verse, in other words; that formal poetry has dimensions that are rhythmic or stanzaic, etc., and consequently measurable, while free verse exists as a sprawl whose disposition is arbitrary and is, as such, non-measurable. [...] But free verse is as formal as any other verse. There is ample evidence that it uses a full range of mnemonic devices, the most common being anaphoral and parallelistic structures, both as syntactically restrictive as they are rhythmically binding.⁴⁸

The free verse Bringhurst cultivates is full of pleasures of this kind. His concern with sound and musicality, with incantatory rhythm, acoustic effects, subtle rhyme patterns and alliteration – with prosody, in short – is inextricably linked to this conception of free verse as being as formal as measurable verse. *Repetition, breath, music: meaning*. Pound used to make a distinction between *melopoeia* (poetry for the ear), *phanopoeia* (poetry for the eye) and *logopoeia* ('the dance of the intellect among words'). Bringhurst combines all three in his masterly *oeuvre*.⁴⁹ If Pound learnt in his early youth the technique of sound⁵⁰ from Provençal poetry and the troubadours, especially from Daniel Arnaut (and this fascination with the troubadours' art crystallized in his *The Spirit of Romance*, 1910), Bringhurst in his turn learns the lessons of the musical phrase from the indisputable master. The auditory modulation of

⁴⁸ See Mark Strand, "Notes on the Craft of Poetry", in *The Weather of Words. Poetic Invention*, pp. 69-70.

⁴⁹ It seems to us that Pound is also the ultimate, decisive influence on Bringhurst's interest in typography, in the integrity of design of poetry on the page (*phanopoeia*), in the technical part accompanying the making of a book. Bringhurst himself confesses this fascination with the material side of poetry writing: "Pound himself touched another American bent in me too, and that was my prolonged fascination with craftsmanship and technique, with inward mechanics and outward physical forms. With Pound's example before me, I spent years on the study of metrics. [...] I studied prosodic systems and speech sounds, the acoustic as well as syntactic shaping of language." See "Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation", in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), p. 105.

⁵⁰ See Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 82 and p. 92. From Provençal poetry Pound learnt a twofold elemental lesson: that words are dissociable, discrete elements (hence the focus on isolated words in the *Cantos*, for instance) endowed with a compelling attraction making us wanting to hear them, and that there is a new sense of the musical phrase to be achieved through a language that cares about sound patterns, about the musical architecture built within poems.

his early poems, the explicit virtuosity of the musical phrase, and the intricate sound patterns binding all the poems' materials and holding them together without recourse to fulfilment of a metrical contract: all this Bringhurst seems to have learnt by Pound's instigation through his conscientious study of *prosody*. In his autobiographical essay "Breathing Through the Feet", the poet explains:

And I don't regret the time I've spent studying prosody, though it's clear to me now it has little to do with the essence of poetry. Like its visual counterpart, typography (another physical and mechanical business which, for me, has held mysterious fascinations), prosody is in its simplest forms a ceremonial tool and in its complex forms a sometimes burdensome luxury. At its best, it is a device for retaining and touching the poetry. It may be as useful and beautiful as a bowl, but a bowl is not water, and the untranslatable stuff of prosody is rarely, I think, *essential* to the poetry itself. Yet I value it highly, as I always have. To borrow a sentence from Pound, I value technique as a test of an author's sincerity. I value it as evidence of his commitment to something more than a private audience with the gods.

None of this means, of course, that poetry doesn't sing. It does sing, or seeks to sing – and will try to do so visually, as the hills do in winter, if it is prevented from doing so audibly, as the thrushes do in spring. It may for all that be no more scannable than the Kaskawulsh Glacier and no more tuneful than an Arctic tern.⁵¹

Prosody, which has been a constant preoccupation in his life, is precious for Bringhurst, but, like language, it has nothing quintessentially to do with poetry. It is but one part of the *wide range of knowledge(s)* a poet must master to produce poetry of intrinsic value, which is grander than "a private audience with the gods" and has something invaluable to say about the human condition and the nature of reality. The study of prosody, of the outward form or vestments of poetry throughout the ages, is inextricably linked to the notion of tradition. Anglo-American Modernism preached a new, fresh kind of simplicity in language which Bringhurst tries to emulate in his long (and short) poems. In the Preface to his own poems published in 1911, Ford Madox Ford encouraged Pound to "study every fragment of Sappho; delve ages long in the works of Bertran de Born; ... let us do anything in the world that will widen our perceptions. *We are the heirs of all the ages.*"⁵² Bringhurst follows this piece of advice from the very beginning and writes with the burden of tradition in his bones, and he does so with the diction and syntax of transparent speech. The simplicity of his language invites the reader to savour the words on the page and in the air as distinct, autonomous entities with a life of their own, as dissociable elements. In this he resembles Pound as well. His poems have a crystal-like texture, full of a kind of music that constantly reminds us that it comes from a man breathing through his feet, "trying to live on closer, less arrogant terms with the real – which is, I repeat, for the most part nonhuman."⁵³



⁵¹ "Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation", *ibid.*, p. 106.

⁵² Quoted by Hugh Kenner in *The Pound Era*, p. 81. Italics mine.

⁵³ "Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation", *ibid.*, p. 103.

“Isthmian”

The poem entitled “Isthmian”⁵⁴ betrays Bringhurst’s interest in indigenous cultures from South and Meso-America. Later, probably around 1982, with the publication of *Tzibalem’s Mountain*, this interest would shift to the Pacific Northwest. “I was thirty years old before I began the serious study of the languages and cultures native to the hemisphere I called home. [...] As it is, I’m still very glad of my little Greek and less Chinese – but the ten years I spent learning Arabic would, I now know, have been far better spent learning Hopi and Navajo.”⁵⁵ These are Bringhurst’s words at the age of 39. His “little Greek and less Chinese”, words strongly reminiscent of Ben Jonson’s about Shakespeare’s ignorance of Latin and Greek, hold no longer true.⁵⁶ So “Isthmian” belongs among the pieces of the pre-Haida period of his literary career. The poem opens with two quotations: one from John Keats, “Silent, upon a peak in Darien”; the other from Jacinto Fombona-Pachano, “Y no quedará piedra sobre piedra”. Both quotes probably make reference to the isthmus of Panama, a most curious geographical area – a transition located right in the middle of the American continent that communicates the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The latter owes its name to Vasco Núñez de Balboa, who is reputed to have been the first European to cross it aboard a ship in 1513. The Darien mentioned by Keats must be a region in central Panama, and the Spanish words evoke the havoc and destruction brought about by the Spanish colonizers when they set foot on the American continent. South and Meso-America were the sites of ancient civilizations such as those of the Mayans or the Aztecs, who suffered the torment, the punishment and the imperialistic greed of the Spanish conquerors.

“Isthmian” consists of two clearly differentiated parts, each of them concerned with a distinct landscape. In the first part we are presented with images of a land that the speaking voice in the poem does not recognize as his own: “*This land’s / native images are not my images,*” he tells us. He is an alien in a foreign land which resists facile interpretation by the non-native. The perplexities the landscape offer to the sight in the poem are almost unbearable. The characterization of the poetic persona through metonymy is eloquent enough: the heart, the head, the hand are everything to which the body is ultimately reduced. The hand and the heart are “*tuning peg and bridge for the filament of vision / silhouetted out of the land’s / provender of images,*” but the tone is one of disappointment and disillusion:

I grow silent and unquiet, alone
from the land and the people, ingrown,
suffocating memories in locked
spaces, strangling the air.

⁵⁴ “Isthmian” was also published in *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* (Boston) ns 1.4 (1973/1974): 561-575, in a sequence entitled “Eight Poems and Translations”, comprising a revised excerpt from “The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods”, “Strophe from Sophocles”, “Herakleitos”, “The Petelia Tablet”, “Four Glyphs”, “Isthmian”, “A Short History” and “Antistrophe from Leopardi”.

⁵⁵ “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), p. 104.

⁵⁶ Almost twenty-four years later, in 2010, the poet cannot speak of his *little Greek* any more, as he has mastered the language: he has translated from classical Greek *Parmenides. The Fragments* (2003) and has worked on a work of progress for a long time which began with the publication of a poem entitled “Herakleitos” in *Cadastre* (1973) and a broadside entitled *Pythagoras* in 1974. They were followed by a chapbook entitled *Eight Objects* (1975), consisting of eight poems inspired by the Presocratics; the same sequence was published in *Bergsbrund* in 1975 and the expanded sequence (12 poems) was published in the section “The Old in their Knowing” in *The Beauty of the Weapons* in 1982 and in *The Calling* in 1995; the collection of twelve poems were collected under the title *The Old in Their Knowing* in 2005 and then published with minor textual variants in *Selected Poems* (2009). The Greek language and culture also held an irresistible fascination for Ezra Pound.

The second part of the poem explores a completely different kind of landscape, with which the speaking voice shares an uncanny kinship. The stanza consists of two long sentences in which there seems to be room for everything nature has to offer in all the seasons round the year. The long, extended noun phrases in the Whitmanesque enumerations punctuated by the most democratic of conjunctions ('and') help create a rhythm and musicality built around the nouns, usually bound to one another through alliteration. Nothing is left behind in this tightly-woven sound structure, in the musical texture of the poem:

I would
 have wind and rock and heather, pine and cedar,
 jacaranda and burnished autumn weather,
 maple and sage, birch, winter,
 field flowers in the stormy spring,
 the starlight cold and clear
 and the sun cool, grass and clear water
 for images. I would have
 season and storm and death and empty spaces,
 clear light and wind and water
 and clear sight of timber and stone, another
 scale, an embraceable beauty.

SL, p. 29.

The description offered in these verse lines partly fits the places where Bringhurst was raised as a child and as an adolescent and where he grew into full maturity as a young adult: “*Delos of the sacred rocks, Nova Scotia, Montana, / the long thud of the Fraser.*” (*SL*, p. 29.) Delos is one of the smallest islands (3 sq km.) of the Cyclades in the Aegean Sea, off the Greek coast. It was an ancient centre of religious, political, and commercial life in the past, and a mythical place, since it was thought to be the legendary birthplace of Apollo and Artemis. Afterwards, it became the home to Apollo’s sanctuary in ancient Greece. The “sacred rocks” are the remains that saw the light in the archaeological excavations⁵⁷ carried out in the nineteenth century, which uncovered the stones of former houses, a theatre and a gymnasium, and a number of invaluable altars of the ancient site consecrated to Apollo. The other places mentioned are the ones Bringhurst knew from first-hand experience: Nova Scotia is one of the Canadian provinces; Montana is one of the USA states; and the Fraser is a river that flows in the south of British Columbia. This is a bare landscape, of utter nakedness: “*the stones / of Ta’iz when the sun strikes... / there is for us only the land, / we have no heroes.*” Ta’iz is a city located in the South-West of Yemen, to the North-East of Aden, which the poet must have known during his stay in Lebanon in the late sixties. Time seems not to exist, and geographical barriers vanish as well. We are reminded of Eliot’s litany of cities in *The Waste Land* (1922). Ancient Greece, Canada, the United States, and Yemen seem to coexist on the same atemporal plane. Ultimately what really matters is just the *genius loci* (the spirit of the place): “*there is for us only the land, / we have no heroes.*”



⁵⁷ The Delian League was established there in 478 BCE, following the Persian Wars. Made a free port by Rome in 166 BCE, Delos was a flourishing commercial post and slave market. But prosperity did not last for long. Sacked in 88 BCE during the Mithradatic Wars, it gradually declined and was abandoned. Its impressive ruins have been extensively excavated, particularly since the nineteenth century. See the entry on ‘Delos’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, p. 4470.

“The African Daydream”

Pieces of a dream, pieces of a lifetime

Unlike the sculpted short lyrics in *The Shipwright's Log*, “The African Daydream” is a long meditative poem and an early masterpiece of a kind, reminiscent at times of the work of the masters of High Modernism – particularly of the poetry of William Butler Yeats and Wallace Stevens –, even if at times echoes from the great American bard Walt Whitman are heard in this astonishing piece of music for the mind. *Beauty is difficult*, as Yeats himself would put it, particularly when it comes to producing memorable poetry that seeks to stand the test of time. Going back to the best that has been written and thought by the masters of the past seems to be the first natural and spontaneous gesture on the part of the young poet committed to producing great art. And this is exactly what Bringham is doing here – not just paying homage to some of the best poets of the past, but also acknowledging the fact that coming to terms with tradition is of the essence when looking for a poetic voice of one's own, a healthy and robust voice. Any serious contribution to literature must take into account the history of the imagination and tradition, and no one can call this a small discovery. The courage to look the beauty of the world in the eye and to tell the truth in a poetry characterized by clarity and simplicity is a great accomplishment after all. This gives us an idea of the ambitious scope of Bringham's work from the very beginning, from the very first poetry collection he published in 1972, *The Shipwright's Log*, a book concerned with observing the world and registering what is going on in reality from a detached and rational standpoint. Pound recommended aspiring writers to go in fear of abstractions and the young poet seems to be closely following or obeying his injunction.

Some of Bringham's poems seem to approach as close to perfection as can be imagined in that medium – silent words on the page that seek to dance and sing into the reader's eye and ear. In this respect, though “The African Daydream” appears, at first sight, to be wholly a creation of the mind, resulting from a masterful command of the English language, and though the poet vanishes in favour of the object in front of him, the fact should be recorded that an autobiographical component seems to be singing throughout in the background. These pieces of autobiography are radiant fragments and reminiscences of the poet's experience of the desert while serving as a soldier in the army in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The portrait of the landscape turns out to be therefore some kind of self-portrait too, similar in nature to the one in “Portrait in Blood”, with which it has several stylistic features in common. Here the poet's voice we get to listen to, provided we care to listen attentively to what it has to say, is the same voice singing in such poems as “The Beauty of the Weapons”, “Jebel Saneen, Lebanon”, and “A Form of Surrender”, all of which are, if only subliminally, concerned with Israel and the war, and are shorter pieces by comparison.

The composition is certainly demanding for both the reader and poet, with its keen perception of and meditation upon the world and its unexpectedly hypnotic repetitions. As a well-wrought urn, the poem consists of seven stanzas, each constructed around a thematic thread that coheres into the overall pattern or design. What this pattern is all about is something that will unfold naturally in the following analysis. All seven stanzas appear to offer fugitive snapshots of a landscape, a view of evanescent and unique moments in time and space, as seen through the consciousness of the poetic self. What is simply astonishing about this poem is its ambition to grasp the fluid, absolutely particular life of the physical world by using the static, general medium of language. Of course, the paradox remains that experience may well seem fluid, instantaneous and evanescent, but

language is sequential and, once uttered, relatively fixed.⁵⁸ This does make sense, especially if we bear in mind that the most fundamental vocation of being is learning. The impulse or compulsion to know about the world is a distinctive feature of humankind from the very cradle of humanity. Humans are born into this world to learn a number of things throughout their lives. For instance, learning a language, no matter whether it is one's mother tongue or a foreign language, is just one instance of this fundamental vocation of being. As a species, *homo sapiens sapiens* cannot but get involved in a dynamic two-way interaction with the world of which it is just a tiny part. In that interactive process language is of the essence, as it structures the way we think and the way we feel about reality and everything that falls under that ambitious umbrella category.

If birds can fly just because they are birds, if sunflowers lean toward the sun because it is an inevitable part of their nature, then human beings speak languages because speaking a language is part of an ancient legacy that has been uninterruptedly passed on from one generation to another throughout innumerable centuries. It is positively encouraging to think that humanity is *one*, that languages are just different manifestations of *one* common human faculty branching out from *one* original *Ursprache*, and that humans have much more things in common than they might at first think. Not without good reason, tradition claims that learning a language makes people become more open-minded and flexible, aware as they are that humanity is a multifarious and complex mosaic. If we think about it, we will realize that humanity has been polyglot since antiquity, since the Babel episode as recounted in Genesis 11, since the very beginning of it all. And languages constitute a most precious legacy that must be preserved at all costs. Whenever a language dies, there are countless other things that get lost: not just a peculiar way of conceiving the world, but also a mental landscape designed or fashioned by the linguistic tools of which a language avails itself to arrange the seeming chaos of reality into a coherent shape or *Gestalt*.

In the first stanza of Bringham's poem, the daydream opens with a view of the world in a state of permanent motion, an idea which is linguistically emphasized through alliteration and lexical repetition. Many of his poems rely heavily on assonance and alliteration; they are pieces of music indeed. Free verse proves to be a natural vehicle for a rhythmic and sustained piece of meditation. The key words in the poet's linguistic universe are present from the outset – bones, stones, light, water, breath, speech –, all of which recur in subsequent poetry collections. "*The tides are turning and the tides of turning / turning down the tide, / the season turning on its heel / and the heel turning*" – these four opening lines evoke an incantatory rhythm that is pervasive throughout the poem in its entirety. That the whole of reality is in flux is a primordial lesson Bringham must have learnt early in his career as a poet and serious thinker concerned with fundamental questions such as the essence of the universe. The Presocratics and the Oriental sages, with whom he has never parted company, had much to teach him in this respect over the years to come. As a matter of fact, Herakleitos said that you cannot bathe twice in the same river, which is to say that both you and the river *are* and *are not* exactly the same as one minute ago because of the relentless passing of time. But there is something else to this first stanza. Following the

⁵⁸ In the groundbreaking book-length essay entitled *The Situation of Poetry. Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions* (1976), poet Robert Pinsky speaks of the conflict "between the idea of experience as unreflective, a flow of absolutely particular moments, and the reality of language as reflective, an arrangement of perfectly abstract categories." (p. 47) And somewhere else in the same book, he says: "Language is absolutely abstract, a web of concepts and patterns; and if one believes experience to consist of unique, ungeneralizable moments, then the gap between language and experience is absolute. But the pursuit of the goal, or the effort to make the gap seem less than absolute, has produced some of the most remarkable and moving poetry in the language." (p. 59)

pervasive *-ing* forms of the beginning, which install readers in a non-stop continuous present, a picture of a universe of opposites is also presented in the first stanza. We are propelled backwards in time to Blake's idea – as formulated in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* – that the world is a world of contraries, and *without contraries there is no progression*:

Sounds against the silence,
the scream and the cough,
gunshot and footfall. Speech,
and never a word spoken.

SL, p. 7.

The stanzas following this breathtaking overture are attempts at definition written in a characteristic declarative style. What all of them seem to rest on is the very idea that there is something beautiful about bending to what is inexorable, and that meditating on the vulnerable nature and ephemeral beauty of all things can seem a form of transcendence. It comes as no surprise that the second stanza should open with the word “death”: “*Death is extravagant and open in the sun.*” The poet acknowledges the existence and presence of the harsh world outside, which is to say the mortality of all things living, and so the poem he writes is one that truly preserves a sense of the harshness of reality. The same applies to the concept of fear, which is tentatively defined in these lines:

Fear is fluid, not a sensing of design,
an animal apprehension,
suspense, not suspicion,
a current of the wind inducted in the blood,
a premonition, a focusing of wonder.

SL, p. 7.

After piling up phrases that attempt at encapsulating the essence of fear, an unexpected optimism pervades the third stanza, which resonates with powerful Whitmanesque echoes and explores the succession of day and night, i.e., of light and darkness, that one of the most basic pairs of opposites in the world. For the first and only time in the poem, the first-person personal pronoun enters the scene quite unexpectedly:

I am a native of the sweetness and the light
somehow peering always out of shadows,
always there, in the dew, in the dust,
in the circular shelter of the tree,
in the cave or in the alleyway;
the shadow like a layer of the skin,
going brown in the sunlight,
paling in the fog.

SL, p. 7.

These lines celebrate the glorious meshing of the poetic persona with the world outside in the luminosity of the sunlight. The poetic voice is at home in the difficult world, in a kaleidoscopic reality where the dew coexists with the dust, the trees breathe in the open air, and there is room for such heterogeneous elements as caves and alleyways. Deep inside is the intimation that the universe is sacred at its roots, and that the whole of the human enterprise on earth is nothing but an attempt to make things connect and cohere. Curiosity is of the essence; it is the pre-requisite for humans to start inquiring about the ultimate

nature of things and reality. You cannot walk through life, as if through a forest, and simply ignore the teeming forms of life surrounding you everywhere you turn to look. You cannot simply ignore the mystery that your very existence entails. You raise your eyes and look up at the sky above your head, and the stars tell you that there will not be any other chance, that the moment is here and now. We humans are but a tiny part in a long chain of human beings that have asked the same questions tirelessly over and over again for thousands of years so far. However, the third stanza closes on an ominous note: “*for the sun there is no more / than the combustion in the blood / and the easy respiration of the lungs.*” These words are premonitory of those we read in “Song of the Summit”, that most powerful poetic statement in Bringham’s second book, *Cadastral* (1973). And it has ominous overtones because the world is stripped of all sorts of Romanticized layers and reduced to its essentials – in the sunlight all living creatures are nothing but breathing entities whose bodies are given life by circulating blood. Then comes the night along and the poetic persona wears the larger darkness of the universe as a gigantic cloak round his voice.

The fourth stanza delves precisely into such elemental bodily functions as the human breath (“*The breath burns without smoke*”) and the pulse (“*savage relaxation of the pulse*”). At night, when there is nothing else to see apart from the darkness covering the whole of the universe, there are only two things left – one’s own breath and the unstopping circulation of one’s own blood inside the body. This stanza is absolutely solipsistic in this respect. It takes a huge effort of concentration to focus one’s attention on such essentials as the breath and the pulse. However, the projection of the self moves outwards, toward the world, since constant references are made to the clear night and sky, with which the breath and the pulse seem to coalesce, and also inwards, toward the unfathomable depths of the mind and dreams. The perceiving mind falls down and down into an elemental world where the darkness embraces the self and soothes the mind into a state of blissful sleep:

A threadbare darkness cradles the brain
poorly, arcs poorly in the wind,
its nap sands down the senses
and firs the easy surface of the dreams.

SL, p. 8.

The progression into the following stanza is fluid and natural. Concerned as it is with “a thinking in mid mind”, with a mind thinking and singing amid an African daydream, stanza number five constitutes, in fact, the still centre of this long meditative poem, with the remaining stanzas revolving harmoniously around it. Now the reader is installed at the very centre of the daydream, at a moment when wakefulness and dreaming are not easily distinguishable any more, as the self is actively immersed in the mesh of living and non-living things in the world outside. The metaphors are audacious and *the audible light in the eyes* starts to acknowledge the kinship with the beauty and mystery of reality. Light and darkness, day and night, wakefulness and dreams are all masterfully intertwined throughout these lines – lines truly demanding for the reader, who somehow gets lost amid the hypnotic repetitions, alliterative effects and musical cadences of these words:

In the full, clear fossil
of the darkness is a thinking in mid mind,
a sleep of wakefulness, a dream
perhaps, of deep sharp eyes
borne up as if by wings;

the dream and waking mingled
like the colors that accrue behind the eye
from watching flame,
the white face of dark water under the moon,
a falcon's feathers in the sun.

SL, pp. 8-9.

"*The colors that accrue behind the eye*" is repeated twice, in both stanzas five and six, and this is no happy coincidence, since the effects of the blinding sunlight on the retina of the perceiving eye seem to be one of the concerns of both stanzas. As in Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, light is central to Bringhurst's early poetry, not just on a figurative or symbolic level, but also in a literal and physical sense. Light is at the very centre of such poems as "Poem about Crystal" in *Cadastral* or "For Robert Grosseteste" in *Bergschrund*, to name just a couple of them, and, incidentally, in many of the poems collected in *The Shipwright's Log*, where the function of the poet is basically that of a territorial recorder concerned with observing all the minute details of reality and recording them in an objective manner, quite impersonally. Exploring the subtle nuances of light and the way it contributes to enhancing an illusory perception of reality (this is, after all, a daydream the poetic persona is dreaming somewhere in Africa in the daylight) is no easy task, especially when words are the medium through which the recording is being done:

The sun's ghost on the retina reflects
the same slow wash of threshed
fermented rainbow, sunlight broken on the dawn,
unravelling in the dusk, threshed out
and woven on those wings.

SL, p. 9.

As in many of the short stories by the worldwide known Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (we are thinking at this moment of the magnificent story entitled "Las ruinas circulares" in particular), the interplay between sleep and waking is perfect, and their harmonious coalescence is aptly compared to that between sound and silence: "*Sleep and waking played against / each other into one the way / a music and the silence interplay, / tuning in their resonance the dream, / broken sunlight and frayed shadow, / the colors that accrue behind the eye.*" Bringhurst's poems are also full of edges and sharpened elements. Let us consider the closing lines of stanza number seven, in which the dream is compared to a 'razored light' that breaks; the daydream that has been unfolding in all the previous stanzas breaks with it too:

Clear as razored light
the dream breaks,
dreams of dreaming broken
open into dream and sleep and waking.

SL, p. 10.

After the prolonged daydreaming, the poetic voices wakes up to the world in a new state of intense wakefulness, and becomes more wise and lucid about the ultimate nature of reality. What started as a portrait of an African daydream has turned out to be a sort of self-portrait in a convex mirror – the convex mirror of the consciousness caught mid-air thinking about itself and the world outside. Therefore, the final stanza of this long meditation looks like an afterthought. After the light and the dreaming comes an extended

meditation on the nature of love, of human love. In the poet's attempt at definition of this complex concept,⁵⁹ he resorts to other basic feelings such as fear ("fear is fluid, not a sensing of design, an animal apprehension, suspense...", we read in the second stanza) and anger, that most elemental of human feelings too:

Love is inarticulate, like anger.
But there is some thing common
to love and fear and anger,
some base stuff of passion
that will hold an edge and sharpen
under heavy recollection and
curb recollection into its design...

SL, p. 10.

Contrary to all expectations, the poet does not break into an effusive, romanticized celebration of love, which is commonplace in the long tradition of love poetry in the history of Western literature, if we think only of Sir Philip Sydney's and Shakespeare's sonnets or Keats's odes, for the matter. To begin with, love is inarticulate, it cannot speak with eloquence, and it does not know how to unveil its nature to the human mind itself:

Love is a ground
and polished facet of that passion,
brimming with the silence
that underwrites all accurate
articulation. Sometimes
you can lay that edge of passion on the blood
like the broadside of a blade against the skull,
lay it against the night
like the lithe sleep of the cougar,
lay it against the day like the fullness
and precision of the wild hawk's hunger.

⁵⁹ At this point, it might be worthwhile, and it might shed some kind of light on this issue, to stop just for a while and allow ourselves a brief philological digression. *Das Leben* and *die Liebe* – in the vast store of German words they are quite similar as for their sound and outward appearance. And yet the melody in both German words is pointing out to a common substratum, to an underlying core of meaning. *Das Leben* is the German noun for *life*, and *die Liebe* is the German equivalent for *love*. Whereas the former is neutrum, the latter is feminine. In natural languages gender is sometimes, if not always, quite arbitrary. Returning to life and to love, it is extremely curious that the former (*das Leben*) should be neutrum and the latter (*die Liebe*) feminine in the German language. A mythical explanation comes up to my mind. Far from being a solid matter, life is amorphous, fluid, malleable, a bunch of potential paths that individuals might take even if they are not sure about where they might lead. *Die Liebe*, love, is the embodiment of the feminine principle. In the beginning of the world there wasn't much; there won't be probably much at the end either. There were the sky and the earth, and out of their union through love all the rest of the universe came into existence. There is no mystery inherent in life; life *is* the mystery, and love is at the very centre of it. Out of love comes everything else; it is because of love that all human enterprises seem to make sense all of a sudden. Life is simple enough to be understood by the human mind: it consists of two fundamental events in the history of a human being – birth and death – and towering between them, right in the middle, is love. *Die Liebe* leads a chameleonic existence in human languages: *ἔπος* in Greek, *amor* in Latin, *amore* in Italian, *l'amour* in French. Whereas love is masculine in most other languages, it turns out to be feminine in German. Is this just a happy coincidence? Maybe not. The German language might have come to the sudden realization that love, together with learning, is the most fundamental vocation of being. In a sense we are born to love, not just ourselves, but rather other human beings and the world surrounding us – of which we are but a tiny part. There is so much beauty in the world that human life would be inconceivable if it were not meant to love itself.

Now the circle of the poem and the circle of the meditation are complete. We do not quite understand completely the meaning of the closing line, probably because poetry is simply inexhaustible and resists conclusive interpretations. Love, like light and dreaming, has got a rare and precious kind of precision that only humans are privileged enough to enjoy in their lifetime.



“Sinai”

“Sinai” is one of the fundamental long poems included in *The Shipwright’s Log*. We are by no means convinced that a composition like this requires a critical analysis at all. It is better to read such a poem innumerable times to enjoy the incantatory rhythms of its verse lines, and dispense with an attempt at elucidation like the one that follows. To begin with, “Sinai” resists any easy, straightforward interpretation. This does not mean that it is an obscure composition, but rather that it eludes our discursive understanding. Being a poem of astonishing beauty that appears to rise out of natural speech, “Sinai” offers a series of snapshots or images of a landscape rich with vast spaces dominated by stillness and silence, light and darkness, but also by a humming voice that is not altogether audible in the living grain of things. Readers should allow these images to fall into their memory successively so that, at the end, a total effect is produced. Indeed, the sequence of images and ideas interwoven at the heart of “Sinai” has nothing chaotic or random about it. There is an imaginative logic to this landscape as seen through the prism of the governing (perceiving) consciousness at the centre of the poem, which might be Moses’ or not. But it might be wise to begin with simple facts: Where exactly is Sinai located from a purely geographical point of view? And why is it important in the biblical tradition?

Sinai is a triangular peninsula, bordered on the north by the Mediterranean Sea, on the west by the Gulf of Suez and the Suez Canal, and on the east by the Gulf of Aqaba / Eilat. Moving from the coastland south, the terrain gradually rises to the Ijma Plateau, near the center of the peninsula. The region south of the plateau becomes mountainous before the terrain descends to a narrow coastland between the mountains and the gulfs. [...] It is generally assumed that somewhere on this peninsula is Mount Sinai, the mountain from which Moses reputedly delivered the Ten Commandments to the Israelites, but evidence is scant for determining which of the many mountains was called Mount Sinai during the time of the wilderness wanderings.⁶⁰

So, at some point of the 40-year wandering in the wilderness towards the Promised Land (Canaan), God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai and gave him the Ten Commandments for the Israelites to obey. That happened in a peculiar landscape close to the sea and the mountains, where the sheer magnitude of the scenery must have been awe-inspiring to Moses and the wanderers. “Sinai” is thus a piece closely connected to (and anticipatory of) the biblical pieces at the heart of *Bergschrund* (1975) – i.e., “Deuteronomy”, the extended dramatic monologue spoken by Moses himself, and other shorter pieces like “Essay on Adam”, “Genesis Frozen”, “An Augury”, “Patrimony”, “Babylon”, or “Ararat” – as well as *Jacob Singing* (1977). However, what distinguishes “Sinai” from all these subsequent poems is that Bringham is still searching for his own distinct poetic voice. There are resonant echoes from Eliot and other Modernist masters in between the lines; one is inevitably

⁶⁰ See the entry on ‘Sinai’ in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 696.

reminded of the gnomic words of *The Four Quartets*, for instance. The poet is undergoing a process of metamorphosis and steadily walking towards his own poetic maturity.

“Sinai” is prefaced by a quote lifted from Exodus 20.24 – i.e., “*An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me...*” These words are spoken by God and addressed to his chosen people, to which the deity is united by a sacred covenant. The poem consists of four long sections, possibly spoken by the poetic persona of Moses, though sometimes we are under the impression that the overwhelming presence here is that of the poet as territorial recorder. There might be indeed a subtle autobiographical substratum at the bottom of “Sinai”; after all, Bringham spent some time in Israel. Among the fruits of his Israelite sojourn are key poems such as “The Beauty of the Weapons” and possibly also the poem under scrutiny here. Section I of “Sinai” dwells primarily on the discernible details of an elemental and overwhelming landscape made of sea, wind and hills. It opens as if *in medias res*: “*And we have no true word / and find no truth in this acknowledgment, / no solace in denial...*” These words should be interpreted against the biblical background provided by the Book of Deuteronomy: Moses is leading the Israelites across the wilderness, guided only by their faith in their omnipotent God, who makes generous provision of food and water for the wanderers. Their only sustaining force is God himself, but at times they might have felt that they were just wanderers, irremediably lost amid the sheer immensity of the Sinai peninsula. Hence the speaking voice refers to the reassuring presence of the hills, trees, the sea, the wind and a startled bird:

What other answer
than the coast hills and the grey-gold weather,
the thin wind over the timberline,
the sea,
the startled upland bird.

SL, p. 11.

In the second stanza, the poetic voice enters the poem and speaks in the first person. If this is Moses’ voice, it is no exaggeration to say that it is singing. The tone of his voice is incantatory, which is stylistically accomplished through different forms of linguistic repetition (basically through alliteration and parallelism), and the message of his words is verging on gnomic poetry, on prophetic revelation. But there is also something tantalizingly humane about this voice, which appears to hesitate in the face of *what is*. There is no way of being absolutely certain of what one’s eyes see in the world out there. What the poetic persona is certainly determined to do is to reduce the world to its bare essentials: there is the sun, there is the wind, and there are the sea waves and the hills. They are endowed with the texture of the real, with a stubborn consistency, and so they are simply inescapable. Thus, the geography of Moses’ mind embraces everything he has seen in this world but appears not to recognize any more in a distinct manner:

I know what settles in the hollows of the hills,
the things the rains rescind
and what the starlight stills:
tomorrow and the wind.
And if there were no more tomorrows
or if there were no more tomorrows but only
the sun dying down like a long wind,
if to forget meant
never to remember
I have seen the sea but the seacoast hills and the shoals

are never quite as I remember
and the waves are like the wind...

SL, p. 11.

Time is almost cancelled, as if suspended, or the poetic persona is plunged all of a sudden into a province outside time: *“And there is time if not tomorrow / in the stillness, and tomorrow if not time / above the flutter in the hull / running with the rising wind.”* In the lines and stanzas that follow this excerpt, what the reader witnesses is nothing more than a primordial encounter between self and world, between the perceiver and the perceived. The poetic voice addresses the wind directly and asks it to cleanse his body, his senses and his mind. In the presence of the nonhuman, some form of catharsis is enacted; one forgets that one is the centre of the world when measured against the sheer magnitude of the sea or of the gigantic mountains. At this point, we are not sure whether Moses’ voice and the poet’s voice commingle in one way or another. The north, east, west and south winds are invoked, and asked to *“wash away / the fleeting passion, the distraction”* of the speaking subject. A sense of utter communion or fusion with the surrounding landscape is enacted in these lines, which are truly a tribute to the wind:

Wind wrap the bone,
and turn and curl and
uncurl around me, breaking like a wave

where the wind and the sun
and the sea are one
and memory and blood
commingle and come back to me.

SL, p. 12.

An accomplished homage to the wind is at the very heart of section II of “Sinai”, which also explores stillness, silence and sound. Hence, *“The stillness and the wind – / both – brace and burn.”* Amid vast expanses of space, what the poetic persona gets to hear is the utter stillness of the landscape, punctuated from time to time by the whispering wind. Landscape, body and mind become one and the same thing, or so seem to suggest these words: *“The muscle in the blood / grown in the stony / land of promise / stirs, / strangely pleasant to the hand.”* Here there is an open reference for the first time to *“the land of promise,”* which might well be Canaan, the Promised Land the wanderers guided by Moses are heading towards. One more piece of evidence that it is Moses that is speaking these words is found in the stanzas that follow, written in italics in the poem as if to signify that there are more voices to be heard in the world if one only cares to pay attention with open ears. Also, two elemental dichotomies are at the core of these lines: darkness vs. light and silence vs. sound (or noise):

*a voice in the darkness
a voice in the light
a sound in the voice
making silence of noise*

SL, p. 13.

It is the wind that brings together the speaking voice at the heart of the landscape, the almost inaudible words it says: *“the healing wind / blends / the sounds heard, the word said.”* The

message is crystal-clear: the world is alive and it speaks. We humans might think otherwise, and believe that we have monopoly on language and on meaning. However, the truth remains that every single thing in the world seeks to *mean* and to communicate something. The voice in the darkness and in the light might be God's voice after all as well, but this does not mean that things are dumb, numb, or mute. They are not. The presence of the wind is pervasive, and it is fashioning the landscape contours: "*The wind welds the sea-ice, / films the rock-face, builds / and levels knolls in the sand.*" This is what the wind can do best of all, but it is also capable of doing something grander: it "*unites the nights and days, / the soul and the heartened hand.*"

Section III of "Sinai" is a moving meditation on silence and sound, on darkness and light. There is Poundian light in most of Bringham's early poems; light is what renders the world visible after all. It makes possible humans' knowledge as well as their enjoyment of the world. At the centre of the meditation is once again the potent equation of world-body-mind (of world and self), and so the poetic voice forcefully says: "*See through the silence, listen to the bone, / it is the same.*" But the section opens with a string of numinous words salvaged from beyond the mists of time, as if from a fragment preserved in a badly damaged papyrus. This looks like an impressionistic catalogue of essences only, a fragmentary atlas of the world. The wind has its own writing script: its runes erode and blur all distinctions into a *Gestalt* or organic whole, so that the world becomes a *continuum* or a *plenum* in which everything is subtly connected to everything else. Thus, *dust, sea-ice, moraine, silence* and *flesh* constitute a constellation of elemental human and nonhuman realities. All of them can be ground into the irreducible smooth *grain*, which is fragile and sturdy at the same time. The deep grain at the heart of all things is rightly celebrated at the end of section III:

Runes of the wind
eroding, blurring into the smooth grain.
Dust, flesh, the surface of old sea-ice,
ancient moraine, sand...

obsidian silence
with a shimmering glaze,

fractable...

fragile
and sturdy as an urn.

SL, p. 15.

But what looked at first like a fragmentary atlas of the world is now further expanded into a comprehensive cartography of reality which embraces *the sap in the twisted trees*, the *indecipherable shadow in the empty meadow*, the *bleached light humming in the bone*, the *shining veins of darkness*, the *spoor of the wind*, the *spore drifting in the wind*, and the *dark air*. All these elements of the world are enunciated in simple, declarative sentences of utter simplicity, in what looks like an endless enumeration. Heterogeneous or chaotic though it may seem, this ambitious catalogue is the embodiment of the inexhaustible, multifarious richness of the world, which is one and plural at the same time. As a matter of fact, *being* has got infinite forms of expression in reality; beneath the multiplicity of things is the universal substratum of *what is*. *Being* is also humming in the deep grain, singing the song of the flesh, which is the song of existence, of all living things. And, needless to say, the living are human and nonhuman alike. Bringham essays up to six different variations on the words "*humming in the deep*"

grain.” The adjective ‘deep’ is placed at different points in the same sequence of words, so that the intended meaning is subtly modulated in ways that prefigure the combinatory poetics of “Song of Tzuhalem” in *Tzuhalem’s Mountain* (1982), written one decade later. Beyond silence, beyond the world of appearances, *being* is “*more quiet than the blood behind the ear,*” “*smaller and darker than the shadows any eye / can recognize,*” and is also audible or discernible in the “*silence and darkness behind the beat / of the blood in the ear / and the eye and behind them.*” This tribute to the deep *grain* (i.e., the irreducible core of things, or *what is*) closes with these moving words:

the deep hum in the deep grain

that silence or darkness or sound or light
can nurture or extinguish
though the scalpel and the arrow
never strike

SL, p. 17.

Section IV of “Sinai” is a meditation on words and breath, or, to be more precise, on words as being mouthfuls of live air emanating from one’s lungs, charged with meaning. Words are akin to physical objects of the world that humans hold in their hands; but the organ in charge of handling words is the breath. Breath handles the air coming out of the body and into the world. Like feet, breath is an elemental kind of link that brings beings and the world at large together. Breathing is truly a mystery then, and so are words. We breathe into them what we want them to convey to others as we utter or write them, but we also inhale them as if they were indispensable nutriment for our body and our mind. Spoken words are closer to the speaking body than writing, which is a technology, a tool for humans to reach where their voice cannot reach. At any rate, words are an intrinsic part of the living mesh of things, and so they are comparable to a leaf, to the ground, or a stone. And it is the wind that purifies the words of the tribe, washes them up, polishes them up to perfect our tool of communication:

The words are like the caught leaf,
the ground, the good stone,
comfortable to hold,
but held in the breath.

Words, washed up by the wind,
yet you inhale them like breath,
breathe into them, exhale into them.
Wind refracted through the stillness,
life diffracted somehow around death,

SL, p. 18.

Though the emphasis is laid on spoken words, at one point “Sinai” becomes meta-poetic. The speaking voice says: “... *this was written on the run / with a stolen motion of the hand.*” These two lines are pregnant with meaning. Bringhurst’s poems are more the product of oral composition than of writing; they are born in the voice, and their ultimate test to keep on being a part of his “living repertory” is that they are comfortable to the voice that handles them in oral (private or public) performances. Writing intervenes only to keep a temporary record for what would otherwise vanish into nothingness. Hence this poem, “Sinai”, has been born out of the precious conjunction of landscape and perceiving self, it has been

almost dictated to the poet, who was quick to jot down the words “*with a stolen motion of the hand.*” The poem closes, finally, with one more biblical reference: “*Thou shalt not cast the molten image,*” which is an express prohibition not to represent God in the form of an icon, and so it recalls the Ten Commandments that God gave Moses on Mount Sinai. God has got a covenant with His chosen people, but they do have to obey his injunctions.



“Portrait in Blood”

Time and space, the Kantian axes or coordinates of human experience, remain a mystery even to this day, in a time dominated by scientific research and objectivity. “Portrait in Blood”⁶¹ is a long poem written in simple language, and an attempt to define through poetic means what exactly motion of the body in time and space is. It is, after all, a hermeneutic exercise, whereby *the language of the body*, which is made of gestures and movements in space, is translated into *the language of words* spoken by humans. It could have been translated into something else – into lines and colours, for instance, had Bringhurst been a painter, which is not the case. Needless to say, apprehending the essence of dance into words is by no means an easy task. As a result, the poet is here envisioned as an interpreter of mysteries and a decipherer of unfamiliar tongues. Understanding what the body goes through in dance is a demanding intellectual activity; making it the subject matter of a poem is no less complex an endeavour. At the back of our mind resonates powerfully W. B. Yeats’s *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1920), if only because of the allusion to dance in the very title of the Irishman’s book.

In any case, a long time ago Herakleitos admitted that everything we know is subject to constant metamorphosis. Dance is the best metaphor we can think of to express the idea of incessant change that seems to be inherent or implicit in reality according to the Greek sage. Dance is *possibly* a perfect metaphor for the Heraclitean motto πάντα ῥεῖ – everything is in a state of flux. In poetry, speech cuts objects and entities off from the universal non-existing – or from the infinite – and it turns them into living things. A thousand existences are concentric, and we see but a little of some of them. Dance brings the whole body into a new existential realm in which blood, breathing, muscle and ligament are all involved in an ancestral and mysterious activity whereby a fresh communion is enacted with the surrounding world. By dancing dancers become something beyond themselves; song and music are summoned up to concur in this magical moment which has got the texture of transcendence:

Dance draws the blood to focus
through the muscle of the dancer, through
the watcher’s eye, dance draws
the nerve to focus and the mind through the nerve
to the eye, to the blood
of the dancer, the watcher,
the dance of the dancers
echoing beyond them,
echo into song, as of

⁶¹ “Portrait in Blood” was later published in *Mundus Artium: A Journal of International Literature and the Arts* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) 8.2 ([Winter] 1975): 130-133, along with “Jebel Saneen, Lebanon”, also included in *The Shipwright’s Log*, and “Song of the Summit” and “The Greenland Stone” (both published in *Cadastre*, 1973).

song into singing...

SL, p. 37.

What we find when we turn to this poem (and to verse lines like the ones just quoted) is simply mesmerizing, mysterious, contradictory, open-ended. The rhythm of “Portrait in Blood”, one of the central pieces in *The Shipwright’s Log*, is incomparable indeed. It is not a poem to lie silent on the page; it must come to life in audition. One must hear it, in one way or another, and out of that intoxication comes beauty unexpectedly. Bringhurst’s style has the freshness of grass and water, and his prose is just as interesting as his verse. It has the terseness and spare beauty without ornament that is of permanent value in great poetry. “Mediocre poetry is about the same in all countries,”⁶² says Pound in one of his essays on French poetry (on Jules Romains, to be more precise) in his collection entitled *Instigations*. Similarly, we would add that great poetry is about the same in all languages and traditions as well. The poetry of genius – as cultivated by Pound, Eliot, Stevens and Bringhurst – is rare and precious, and when it happens to be produced, it turns out to be durable and indispensable, because it has got the seeds of permanent literature within itself. Of course, it is impossible to make poetry out of nothing. “Portrait in Blood” is the result of a most curious alchemy: of words that are imbued with music, of ideas made the flesh of tangible sounds, and of a number of essential precepts that we find in Pound’s essays, as we shall try to demonstrate below.

Matters of small concern are worthy of serious and careful consideration. If we focus on the fine details of the poem, not just on the poem’s overall *Gestalt*, we realize that Bringhurst has given calm thought and attention to the way he has articulated his message. The poet cares for well-wrought sound and its impact on the overall effects of the poetic composition. The way the individual words compel us readers to keep on reading incessantly, to move forward to other words to which they seem to be inextricably linked, amply demonstrates that we are immersed in the golden labyrinth of poetry. In the making of a poem form is of the utmost importance, and a proper understanding of poetic form and of its mysteries enhances an appreciation of poetry. Poem form is not abstract, but human. It is not a monolith either. This is the charm and power of poetic form: it is not imposed, it is rooted.⁶³ To understand “Portrait in Blood” fully, it is necessary to see how distinct the arrangement of verse lines is, how the constitutive parts are tessellated to cohere into an organic whole to form a masterwork. The intricate delineations and patterns in this poem seem to express a form more exquisite than we might imagine at first sight. Despite motion, the motion of the body in space, it persists despite the devastating effects of the passing of time as an unparalleled masterwork.

What strikes most about this poem is the fact that, in spite of dealing with the very idea of motion, it refuses to go forward in any kind of linear development. It circles around and around, suggesting, at the deepest level, powerful recurrences of mood and emotion. Therefore, it leans towards song, towards lyric poetry. What is more: the formal properties of Bringhurst’s poem seem to address the idea of motion directly. Bringhurst’s poem is a perfect example of poetry that is implicit in its own medium, poetry which is indissolubly bound in with the actual words, word music, the fineness and firmness of the actual writing. To put it differently, the subject matter is coterminous with the expression. Its repeated lines and the circularity of its very structure become a repudiation of forward

⁶² See *Instigations of Ezra Pound*, p. 60.

⁶³ See Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, *The Making of a Poem. A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001, p. 3.

motion, of temporality and therefore, formally, of dissolution. As a result, the insistent repetition of words in a number of variations ends up building an acoustic chamber for the words, the lines, and the meanings. And the repetition of the lines allows them to take on new meanings each time they are repeated. This can be fully appreciated in the beautifully designed refrain repeated twice in the poem:

the dance that is sculpture
of the form of man in time,
the dance that is portraiture
in motion, in time,

the dance that is joy
of the body in motion,
rhythm written in the body
and the body in motion,

the dance that is motion
made order, the dance
that is order made motion
in space and in time,

the dance that is order
in time, creating place, creating
order in the interface
of motion, space and time

SL, p. 37.

The patterns of repetition in the poem are constructed across a selected number of key words, repeated at predictable intervals. Each time that the words “the dance that is...” are heard, repeated, readdressed, they take on a new layer of meaning, a different force. Ordinary, unadorned speech tends to repeat certain words. In fact, lexical repetition is a salient feature of common speech. Repetition becomes a form of affirmation, a linguistic device that places the poem outside the province of time in a way. But it is also an age-old linguistic device to be found in the Bible and other ancient literary texts belonging to the oral tradition. Repetition provides the groundwork for a circular structure, dependent on a number of variations on a theme. This avoidance of absolute closure amounts to an open-endedness of meaning that lingers mid-air at the end of the poem, re-echoing in our minds.

The statement contained in the poem has the perfectly simple order of words. It is the simple statement of a man saying things for the first time, whose chief concern is that he shall speak clearly. If one opens him almost anywhere, one can discern the authentic accent of a man saying something of value. A whole array of linguistic strategies and devices is being made use of to produce a sort of incantatory rhythm which is anticipatory of some of the poems contained in subsequent books like *Tzibalem's Mountain* (1982). In fact, it seems to us that the force of Bringhurst's *oeuvre* is cumulative: his early books gather further meaning, even more subtle nuances of meaning, as one reads through the later ones. At the heart of the chorus is a potent equation whereby dance is associated with sculpture, joy, motion and order. Ultimately, all four equations become indistinguishable as they are intertwined into a rich musical tapestry in which a handful of key, resonant words are repeated in a number of variations. The motion of the verse lines is smooth and impetuous at the same time. The chorus resembles mostly the variations on a theme we may well find in a piece of music; the words of the poem are equivalent to the musical

notes on a pentagram for a musical composition. In sum, the main structural devices are repetition, parallelism, tautology and paradox, and what has already been called an assertive mode of speaking, whereby A is B, a device overtly concerned with defining and clarifying concepts. With the overt proliferation of nouns clearly contrasts the scarcity of verbs, all of them in the present tense. In so far as Bringham writes in the present tense, he carries conviction, he utters, in original vein, progressive states of consciousness, connected to the notion of breathing through the feet, i.e., paying attention to dance as a form of interaction with reality that involves the whole body and the mind.

Now it is due time to stop for a while and see what Pound has to tell about the way the words in this poem carry, convey, and express meaning. Pound himself preached the cultivation of this poetics of transparent language and accurate thought indefatigably in his literary essays; he constantly advocated renewal of language and formal experimentation by returning to the masters of the past. For his part, Bringham is bringing new voices to the old Poundian precepts. It could not be otherwise – poetic forms are lodging deep into human history and depend on the best tradition. Robert Bringham must have found a source of inspiration for his own poetic programme in Pound's words regarding poetry and music, the practice of translation, the masters of the past to be read, and a pristine use of language that brings about a new knowledge of reality, an insight into the essence of things. In an early group of essays entitled "A Retrospect", which appeared under this title in *Pavannes and Divisions* (1918), Pound encourages authors to bear in mind three basic principles when writing poetry:

1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome.⁶⁴

Bringham seems to follow all three precepts quite literally. First, there is no oblique approach to the theme of the poem, which is dance and its meaningful ramifications. Secondly, in this framework of language economy, there are no wasted words at all: there is no room for superfluous words, and each word falls exactly into place. And thirdly, the very arrangement of words and verse lines is meant to suggest the rhythm and workings of music itself. The result is a poem which is a perfect jewel in its carefully meditated geometry and musical design, or a perfect image, which in Pound's view is an ambitious thing:

An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. [...] it is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.⁶⁵

The verse lines that follow are a perfect illustration of what we mean by *economy of language*, the *masterful use of the musical phrase*, and the *direct treatment of the thing in itself*, as claimed by Pound. At the start, music seems the affair of an isolated moment in time, but then it becomes pervasive in the poem. The poet must behave like a musician in his treatment of words when making a poem, says Pound, who draws a well-known distinction between *phanopoeia* (words as images), *melopoeia* (the music inherent in words) and *logopoeia*

⁶⁴ See "A Retrospect", in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (1954), p. 3.

⁶⁵ See "A Few Don'ts", under the heading "A Retrospect", in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (1954), p. 4.

(ideas embedded in words, or *the dance of the intellect among words*). Bringhurst combines all three masterfully in “Portrait in Blood”, which is a perfect image of dance presented in musical words that invite readers to dwell on ideas that would otherwise pass unnoticed to their intellect. Notice the proliferation of verbs here, which suggest the very idea of relentless motion, the joy of motion in dance. The sense of sweeping liberation is absolute:

The dance draws time
and space to focus, which is place, and place is
order gone beyond the place
of order. Order echoes, order
eddies back, or boomerangs,
entering into the ear, the eye,
the nerve, the blood, the red bone, drawing
the body into dance, the mind into the dance,
dance into other dance, echo into new
re-echo, gesture into gesture, as of
song into song, creating
echoes between them,
intertwining tempo, texture,
posture, intermixture
of melody, of deep and shallow
shoalwater currents, waves,
combers, breakers, tides, tides running
full, hurtling, climbing, swirling, tides that mash the moorings
under the stage, topple the seats, scatter the dancers, drive
the mind into the dead end of the tooth, the torn nail

listen at the stillness,
listen for the sound

SL, p. 38.

The tempo of the words accelerate, the music gathers force, and the sequence culminates in an astonishingly beautiful paradox of perfect stasis: “*listen at the stillness, / listen for the sound.*” The repetitions are consistent, but the human voice, that of the bard, of the visionary and seer, is heard beneath the lines as a powerful counterpoint to them. This is a poem that is exceptional in its insistence that the poet’s voice be heard clearly through the patterns of repetition around which the whole poem is structured.

X · Long Poems II – *Reworked Myth*

The long poem “The Sun and Moon” is a perfect illustration of what we called a *reworked myth* in our taxonomical overview of the poems in *The Shipwright’s Log* at the beginning of this chapter. Bringhurst has been concerned with myth as a potent means of investigating the essence of reality from the very beginning of his literary career. This concern has permeated his work up to the present. In many respects, “The Sun and Moon” is of a prophetic nature: it anticipates Bringhurst’s later reworked myths (most prominently *Tending the Fire* 1985 and *Ursa Major* 2003), as well as his joint projects with Haida artist Bill Reid (*The Raven Steals the Light* 1984 and *The Black Canoe* 1991) and his solo investigations into the oral literature and mythology of the Haida, which resulted in the impressive Haida masterworks trilogy published from 1999 to 2001, encompassing both a theoretical overview of the Haida world and his magnificent translations from a constellation of long

narrative poems of the Haida people living on Haida Gwaii, or Queen Charlotte Islands, off the coast of British Columbia. But at the time of the publication of “The Sun and Moon” in book form, Bringhurst was only 26 years old, and probably unaware of what the future held for him. We might as well begin with an analysis of his conception of what a *mythology* is. Quite recently, in an ambitious reference book entitled *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*, edited by W. H. New, the poet gives a most illuminating definition under the ‘mythology’ entry:

A mythology is an ecosystem of myths. It is in other words a functioning community of stories, striving to maintain its own coherence though its membership is constantly subject to change. So a mythology is similar to a literature, which is a constantly evolving intellectual ecology of works made out of words. Mythology and literature would, in fact, be synonyms if myth were just another name for a literary work. But a myth is not exactly a work of literature; it is instead a kind of story that a literary work can only partially embody or contain. A myth is a theorem about the nature of reality expressed not in algebraic symbols or inanimate abstractions but in animate narrative form.⁶⁶

In words strongly reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”,⁶⁷ Bringhurst defines mythology as being *an ecosystem of myths*, a totalizing system of interrelated stories subject to constant change, which are an attempt on the part of the human imagination to understand or grasp “the nature of reality” in narrative terms. A mythology cannot be dissociated from the land which gave it birth without being seriously damaged or misunderstood.⁶⁸ Like science or philosophy, myth, which is universal across cultures and times, aspires then to some kind of ultimate truth about the essence of reality and the human condition. The concern with an ultimate truth is inherent in the species *homo sapiens sapiens*, and so it is only natural that myth should be tremendously ubiquitous in all civilizations and cultures, as a kind of anthropological universal. In the face of the grandeur and mystery of the world, there are two possible paths leading into the heart of the mystery: the intellectual one, which is the preserve of science, and the mythical one, which is inextricable from literature (at least in its narrative manifestation) and from the worldview embedded in the language spoken by a certain people. Owing to this mythical compulsion, and given the fact that we humans have much more in common than we may think at first sight, many myths share an irreducible core of meaning across cultures which is expressive of our common humanity. Bringhurst writes: “A myth, nonetheless, is a story so perceptive of reality that it might be rediscovered, like any law of nature, in almost any culture at almost any time.”⁶⁹

Convinced that there is a subtle interconnectedness among all living and non-living things in the universe, and that human knowledge is *one* many-sided attempt to grasp what

⁶⁶ See the entry on ‘mythology’ in *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*, edited by W. H. New, pp. 790-791.

⁶⁷ In his seminal essay, T. S. Eliot said: “what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered”. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, London: Faber and Faber, 1986, p. 15.

⁶⁸ In Bringhurst’s own words, “Those systems can be diagrammed or sketched, but they cannot be transplanted intact, nor can they be extracted for inspection and display and still be expected to function. In order to watch a mythology work, we have to study it *in situ*, in the flesh of its own literature and culture. You cannot summarize or analyze or count all the myths in a mythology any more than you can list all the sentences in a language or tag all the corpuscles in the body.” *Ibid.*, p. 791.

⁶⁹ *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*, p. 791.

is going on in the world, Bringhurst insists on the fact that science and myth are but two complementary paths towards the essence of reality:

Myth is actually, however, an alternative kind of science – that is, an alternative *kind* of investigation. It is a means of understanding and elucidating the nature of the world. It aims, like science, at perceiving and expressing ultimate truths. But the hypotheses of myth are framed as stories, not equations, technical descriptions, or taxonomic rules.⁷⁰

This is the case with “The Sun and Moon”, which closely resembles a cosmogony – i.e., an account of the origins of the cosmos. But it is not exactly a cosmogony; it is rather an account of the natural succession of day and night, and of the uncanny, inescapable presence of the sun and the moon up above in the sky. In fact, Bringhurst tells us that “such stories deal more often with the gods or other elemental powers than they do with human beings. Yet as soon as they are heard, they are known to enrich human experience. That is why they are incessantly retold.”⁷¹ Humans’ fascination with the sun and the moon as potent elemental powers can be traced back to antiquity, almost to the cradle of humanity. After all, the sun makes life possible on earth, and the moon somehow reminds us at night that we are not quite alone, as the pale reflection of light on its surface promises that the return of the sun heralding a new day is near. Finding out about the essence of the world we live in is a form of surrender to the sublime beauty and grandeur of the universe, which remains an inexhaustible mystery, *a bluer arcanum*, but it is also a form of acknowledging our essential kinship with all the existents, no matter whether animate or inanimate. Therefore, when learning about the essence of the sun and the moon, we are shedding light on an unilluminated part of our selves – we are somehow learning about our nature as human beings that are a microcosm, a little part in the overall design called *cosmos*. We are made of the same stuff; we come from the stars – we are stars’ dust, irreplaceable and meaningful specks of dust.

“The Sun and Moon” is structured around five movements for the mind. The first movement coincides with the first stanza and it sets the scene for the action in the poem. The spatial-temporal coordinates are somewhat vague, outside the province of time as we know it to be and outside the realm of space as the rational mind conceives of it. We are plunged in the middle of a mythical time, pre-dating the analytical impulse inherent in scientific statements about the world, and on an earth which is almost barren of human presence, were it not for the reference to “*the upturned eye at noon*” scanning the sky in search of the sun. As the myth aspires to be true, then it must begin with certain hypotheses about the nature of the world, more specifically about the primordial dichotomy of darkness and light. Such hypotheses take on a narrative form: through the narrative path unfolds the essence of things that are being investigated. The first stanza is thus like the first part in a syllogism and, as such, objective, impersonal, thoroughly precise. The strongly parallelistic structures seek an oscillation between the sun and the moon as if to suggest the succession of day and night:

In the night’s darkness
there was once no moon.
No sun rose ever into the dawn’s light,
no sun withered the dry grass.
No moon broke open the empty womb,
no moon frosted water, leaf and stone.
No sun burned into the upturned eye at noon

⁷⁰ *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*, p. 791.

⁷¹ *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*, p. 791.

or polished the empty skull
or the coyote's bone.

SL, p. 35.

Unlike scientific research, which operates by reducing reality to theorems or algebraic formulations, mythological accounts of the world personify the entities in it. In this account of the origins of the world, non-human beings are on a par with human beings: *grass, water, leaf, stone, skull and bone* belong in the same constellation of words as *the upturned eye*,⁷² a powerful metonymy (*pars pro toto*) embodying the human species as a whole. The sense of kinship is still all-embracing in this *continuum of life* where day and night remain largely undifferentiated or undistinguishable, as their major agents, the sun and the moon, are absent. As Bringham himself puts it,

The scientist may begin an investigation by quantifying reality. The myhteller personifies it instead, and then proceeds by narrative interaction instead of computation. A myth begins with the assumption that all existents are alive: they have identities and appetites and wills, which necessarily reveal themselves in stories rather than equations. Experimental science very often gives the opposite impression, that all existents might as well be dead.⁷³

Human presence enters the second stanza of the poem in the form of a pair of lovers. A young girl and a young man meet secretly at night when her fire is extinguished in the darkness. In the daylight she searches "*the eyes / of the young men*" in hopes that she might at last discover who her lover is. However hard she may try, she cannot find out the true identity of the lover "*whose blind, / dumb glance in the midnight made / bright darkness dance in her blood.*" Hence the deliberate, carefully planned strategy, and the determination to do whatever she has to do to recognize her lover by daylight:

Waiting, one night, willing to wait
no longer to know her lover by day, by sight,
she rubbed her hands in the soot
of the fire's crater.
In the morning she looked for her lover
and found
the marks of her hands on the back of her brother.

SL, pp. 35-36.

The moment of *anagnorisis* or sudden revelation about the lover's true identity is truly dramatic. That the lover turns out to be her brother is no coincidence: there might be some implicit hint that incest is also at stake here. This raises a simple question: why should the girl flee from her lover's embrace once the discovery has been made? Probably because incest is a taboo issue that should prevent them from going on with their sexual encounters. In fact, Bringham reminds us that "the context of a myth is always a world of

⁷² Impossible not to remember here Emerson's words in his groundbreaking essay *Nature* (1836): "In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, – no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and *uplifted into infinite space*, – all mean egotism vanishes. *I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me*; I am part or parcel of God... In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages." [Italics mine.] See Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature and Selected Essays*, New York / London: Penguin Books, ed. and with an introduction by Larzer Ziff, 2003, p. 39.

⁷³ *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*, p. 791.

living entities linked imperfectly but powerfully by moral obligations, while the context of a scientific statement often purports to be a purely material world that is devoid of moral concerns.”⁷⁴ The lover’s chase after the beloved over “*the sea’s / cold meadow, the land, / the mountains, the trees, to the earth’s end / and over*”, thus embracing the earth in its entirety, culminates in metamorphosis. Just as Daphne becomes a laurel tree in her flight from Apollo, the girl becomes the sun and the boy becomes the moon. Transformation is, in fact, a curious idea. What happens to the young lovers is exactly the opposite of anthropomorphism. If in Greek mythology the moon is usually associated with the feminine world (Selene is the goddess), and the sun is the embodiment of a male god (Apollo), the roles have been reversed on this occasion:

She became the flaming sun
and her brother became the husk of the moon
to chase her, to come to her, brother and lover
again.

Her virgin blood flows in the dusk
and she wipes it away at dawn.

Her evening fire burns in the dusk
and her morning fire in the dawn,
and he comes out looking, over sea and land,
when her evening fire has burned itself black,

and the marks of her hands
are still on his back.

SL, p. 36.

This is the *dénouement* of the narrative. Now the mystery has been grasped: the succession of the dusk and dawn accounted for by the perpetual chase of the moon after the sun, eternal lovers, as old as the earth itself. To this day the moon has been unrelentingly pursuing its course on the heavens just because the sun leads the way, and *he* is in love with *her*. If myths still have any appeal to modern man and are retold incessantly, it is because, Bringham tells us, “the myths stand in relation to other stories as the elders do to other human beings. They know more, because they have been learning for longer.”⁷⁵ This is the ultimate message of memorable beauty and truth “The Sun and Moon” has to teach us.

⁷⁴ *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*, p. 791.

⁷⁵ *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*, p. 792.

Cadastre

Shattered & Luminous Fragments from the Past, Or Bright Tatters of Wisdom

INTRODUCTION

Robert Bringhurst's second book, *Cadastre*,¹ was published in 1973. From the copyright page, we learn that the publication was made possible by a grant from the Independent Learning Program of Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. The book consists of twenty-three poems, some of which had previously appeared, or were scheduled for publication at that time, in such periodicals as *Concerning Poetry*, *Contemporary Literature in Translation*, *Quarry*, and *Stoney Lonesome*.² The twenty-three poems are arranged in four sections, which could be roughly grouped under four categories: (1) poems of primitive wisdom (echoes and lessons from the philosophy of the so-called Presocratics of ancient Greece, from the Bible, from Greek and Meso-American mythologies, and from Nature itself); (2) poems seeking nourishment on the literary masters' voices (translations and versions from classic Sanskrit, Italian and French poems); (3) light satiric and occasional verse (in which the voices of the early poetry of Eliot, Pound and Stevens are heard); and (4) translations of two long compositions from two different languages and traditions, Nahuatl and Arabic. From such a general overview as this is to be inferred the weight of tradition in this new book of poems. The ultimate message seems to be that Bringhurst's vocation as a poet is with the inescapable tradition that sustains every new effort made in

¹ A.2 •• *Cadastre*. Bloomington, Indiana: Kanchenjunga Press, 1973. 80 p. Paper, 17.5 × 21.5 cm, approx. 300 copies. ISBN 0-913600-03-2. Contents: *Section I*: • "Herakleitos" (rpt. in A.5, A.6, C.22, and rev. in A.14, A.47, B.69); • "Song of the Summit" (rpt. in A.6, A.11, A.14, A.47, B.7, B.9, C.27, C.63); • "Study for an Ecumenical Window" (rpt. in A.6, A.14, C.9, C.54); • "Poem about Crystal" (rpt. in A.6, A.14, A.47, B.7, B.17, B.27, B.43, B.69, C.10, C.54, C.67); • "Strophe from Sophocles" (trans. from Greek, rpt. in C.22, C.36; rev. and enlarged as "Of the Snaring of Birds" in A.14; further rev. in A.47, A.76 and A.92); • "Four Glyphs" (rpt. in A.6, A.14, C.22); • "Kerry Shawn Keys" (rpt. in B.64); • "The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods" (rev. in C.22); • "The Greenland Stone" (rpt. in A.6, A.14, A.47, C.27, C.36); *Section II*: • "A Portrait"; • "Four Love Poems from Vidyakara's Anthology" (trans. from Sanskrit); • "Lullaby for Brendan"; • "Antistrophe from Leopardi" (trans. from Italian, rpt. in B.67, C.10, C.22); • "Le Debat du cuer et du corps de François Villon" (trans. from French, rpt. from C.4); *Section III*: • "The Poet, Having at Last Encountered the Muse" (rpt. in C.10); • "A Document"; • "Poem of the Sexton's Tinnitus"; • "Three Ways of Looking for the Northwest Passage in the Shipyards of Bristol and Rouen" (see also C.8); • "Poem to be Sung into a Sheet of Paper at 216 Beacon Street"; • "Three Epigrams"; • "The Rhythms of Irene"; *Section IV*: • "The Song of Macuilxochitzin" (trans. from Nahuatl); • "The Ode of Imr el-Qais" (trans. from Arabic, rpt. in B.67, C.6; see also D.1). With three drawings by Patrick Morrison and one by Paco Castillo. The only anonymous review of *Cadastre*, published in *Choice* 10.11 (January 1974): 1714, reads as follows: "This is poetry that in neither theme nor imagery ever catches the reader unawares. It is rewarmed mainstream – a little Romantic, a little Victorian, a little modern; it in no ways points to a post-modern future and in many ways rings bells along an already-passed-through past."

² "Le Debat du Cuer et du Corps de François Villon", a translation from François Villon's original poem in French, was published in *Concerning Poetry* (Bellingham, Washington) 6:2 (Fall 1973): 12-14. Under the title "Three Translations", "The Ode of Imr el-Qais" (a translation from Arabic), and "Le Debat du Cuer et du Corps de François Villon" and "Je suis François, dont il me poise", translated from the French of François Villon, were published in *Contemporary Literature in Translation* (Mission, British Columbia) 16 (Fall 1973): 11-14, 19-20, 21. "Study for an Ecumenical Window" was to be published in *Stoney Lonesome* 4 (1974): 16-17; "Poem about Crystal", "The Poet, Having at Last Encountered the Muse" and "Antistrophe from Leopardi" (a translation from the Italian of Giacomo Leopardi) would be published under the title "Two Poems and One Translation" in *Quarry* 4 (Spring 1974): 33-34. Bringhurst also wrote an essay entitled "Some Notes on Imr el-Qais", about the sixth-century Arab poet, in *Contemporary Literature in Translation* 16 (Fall 1973): 15-18.

the field of literary creation. All literature enters a simultaneous order; all times, languages and traditions coexist on the same plane, floating somewhere in timeless mid-air. In writing with perfect naturalness a book like *Cadastré*, which unites unique threads from a number of literary traditions around the world, Bringhurst appears to be inscribed right in the middle of Eliot's concept of tradition as formulated in his landmark essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" once more.

As in *The Shipwright's Log*, paratexts and quotations are of paramount importance in *Cadastré* as well. The book opens with a quotation from classical Greek:

... δίδοναι γὰρ αὐτὰ δίκην καὶ τίσιν ἀλλήλοις τῆς
ἀδικίας κατὰ τὴν τοῦ χρόνου τάξιν, ποιητικωτέροις
οὕτως ὀνόμασιν αὐτὰ λέγων.

These words by Simplicius, in his *Physics*, quoting Anaximander, are translated into English by Bringhurst himself: "... for they must pay one another the penalty and compensation for their mutual injustice in the order of time," as he describes it in these rather poetical terms." With his "little Greek and less Chinese",³ the poet positions himself at the very centre of the classical tradition. The allusion to a Greek text, lifted from a most potent tradition and a shared body of wisdom from the masters of ancient Greece and Rome, invests the poet's words with a kind of authority and grandeur that would be otherwise missing. In this respect, the parallelism with Ezra Pound, the master, is self-evident.⁴ The fascination with the Greek world is an overwhelming and refreshing presence in both Pound's and Bringhurst's literary career. It is no coincidence that *Cadastré* should open with a complex piece entitled "Herakleitos", a poem that encapsulates in five movements the philosopher's thinking about metamorphosis as the essence of all things living in this world. The Pre-Socratic sage would be revisited time and again in subsequent books.⁵ What was it that attracted Pound's attention so irresistibly towards the Greek tradition? Again, Hugh Kenner seems to have found the right answer to this question when he explores Pound's concern with Sappho's poetry. The fragments frozen on the papyri discovered and disinterred from the mists of the past by scholars in the late 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century afford "a mysterious glimpse into intensities important" to the Greek poetess:

What was he responding to when he read Greek? To rhythms and dictions, nutriment for his purposes. Especially in Greek lyrics he is sensitive to the boundaries of individual words, and apt to discern a talismanic virtue in relevant English words of

³ In his essay "Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation" (in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*), Bringhurst speaks of his "little Greek and less Chinese" in words reminiscent of Jonson's criticism levelled against Shakespeare's ignorance of Latin and Greek, the essential baggage poets were supposed to take with themselves when embarking on the demanding task of writing poetry in the 16th century. The masters were simply the masters and had to be acknowledged and known in depth on a basis of absolute familiarity.

⁴ Pound's concern with the classics can be traced back to the beginnings of his literary career. Significantly enough, in a poem entitled "Cantico del Sole" (from *Instigations*, 1920) he keeps repeating "The thought of what America would be like / If the Classics had a wide circulation / Troubles my sleep," which lends his composition an incantatory rhythm. A solid knowledge of the classics allows the would-be poet to compose a kind of poetry firmly rooted in a sense of actuality, in a grip of the real.

⁵ The concern with the Presocratics has been something like a work in progress in Bringhurst's career. Following Guy Davenport's example as a translator of Greek literature (for instance, Davenport published *7 Greeks, Herakleitos and Diogenes*, and *Herakleitos* in 1990 with Peter Koch Press), Bringhurst has expanded and revised for each republication his sequence of poems devoted to the Presocratics' philosophy. It all began with this poem, and continued with the broadside entitled *Pythagoras* (1974), *Eight Objects* (1975), *Bergschrund* (1975), *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), *The Calling* (1995), *The Old in Their Knowing* (2005), and *Selected Poems* (2009). Therefore, we shall analyze "Herakleitos" in depth at a later point in our dissertation.

his discovery. [...] The poems where Ezra Pound explored the Sapphic heritage are “exempla” of the disciplined attention at work, attention disciplined not only by fragments of Greek but by a time’s aesthetic, *an aesthetic of glimpses*. For the second Renaissance that opened for classicists in 1891 with a shower of papyri was a renaissance of attention.⁶ [*Italics mine.*]

What Pound learnt from the fragments being rescued by classicists in his early manhood were important lessons to be learnt by heart: the core of prosody, or the sound texture of words as autonomous entities out of which poems are carved; the rhythm and music inherent in great poetry; a treasure of luminous words that he could incorporate into the making of his own poems; and the simultaneous contemporaneity of imperishable, monumental works dating from the sixth century BCE. Pound sensed that “behind the Greek words stood the real, even behind the formulaic epithets” and that Greek poetry could afford him “a grip on detailed actuality”⁷. Therefore, Sappho’s luminous fragments could concentrate all that one knew of the real. This is possibly what Bringhurst himself learnt from the indisputable master, Pound.

SECTION I

Primitive Wisdom: The Voices of the Ancestors

I · The Nourishment of Tradition

Ezra Pound’s extended meditation on the importance of tradition is scattered in the form of luminous fragments throughout *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, edited by T.S. Eliot and published by Faber and Faber in 1954. As early as December 1913, in an essay entitled “The Tradition”, published in *Poetry*, III, 3, Pound was preaching an essential lesson that Bringhurst must have embraced from the beginning of his literary career: “The tradition is a beauty which we preserve and not a set of fetters to bind us.” Somewhere else in the same essay he claims: “A return to origins invigorates because it is a return to nature and reason. The man who returns to origins does so because he wishes to behave in the eternally sensible manner. That is to say, naturally, reasonably, intuitively.”⁸ Pound conceives of tradition as being a matter of collective effort sustained throughout time: the present builds on the achievements of the past, and there is no other way to produce great literature. This is the view of the craftsman, who is armed with the conviction that literature is no soloist’s enterprise, but rather a matter of attention and accuracy on the part of the most talented human beings. “I take technique as a test of a man’s sincerity,” says Pound in one of his essays. *Accuracy* is a crucial word in this context; it draws virtue from its etymology: *ad + curare*, which means *the taking of care* and is closely associated to pre-cision and con-cision. According to Spinoza, “The love of a thing is the knowledge of its perfections.” This is a quote Pound repeats indefatigably, time and again, throughout his essays. When applied to the art of verbal music, the love of literature means the effort to understand and appreciate (i.e., recognize the value of) what has already been achieved in the past. Or, in Pound’s words: “We must learn what we can from the past, we must learn what other nations have done successfully under similar circumstances, we must think how

⁶ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 69.

⁷ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 44 and p. 45, respectively.

⁸ See the essay entitled “The Tradition”, originally published in *Poetry*, III, 3 (Dec. 1913), and afterwards collected in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* edited by T.S. Eliot, London: Faber and Faber, 1954, pp. 91-92.

they did it.”⁹ There is no sense in repeating what has already been masterfully done; the thing is to go a step beyond, in the direction of excellence.

In the light of the ancient voices and echoes with which his mind vibrated, partly because of his academic training in Comparative Literature and languages at university, and possibly because of a natural proclivity to listen attentively to the lessons the past masters have to teach, Bringham followed the unerring dictates of his conscience in his early career as a poet. And therefore he is most centrally in the track or orbit of tradition. Out of a fierce need to make things cohere, connect, and make sense, he cannot but compose poetry feeling the overwhelming presence of the old masters in his bones. He does not turn his back on the insights of the past. The perfection of a circle, otherwise known as the beauty of *the unity of one man's thought*, is what we are being confronted with in these poems. Intellectual, spiritual, moral, philosophical and lyrical coherence and consistency over time are rare and precious virtues, and found only among geniuses. And tradition is precisely what lends authority to the poetic statements of poets who conceptualize poetry as being something other than self-expression, the turning loose of emotion, or sheer subjective narcissism. That tradition is the expression of a form of historical continuity, and that there are coexisting time planes without our being aware of the implications, seem to be out of the question for him. This compelling sense of the past takes on the form of a puzzling and fertile simultaneity of traditions in Bringham's poetry: the “bright tatters of wisdom” in “Herakleitos”, one of the central poems in *Cadastré*, and the opening one for that matter, are to be found side by side with fragments of Greek and Meso-American mythology, with pieces of strong Biblical resonances, with Vidyakara's Sanskrit love poems in the form of perfect verbal diamonds, with the all-too-modern medieval French of Villon and the resonant 19th-century Italian of Leopardi's *I Canti*, and with Arabic and Nahuatl translations. All of these texts cohere miraculously, as if attracted by a will of their own, into a circle. The resulting tapestry is tessellated out of numinous verbal and musical pieces that are somehow imperishable. They still taste good on the palate of the most exquisite and demanding lovers of poetry.

Once more, Pound has got *le mot juste* to explain the quality in Bringham's poetry I am seeking to define here: “It is the mark of the artist that he, and he almost alone, is indifferent to oldness or newness.” Or, in other words: “Originality is often a matter of ‘sheer lineage.’”¹⁰ Consult the ancestors, listen to whatever lessons, technical or epistemological, they have to impart. Hugh Kenner is also eloquent enough about this: “The past exists in the form of a torn papyrus: stray words, random things recorded, tattered ruins and scraps.”¹¹ High Modernism set out to recover the luminous insights of the past out of these tattered fragments from different languages and traditions. The greatest intellectual achievement of Comparative Philology in the 19th century was, in fact, the discovery and explanation of language families, which is to say: “Behind every sound we utter extends a history of ordered changes and remote cultural transactions.”¹² What is even more transcendental, the main lesson of Comparative Philology is that “we are joined [...] as much to one another as to the dead by continuities of speech as of flesh.”¹³ Needless to say, language is the natural vehicle whereby tradition is preserved and passed

⁹ See the essay entitled “The Renaissance”, included in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 219.

¹⁰ See Pound's essay “Irony, Laforgue, and Some Satire”, collected in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 280.

¹¹ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 5.

¹² Hugh Kenner, *ibid.*, p. 99. Kenner speaks of language as being “a complex coherent organism [...] that can maintain its identity as it grows and evolves in time. [...] We are not to think of babelized languages but of language, a mesh of filaments uniting all human beings [...] The filaments run back in time likewise, binding us all to our dead ancestors”. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹³ Hugh Kenner, *ibid.*, p. 96.

on from one generation to another throughout history. Metamorphosis is a most curious idea, indeed. For the first time in history, language was conceived as being a historic process, unfolding over time, with roots and developments, in constant change. Language is not a static entity, but rather a phenomenon in a state of flux or perpetual metamorphosis.

Modernists like Pound, Eliot and Joyce led the way; Bringhurst followed in closely their steps. The province of such ambitious works as *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land*, *Finnegans Wake*, and *The Cantos* is the whole intellectual history of humanity in its entirety. All of them embrace a polyglot poetics, a sort of *linguistic ecology* by virtue of which the intellectual and artistic achievements of all languages are to be preserved at all costs. Thus, the serious artist is to delve deep into the past, across languages and traditions, in search of the best that has been thought and said about the ultimate essence of things. Kenner puts it in these most eloquent of terms: in the work of the Modernists, “as never before in history, is the entire human race speaking, and in time as well as in space.”¹⁴ What serious artists find out in their search after the origins and the ancestral roots is nothing but the multitudinous tongues of the world evolving over time, seeking to express *something* of value for posterity. Humanity changes, but no so much as to be completely unrecognizable. There are eloquent parallelisms, subtle connections, a precious coherence, and elusive ramifications that betray the essential interconnectedness of all traditions and civilizations, as there are history-rhymes, culture-rhymes – *two sensibilities may rhyme*, says penetrating Kenner.¹⁵ This is what makes such an ambitious work as *The Cantos* such a fascinating monument of artifice: it seeks to uncover the threads that unite all human beings across time, across barriers and divisions imposed by human beings’ inquisitive mind, while not forgetting to pay attention to verbal craftsmanship, to intellectual accuracy and to clear definition. *I have always wanted to be clear and certain about what I know and about what I don’t know*, says Pound somewhere else. “The love of a thing is the knowledge of its perfections,” says Spinoza. In his poetry, pervaded by a multiform consciousness of the voices from the past, Bringhurst is after the outline of the whole picture, after the essential brushes that will yield a durable form of verbal music, beauty and perfection.

II · Ezra Pound & Robert Bringhurst’s Language: Transparency, Simplicity, Accuracy

Bringhurst’s nearest literary kinships are to W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens, though it is Pound whom most by attitude, genius and talent he must be said to resemble. There are certain words scattered in Ezra Pound’s literary essays, attributed to Spinoza, which are repeated time and again as if they were endowed with a talismanic value to the author’s mind: “The intellectual love of a thing consists in the understanding of its perfections.” It is the stubborn transparency, the passionate simplicity, and the intellectual precision that we *love* in Bringhurst’s poetry that we are seeking to define here. This is the mystery and the core at the very heart of his poetry, most palpable in poems like “Song of the Summit” and “Study for an Ecumenical Window”, which are imbued with strong Biblical resonances.¹⁶ There are, in fact, certain kinds of passionate clarities we find in most of Bringhurst’s poems. These are the words of the master in Canto 115:

¹⁴ Hugh Kenner, *ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁵ Hugh Kenner, *ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁶ “Song of the Summit” and “Study for an Ecumenical Window” are pervaded by Biblical echoes. Pound had written some poems whose source of inspiration might have been the Bible as well, such as “De

but the light sings eternal
(the charged intensity of simple words)
ways to purify the English language for the noble
purposes of writing poetry
such power is latent in simple words!!!

The charged intensity of simple words, or the power to charge simple words with all that they can say, seems to be of utmost importance to Bringhurst. Out of infinite knowledge of all the ways of saying a thing, Bringhurst finds the right way to put things in a straightforward manner, unostentatiously. But, as a matter of fact, this is the rare cooperation of genius with common speech. Bringhurst brings his poetry into the domain of such intensities as are to be found in the art of verbal music, and, from the very beginning of his literary career, he is at pains to master the art of the willed patterning of sounds in his poetry, just as music patterns random sonorities. This is an aural patterning in which words are like a few clear crystals on a thread, and this quality is certainly rare and precious in poetry. Following the example of Pound, who learnt in his early youth the intricacy of sound wrought into his *Cantos* from the 12th-century troubadour Arnaut Daniel and the subtlety of thought (a *claritas* of mind dear to both erudite authors) from Cavalcanti, Bringhurst learned this fundamental lesson by understanding that Pound made poetry and music in his craft at the same time, and that by singing, he was giving voice to issues which were worthy of careful consideration.



“Song of the Summit”

Bringhurst’s serious care for finely-wrought sound is a proof that there are seeds of permanent literature in his work. The weight of so many hours’ careful, incessant labour of minute observation of the way prosody works, is there to enrich his poetry. As a result, a consistency, a coherence which is rare and precious, is to be found in the unfolding of Bringhurst’s literary career, which has the simplicity and perfection of a circle. The seeds of great literature are indubitably in his verse and prose works alike.¹⁷ He cares not just about the beauty of the words’ sound and musicality, but also about the content, about what he has to say of value to his fellow human beings that is worth preserving in memorable lines, in beautiful books conceived as perfect artefacts. His poetry is, therefore, the least dispensable of all the poetry that is being written nowadays on the Canadian scene. His calling is with serious poetry and serious art – that which seeks truth, beauty, and permanence despite the devastating effects of time, *edax rerum*. We are reminded here of Pound’s conviction that good poetry must be written at any cost, no matter who *does* the writing. This is not meant as mere eulogy; I am trying to keep things clear and distinct. Like Pound, I have always wanted to be clear about what I do know for sure and what I simply ignore. That Robert Bringhurst is a great poet, probably one of the greatest and most lucid minds in English literature, is utterly out of the question. And this is Bringhurst singing his “Song of the Summit”:

Aegypto” (Poems of 1908-1911) and “Dance Figure” (*Lustra*, 1913-1915). Furthermore, in *Instigations* he devotes an interesting essay to the Book of Genesis.

¹⁷ In the essay “The Hard and Soft in French Poetry”, included in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, Pound claims that “English prose is good in proportion as a man makes it an individual language, one which he alone uses” (p. 287), words which apply to the exquisite, terse texture and elegance of Bringhurst’s prose pieces and works.

The difference is nothing you can see – only
the dressed edge of the air
over those stones, and the air goes

deeper into the lung, like a long fang,
clean as magnesium. Breathing
always hollows out a basin,

leaving nothing in the blood
except an empty
cup, usable for drinking

anything the mind finds – bitter
light or bright darkness or the cold
corner of immeasurable distance.

This is what remains: the pitted blood
out looking for the vein,
tasting of the tempered tooth and the vanished flame.

C, p. 13.

“*The difference is nothing you can see*,” “Song of the Summit”¹⁸ begins, and we are immediately plunged into the core of the poem without any preceding preliminaries or contextualization. This poem is close to a lyric jewel; it has a kind of geometrical perfection in very small compass that we cannot quite put our finger on. Like other great works of art, or masterworks, it is evocative and tantalizing, and it keeps on resonating in the echo-chamber of our minds once we have encountered it for the first time, and listened attentively to what it has to tell us in the form of unexpected epiphany or revelation about the world. Because Bringham is an exquisite poet and puts his unperturbed sincerity into the making of poems like this one now under scrutiny, the reason why such force and evocativeness should reside in so condensed little poem will remain forever a mystery. Borrowing Pound’s words, if one may compare the flight of a butterfly with the progress of an ox, one may well appreciate the *thinking* of the perceiving mind turned into solid, physical sounds in the silent words that make up this poem. Bringham is a poet awake to the value of language as a most subtle musical instrument and as a charged weapon to convey invaluable messages to humankind. This entails that he does not neglect the value of words as words, and he is intent on their value as sound and meaning alike. No one who cares about great poetry can be deaf to the rhythms of his poetry, to his spontaneous splendour. His later work shows very considerable progress in this direction, and a much more vigorous grasp on this matter – this poetics characterized by *precision of statement*, in which not a word is wasted. Furthermore, the poet is convinced that the language of great poetry should be simple and austere. Stylistically speaking, Bringham belongs to an age when artifice in poetry has been distrusted. Now, how a poet manages to find or make a distinctive language for poems of his own remains a mystery. And it is natural that it should be so, since “language is the total apprehension, in time and space, of the human mind, that labyrinthine marvel.”¹⁹

¹⁸ “Song of the Summit” was later published in *Mundus Artium: A Journal of International Literature and the Arts* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) 8.2 ([Winter] 1975): 130-133, along with “Portrait in Blood” and “Jebel Saneen, Lebanon” (from *The Shipwright’s Log*, 1972), and “The Greenland Stone” (also included in *Cadastre*, 1973). It was rpt. in A.6, A.11, A.14, A.47, A.92, B.7, B.9, C.27 and C.63.

¹⁹ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 120.

In “Song of the Summit” we are back in a world of elemental things – air, stones, and breathing. There is probably an autobiographical substratum to the composition; the walking tours of the poet in the mountains, in perfect solitude, might have well served as a source of inspiration for this poem. But there is also a subterranean undercurrent of potent Biblical echoes beneath or between the lines. We are reminded of the ancient prophets and Biblical figures (Moses, Noah, Abraham, Isaiah, Ezekiel, or Jacob), and their visionary capacity to see into the essence of things, scratching the outer surface of reality and getting to a core of irreducible meaning. It is no happy coincidence that “Song of the Summit” should be the first, opening poem in *Bergschrund*, a landmark in Bringhurst’s literary career published in 1975. It provides a most eloquent threshold into the book for a number of reasons as we shall see later on. It displays the linguistic devices characteristic of the whole collection and is imbued with a sense of revelation or insight into the essence of the world, attained on the top of a mountain:

At a summit, we catch our breath; here, we find the clarity, balance, and orchestration which characterize Bringhurst’s voice. “Song of the Summit” is composed with a lovely equilibrium, achieved by the arrangement of stresses, line lengths, and rhymes about the pivot of “except an empty.” Bringhurst’s verse is subtle and never closets his meanings. [...] his work is not only technically interesting. The forms developed in his poems make his content striking and memorable – most readers will not notice how he goes about it.²⁰

In “Song of the Summit” we eventually reach “mind” and then encounter the first mention of “light or bright darkness” in the book,²¹ which is part of the essential, recurrent imagery in the collection. In fact, at its root, it is a poem engaged with the age-old philosophical question of what can be known at the exact intersection where the mind meets the world. What is most astonishing about this poem is that Bringhurst thinks with precision and concision, in accurate terms; his words correspond to definite sensations undergone. His language is *speech of precision*; beneath the surface there is a struggle for clear definition. Like Pound before him, Bringhurst is intent on being “hard”, on conveying a certain verity of feeling, and he ends by being truly poetic. These are Pound’s words concerning the hardness or softness of poetry: “By ‘hardness’ I mean a quality which is in poetry always a virtue. [...] By ‘softness’ I mean an opposite quality which is not always a fault.”²² Notice the textural terms Pound uses to refer to two distinct types of poetry. They are useful in our attempt to put our finger on the quality in Bringhurst’s poetry we are seeking to define here. This *hardness* may partly account for the fact that the whole poem is alive with a tantalizing intellectual vigour. The author is concerned to utter a profound and fundamental idea. The clarity and profundity of the literal sense of the poem is proof that the poet is in search of an ultimate wisdom. Literature, after all, is the space in which we do our best thinking about the things that matter, where we rehearse answers and test their truth. Poetry helps us understand who we are and how to understand ourselves and our world. It is not luxury. It is not didactic, nor escapist, nor mere entertainment. It is an ambitious task, committed to paying attention to matters of small concern, which are worthy of serious consideration.

As in the lyric jewel “Poem About Crystal”, Bringhurst tessellates a handful of resonant words here, which constitutes the manifest lyric impulse or the emotional force in the poem. So far as the actual feel and texture of the work is concerned, the sharp clear quality

²⁰ See the review of *Bergschrund* by Jane Munro, entitled “Bringhurst’s Range: Essential Information”, in *CVII [Contemporary Verse Two]* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81): 38-41. See, in particular, page 38.

²¹ See the review of *Bergschrund* by Jane Munro, p. 39.

²² See “The Hard and Soft in French Poetry”, in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 285.

of the sounds in the poem answers to the same impulse towards intellectual clarity and precision. When we focus on how the poem is constructed or made, we are led to ask the right questions. When we ask the right questions, its meaning springs to life. There is much that is unvoiced in the writing, though; but it is latent. When we regard every detail as worthy of our concentrated (lyric and intellectual) attention, the work's essential coherence and unity begin to emerge. Turning back to the essential encounter between the perceiving *I* and reality, which is a potent thread in the Romantic/Modernist tradition, we realize that there is not much left except for the very physicality of the body and the surrounding world. In verse lines marked by strong enjambment, we are being confronted with a world of elemental things in which the barrier between the self and the universe at large vanishes altogether. The connection with the world is after all purely physical, and done through such a simple act as breathing. Air gets into the lungs and pervades the whole body through the blood in the veins – in a way, the world is being swallowed up through respiration. The metaphor used to convey this feeling that the world out there is no longer alien or remote is most eloquent: breathing brings a cup into the blood that the mind uses to drink whatever it happens to encounter in the world outside (light, darkness, and the distance on the horizon). What remains is the blood circulating non-stop in the body, somewhat connected to the currents of air and light in the outer, observable world.



“Study for an Ecumenical Window” *Or when Moses met Mohammed*

Moses spent forty years of his lifetime leading Israel to the Promised Land, sustained only on the hope that Yahweh was giving them spiritual guidance and support all the time. Manna rained from the heavens to give them food; water was supplied when necessary in a hostile wilderness that seemed not to care about the survival of Moses' people. This forty-year wandering in the desert on their way to Canaan is recounted largely in the Book of Exodus and in the Book of Deuteronomy, which are central to the Pentateuch and fundamental for a proper understanding of the ancient history of Israel in a formative period of its past. The Exodus was a landmark episode in Israel's history, as it meant the definitive escape from slavery under Egyptian rule. At the end of their journey was a land of abundance and of comfort which Moses only got to glimpse in the distance as he stood on Mount Horeb. Shortly afterwards, he died, the Promised Land lingering as an unbelievable mirage on the horizon. But Moses, like Abraham or Joseph before him, and like David and Jesus after him, was not the definitive prophet, at least not for Muslims, for whom he was just one preliminary prophet predating the true one – Mohammed, the prophet of Islam. Through Mohammed God revealed to Muslims the true word of the scripture, otherwise known as the Koran – the revealed word of Allāh in Arabic, dictated in segments by the angel Gabriel to the Prophet between the years 610 and 632.

Bringhurst was interested in Arabic literature since early in his literary career. For a long time, he studied the Arabic language conscientiously and translated from the work of a number of Arab poets, so as to learn the rudiments and essentials of prosody that might enable him to find his own poetic voice – one marked by austerity, clarity, and intellectual intensity. But, at the same time, he was interested in the Bible as a text which remained central to the Western canon, to which he aimed to make a lasting contribution with his own work. The Bible was conceived of not so much as being sacred scripture as a primarily literary text, full of peculiar stories about the visionary men of ancient Israel. In this

context, “Study for an Ecumenical Window”²³ is a most curious poem in that it essays a juxtaposition of both Moses and Mohammed, belonging to the Judeo-Christian tradition and to the Islamic tradition, respectively. On one level, the resulting lyric poem looks like an inquiry into the nature of human religion as an anthropological universal. On another, a simple message is being embodied in intense poetic language: the hero of the biblical Exodus and the prophet of Islam have got something fundamental in common. Both prophets are depicted as being truly visionary men, capable of transcending the surface appearance of things to reach a core of irreducible meaning at the heart of reality.

As in the case of “Song of the Summit”, we are plunged back into an elemental world of silence, sun, stone, water, light, darkness, and blood. As a well-wrought artefact, the poem is articulated around five movements for the mind, or five stanzas, each concerned with exploring a basic element of reality. The emphasis is placed throughout on *seeing* and *knowing* as being the natural, spontaneous acts both Moses and Mohammed performed in their daily life. The resulting poem is suspended somewhere in mid-air, out of the province of time marked by ticking clocks, and consists of a number of insights into reality on the part of both prophets. For a while an omniscient poetic voice appears to appropriate the precious perception of the world of both visionaries. Thus, the poem opens with these resonant and terse words:

Moses and Mohammed knew
the long hollow in the silence through
the script in the star-eaten stone
and the incessant alternation
of the new-honed
light and the rust-pocked, chipped, uneven
edges of the sun.

C, p. 14.

As pointed out above, *Bergschrund* is pervaded by images of light, edges, and sharpened objects. This is obvious from the first stanza of “Study for an Ecumenical Window”. Moses and Mohammed are men convinced that there is more to reality than the eye can see at first glance. As visionary men, endowed with an extraordinary capacity to see the interconnectedness of all things in the living mesh that the universe is, they perceive what would normally pass unnoticed to most of their fellow human beings. It comes as no surprise then that they should be able to read in the book of Nature, to interpret it correctly, and to have a vivid awareness of such an ethereal thing as “*the long hollow in the silence.*” To borrow the title of one of Bringham’s celebrated essays, everywhere being is dancing in the world, and it is there awaiting for us humans to pay attention and breathe through our feet. Now, Moses and Mohammed were not conventional men; they were made of a different stuff. They seemed to be alert to the subtlety of the reality around them, visible to the eye, and to the reality invisible to humans unless they pay attention to *what is*. Everywhere in the universe there were signs to be interpreted and there were meanings awaiting sensible elucidation. In “*the script of the star-eaten stone*”, in “*the incessant alternation / of the new-boned / light*”, and in the “*uneven / edges of the sun*” both prophets saw indices that the world is a complex net of meanings inextricably linked to one another. The essential ingredients out of which reality is made (carbon, diamond, crystal, bone) pose no mystery to their inquisitive look, which goes beyond the surface of reality and into the heart of things. While reality is being transcended, the sense that reality is stubbornly present is powerfully conveyed in the poem. In this respect, the images of utter silence and solitude,

²³ “Study for an Ecumenical Window” was reprinted in A.6, A.14, C.9 and C.54.

of stark nakedness, of light and sun, are reminiscent of the desert landscapes evoked in the Bible and in the Koran which constitute the setting for much of these prophets' lives. Reality fits "the socket of the hand": it is comprehensible and yet unfathomable at the same time. It does ring a bell; Bringhurst's words remind us of Blake's – *to see the world in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour*. On the palm of one's hand is the universe contained in miniature. *Pars pro toto*, or, in other words, the interconnectedness of all things, living and non-living alike, springs to the fore if we are capable of paying attention to the world.

If the first stanza is about silence and light, which are impersonal elements in the universe, the second stanza is about living matter: about the living cells and the atoms that make up the human and non-human world. Perhaps this stanza constitutes the heart of the poem; nowhere else is the message Bringhurst is trying to put forward more clearly and eloquently enunciated. It is, therefore, worth quoting in full:

They looked through oxide and scale,
oak-bark, hide, nail, the enamel
over the live nerve. Yes, certainly, they knew
the taste of marrow,
visions that grow in the bone, things seen
in the sap before it is frozen,
in the hard unclouded fluid.
Moses and Mohammed
saw the blood before the air eats
into its essence, when the light sits
not quite on it but
about it, without weight.

C, p. 90.

The whole range of entities in the universe is represented in such a small compass of an enumeration: oxide, scale, oak-bark, hide, nail, live nerve, marrow, bone, sap, and blood. Rocks, trees, animals, and human beings all fall under the same category, i.e., elements in the natural world. What is most peculiar about Moses and Mohammed's perception of all of them is that they "looked through" them, transcending the stubborn surface of things, to reach an indestructible core of existence flowing like a river through arteries permeating the whole universe. It is no coincidence that the summary enumeration in the opening lines of the stanza should be further elaborated upon by the poet in the lines following. Two astonishing images are worth considering here: the image of "*the taste of the marrow, / visions that grow in the bone*" and the blood in a pure, uncontaminated state, before the air actually "*eats / into its essence.*" Not only are the prophets capable of going beyond the surface of all things, they have also had a first-hand knowledge of visions from the inside, as it were. They do see the inside of trees, as evoked by the reference to the sap, and also the inside of human beings, as symbolized by the blood. The sap is to the tree as the blood to the human body, one might think. Both are essential, life-giving fluids that make life possible. The incantatory rhythm in the stanza, which is a prodigious construction, is accomplished by means of repetition and parallelism, the repeated refrain of the prophets' names, and alliteration, which creates a terse sound texture, naturally flowing as the *thinking* that is taking place in this poem.

In the history of Western philosophy there has been a widespread distrust of the reliability of whatever information the senses provide about the world. Traditionally, it has been acknowledged that reality consists of two distinct planes, as it were: on the one hand, there is the surface appearance of things, unreliable and fleeting by nature, and, on the

other, there is a core or essence, not easily accessible to the mind, which is the true and permanent nature of things. The senses themselves provide contradictory data about the true nature of reality, and poetry has availed itself of the confusion they might bring to the perceiving subject. This may partly account for the use of synaesthesia as a poetic licence, whereby a particular sensation is attributed to a certain sense with which it is not primarily associated. Thus, in Bringhurst's poem, Moses and Mohammed are said to be able to see "*the surface / that is deeper than the water,*" a statement that does not defy logic, but immediately afterwards they are said to listen "*to the light / and the undertow's sound.*" It is not logically possible to listen to light, even though we are well aware that such astonishing juxtapositions in poetic language may shed light on the ultimate nature of things. Inevitably, at some point in the perception of the world, language comes to play a fundamental role. The senses provide the raw materials, the non-stop flux of data emanating from reality in all directions, but then the mind sets an order upon all that exuberant mess of sensations. And the mind operates in a way that cannot do without the mechanisms of language as a tool of knowledge. Stanza number three deals precisely with language, or rather with Moses and Mohammed's language philosophy in miniature:

They knew the word will congeal around
the heart and in that instant will be²⁴
brighter than at any time later,
tighter than the crystal, finer
than the blade that has been sharpened
into effervescence,
ground down an atom at a time.

C, p. 90.

The poetic images in the verse lines just quoted are characterized by an intense clarity and a tantalizing power. In human beings' attempt to understand the mystery of the world, language could be interpreted as being a substitute for reality, an analytic tool that reduces the freshness of the universe into manageable concepts. There is no questioning that cool reason aims at simplifying reality and that language does play a role in the whole process of categorization or conceptualization of the millions of objects populating the world. We all know that it would be positively impracticable to try to capture the infinite nuances of meaning of a world incessantly changing from one second to another. Only people endowed with portentous memories (like *Funes el Memorioso* in the homonymous short story by Jorge Luis Borges) would be truly capable of perceiving and processing the myriad impressions that the world produces and sends in all directions. The stream-of-consciousness technique, deployed by Virginia Woolf or James Joyce in their attempts to faithfully record the effervescence of impressions, emotions and ideas in their characters' minds in the face of a kaleidoscopic world, was doomed to fail from the start, as language is not truly capable of such an exhaustive recording of reality.

However, in Bringhurst's verse lines a different view of language is at stake. In the hands of visionary men like Moses and Mohammed, language is charged with meaning to the nth power, as it were. In the Hebraic conception of language, words are sacred entities, inextricably linked to the things they refer to in the world out there. Thus, in the biblical story of Moses and Israel's wandering in the wilderness, Yahweh speaks to His people and His word is the law. The words of the Ten Commandments are written on stone, as if to suggest that there is an unshakeable truth inherent in them. Similarly, to the Muslims the

²⁴ The original "in that instant will be" becomes "in that instant it is" in a later version of the poem in *Bergschrund* (1975).

sacred word in the Koran was the literal transcription into Arabic of Allāh’s words as dictated to Mohammed by the angel Gabriel. By suggesting that “*the word will congeal around / the heart*” and that at that precise moment language is brighter, tighter than crystal, finer than a blade, the speaking voice in the poem is putting forward two important ideas. First, that language is reliable whenever it is inextricably united to the heart, which may be interpreted as standing for sincerity. In associating human language with the heart, one cannot help feeling that there is a sense of moral responsibility lingering beneath this statement: if humans are to use language, then they had better use it to tell the truth; otherwise they had better remain silent and not say a word at all. Secondly, language is sharp-edged as a knife, tight and clear as a crystal, and reliable as an instrument of intellectual precision if carefully handled. Capable as they were of seeing beyond the surface of the most ordinary things in the world, visionary men like Moses and Mohammed were aware of the potential splendour that language had in store as a tool to apprehend the essence of things. Like the mind, words grasp the ultimate nature of everything in the world. In their minds they appear connected to a strong sense of moral and intellectual responsibility. When those words are uttered by God, then they somehow become even more reliable and more illuminating in a way. God’s words weigh thousands of tons just because they are divine, exactly like their maker.

In stanzas four and five, Bringham turns to the theme of light and darkness, as well as to the blood mentioned in the second stanza. Both stanzas present an image of the prophets as having an intimate knowledge of the blood in the arteries. Now they are looking at the world not from the standpoint of an attentive spectator, but rather from the perspective of someone capable of transcending the outer skin of bodies and of getting into the blood of the very arteries of living things. Whereas the world outside is the realm of light and splendour, the world inside is one of darkness:

a darkness that is
 razor-like and ragged, like
 the stone of circumcision,
 the die’s edge, the final incursion
 of the chisel, the precise place
 where the sculpture grows
 out of its base. Flint for the light to strike,
 backdrop for the diamond’s
 museum-case.

C, p. 91.

Like language and light, darkness is razor-like, ragged, and sharp-edged. The string of images or similes that follows the word ‘darkness’ in an attempt to shed light on its true nature is an exercise in intellectual precision – and an escape from mistiness, vagueness, and subjectivity. At this point where the poem comes to a close, the title of the composition still remains a mystery. “Study for an Ecumenical Window” is a miniature essay on the common substratum beneath Christianity and Islam, explored by the way of two fundamental prophets, Moses and Mohammed. From the Latin *oecumenicus*, meaning ‘universal’, the very word ‘ecumenical’ points to the ambitious scope of the meditation contained in Bringham’s poem, which in the end turns out to be a window open onto incredible vistas – those consisting of the insights into the ultimate core of reality as perceived by two lucid-minded, visionary men. Being a man of omnivorous curiosity, Bringham has felt the need to tackle the issue of theology in his poetry. His concern with ultimate questions has led him deeply into exploring issues like these in his poetry. The concern is not obviously with matters of religious dogma, ritualistic practices, or other

dispensable paraphernalia surrounding religion, but rather with a profounder issue, which is possibly the fact that religion is an anthropological universal. Like art, science, or philosophy, it might be one of those prodigious gestures of the human imagination to apprehend reality – the elusive *being* that is dancing in the world.

III · On Language as Spontaneous Poetry

“Poem about Crystal”

Nature’s Lessons

Bringhurst has an acute sense of the inquisitive short lyric – the poem that turns metre and music to an epistemological use. In this respect, “Poem about Crystal”²⁵ is a perfect artefact of verbal music in its precision and concision. The architectural design and sound texture are carefully carved out of a language that goes straight into the heart of things and has got potent scientific resonances. It is not only human beings who speak a language of their own in their interaction with the world; the world of objects has got a language of its own as well, and something of value to communicate to mortals. In his Canto 87, Pound reminds us of this truism that we tend to overlook in our logocentric Western tradition: “... *In nature are signatures / needing no verbal tradition, / oak leaf never plane leaf...*” Crystal is one of such *signatura rerum* we find in Nature.²⁶ After all, the message in the nine verse lines in Bringhurst’s poem is crystal-clear: crystal will not yield any meaning beyond its stubborn material existence. The lesson it has to teach is simple enough and inescapable inasmuch as it speaks of itself, of its own condition of crystal, and of such bare essentials as clarity and light. It is not a symbol of something else, nor embodies the past or the future, nor promises astonishing revelations. Crystal *finds* speech, and so this is poetry emerging from the very texture of things themselves:

Look at it, stare
into the crystal because
it will tell you, not
the future, no, but
the quality of crystal,
clarity’s nature,
teach you the stricture
of uncut, utterly
uncluttered light.

C, p. 17.

Since early in his literary career, Pound was concerned with the conception of language as poetry, spontaneous poetry, “in touch with the very spirit of the universe.”²⁷ In studying Fenollosa’s papers about the nature of the Chinese written character, he was after some form of transcendental dimension inherent in human language: the possibility that

²⁵ “Poem about Crystal” was reprinted in A.6, A.14, A.47, A.92, B.17, B.27, B.43, B.69, C.10, C.54, C.67.

²⁶ The first reference to crystal in *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound is found in Canto LXXVI: “no cloud, but the crystal body”, “the sphere moving crystal, fluid”, and “tangibility by no means *atal* / but the crystal can be weighed in the hand”. See *The Cantos*, New York: New Directions, 1996, p. 168 and p. 169. And in Canto XCI we find a reference to crystal as being the symbol of paradise: “Crystal waves weaving together toward the gt/ healing” and “Light & the flowing crystal / never gin in cut glass had such clarity / that Drake saw the splendor and wreckage / in that clarity / Gods moving in crystal...” *The Cantos*, p. 185.

²⁷ Pound’s words quoted by Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 104.

the relationship holding between words and things might not ultimately be completely arbitrary, but rather motivated by a sort of spiritual kinship uniting language and the world that it seeks to render intelligible for human beings. In other words, he was exploring “the possibility that a language might be a system of natural signs”²⁸ and the corollary that a natural poetic language based on such natural signs was conceivable. To Pound’s imagination, Chinese written characters offered a unique opportunity to ascertain an intrinsic relationship bringing language and reality together, as the characters were strongly reminiscent of the physical objects that gave rise to them in the beginning of time. It was as if language stemmed directly from the world of things it named. Pound’s concept of *phanopoeia*, or *the casting of images on the visual imagination*, was precisely based on this non-arbitrary connection holding between words and things.

If the primitive roots of language are to be found in Nature itself, then it is somehow possible to gaze into the single word as if into a concentrated poem. To Fenollosa’s mind, “all poetry “was once in the language itself, and still underlies the dry bones of even our dictionaries”.”²⁹ Kenner quotes him saying: “The prehistoric peoples who created language were necessarily poets, since they discovered the whole harmonious framework of the universe and the essential interplay of its living processes.”³⁰ But, much earlier, in the 19th century, on American soil, a compatriot of Pound’s, Ralph Waldo Emerson, embracing the idealism constitutive of American Transcendentalism, had already written in “The Poet” (1844) of language as being ‘fossil poetry’,³¹ of the single word as a concentrated poem. Nature was conceptualized as being a book, a scripture perfectly decipherable if humans had access to the right code to interpret its message. This was part of the *Zeitgeist* and was floating much in the air at that time.³² In the 20th century Mallarmé speaks of “le mystère d’un nom” and Benedetto Croce conceives of an aesthetics based on the idea that language is spontaneous poetry stemming from things themselves – emerging spontaneously out of the earth, the sky, plants, and stones.

Language is poetry, but it is also a mode of knowing and a form of knowledge. Language does not only bring about knowledge, but is also the embodiment of our knowledge of the world and *Weltanschauung* – a most interesting German word in that it agglutinates two primordial words: the noun *die Welt*, ‘world’ (feminine), and the verb *anschauen*, ‘to see’. The origins of the notion of language as knowledge can be traced back to the very Bible, which is literally a collection of books – βιβλία means ‘books’ in Greek, as it is the plural of τὸ βιβλίον. It is only natural that man should be interested in language from the very beginning of history, or to put it differently, that he should direct his inquisitive look toward something inherent in the species which tends to be overlooked, as

²⁸ H. Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 103.

²⁹ H. Kenner, *ibid.*, p. 105.

³⁰ H. Kenner, *ibid.*, p. 106.

³¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet”, *Nature and Selected Essays*, New York / London: Penguin Books, ed. and with an introduction by Larzer Ziff, 2003, p. 271: “The poet is the Namer or Language-maker, naming things after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another’s, thereby rejoicing the intellect, which delights in detachment or boundary. The poets made all the words, and therefore language is the archives of history, and, if we must say it, a sort of tomb of the muses. For though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry.”

³² In *The Pound Era*, Kenner recounts an enlightening anecdote in this respect. He speaks of a scholar called Richard Chenevix Trench, who read a paper before the Philological Society in 1857. “He said: “Many a single word... is itself a concentrated poem, having stores of poetical thought and imagery laid up in it.” Trench also reflected on the *signatura rerum*, the second scripture, Nature, which has evolved like language and asks to be read like a book.” *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.

it seems to be the very air we breathe. One of the reasons that may partly account for this preoccupation with the problem of language is that man is an inquiring creature. There is no room for uncertainty or chiaroscuro reality bites in the mind of man. It is man's compulsion to have everything under control, to grasp and see into reality rather than remain on surface appearances. In this sense, human beings, who are *verbal creatures*, feel compelled to ask themselves what language is, or, in other words, what is it that allows them to interact with the surrounding world and arrange it into more or less neat categories. In this respect, as pointed out somewhere else, metamorphosis is a curious idea. Curiosity is an interesting idea too: wonder is at the very basis of humans' pursuit of knowledge.

Human beings' linguistic awareness instils in us an acute sense that language is of a problematic nature, that language, inasmuch as it is there mediating our relationship with everything around us, is inescapable. Language mediates our relationships with the world, with the other and with the *me-myself*. Karl Bühler, Roman Jakobson, M.A.K. Halliday and a number of other linguists in the 20th century have tried to systematize the so-called functions of language into a coherent whole. What is interesting about all of these classifications is that there is an underlying triad upon which the whole model is built, namely the world, the other and the *I* or *me-myself*. Thus, through language we are able to represent and grasp reality (referential, representative or ideational function of language), we can contact and interact with our fellow human beings (conative, appellative, social or interpersonal function of language), and, finally, we can do some kind of introspection and explore the inner territories of our soul, which is made of ideas, emotions, thoughts and feelings (expressive or emotive function of language). The two former functions of language point clearly outwards to the outside, to that which is around humans; on the contrary, the latter points inwards, to the inside of human beings.

It is possible to draw *a precise genealogy of language as knowledge*, and trace the idea that language is a system of knowledge as it has been conceived of throughout history. In this context, it might be interesting to go into the earlier chapters or phases of this universal concern. "In the beginning was the Word", tells us John in the Bible. The logocentric compulsion that Post-Structuralist/Post-modernist discourse regards as something deeply rooted in Western thought is to be sought and found in such a landmark text as the Bible. The obsession with and awareness of the *λόγος* is already in this Hebraic-Christian collection of books. In the Book of Genesis, God is reported to have created the world *ex nihilo*, out of the blue, by solely uttering the exact words that bring objects into existence. It is precisely at the intersection of word and object that we find reality, though the former is much more important than the latter. In the Hebraic conception of language, the *λόγος* is prior to the thing and, therefore, naming a thing is tantamount to creating it. As a result, it could not be otherwise, an essentialist connection holds between words and objects. This is the source of magic, of shamanism and, most important of all, of myth. Thus, in the beginning of time *to name* was *to know*.

Words weigh thousands of tons in ancient mythology for they imply *an act of creation and of knowledge*, inasmuch as to dissect reality into sections entails an act of interpretation, the adoption of a particular stance in the face of an overwhelming reality, which is the constant flux of sensation. Human beings must make such multifarious reality into a manageable whole, grouped into categories and concepts linked to certain linguistic labels. After Babel, such linguistic labels (the Saussurean *signifiant*) have come to be embodied differently across a huge number of natural languages. Babel installs linguistic chaos and diversity where there was uniformity and homogeneity before. It has been argued that all

human languages might well stem from one single language, from an ancestral *Ursprache* common to all men and women. Then, with the passage of time, and due to the fact that languages are like organic beings with an internal logic to them, a number of varieties would have arisen and begun their expansion through vast geographical areas. On the contrary, it has also been claimed that there is no such thing as a *linguistic pangensis*: many different languages would have sprung at the same time in different places of the planet, instead.

If, in Hebraic language philosophy, language takes precedence over reality, it seems to us that it is rather the other way around in classical Greek philosophy. *What is real is real*, language is subsidiary to thought and reality, and written language is even much more removed from true reality than speech is. This is one of the reasons why much of ancient philosophy is oral, as can be seen from the Presocratics in their knowing, from Socrates' teachings, and from Plato's dialogues. Philosophers make philosophy out of intense talks and walks in public places like the *agora* or the market. This is only to mention Western thought, but we should not forget that something similar happens in ancient Oriental philosophy. Walking in the open air activates the philosopher's mind in close contact with the natural elements. Plato and Aristotle, and the Presocratics before them, are the makers of the central thread pervading the whole of Western philosophy: the human being confronting reality, or how human beings get to know the world, the others and themselves. Plato is responsible for a crucial split in man's nature that has survived up to the present. Man is made up of a body and a soul, the former belonging to the realm of things and shadows, which is the world of mutability, change and decay; the latter belonging to the realm of ideas, which are permanent, eternal, and universal. For Plato ideas are innate: humans carry ideas within their heads from the very moment they are born. When they see things, they are only seeing – and remembering – a pale reflection or shadow of true, immutable and eternal essences, which are embodied in ideas.

On the contrary, for Aristotle, for man to arrive to the realm of ideas, he has to start from experience, which is the true point of departure. Aristotle is responsible for the first theory of categorization in Western thought, which is vastly illustrated by his own work on taxonomies in *Metaphysics*, *Politics*, *Ethics*, and so on. The universe of objects is the only real thing which human beings should be concerned with. Thus, in the well-known painting by Michelangelo, while Plato points upwards with his forefinger to the transcendental realm of ideas (and celestial Heaven in Christianity), Aristotle points downwards to Earth, with his feet pressing firmly the ground. The world of objects can be conceptualized into strictly neat categories, which have their own linguistic counterpart or label. Things are made of an essence or defining property (*genus*) and a number of peripheral or secondary properties (*accidence*) which are added to their core structure. Categories are precisely built on the basis of shared essence, which means that things are grouped into categories if and only if they share a set of defining inherent characteristics, even though they may differ as to certain nuances. This is also the basis of similarity and difference of particular instances of individual members in a category. For instance, even if Herakleitos, Socrates and Plato are not exactly the same, they all share a number of necessary and sufficient conditions in common as to be subsumed under the category of *man*. The same applies to tables, plants, animals, stones, dogs, houses, and all the objects in this world. The important thing worth noticing is that it is possible to draw clear-cut boundaries between different categories and that such boundaries are not problematic as such.³³

³³ The Aristotelian model of conceptualization would be of paramount importance throughout the Middle Ages. However, Ockham's Nominalism might be worth mentioning. Umberto Eco, the Italian semiotician,

Deep inside, “Poem about Crystal” reminds us that language is not omnipotent. It is but an imperfect, unreliable instrument to render reality intelligible, partly because it obliterates differences between objects and sensorial nuances in the process of categorization, partly because reality is vaster than whatever we may come to say about it. Human beings cannot live outside language; they perceive the world through the senses and through the lively network of the words that make up a language. Interpretation of objectively observable phenomena is possible thanks to the dissecting tools language provides humans with. Not only do human beings speak, language speaks too. Speech finds speech, *die Sprache spricht*, says Heidegger, who suggests that human beings’ home is language: “das Sein istet, die Welt weltet, die Zeit zeitigt, das Nicht nichtet, das Ding dingt, das Ereignis ereignet, die Sprache spricht. [...] Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins.”³⁴ Bringhurst’s jewel of a poem is a manifesto against human being’s conquering will, against their hermeneutic enterprise, which language alone makes possible. Be crystal yourself if you want to understand what it means to be crystal, what it means to be a transparent, non-verbal entity that is simply out there in the world. In this tiny verbal constellation, the value of each word is discriminated and released in its multiple echoes and resonances, so that the final picture is one of compact, well-wrought beauty.



“Strophe from Sophocles” *A Meditation on Man’s Nature*

“Strophe from Sophocles”³⁵ is a translation of the first stanza in a chorus from the ancient Greek playwright’s well-known tragedy entitled *Antigone*. Sophocles evolved for his plays a plain style that was very different from the magniloquence of his senior contemporary Aeschylus. Once more, Ezra Pound, or the acknowledged master, may have put Bringhurst on the right trail. Pound himself gave thought to Sophocles as well: he translated the Greek playwright’s play *Women of Trachis* into English. What is more, Pound uses the expression “Sophoclean light” in his poem “Ité”³⁶ to criticize the misty derivativeness of English poetry since the 1890s up to his day (1915, the year of publication of *Lustra*, where “Ité” is included). Sophocles is thus presented as symbolizing a hard kind of poetry, as opposed to soft, sentimental, abstract poetry. Yet this version of the classical Greek text is but the beginning of a long process in which Bringhurst tries to come to terms with the original.

literary critic and writer, offers an interesting picture of the matter in his ambitious novel, *The Name of the Rose*. Ockham’s skepticism leads him to realize that there is no essential connection between the thing and the word. He lays the emphasis on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign: words are just tools, mere names and labels which human beings use conveniently to refer to a set of things that are similar only in appearance. Everything is just similar to everything else, for the world is *a continuum* and the objects in it are differences we impose upon reality, as Goethe would put it.

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1959, p. 10.

³⁵ “Strophe from Sophocles” was later published in *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* (Boston) ns 1.4 (1973/1974): 561-575, in a sequence entitled “Eight Poems and Translations” (a revised excerpt from “The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods”, “Strophe from Sophocles”, “Herakleitos”, “The Petelia Tablet”, “Four Glyphs”, “Isthmian”, “A Short History”, and “Antistrophe from Leopardi”). Afterwards, it was also published in *American Poetry Review* 20.3 (Spring 1982): 26-27, along with “The Greenland Stone” (also included in *Cadastre*, 1973).

³⁶ “Ité” (the Latin ‘ite’ means *go*) reads as follows: “Go, my songs, seek your praise from the young and from the intolerant, / Move among the lovers of perfection alone. / Seek ever to stand in the hard Sophoclean light / And take your wounds from it gladly.” The phrase ‘Sophoclean light’ may derive from ‘lumen siccum’ (dry light), of the medieval scholastics, we are told by K.K. Ruthven in *A Guide to Ezra Pound’s Personae* (1926), Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969.

“Strophe from Sophocles” was to be subsequently modified and expanded into the poem entitled “Of the Snaring of Birds”, included for the first time in his twelve-poem sequence called “The Old in their Knowing”³⁷ in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), which is a magnificent recreation of Sophocles’ chorus in its entirety. In the Notations at the end of *Cadastre*, Bringhurst informs us that

The Sophocles doesn’t derive from Heidegger’s reading of the passage, but neither does it seem to replace Heidegger’s reading. (Similarly, Morrison’s drawing of Poseidon in his Armor isn’t, so far as I know, based on Leonardo’s Neptune with his Horses; but the two can be looked at together nevertheless to achieve a degree of stereoscopy.)

The poet seems to suggest that we should bear in mind Heidegger’s exegetical study of the poem in his *Einführung in die Metaphysik* IV, 3 (*Introduction to Metaphysics*, chapter IV, section 3)³⁸ in the hope that some sort of stereoscopy might be achieved if his translation is read in conjunction with the original Greek text and the German philosopher’s lucid interpretation of Sophocles’ words. If Sophocles’ chorus is an extended meditation on man’s nature – on his virtues and omnipotent domination over all creatures on Earth –, “Strophe from Sophocles” is a miniature meditation that focuses on human beings’ relationship with two fundamental natural forces: the sea and mother earth. But let us turn first to the original text and the vital circumstances that accompanied the Greek man who composed such a masterpiece amid the splendour of classical Athens, at the heights of its creative powers.

Sophocles was born *ca.* 496 BCE at Colonus, a village outside the walls of Athens, and he died in 406 BCE in Athens, the cultural centre of classical Greece. He is one of the classical Athens’s three great tragic playwrights along with Aeschylus and Euripides. Few facts are known about his life though. Whatever details are known about his life on earth are worth recording: knowing the man will give us a clue to understand why Bringhurst should have decided to translate a *strophe* from one of his most well-wrought plays. Sophocles came from a wealthy family, and he was highly educated, noted for his impressive beauty of physique, athletic prowess, and outstanding artistic talents. Endowed with a sense of social commitment, he participated actively in civic life affairs in the Greek polis. He won his first victory at the Dionysian dramatic festival in 468, defeating the great Aeschylus in the process and beginning a career of unparalleled success and longevity. In total, he wrote 123 dramas for the festivals, of which only seven have survived in their entirety, along with 400 lines of a satyr play, and numerous fragments of plays now lost. All seven of the complete plays that have survived are works of Sophocles’ maturity. *Ajax* is generally regarded as the earliest of the extant plays. *Antigone* was first performed in 442 or

³⁷ “The Old in Their Knowing” sequence was born in 1973 with the publication of “Herakleitos” in *Cadastre* and in 1974 with the publication of the broadside *Pythagoras*, both of which were later incorporated into the chapbook *Eight Objects* (1975), a sequence of eight poems concerning the primordial lessons of the Presocratics’ philosophy. They were later collected in *Bergschrund* (1975) and expanded into the 12-piece sequence entitled “The Old in Their Knowing” in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), pp. 67-68. In his second groundbreaking anthology, *The Calling* (1995), Bringhurst recuperated the same sequence with minor changes. 2005 saw the publication of the beautiful book entitled *The Old in Their Knowing*, printed by Peter Koch, in Berkeley (California). More recently, *Selected Poems* (2009) includes again such a central sequence in Bringhurst’s poetic career. These poems are therefore *a work in progress*, the work of a lifetime, the palpable expression of the poet’s fascination with the Greek world and what it stands for – spiritual integrity, intellectual honesty, naturalness, a firm grasp of reality.

³⁸ In “Of the Snaring of Birds”, the linguistic threshold before the poem reads: “*from the Antigone of Sophocles, a version in memory of Martin Heidegger, 1889-1977.*” It is in fact a most eloquent version, not a faithful rendering, of the original text, conceived as an inescapable homage to Heidegger, a lover of all things ancient and Greek.

441 BCE. *Philoctetes* was first performed in 409, and *Oedipus at Colonus* was produced after his death by his grandson.

Sophocles was a superb artist. His command of language and his mastery of form and diction respond flexibly to the dramatic needs of the moment. He has also been universally admired for the sympathy and vividness with which he delineates his characters, especially his tragic women, such as Antigone and Electra. Many of his plays are masterpieces of construction, particularly *Oedipus the King*, to which Aristotle makes constant references in the *Poetics*. He is indeed credited with some major and minor dramatic innovations. His major innovation was the introduction of a third actor in the dramatic performance onstage, which enabled him to increase the number of his characters and widen the variety of their interactions. The scope of the dramatic conflict was thereby extended, plots could be more fluid, and situations could be more complex. Thus, the typical Sophoclean drama presents a few characters, impressive in their determination and power, and possessing a few strongly drawn qualities or faults that combine with a particular set of circumstances to lead them inevitably to a tragic fate. With great economy, concentration, and dramatic effectiveness he develops his characters' inexorable rush to tragedy in what looks like a relentless manner. Usually the chief character does something involving grave error. This action or decision affects others, each of whom reacts in their own way, thereby causing the chief agent to take another inevitable step toward ruin – his own and that of others as well.

Apart from being a magnificent craftsman, this master playwright was an inquisitive spirit concerned with investigating the tragic dimension inherent in the human condition. To Sophocles, human beings live for the most part in dark ignorance because they are cut off from the gods, those permanent, unchanging forces and structures of reality. He presents truth in collision with ignorance, delusion, and folly. Ultimately, it is through pain, suffering, and endurance of tragic crisis that people get into contact with the universal order of things and gain some sort of knowledge of themselves. In this respect, *Antigone* is a play about the conflicting obligations of civic versus personal loyalties and religious mores. It marks one of the highest summits of classical Greek drama's formal achievements. The greatest moral dilemma at the heart of the play is that of human or personal liberty: the rights of the individual, who follows the dictates of her conscience, against all sorts of conventional rules and norms, intangible bondage and tyranny, as represented by Creon's edict that no one in the polis is to bury the body of Polinices, a traitor to the city and Antigone's brother.

Bringham's must have admired the clarity, the precision, the command of language on the part of the Greek master in what turns out to be the most moving meditation about human nature in the whole play. Here is the miniature meditation:

Strangeness is frequent enough but nothing
is stranger than man –
thus
and across
the grey-maned water,
heavy weather on the southwest quarter,
moves amid sea-thunder,
tacking through the bruise-blue waves.
And he rubs at the earth,
the eternal, the tireless
eldest of goddesses,

driving the plough in its circle year after year
with the offspring of horses.³⁹

C, p. 18.

The starting point of Sophocles' meditation is straightforward enough: man is a strange creature, stranger than any other creature on Earth. Endowed with intelligence and sagacity, he manages to control the savage forces of Nature to his own satisfaction and benefit. In the Greek framework of perception, the world is a place pervaded by the presence of gods and goddesses, who more often than not interfere in human affairs. But the world is out there for man to conquer with all the might he is capable of. The *grey-named water*, which is the embodiment of Poseidon to the Greeks' mythopoeic mind, awakes humans' sense of grandeur in the face of the sublime and of the unknown. That human beings are vulnerable, devoid of warmth or protection when they arrive on Earth, is out of the question. That the ocean is stronger than all human beings is also out of the question, yet it remains a challenge for men to sail on it in vessels they have devised with their technical knowledge of tools and strategies that make the world manageable to a certain degree. Hence the sea with its vast expanses of water offers no obstacle at all in spite of bad weather conditions, as humans are reckless in their determination to ride the *bruise-blue* waves comfortably in the bosom of their vessels, aided by favourable winds.

The two primordial divine entities in Greek cosmogony (i.e., the mythic account of the origin of the universe) are Heaven (Uranus) and Mother Earth (Gea). Out of their marriage sprang everything, living and non-living, that comprises the cosmos. No mention is made here of Heaven, but rather of the Earth in its entirety, which is made of water and solid earth. Earth is "*the eternal, the tireless / eldest of goddesses,*" the first mother of mothers. Out of a proverbial generosity, she has sustained innumerable generations of humans, has nourished them and given them all they need to lead a comfortable existence in their lifetime. And men make use of whatever available resources (the plough and the brute force of horses) to till it and cultivate it (almost mercilessly) so as to make it yield nourishment to appease their hunger and thirst. There is no respite for mother earth, we read in between the lines; some sort of violence is being exerted on her time and again, and yet she still gives demanding humans generously whatever they demand.

IV · Mesoamerican Mythology

“Four Glyphs”

Robert Bringhurst was deeply fascinated by mythologies other than Western ones, as shown by such poems included in *Cadastre* as “Kerry Shawn Keys” and “The Third Generation”, concerned with Greek gods and goddesses, and a four-part sequence entitled “Four Glyphs”.⁴⁰ Along with “The Song of Macuilxochitzin”, a translation from the Nahuatl incorporated in the fourth section of *Cadastre*, “Four Glyphs”⁴¹ is a fascinating

³⁹ Verse lines 334-340 (first stanza) of the *Χορός* in the original Greek text, ed. Sir Richard Jebb, Cambridge, 1891: πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδεν ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον πέλει. / τοῦτο καὶ πολιοῦ πέραν πόντου χειμερίω νότῳ / χωρεῖ, περιβρυχίοισιν / περῶν ὑπ' οἰδμασιν. / θεῶν τε τὰν ὑπερτάταν, Γᾶν / ἄφθιτον, ἀκαμάταν, ἀποτρύεται / ἰλλομένων ἀρότρων ἔτος εἰς ἔτος / ἵππειῶ γένει πολεῦων.

⁴⁰ In *The Shipwright's Log* (1972) there was already an early, tentative approach to myth in the poem “The Sun and Moon”, as we have seen earlier in our dissertation.

⁴¹ “Four Glyphs” was later published in *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* (Boston) ns 1.4 (1973/1974): 561-575, in a sequence entitled “Eight Poems and Translations”, comprising a revised excerpt

poem indicative of Bringhurst's sense of admiration for Mesoamerican cultures and for whatever literary manifestations of value they had to offer the young poet. In his embracing of a most *sui generis* conception of *Weltliteratur*, Greek-inspired texts coexist with poems inspired by the literary production of the Aztec people, as can be seen in the two compositions already mentioned. Before turning his attention to the myths of the Pacific West Coast and the impressive oral literature of the Haida, Bringhurst explored most attentively and passionately the oral tradition of the southern hemisphere. But before embarking on a closer scrutiny of "Four Glyphs", it might be fruitful and enlightening for a proper understanding of the matter in our hands at the present, to gather the bare essentials about the people that spoke the language – i.e., Nahuatl, and produced a corpus of texts that has been preserved in the form of innumerable inscriptions on stones, in codices, and other sources.⁴²

The Aztecs were a Nahuatl-speaking people who managed to build and rule a large empire in what is now central and southern Mexico in the 15th and early 16th centuries. The origin of the Aztec people remains uncertain, but there is ample evidence in their own tradition that suggests that they were a tribe of hunters and gatherers on the northern Mexican plateau before their appearance in Mesoamerica in perhaps the 12th century. Their migration southwards was part of a general movement of peoples that followed, or perhaps somehow triggered, the collapse of the Toltec civilization – the acknowledged ancestors of the Aztec people. In fact, the Nahua people of the 14th and 15th centuries claim a strong link with the splendour of their Toltec ancestors. In 1325 CE they founded the great city of Tenochtitlan, which was to become their chief centre and metropolis. The success of the Aztec empire is to be found in their remarkable system of agriculture,⁴³ which made for a rich and populous state. Such wealth was made possible by inflexible control on the part of rulers and social inequity in fact, as the Aztec state was a despotism in which valour in war was the surest path for advancement upward in the social ladder. It was a hierarchical society in which there were priestly and bureaucratic classes, involved in the administration of the empire, and, down at the bottom of the social ladder, there were classes of serfs, indentured servants, and slaves, who sustained the whole system with their effort and unpaid labour. However, paradoxically enough, the conjunction of despotism and such a sophisticated agricultural system made social stability and an unparalleled flourishing of the arts possible. Splendour and prosperity do not last forever, though. The Aztec empire was still expanding, and its society still evolving, when its progress was halted in 1519 by the appearance of Spanish explorers, the *hombres de Castilla*, on the horizon. With the Spanish capture of Tenochtitlan by Hernán Cortés and his forces in 1521, the empire came to an end.

And yet, the cultural contribution of the Aztec people to the history of humanity remains unquestionable. Their technological advancement, their arithmetic knowledge, their interest in the cosmos, and their mythic world-view have all yielded spirit creations

from "The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods", "Strophe from Sophocles", "Herakleitos", "The Petelia Tablet", "Four Glyphs", "Isthmian", "A Short History", and "Antistrophe from Leopardi". It was reprinted in A.6, A.14, C.22. In A.92, it was partially reprinted as "One Glyph" (third section of the original sequence).

⁴² As Miguel León-Portilla points out in *Cantos y crónicas del México antiguo*, Crónicas de América, Madrid: Dastin, 2002: "el trasfondo cultural de Mesoamérica, la riqueza de su pensamiento, está en el gran conjunto de inscripciones en piedra, códices y otros textos de la tradición en lenguas nativas. Allí se torna presente el legado de la palabra indígena, o como también se describe, la literatura prehispánica de Mesoamérica." (p. 6)

⁴³ Miguel León-Portilla claims that "una base agrícola muy rica fue la que permitió en Mesoamérica el desarrollo de su civilización. En el conjunto de textos que pertenecen a su literatura hay varios en los que el tema es precisamente el origen mítico de algunas de estas plantas suyas por excelencia" and that many of the original texts are "mágicos testimonios del primer capítulo en el desarrollo de estos pueblos que, asentados en aldeas, comenzaban a abandonar sus antiguas formas de vida nómada o seminómada." *Ibid.*, p. 7.

that are no doubt worthy of attention. Aztec religion was syncretistic, absorbing elements from many other Mesoamerican cultures. At base, it shared many of the cosmological beliefs of earlier peoples, notably the Maya, such as that the present Earth was the last in a series of creations, and that they lived in the fifth Earth under the beneficial sunlight of the fifth Sun. Prominent in their pantheon were such gods as Huitzilopochtli, god of war; Tonatiuh, god of the sun; Tlaloc, god of rain; and Quetzalcóatl, the Feathered Serpent, who was part deity and part legendary hero. The Sun was the Giver of Life, the divine source of life on Earth, and it demanded that blood be shed in its honour. Thus, human sacrifice, particularly by offering a victim's heart to the sun god, was commonly practiced, as was bloodletting. On the other hand, war is of paramount importance in the Aztec world, and not just because of the territorial imperative and the need to ensure the safety of the empire and to affirm their superiority over neighbouring peoples. War with other tribes was a way of expanding their territory, and it gave them also a unique opportunity to capture slaves and potential victims for their ritual sacrifices in honour of the sun-god. On the other hand, the Aztec people developed a complex Aztec calendar, based on the Mayan calendar, which combined the ritual cycle of 260 days and a 365-day civil cycle, which served religious observance and rituals. Each named day was associated with a unique deity. In addition, different writing systems were developed based on the glyphs of the Mayan example, as a way of preserving the ancient wisdom of the past, important historical events, myths and legends, and the memory of a powerful people.⁴⁴ Nahuatl, also called Aztec, an American Indian language of the Uto-Aztecan family, was the language of the Aztec and Toltec civilizations of Mexico. Modern varieties of the ancient languages are still spoken by over one million people in Mexico. Its grammar is basically agglutinative, making much use of prefixes and suffixes, reduplication of syllables, and compound words.

The main characteristics of Nahuatl poetry according to Miguel León-Portilla are worth enumerating in full: the use of parallelism, which is a recurrent device in many oral literatures around the world; the recourse to the so-called “difrasismo”, which is to say, bringing two metaphors together, whereby an idea or thought is repeated twice in slightly different phrasing; and the recurrent use of imagery and metaphors related to flowers, animals (eagles, ocelots, butterflies, tigers, and other exotic birds), precious stones (onyx, obsidian, jade), colours (charged with symbolical meaning), musical instruments and war.⁴⁵ “Four Glyphs” is a rich tapestry beneath which there are powerful resonances of these features identified by León-Portilla. Though the four poems in the sequence are no direct rendering of any Nahuatl poem, they seem to capture the genuine verbal texture and the mythological spirit that pervade the original texts which must have served as source of inspiration for Bringhurst. There is room in these poems for the Toltec ancestors, for the god of rain and the supreme god of the Aztecs, for legendary cities of wealth and splendour like Tula, for the typical animals that figure prominently in Nahuatl poetry, for precious stones and feathers, and for colour symbolism associated with the complex Aztec calendar. What is more, Bringhurst tries to rescue the voices of the ancestors in four poems of his own that deploy many of the stylistic intensities characteristic of Nahuatl literature: parallelism and repetition, and an incantatory use of rhythm and rhyme that communicates to modern readers an idea of the ancient communion of human beings with the sun and everything, no matter whether human and non-human, around them. These tattered

⁴⁴ According to Miguel León-Portilla, “en sociedades en las que existían formas complejas de estratificación social, con relaciones muy diversas en lo tocante a la posesión de recursos económicos y a las fuerzas de producción, llegó a haber ya grupos de personas especializadas en conocimientos del calendario, la sabiduría acerca de los dioses, la escritura, y la tradición oral sistemática. A esas personas [...] correspondía preservar y enriquecer tales formas de conocimientos, que además eran transmitidos en las escuelas erigidas en los principales centros de población”. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-33.

fragments of wisdom are subtly connected to the luminous fragments of the ancient Presocratics that have been preserved in the Western tradition, which Bringhurst captures with a probing mind and a perfect command of language in “Herakleitos”, the opening poem in *Cadastre*. Only one thousand years, and a large geographical distance, keep the Mesoamerican Nahuatl texts apart from the Presocratics’ wisdom. At base, something of the same mythopoeic impulse and the same sense of emotional integrity are preserved in both primitive visions rescued from the mists of time.

In an entry devoted to Tláloc in the final glossary at the end of *The Beauty of the Weapons*, Bringhurst informs us that “Four Glyphs” concerns four of the gods of the Aztec pantheon, namely Tláloc, Quetzalcoatl, Huitzilopochtli, and Tezcatlipoca:

“Four Glyphs” is a brief meditation on four of the Aztec gods: 1) Tlaloc, “He in the Land,” whose nearest counterpart in the Indo-European tradition is probably Poseidon; 2) Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Lizard or, in D.H. Lawrence’s more famous phrase, the Plumed Serpent, who inhabits the mask of Ehecatl, the wind, and is the drunken savior; 3) Huitzilopochtli, “Hummingbird from the Left,” who drinks blood for the sun; and 4) Tezcatlipoca, the Smoking Mirror, the impalpable transformer, who in some accounts is not one god but four brothers. These four in their turn are Xipe Totec the Red, Lord of the Flayed Skin; Tezcatlipoca himself, the wizard, whose color is black; and two others we have already met: Quetzalcoatl the White and Huitzilopochtli the Blue.

Thus, the first glyph in Bringhurst’s sequence is concerned with rain, the life-giving element in Nature that ensures abundant crops, especially maize, which is the base of the Aztec diet. The whole poem turns out to be a mythological (no scientific or rational) explanation of a natural phenomenon – why it rains. In its concision, it is a sculpted lyric of clear contours; in its beautiful simplicity, it is highly reminiscent of Nahuatl poetry:

Tláloc’s jacket was sleeveless
and made out of cloud.
A string of green stones
sank into his shoulders.
The tall blue sky was his brain.

Tláloc planted the rain.
He planted it loud
as boulders
and quiet as butterflies’ bones.
And in a time to come he will reap it.

C, p. 19.

The composition consists of two stanzas and two clearly differentiated parts: the first one is a most curious anatomy of Tláloc, god of rain, whereby his body is described in terms of natural elements; the second one is a magnificent explanation of the way rain makes crops possible on Earth. In the first stanza, Tláloc’s portrait is delineated in three simple sentences: his body is covered with clouds, which is the typical garment he wears, along with precious stones over his shoulders, and the “tall blue sky” is his brain. Among the gods in the Aztec pantheon, Tláloc is an impressive god in a way, as he has got his head up above in the sky and his entire body extends across the vast expanses of blue air and clouds. In the second stanza, there is an account of how Tláloc generates rain in a perfect, jewel-like image. The god planted the rain, which is a wonderful image of how rain falls

down from heaven and the earth absorbs it, and he planted it “*loud / as boulders / and quiet as butterflies’ bones*,” which probably alludes to different kinds of rain (downpour and gentle showers), accomplished by means of a reference to a typical animal in Nahuatl poetry – the butterfly.⁴⁶ In due time, Tláloc will reap the rain he has planted on Earth in the form of crops, presumably maize. Bringhurst shows a masterly command of language and of the sound texture here. The use of parallelism and repetition is crystal clear in the second stanza, where the crucial verb *planted* is repeated twice and a most subtle tension is created between *loud boulders* and *quiet butterflies’ bones* (note the alliteration). On the other hand, rhyme brings the two stanzas closely together, so that it is no happy coincidence that line-end words (*sleeveless-it, cloud-loud, stones-bones, shoulders-boulders, rain-brain*) should be united by the same vowel sounds. Apart from accomplishing the acoustic demand of creating the right musicality, rhyme is a potent semantic strategy here, as *bones* are as hard as *stones*, *shoulders* are reminiscent of *boulders* in their morphology, and the *brain’s* ideas look like drops of *rain* in their incessant fall.

The second glyph is about the pervasive presence of the wind everywhere in Nature: about the wind that is “*the feather of the lizard that the lizard / never wears, / and the cloak of the kidnapped king, / the rain’s roadsweeper*.” These opening lines are prophetic of what is to come afterwards and show the use of a stylistic strategy common to Nahuatl poetry: the subject of the sentence is followed by a complex predicate (a chain of three subject complements) punctuated by the pervasive alliteration in the constellations of such words as *wind-wears, cloak-kidnapped, rain-roadsweeper*. In much the same way the first glyph was a mythical account of the rain god, this second glyph turns out to be a mythical explanation of the wind as an omnipotent spirit being in the universe. Poetry and myth go hand in hand in this context. We all know that poetry is the art of verbal compression and precision – poetry manages to say so much in few words, and it is probably the first of the genres to develop in the cradle of humanity, as it is human beings’ first impulse to react poetically to the world around them. In the face of the wonder inspired by the universe, humans devise complex mythical explanations of the origins and mechanisms underlying the workings of the universe (such as the rhythm of seasons, the succession of day and night, or the very presence of natural forces like mountains and rivers and trees). In the beginning poetry must have been the expression of humankind’s wonder in the face of the sense of the unknown, the unsaid and the sublime in Nature.

To put it differently, before science came into play to offer a rational explanation of the logic beneath the surface of natural phenomena, human beings must have relied on the power of poetry to evoke and invoke, to appease and to instigate alien forces, whether menacing or not, around them. Hence the multiple cosmogonies and the *myth-making habit of mind* common to most primitive peoples in both hemispheres, found in Greek mythology, in Mesoamerican mythologies, and in Native American mythologies. Before the scientific mode of thinking (analytical, rational, Apollonian) could reach maturity, there was a need to satisfy one’s curiosity by means other than purely logical, discursive language. Poetry met that end at the beginning of humanity. Words must have been sensed to hold a closer connection to the things they refer to in the world outside language. The world was perceived as being permeated by gods or spirit beings governing rain, the wind, the simple motion of the sun and the moon, by some kind of logic; people felt compelled to invent mythical creatures capable of marvellous deeds to save humanity from a bleak destiny.

⁴⁶ Miguel León-Portilla has translated a number of Nahuatl poems where the butterfly is a central image. There is a magnificent poem entitled “Las aves sagradas”, which reads: “Ya viene la mariposa, / volando viene: / abre sus alas, sobre flores anda: / ¡Libe la miel: / que goce: / su corazón se abre: / es una flor!”. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

Cosmogonies served the purpose of tracing the community's origins back to ancient divinities, in pursuit of an understanding of the natural phenomena in the world around them. There is, in fact, a wind god in the Aztec pantheon as well called Ehécatl,⁴⁷ presumably referred to in the fourth and fifth verse lines: "*the wind / is the god in his ocelot anklets.*" The Aztec landscape, full of lizards, ocelots and precious stones (onyx, garnet, sapphire), is perfectly recreated in a poem that gives the impression of incessant motion – that of the wind. What inevitably attracts readers' attention to Bringhurst's poem is the sense of lively motion associated with the wind. Motion is conveyed by an incantatory rhythm achieved mainly through recurrent alliteration, repetition, and the strategic placing of the key word *wind*, repeated eleven times throughout the whole poem – six times in line-end position:

the wind
leaps out of the mountain, wind with white teeth
and bright talons, light and dark wind within wind,
air in the air's heart and arteries, dark
wind in the vein under live tissue of wind,

bones made out of bright air and the dark air
swollen around them, tendon and flexed
muscle of wind, air like white onyx set in sockets
of the wind and the light on them, stopped light,

caught the way the sunlight slides over garnet
or cabochon sapphire:

wind
pounces out of the mountain, the wind
leaps out of the overturned shield.

C, p. 20.

In the core of the poem a metamorphosis has been accomplished: the wind has been endowed with certain physical attributes which are basically those of an animal. What is conveyed is the ultimate sense of motion and change: in Herakleitos's words, πάντα ῥεῖ, everything flows. In a masterly metonymic sequence, the wind is given white teeth, heart and arteries, bright talons, bones of bright air, tendon and flexed muscle, and onyx eyes capable of tracing the subtle sliding of the sunlight over precious stones. This phenomenon is similar to what is called *anthropomorphism*, which is frequent enough in mythological accounts of natural phenomena in civilizations across the world. It consists in attributing human features to non-human entities in an attempt to make the world intelligible. Ultimately the wind is presented as *being alive*, endowed with a stubborn physical corporeity, and made into a god in the Aztec pantheon. The poem closes with echoes reminiscent of war: the wind leaps out of the mountain and out of "the overturned shield".

⁴⁷ Miguel León-Portilla gives us once more the clue to understand the opening lines of this glyph, which is probably connected to the Aztec gods' primordial sacrifice that made the fifth sun's movement and life on Earth possible: "el sacrificio primordial de los dioses, que con su sangre hacen posible la vida y el movimiento del sol [...] El señor Ehécatl da muerte a los dioses. [...] En el mundo de los dioses, Xólotl, el doble de Quetzalcóatl, se resiste a morir. Xólotl huye de Ehécatl que va a darle muerte y una y otra vez se transforma, primero en caña doble de maíz, luego en maguay y finalmente en *ajolote* (salamandra), hasta que al fin es también sacrificado. Los dioses consuman su ofrenda de sangre. Ello y el esfuerzo de Ehécatl, deidad del viento, hacen posible el movimiento del sol." Ibid., p. 37.

The third glyph tessellates four images related to light and the sun: *the hummingbird's tongue*, *fire*, *light's core* and *the bright blade of blue sunlight*. The juxtaposition of all four images pivots around the sun, the giver of life in the Aztec mythic world-view.⁴⁸ The poem embodies an attempt to make tiny, luminous fragments of the world cohere: “the hummingbird’s tongue” sucks the nectar of “the sun’s black anther”, for the sun is a flower inasmuch as it gives flowers their existence; “fire”, that is to say the warmth irradiating from the sun, expands across the vast expanses of air in the sky (“taking the sky’s measure”); “light’s core” permeates Nature in its entirety – all human and non-human creatures of air, water and land, as well as trees and mountains; and the “bright blade of blue sunlight” is a potent metaphor for the light traversing the blue spaces in the sky as if it were the blade of a weapon (‘razor of obsidian’) or the wing of a mythical bird (‘an unseen wing’). *Mutatis mutandis*, Bringham’s poem is strongly reminiscent of Novalis’ first hymn in *Hymnen an die Nacht*, the first part of which is also an extended celebration of light as the ethereal, life-giving substance that surrounds all creatures on Earth:⁴⁹

The hummingbird’s tongue
under the sun’s black anther,
fire taking the sky’s measure,
light’s core soaring over
blue air, wave, rock and water,
over eagle-cactus, pine,
and the spiked dust of the summer highlands,

bright blade of blue sunlight
over the stone,
spalled off the solid block
of the sky’s light like a smoke-thin
razor of obsidian
or an unseen wing.

C, p. 21.

We readers are plunged straightaway, without preliminaries, into a landscape of elemental things: sky, air, light, water, and stone. Part of the beauty of the poem is to be found precisely in this bare-to-the-bone minimalism, which takes on the form of a sequence of nouns (we are in a world of elemental essences after all) that crystallize into what looks like a static picture. Verbs denote action and motion, but there are no conjugated verbs at all in the poem, only a couple of present participles (*taking*, *soaring*) and

⁴⁸ For a complete account of the birth of the fifth sun in Aztec cosmogony, see “Los soles o edades que han existido” (pp. 56-58), “El nuevo sol en Teotihuacán” (pp. 58-63) and “El nacimiento de Huitzilopochtli, el sol, en el pensamiento mexica” (pp. 63-69), translated from Nahuatl into Spanish by Miguel León-Portilla under the section “Ciclos de los mitos cosmogónicos” in *Cantos y crónicas del México antiguo*. “Para el pensamiento nahuatl, el mundo había existido no una sino varias veces consecutivas. La primera fundamentación de la tierra había tenido lugar hacía muchos milenios. Otros cuatro soles o edades habían existido antes de la época presente. Durante todo ese tiempo había habido una cierta evolución en espiral en la que aparecieron formas cada vez mejores de seres humanos, de plantas y de elementos.” *Ibid.*, p. 56. The beginning of the fifth sun and era was made possible by the sacrifice of the primordial gods in a sacred place called Teotihuacán. As pointed out above, it was their sacrifice that brought about the motion of the sun and the moon in their respective orbits.

⁴⁹ Novalis’ hymn begins like this: “Welcher Lebendige, Sinnbegabte, liebt nicht vor allen Wundererscheinungen des verbreiteten Raums um ihn, das allerfreulichste Licht – mit seinen Farben, seinen Strahlen und Wogen; seiner milden Allgegenwart, als weckender Tag. Wie des Lebens innerste Seele atmet es der rastlosen Gestirne Riesenwelt, und schwimmt tanzend in seiner blauen Flut – atmet es der funkelnde, ewigruhende Stein, die sinnige, saugende Pflanze, und das wilde, brennende, vielgestalte Tier...”

a couple of past participles (*spiked, spalled*) with an explicit adjectival dimension. If compared to glyph number 2, the contrast is most eloquent: whereas the wind signified a world in a state of permanent flux, the quasi-divine light in glyph number 3 is of a static nature. The final picture is a perfect example of Pound's *phanopoeia* (a complex set of images directed towards the mind's eye attention) and *logopoeia* (the dance of the intellect among words). To the over-all picture contributes the use of the prototypical images recurrent in Nahuatl poetry. Hence the constellated imagery of a bird like the hummingbird, sitting in the shade of the sun (which is conceptualized as being a flower), of the precious stone (obsidian), of the razor (a veiled reference to war), and of the unseen wing (probably belonging to Quetzalcóatl, the Feathered Serpent in the Aztec world).

The first glyph was about the rain (Tláloc, god of rain), the second about the wind (Ehécatl, god of wind), the third about the sunlight (Tonatiuh, god of the sun), and the fourth and last glyph is about the four cardinal points (the compass rose) or the earth in its entirety (the supreme god, the dual Father-Mother of existence). The first stanza opens with Aztec references that are worth elucidating for a proper understanding of this poem. As for Tezcatlipóca, Miguel León-Portilla tells us that Huitzilopochtli is “el dios tutelar de los aztecas o mexicas. Este dios era en realidad una manifestación del gran Tezcatlipóca, Espejo Humeante, manifestación o hijo de la suprema pareja dual, Nuestra Madre-Nuestro Padre.”⁵⁰ Tula is the legendary metropolis ruled by the culture hero Quetzalcóatl, the Feathered Serpent, in antiquity. The Toltec people are the ancestors of the Mexica or Aztec people, who lived in a time of splendour and abundance. The Smoking Mirror is Tezcatlipóca himself, the *Espejo Humeante* as León-Portilla calls it, which comes to stand for the earth and the sky in their entirety, as he is the son of the dual Father-Mother god of the Aztec people. This is the reason why it “*can be looked for in four / directions*”:

Red in the East, the fertile light, the flayed
bright water in the canebrake, quivering
flesh of the air alive over the limber reed.

Black in the North, the vanished absolute
fruit of the fire, the cold flint flat between
two hands, tasting of death and the dead land.

White in the West, where the wind lies
over gold water and under a beam
like flame on a flat stone, under hewed timber.

Blue to the South, under the sun's beak, where
the rabbit hears the iridescent bird.

C, p. 22.

Colours are charged with symbolical meanings⁵¹ in the Aztec world. As can be seen in this glyph, the East is associated with red, with the early morning light, with daybreak and the sunrise, as it is the cardinal point at which the sun rises surrounded by a red halo. The East is the source of ‘fertile light’ and is also closely connected with the ‘limber reed’, for the reed is one of the names used in the Aztec calendar to name particular years. Secondly, the North, which is black, denotes darkness, death, the absence of light that

⁵⁰ Miguel León-Portilla, *ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵¹ M. León-Portilla claims that “los colores aparecen, además, calificando y enriqueciendo la significación de realidades que ya son de por sí portadoras de símbolos. [...] la imagen se torna doblemente semántica.” *Ibid.*, p. 33.

follows the extinction of fire, and it is associated with the ‘cold flint’ used to make a fire, another name by which Aztec years was named. Thirdly, the West is white and symbolizes the sunset, nightfall, dusk, the domestic realm of the home, as suggested by the “flame on a flat stone” (the hearth) and by the “hewed timber” which gives humans a haven of warmth and protection when night falls. Fourthly, the South is blue and is “under the sun’s beak”, where the existence of such creatures as the rabbit and bird is possible owing to the life-giving properties of the sun. It is no coincidence that reed, flint, home, and rabbit are the four signs used in the Aztec calendar to name years.

Tezcatlipóca is to be found in all four directions, wherever you turn to look for him, as he is the heart and the body of the whole Earth in its entirety. Owing to the symbolism that brings cardinal points, colours and the Aztec calendar together, the poem turns out to be a well-wrought urn, a tightly-woven artefact. One more stylistic element contributes to this cohesion and helps building the musicality of ideas in the poem: the strongly alliterative verse lines from the very beginning of the piece (*Tezcatlipóca-Tula-Toltec*). In this respect, line 8 (“fruit of the fire, the cold flint flat between”) and line 9 (“White in the West, where the wind lies”) are a perfect example of the quality and sound texture we are seeking to define here: the ideas and the sounds coalesce into one another to form a harmonious whole that communicates the interconnectedness of all things on Earth as symbolized by the supreme Aztec god Tezcatlipóca. It is only natural that he should be the Smoking Mirror that reflects the whole universe on its polished surface.

V · Greek Mythology

In *Cadastre* there are at least two poems which are explicitly and overtly concerned with Greek mythology. As we have already seen, “Strophe from Sophocles” is a Greek-inspired poem too in that it is a version of the first stanza from a chorus (verse lines 332-375) in Sophocles’ tragedy *Antigone*. On the other hand, the opening poem, “Herakleitos”, is an example of Pound’s *Dichtung* as *condesare*, which is to say how to condense the extant philosophical fragments of one of the most outstanding Presocratics into a brilliantly inquisitive five-part poem, or a concentrated meditation in five movements for the mind.⁵² But “Kerry Shawn Keys” and “The Third Generation. A Treatise on the Gods” are Greek-inspired compositions in a different sense of the word. Here Bringhurst is exploring the pantheon of the gods and goddesses of the ancient Greek world. In writing about the Greek matter (*la metière grécque*, by analogy with other literary matters on the European continent, such as *la metière de Bretagne*), Bringhurst was closely following Ezra Pound’s example and the acknowledged master’s compositions created in the early 20th century when he was revisiting the luminous, tattered fragments of the past. In fact, Pound had already written several poems about the pagan gods and the curious idea of metamorphosis,⁵³ as well as other Greek-inspired poems⁵⁴ based on compositions by the

⁵² The fragments of the Greek sage have been variously collected and scrutinized – by Diels and Kranz in their monumental classic *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, by W. W. K. Guthrie, in his six-volume *A History of Greek Philosophy*; by Kirk and Raven, in their *Fragments of the Presocratics*, and many others. There are also several other translations of Herakleitos’ fragments into English, the most remarkable of which is probably Guy Davenport’s, published by Peter Koch in a wonderful edition in 1990, and appraised by Bringhurst himself in a review entitled “Herakleitos in California”, published in *Amphora*, 93, Autumn 1993: 26-29.

⁵³ “The Tree” (Poems of 1908-1911, from *A Lume Spento*, 1908), “Δώριον” (*Ripostes*, 1912), “The Return” (*Ripostes*, 1912), “A Girl” (*Ripostes*, 1912), “Pan Is Dead” (*Ripostes*, 1912), “Before Sleep” (*Blast*, 1914), “The Coming of War: Actaeon” (*Lustra*, 1913-1915), “Surgit Fama” (*Lustra*, 1913-1915), “April” (*Lustra*, 1913-1915), “Ancora” (*Lustra*, 1913-1915), “The Faun” (*Lustra*, 1913-1915), “Cantus planus” (Poems of 1917-1920). For instance, “The Tree”, “A Girl” and “April” are crucial poems on metamorphosis.

renowned woman poet Sappho and the 6th-century BCE poet Ibycus. “The Return” is an enlightening poem in this context, worth quoting in full:

See, they return; ah, see the tentative
Movements, and the slow feet
The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
Wavering!
See, they return, one, and by one,
With fear, as half-awakened;
As if the snow should hesitate
And murmur in the wind,
and half turn back;
These were the “Wing’d-with-Awe,”
Inviolable,

Gods of the wingèd-shoe!
With them the silver hounds,
sniffing the trace of air!

Haie! Haie!
These were the swift to harry;
These the keen-scented;
These were the souls of blood.

Slow on the leash,
pallid the leash-men!⁵⁵

“The Return” was celebrated and admired by W. B. Yeats as being “the most beautiful poem that has been written in the free form, one of the few in which I find real organic rhythm” (*Little Review*, April 1914, p. 48). It is a tantalizing poem, not just because of the musicality that pervades its lines, but also because of the image of paganism it has to offer. Pound’s poem seems to be about the pagan gods and goddesses of antiquity, who were vigorous in a remote past and have managed to survive into the present as mere shadows of their former, brilliant selves. An image of the modern world where the presence of the gods is no longer felt, a mechanical world devoid of the divine presence of the Olympians – this is what Pound tries to convey in this poem, from which Richard Aldington and H.D. would learn the rudiments of their Greek style.



“Kerry Shawn Keys”

“Kerry Shawn Keys”⁵⁶ is reminiscent of Pound’s poem to a certain extent. The Latin epigraph is a verse-line from Virgil’s *Aeneid* VI, 95: “tu ne cede malis sed contra audentior

⁵⁴ “The Cloak” (*Ripostes*, 1912) and “Homage to Quintus Septimius Florentis Christianus” (*Lustra*, 1915-1916); the two Sappho-inspired poems entitled “IMÉPPΩ” (based on Sappho, LXXXVI and XXIII) and “Papyrus” (both published in *Lustra*, 1913-1915); and “The Spring” (*Lustra*, 1913-1915), a version of the original Greek poem by the 6th-century BCE poet Ibycus, who reappears in Canto 39 again. Obviously, it is a bit more complex to trace the presence, or rather persistence, of Greek elements in *The Cantos*, where there are undoubtedly echoes of Sappho and the Greek world.

⁵⁵ Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems 1908-1965*, London: Faber and Faber, 1988, pp. 39-40.

⁵⁶ This poem was reprinted in B.64, *Vultures’ Country / Krajina supů*, by Kerry Shawn Keys. [Olomouc, Czech Republic]: Votobia, 1996: pp. 113, 131–132, 133, 150–151. Contribution: “Kerry Shawn Keys” (rpt. from A.2), with Czech translation by Petr Mikeš; and what appears to be an unauthorized excerpt from a letter of

ito”, which means “Yield not to misfortunes, but advance all the more boldly against them.” Thus, the message of this quote is closely connected with the ultimate meaning of the poem. Beneath the surface is a curious, elliptical account of the mythological story of the lovers Eos and Tithonos. The first two stanzas introduce the setting and the characters of the myth in an enigmatic manner:

He spoke of Tithonos, who withered into a bedridden voice
East of the world, behind panels of pale light
that slide shut in the silence.

“Tithonos,” he said, “and this business of Big Daddy Zeus
fucking over Tithonos... and Eos lonely... no lover
for four thousand years...”

C, p. 23.

At this point, it might be worthwhile to recount Eos and Tithonos’ love story.⁵⁷ In Greek mythology, Eos (Ἠώς), otherwise known as Aurora, is the personification of the dawn. Homer calls her by the well-known epithet *rosy-fingered*, which is a recurrent one in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In ancient iconography she is usually represented as a young woman either walking fast with a youth in her arms or rising from the sea in a chariot drawn by winged horses. Sometimes, in her capacity of dawn goddess, she is depicted as a woman carrying a pitcher in each hand, with which she dispenses the dew of the morning. In his *Theogony*, the poet Hesiod explains that she was the daughter of the Titan Hyperion and the Titaness Theia, and sister of Helios, the sun god, and Selene, the moon goddess. As a result, she belongs to the first generation of the Greek gods and goddesses. She had innumerable love affairs, and so Eos was also represented as the lover of the hunter Orion and of the youthful hunter Cephalus, by whom she was the mother of Phaeton. By the Titan Astraeus she was the mother of the winds Zephyrus, Notus, and Boreas, and of Hesperus (the Evening Star) and the other stars; by Tithonus of Assyria she begot two more children, Emathion and Memnon, king of the Ethiopians. For his part, Tithonus (Τιθωνός) was son of Laomedon, king of Troy, and of Strymo, daughter of the god-river Scamander, so that he was Priam’s eldest brother. As we have pointed out above, Eos fell in love with Tithonus, who was really handsome. The goddess kidnapped him and took him to Ethiopia, where she bore her two children. When Eos asked Zeus to grant him eternal life, the father of the Olympian gods and goddesses consented to her request. However, she forgot to ask also for eternal youth, and as a result her husband grew astonishingly old. Eos, who remained eternally young, was embarrassed and shut him away in a room in her palace. Eventually she took pity on him and he was transformed into a cicada.

Now the first two stanzas of “Kerry Shawn Keys” make absolute sense. Tithonos becomes a “*bedridden voice*” as he grows astonishingly old and tired, and is eventually metamorphosed into a cicada, which sings unseen in the woods. Here there might be also an indication that Tithonos could not get out of bed, as he was extremely old and some versions of the story explain that he slept in a sort of wicker cradle. It all happens “*East of the world*,” for Eos is the dawn and the sun rises in the East, so that we can picture her

recommendation, quoted by Hana Wasserová in her essay “Natural Fire: An Introduction to the Life and Poetry of Kerry Shawn Keys.”

⁵⁷ For exhaustive information on Greek mythology we have consulted several reference works, such as Pierre Grimal, *Dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine*, 1951, and Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*. Other primary texts have been consulted as well: Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Hesiod’s *Theogony*, and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. See also *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2009 Global Edition, vol. 9, p. 5358 and vol. 28, p. 16616, for entries on ‘Eos’ and ‘Tithonos’, respectively.

emerging from the ocean on her winged-horse drawn chariot. Notice the alliteration (*panels-pale, withered-world, slide-silence*), which helps suggest the sound made by the cicada. The second stanza is presumably what poet Kerry Shawn Keys (a close friend of Bringhurst in the 1970s) explains about the myth in surprisingly colloquial language. The juxtaposition is most curious: the formal, solemn language used in the first stanza in dealing with the characters of the story contrasts in a dramatic fashion with the disrespectful tone that pervades the second stanza. “*Big Daddy Zeus*” is represented as “*fucking over*” Tithonos, and Eos, eternally young, is lonely for eons of time as her lover is growing older and older whereas she seems not to enjoy the consolation of any other lover in the meantime.

The last stanza offers an enigmatic conclusion as well: “*and then something, luminous alloy, electrum of air / overtaking his eye and the thought formed, “armed with the story, / I will be wiser.”*” It seems as if Kerry Shawn Keys had experienced a sudden epiphany in the process of relating Eos and Tithonos’ story, whereby he becomes wiser. The way the thought forms in his mind is described in chemistry terms, as suggested by such phrases as ‘luminous alloy’ and ‘electrum of air’. An *alloy* is a metal made by mixing two or more types of metal together, and *electrum* is also a special type of alloy – a natural or artificial alloy of gold with at least 20% silver, which was used to make the first coins in the Western world. In this context, the difference is crystal-clear, as the mind does not mix different sorts of metals, but rather combines words or tatters from an ancient story and learns a lesson. The ultimate message could be as simple as this: myth is still valid and alive, even if in a precarious form, in our modern world. Tales of ancient lovers have some lesson to yield to the modern sensibility and a *claritas* of mind is still made palpable by the ancient Greek myths. One of the lessons to be learnt from this ancient myth is already encapsulated in the Latin epigraph: “*tu ne cede malis sed ontra audientior ito.*” This will make you wiser. Bringhurst’s poem resembles Pound’s “The Return” only in a precarious way as well, but there is some subtle connection between both poems indeed.



“The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods”

Bringhurst’s poem “The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods”⁵⁸ is a miniature treatise on six of the Olympian gods and goddesses of the third generation worshipped by the ancient Greeks. Therefore, this poem cannot be properly interpreted and understood except in the light of the research on Greek mythology from both a historical and anthropological perspective. The classics have progressively lost so much ground in schools and universities that it is no longer felt that an educated person should have a thorough knowledge of the huge corpus of Greek mythology, but knowledge of the classics (Greek and Latin) has traditionally been a sign of a well-rounded, solid education. It is a pity, or a shame, that there is no longer room for a serious concern with what constitutes no doubt the cradle of Western civilization in the official curricula of compulsory and non-compulsory education. Many factors are involved in this process whereby a close familiarity with the classics is no longer deemed necessary. Among them is the fact that we live in a pragmatically-biased society, dominated by technology and applied knowledge, where

⁵⁸ A revised excerpt from “The Third Generation” was later published in *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* (Boston) ns 1.4 (1973/1974): 561-575, in a sequence entitled “Eight Poems and Translations”, comprising, apart from the revised excerpt from “The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods”, “Strophe from Sophocles”, “Herakleitos”, “The Petelia Tablet”, “Four Glyphs”, “Isthmian”, “A Short History”, and “Antistrophe from Leopardi”.

classical tongues serve no practical purpose at all. As Robert Graves puts it in his Introduction to his monumental classic *The Greek Myths*,

For the last two thousand years it has been the fashion to dismiss the myths as bizarre and chimerical fancies, a charming legacy from the childhood of the Greek intelligence, which the Church naturally depreciates in order to emphasize the greater spiritual importance of the Bible.⁵⁹

However, myths are not simple stories to be dismissed as the light-hearted or trivial products or proclivities of whimsical fancy. In the beginning, myth was a form of coming to terms with the world, of trying to comprehend what was going on in it at all. Myths were originally conceived as embodying divine or timeless truths, so that they represent one of the first attempts on the part of the human imagination to render the universe comprehensible, intelligible in human terms. It comes then as no surprise that such a sophisticated culture as that of the ancient Greeks should develop myths that explain the existence and workings of natural phenomena, recount the deeds of gods or heroes, or seek to justify social or political institutions. The early Greeks personalized every aspect of their world, natural and cultural, and their place and experience in it. The earth, the sea, the mountains, the rivers, the trees, and the individual's part in the community were all seen and interpreted in terms of gods and goddesses of their Olympian pantheon. There are different myth types: myths of origin or cosmogonies, myths of the ages of the world, myths concerned with the gods and goddesses, myths of heroes, myths of seasonal renewal, myths involving animal transformations or some kind of metamorphosis, among others. For instance, myths about the gods described their births, victories over monsters or rivals, love affairs with other deities or simple mortals, special powers and attributes, animals sacred to them, or connections with a cultic site or ritual. The most striking feature of the ancient Greek's religion was, in fact, their belief in a multiplicity of anthropomorphic deities, coupled with a minimum of dogmatism. The Greeks were expected to participate in propitiatory rituals and festivities, and to honour their gods by offering them sacrifices. The large corpus of myths concerned with gods, heroes, and rituals embodied the worldview of the ancient Greeks, and it remains its most fascinating legacy in the Western world. That Greek mythology has had a profound effect on the development of Western civilization seems to be out of the question. Major poets and artists from ancient times to the present have turned for inspiration to Greek mythology and have discovered contemporary significance and relevance in classical mythological themes. Bringhurst proves to be no exception to this.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, London: Penguin, revised ed., 1960, p. 11.

⁶⁰ In his fascination with the Greek world, Robert Bringhurst had the Modernist example and precedent before him. In this respect, in *The Pound Era*, the great Hugh Kenner explains the relevance of Homer's *Odyssey* to the work of such Modernist authors as Joyce (*Ulysses*) and Pound (*The Cantos*). At some point, he recounts how Pound himself bought a Latin edition of Homer's poem in Paris early in his literary career: "And no later than 1910 on a Paris *quai*, Ezra Pound with four francs to spend and two four-franc books to choose from, a Renaissance Latin *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, laid his hand on the *Odyssey*, we can now say on the future of the *Cantos*, and does not record having hesitated. Homer in most times has been the poet of the *Iliad*. That *Odyssey* decade was an historical anomaly." (p. 44). Pound himself remembers this crucial episode in his lifetime in these terms: "In the year of grace 1906, 1908, or 1910 I picked from the Paris *quais* a Latin version of the *Odyssey* by Andreas Divus Justinopolitanus (Parisiis, In officina Christiani Wecheli, MDXXXVIII), the volume containing also the *Batrachomyomachia*, by Aldus Manutius, and the *Hymni Deorum* rendered by Georgius Dartona Cretensis. I lost a Latin *Iliad* for the economy of four francs, these coins being at that time scarcer with me than they ever should be with any man of my tastes and abilities." See Pound's essay "Early Translators of Homer", in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot, London: Faber and Faber, p. 259.

The ancient roots of Greek myths are to be sought in both literary and archaeological sources. The discovery of the Mycenaean civilization by Heinrich Schliemann in the 19th century and the discovery of Minoan civilization in Crete by Sir Arthur Evans in the 20th century were essential for a proper understanding of myth and ritual in the Greek world. It turned out that there was tangible, precious evidence (pottery, valuable ruins) for much that was recorded in textual sources. In his search after a comprehensive understanding of Greek mythology, Robert Graves insists on the existence of a common religious ground in ancient Europe, the roots of which must be searched in pre-Greek times, when primitive matrilineal societies were common and everything religious was based on the idea of a Mother-Goddess:

A study of Greek mythology should begin with a consideration of what political and religious systems existed in Europe before the arrival of Aryan invaders from the distant North and East. The whole of Neolithic Europe, to judge from surviving artefacts and myths, had a remarkably homogeneous system of religious ideas, based on worship of the many-titled Mother-Goddess, who was also known in Syria and Libya.

Ancient Europe had no gods. The Great Goddess was regarded as immortal, changeless, and omnipotent; and the concept of fatherhood had not been introduced into religious thought. She took lovers, but for pleasure, not to provide her children with a father. Men feared, adored, and obeyed the matriarch; the hearth which she tended in a cave or hut being their earliest social centre, and motherhood their prime mystery. [...] Not only the moon, but [...] the sun, were the goddess's celestial symbols. In earlier Greek myth, however, the sun yields precedence to the moon – which inspires the greater superstitious fear, does not grow dimmer as the year wanes, and is credited with the power to grant or deny water to the fields.⁶¹

What is certain is that the beliefs of the ancient Hellenes about the gods and their relationships with human beings were codified throughout a long period of time, from the epoch of Homer (probably in the 8th century BCE) to the reign of emperor Julian (4th century CE). The most ancient sources are the Homeric poems (the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) and Hesiod's *Theogony*, which is the fullest and most important source of myths about the origin of the gods, presenting elaborate genealogies and declaring the identities and alliances of the gods. Of several competing cosmogonies, or accounts of the origins of the universe and everything in it, in archaic Greece, Hesiod's is the only one that has survived in more than fragments. It records the generations of gods from primordial Chaos that culminated in the supremacy of Zeus, the ruling god of Olympus, and his contemporaries, as well as the gods who had two divine parents and the mortals who had only one divine parent. Hesiod uses the relationships of the deities, by birth, marriage, or treaty, to explain why the world is as it is and why Zeus, the third supreme deity of the Greeks, succeeded in maintaining his supremacy where his predecessors (Uranus and Cronus) had failed. Zeus deposed Cronus, just as Cronus had deposed Uranus before him by castrating his genitals.

Of course, there are other literary sources for Greek myths, such as the so-called Homeric Hymns (surviving shorter poems), the odes of Pindar of Thebes (6th-5th century BCE), and the work of the classical tragedians (Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides) in the 5th century BCE. In Hellenistic times, Callimachus, a 3rd-century BCE poet and scholar in Alexandria, preserved many obscure myths; but there were other scholars concerned with the tantalizing world of ancient myths, such as the mythographer Euhemerus, or Apollonius of Rhodes, who preserved the fullest account of the Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece. In the period of the Roman Empire proliferated a wealth of valuable

⁶¹ Robert Graves, *ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

sources in Latin of later Greek mythology: Strabo's *Geography* (1st century BCE), the *Library* of the pseudo-Apollodorus (attributed to a 2nd-century CE scholar), the antiquarian writings of the Greek biographer Plutarch, the works of Pausanias, a 2nd-century CE historian, and the *Latin Genealogies* of Hyginus, a 2nd-century CE mythographer. As a result there is a mass of textual sources for the corpus of Greek myths in its entirety. But, according to Robert Graves, "the fullest or most illuminating version of a given myth is seldom supplied by any one author; nor, when searching for its original form, should one assume that the more ancient the written source, the more authoritative it must be."⁶² Therefore, in his ambitious work Graves draws on an enormous range of sources and brings together all the relevant elements of every myth, so as to offer a most exhaustive interpretation of its ultimate essence in both historical and anthropological terms.



"The Third Generation: a Treatise on the Gods" opens with a Latin epigraph lifted from Ockham: "*Pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate.*" Now, the divine world of the Greeks was bisected by a horizontal line. Above that line were the Olympians, gods of life, daylight, and the bright sky; below it were the chthonic (underworld) gods of the dead and of the mysterious fertility of the earth. Human beings dwell somewhere in the middle, making sacrifices to the gods and goddesses above (on Mount Olympus) and below (Hades, or the realm of the dead). In much the same way "Strophe from Sophocles" was a miniature meditation on man's nature, Bringham's longer poem ("The Third Generation") is a miniature treatise on six of the Olympian gods and goddesses of the third generation (that under Zeus' aegis): Apollo, Artemis, Athena, Hermes, Aphrodite, and Ares. It is no coincidence that this miniature treatise on the gods in five parts should open with a meditation on Apollo, otherwise known as Phoebus, who is the most widely revered and influential of all the gods in Greek religion. Apollo is a god of obscure nature and origins. Apparently he was of foreign descent, coming either from somewhere north of Greece or from Asia, but traditionally he and his twin, Artemis, were the children of Zeus and Leto, and they were born on the isle of Delos.⁶³ On leaving Delos, the twin-brother of Artemis, armed with a bow and arrows he demanded from Hephaestus, made straight for Mount Parnassus, where the serpent Python, his mother's enemy, was lurking. There he wounded him severely with his arrows. Then Python fled to the Pytho, the Oracle of Mother Earth at Delphi, but Apollo dared follow him into the shrine, and there despatched him beside the sacred chasm. He established his oracle by taking on the guise of a dolphin, leaping aboard a Cretan ship, and forcing the crew to serve him. Thus Pytho was renamed Delphi after the dolphin (*delphis*), and, by legend, the cult of Apollo Delphinus superseded that previously established there by Gaea, or Mother Earth. During the Archaic period of Greek history (8th to 6th century BCE), the fame of the Delphic oracle achieved pan-Hellenic status. The god's medium was the so-called Pythia, a local woman over 50 years

⁶² Robert, Graves, *ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

⁶³ According to Robert Graves, Zeus "begat Apollo and Artemis on Leto, daughter of the Titans Coeus and Phoebe, transforming himself and her into quails when they coupled; but jealous Hera sent the serpent Python to pursue Leto all over the world, and decreed that she should not be delivered in any place where the sun shone. Carried on the wings of the South Wind, Leto at last came to Ortygia, close to Delos, where she bore Artemis, who was no sooner born than she helped her mother across the narrow straits, and there, between an olive-tree and a date-palm growing on the north side of Delian Mount Cynthus, delivered her of Apollo on the ninth day of labour. Delos, hitherto a floating island, became immovably fixed in the sea and, by decree, no one is now allowed either to be born or to die there: sick folk and pregnant women are ferried over to Ortygia instead." *Ibidem*, pp. 55-56. "On his return to Greece, Apollo sought out Pan, the disreputable old goat-legged Arcadian god and, having coaxed him to reveal the art of prophecy, seized the Delphic Oracle and retained its priestess, called the Pythoness, in his own service." *Ibid.*, p. 76.

old, who, under his inspiration, delivered oracles in the main temple of Apollo. Other oracles of Apollo existed on the Greek mainland, Delos, and in Anatolia, but none rivalled Delphi in importance.

In his poem, Bringhurst explores Apollo's attributes in astonishing images, which are juxtaposed in an impressive sequence where there is no room for conjugated verbs. Juxtaposition, enumeration, and parallelism constitute the main linguistic strategies to which Bringhurst resorts in order to produce an overall picture of the Greek god endowed with potent resonances. The music of these lines is achieved not just by one of the most ancient poetic devices (simple enumeration and parallelism), but also by means of alliteration, which helps create the musical texture of a well-wrought product of human artifice. There are three clearly differentiated parts in the composition though. The whole poem is a tessellated tapestry in which Apollo's attributes are presented one at a time in luminous, intensely lyrical language. This is the first constellation of *tesserae*:

Apollo, full sunlight, the sky's depth, distance, the god,
the vision when the bark falls
back as from a casting, leaving
light taking form from the mold.

C, p. 24.

Whereas Dionysus, the orgiastic god born of Zeus' thigh associated with the vine, represents instinct and irrational impulse, Apollo is quite the opposite: he is the god of sunlight and truth, the god who preaches moderation in all things. Hence he stands for reason, the inquisitive spirit, and the analytical mind of humankind. However, in these verse lines the emphasis is laid on Apollo as being the sun god, the god of prophecy and clear cognition. Though his original nature is obscure, at least from the time of Homer Apollo was worshipped as the god of prophecy and medicine. Thus, he was the god who sent or threatened from afar, made humans aware of their guilt and purified them of it, presided over religious law and the constitutions of cities, and communicated through prophets and oracles his knowledge of the future and the will of his father, Zeus. Apollo was a fearsome god in fact. Even the gods feared him, and only his parents could endure his presence. Distance, death, terror, and awe were summed up in his symbolic bow, which is his main attribute. The Apollonian attributes are mentioned in these verse lines:

The musician, Apollo
of clear-eyed cognition, the song's clear intention
and accuracy, word after word,
tone after tone, the tuned string ringing
true, silent as bowshot.

C, p. 24.

As is made clear in this second part of the poem, Apollo is also the acknowledged god of music and poetry. His other attribute, the seven-stringed lyre, proclaimed the joy of communion with Olympus through music, poetry, and dance. The god's jealousy of mortals' musical talents appears in the beating and flaying of the flute-playing satyr Marsyas, who was the innocent victim of Athena's curse and Apollo's despotism.⁶⁴ He was

⁶⁴ Graves explains that "Apollo won a second musical contest, at which King Midas presided; this time he beat Pan. Becoming the acknowledged god of Music, he has ever since played on his seven-stringed lyre while the gods banquet. Another of his duties was once to guard the herds and flocks which the gods kept in Pieria; but he later delegated this task to Hermes." *Ibid.*, p.77.

also a god of crops and herds, primarily as a divine bulwark against wild animals and disease, as his epithet *Alexikakos* ('Averter of Evil') indicates. Among Apollo's epithets was *Nomios* ('Herdsman'), and he is said to have served King Admetus of Pherae in the capacities of groom and herdsman as penance for slaying Zeus's armourers, the Cyclopes. He was also called *Lyceius*, presumably because he protected the flocks from wolves (*lykoi*); because herdsmen and shepherds passed the time with music, this may have been Apollo's original role.

In the third part of the poem, which constitutes the crucial core of the composition, Bringham dwells on his facet as the god of science and knowledge:

Proportion not in mixture but in order of relation
of shapes in continuum, order of portions
distinct in one medium, moving and still,
patron of mathematicians, physicians,
the luminous law without word, the will only
toward clarity and clarity of form,
the sun's brightness
and lightness of breath like a scalpel, the will
moving weightless, unobstructed by the texture
or density, cleavage or grain
of the material.

C, p. 24.

The potent equation beneath these lines is that of light-clarity-knowledge-truth-order. It is the sunlight that makes humans' perception and knowledge of reality possible and allows them to impose some sort of order on chaos and the flux of sensations coming from every single direction. The *claritas* of mind Apollo embodies is not to be dissociated from the "clear-eyed cognition", "accuracy" and "the song's clear intention" mentioned in the second part above, which are to be interpreted as the prerogatives of poetry. In fact, poetry and knowledge seem to go hand in hand here; the impulse towards clarity and passionate luminous detail is common to art, philosophy and science. To put it more clearly in Robert Graves' enlightening words:

In Classical times, music, poetry, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and science came under Apollo's control. As the enemy of barbarism, he stood for moderation in all things, and the seven strings of his lute were connected with the seven vowels of the later Greek alphabet, given mystical significance, and used for therapeutic music. Finally, because of his identification with the Child Horus, a solar concept, he was worshipped as the sun, whose Corinthian cult had been taken over by Solar Zeus; and his sister Artemis was, rightly, identified with the moon.⁶⁵

Now the circle is full and complete. Apollo is the embodiment of the rational side of humankind. The will to grasp the essence of things beyond apparent surfaces, and the impulse to conquer truth and knowledge of permanent value are part and parcel of the immense Greek legacy in our Western tradition. But no mention is made here of love, of the more humane side to Apollo. Although the god had many love affairs, they were mostly unfortunate: Daphne, in her efforts to escape him, was changed into a laurel, his sacred tree; Coronis (mother of Asclepius) was shot by Apollo's twin, Artemis, when Coronis proved unfaithful; and Cassandra (daughter of King Priam of Troy) rejected his advance and was punished by being made to utter true prophecies (including that of the

⁶⁵ Robert Graves, *ibid.*, p. 82.

destruction of Troy in the hands of the Achaeans) that no one believed. In his *Manifeste pour la philosophie*, the French philosopher Alain Badiou claims that there are at least four realms of human action and experience where knowledge can be produced: art, philosophy, science, and love. It is something of a surprise to see that Apollo was successful in the first three realms; the gift of love was not granted to him that easily, even if he was immortal and almost omnipotent in all other respects.



Artemis, the daughter of Zeus and Leto, and the twin-sister of Apollo, comes second in Bringham's poem. In Greek religion, she is the huntress goddess, and a sylvan deity: the goddess of wild animals, the hunt, vegetation, and of chastity and childbirth. She is the protectress of little children and of all sucking animals, and she aided women in childbirth. But she also loves the chase, especially that of stags, which is a recurrent motif in ancient iconography, where she is usually pictured with the stag of hunting dog. Artemis goes armed with bow and arrows, and, like her brother, has the power both to send plagues and sudden death among mortals, and to heal them.⁶⁶ Originally an orgiastic goddess, Artemis had the lascivious quail as her sacred bird, and might have developed from Ishtar (Inanna) in the East. Many of her local cults, such as that of Artemis Orthia at Sparta, preserved traces of other deities, often with Greek names. According to Robert Graves, Artemis is in fact one more title of the Triple Moon-goddess, and her silver bow stood for the new moon. She recalls the Cretan 'Lady of the Wild Things', apparently the supreme Nymph-goddess of archaic totem societies.⁶⁷

While the mythological roles of other prominent Olympians evolved in the works of the poets, the lore of Artemis developed primarily from cult, which showed considerable variety. Thus, her character and function varied greatly from place to place, but, apparently, behind all forms lay the goddess of wild nature, who danced, usually accompanied by tree nymphs (dryads), in mountains, forests, and marshes. Dances of maidens representing these dryads were especially common in Artemis' worship as goddess of vegetation, a role especially popular in the Peloponnese. Throughout the Peloponnese, bearing such epithets as *Limnaea* and *Limnatis* ('Lady of the Lake'), Artemis supervised waters and lush wild growth, attended by nymphs of wells and springs (Naiads). In parts of the peninsula her dances were wild and lascivious. Outside the Peloponnese, Artemis's most familiar form was as Mistress of Animals, as she was believed to protect young, sucking animals.

Bringham's poem consists of four closely connected parts in which the poet analyses the different attributes of the moon-goddess. In the first part, Artemis is presented in strongly alliterative verse lines (notice, for instance, the alliteration in *geese-guardian, birds-*

⁶⁶ As for her attributes, Robert Graves gives a detailed account of what the ancient myths say about Artemis: "One day, while she was still a three-year-old child, her father Zeus, on whose knees she was sitting, asked her what presents she would like. Artemis answered at once: 'Pray give me eternal virginity; as many names as my brother Apollo; a bow and arrows like his; the office of bringing light; a saffron hunting tunic with a red hem reaching to my knees; sixty young ocean nymphs, all of the same age, as my maids of honour; twenty river nymphs from Amnisus in Crete, to take care of my buskins and feed my hounds when I am not out shooting; all the mountains in the world; and, lastly, any city you care to choose for me, but one will be enough, because I intend to live on mountains most of the time. Unfortunately, women in labour will often be invoking me, since my mother Leto carried and bore me without pains, and the Fates have therefore made me patroness of child-birth.'" (Ibid., p. 83). The original source of Graves' account is Callimachus' *Hymn to Artemis*.

⁶⁷ Robert Graves, *ibid.*, p. 85.

beasts) as a sylvan goddess, who dwells in the woods and in the mountains in the company of wild animals, and as the protectress of little children:

Artemis, alpine, keeper of quail,
of geese on the long migration, guardian
of birds, beasts, and the young
of humankind,
a glimmer at the edges of the mind,
goddess in the high clear meadow and the high clear air,
and in the clarity of flow
below the hillside spring.

C, p. 25.

In these lines Artemis is the goddess who harmonizes all three elements, as she lives “*in the high clear meadow*” (land), in “*the high clear air*” (air) and “*in the clarity of flow / below the hillside spring*” (water). The triple parallelism is eloquent enough. The suggestive phrase “a glimmer at the edges of the mind” is probably intended as a reference to Artemis’ office of bringing light in her capacity of moon goddess and to the pale light of the moon, which was regarded as the source of all water in the ancient Greek worldview. Graves speculates about the etymology of the goddess’ name itself: “The meaning of *Artemis* is doubtful: it may be ‘strong-limbed’, from *artemes*; or ‘she who cuts up’, since the Spartans called her *Artamis*, from *artao*; or ‘the lofty convener’, from *airo* and *themis*; or the ‘themis’ syllable may mean ‘water’, because the moon was regarded as the source of all water.”⁶⁸

The second part of the poem dwells on Artemis’s role as the guardian of women, as she came to the aid of women in labour, in childbed. Artemis is described as being ‘unforgiving’ because her wrath was proverbial. For instance, poor Actaeon, son of Aristaeus, was metamorphosed into a stag and was eventually torn to pieces by her pack of fifty hounds just because he happened to surprise the goddess completely naked as she was bathing in a stream in the woods. Yet Greek sculpture avoided Artemis’ unpitying anger as a motif; in fact, the goddess herself did not become popular as a sculptural subject until the 4th century BCE, and on most occasions she was depicted in her capacity of huntress goddess. Artemis is also ‘unloving’, as she was a maiden goddess, married noone, and asked her father Zeus for eternal virginity. She required the same perfect chastity from her companions as she practised herself. Poor Callisto, one of her maidens, who was seduced by Zeus and was to bear a child by him, was found guilty by the goddess and metamorphosed into a bear. Had Zeus not caught her up immediately to Heaven, she would have been hunted to death by Artemis’ pack of hounds.⁶⁹ However, the frequent stories of the love affairs of Artemis’ nymphs may have originally been told of the goddess

⁶⁸ Robert Graves, *ibid.*, p. 86.

⁶⁹ Graves claims that when Zeus seduced Callisto, daughter of Lycaon, “Artemis noticed that she was with child. Changing her into a bear, she shouted to the pack, and Callisto would have been hunted to death had she not been caught up to Heaven by Zeus who, later, set her image among the stars. But some say that Zeus himself changed Callisto into a bear, and that jealous Hera arranged for Artemis to chase her in error. Callisto’s child, Arcas, was saved, and became the ancestors of the Arcadians.” *Ibid.*, p. 84. The original sources of Graves’ account are Hyginus, *Poetic Astronomy* ii. 1, and Apollodorus: iii. 8. 2. According to Graves, “the myth of Callisto has been told to account for the two small girls, dressed as she-bears, who appeared in the attic festival of Brauronian Artemis, and for the traditional connexion between Artemis and the Great Bear. But an earlier version of the myth may be presumed, in which Zeus seduced Artemis, although she first transformed herself into a bear and then daubed her face with gypsum, in an attempt to escape him. Artemis was, originally, the ruler of the stars, but lost them to Zeus.” *Ibid.*, p. 86. To Callisto’s story we will turn later in our dissertation, for she is the protagonist of Robert Bringhurst’s polyphonic poem *Ursa Major* (2003/2009).

herself, who was originally an orgiastic goddess, a manifestation of the Triple Moon-goddess, whose sacred animal was the lascivious quail. The poets after Homer, however, stressed Artemis' immaculate chastity. She is subtly connected to the mystery of fertility and procreation, though, as the goddess is the protectress of women in "the time of menstruation" and in childbirth.

In the third part of the poem the concern is with the goddess as a consummate archeress living in the mountains and in the woods, far away from "the last mark of the plough," that is to say, beyond cultivated land, agriculture, and civilization. That is her personal province, where she rides an 'unbridled stallion' in pursuit of stags, with her pack of hounds practising her favourite pastime, namely hunting. She is a dancer too, as she used to dance in the woods in the company of her chaste maidens and nymphs. In the last verse lines of this part there is an amazing proliferation of images of darkness and moonlight, which emphasizes the fact that Artemis is also the moon-goddess that sheds light on all things at night. The moon was the reputed source of the dew which refreshed the pastures, hence the reference to the meadowgrass, to the lunar ore in the air, and the clarity of crystal:

The archeress, dancer, the rider
of unbridled stallion and stag, the flight of the teal
over the next hill and always
past the last mark of the plough,
the iced light over alders, light's tread on meadowgrass,
lunar ore in the air. The tremor over
the unclimbed peak, starlight in darkness,
over the dark root of the cypress a grainless unharvestable
timber of the clarity of crystal.

C, p. 25.

The last part of the poem closes with enigmatic words. Both twins, Apollo and Artemis, carry a bow and arrows; both are in charge of bringing light to Earth, sunlight and moonlight, in their respective capacities of sun god and moon goddess. The light traverses the air very fast and there is no way of ascertaining which god or goddess is to be held responsible for this: "*The light leaps / like an arrow past the air. / Ridiculous to ask / what god, what goddess; / the light keeps / the arrow's character.*" (C, p. 26.)



Bringham's concern in the third poem of this short treatise is with Athena, the protectress of Athens, goddess of war, handicraft, and practical reason in ancient Greek religion. She was probably a pre-Hellenic goddess taken over by the Greeks. She is also the subject of another of the poems of the acknowledged master, a poem entitled "Before Sleep" (published in *Blast*, 1914), where Pound invokes Pallas before falling asleep. The Athenians' city-goddess was the parthenogenous daughter of the immortal Titaness Metis, who presided over all wisdom and knowledge. Zeus had swallowed Metis while she was pregnant, so that Athena would be born from the father's skull only. Athena sprang in full battle armour from Zeus' forehead, in some versions after Hephaestus had split open Zeus' head with an ax.⁷⁰ Some scholars have interpreted Athena's birth from Zeus's head as a

⁷⁰ The fantastic story of her birth is to be found in Hesiod's *Theogony*, 886-900; in Pindar's *Olympian Odes*, vii, 34 ff.; and in Apollodorus, i. 3. 6. And this is Robert Graves' detailed account: "Zeus lusted after Metis the Titaness, who turned into many shapes to escape him until she was caught at last and got with child. An

sort of desperate dogmatic insistence on wisdom as a male prerogative alone. On the other hand, the tutelary deity of Athens, like Artemis, was a virgin goddess. She was thought to have had neither husband nor offspring. Even if she may not have been described as a virgin originally, virginity was attributed to her very early and was the basis for the interpretation of her common epithets *Pallas* and *Parthenos*. In fact, according to Graves, “the Athenians made their goddess’s maidenhood symbolic of the city’s invincibility.”⁷¹ The olive tree was sacred Athena, as it had been the decisive gift that she gave the Athenians in her bitter dispute and contest with Poseidon, Zeus’s brother and sea god, over the suzerainty of the city of Athens, to which she gave her name.⁷² Her emergence there as city goddess, Athena Polis (“Athena of the City”), accompanied the ancient city-state’s transition from monarchy to democracy. She was associated with birds, particularly the owl, and with the snake.

In the first part of Bringham’s poem, Athena is portrayed as being the goddess of daylight and of the mind. Athena is the embodiment of the clarity accompanying the light of a new day, which allows the clear perception of the surrounding world. The olive tree is mentioned as the tree sacred to her:

Athena, the mist off the sea, the translucence
clinging in the cedars and the olive trees,
morning, the mind, the clear light cut
as with a razor, taking count of the color
and the light’s own form.

C, p. 27.

Athena was the goddess of practical knowledge, of so-called *τεχνή*, that is to say, of humans’ ability to *make* things with their own hands. Hence she was the goddess of crafts and skilled pursuits in general, especially known and worshipped as the patroness of spinning and weaving. That she ultimately became allegorized to personify wisdom and righteousness was a natural development of her being the tutelary goddess of skill. The second part of Bringham’s poem is explicitly concerned with the progression from ‘manual facility’ and ‘technical fluency’ (several jobs are mentioned here, such as that of the shipwright, the potter, and the navigator) towards the ‘lucid gaze’ inherent in wisdom. It is in fact a different kind of knowledge; it is not Apollonian in essence, but it does represent ‘the working edge of the soul’. In addition, according to Graves, Athena “invented the flute, the trumpet, the earthenware pot, the plough, the rake, the ox-yoke, the horse-bridle, the chariot, and the ship. She first taught the science of numbers, and all women’s arts, such as cooking, weaving, and spinning.”⁷³ Hence the reference to horses and to the specific professions mentioned in these lines:

oracle of Mother Earth then declared that this would be a girl-child and that, if Metis conceived again, she would bear a son who was fated to depose Zeus, just as Zeus had deposed Cronus, and Cronus had deposed Uranus. Therefore, having coaxed Metis to a couch with honeyed words, Zeus suddenly opened his mouth and swallowed her, and that was the end of Metis, though he claimed afterwards that she gave him counsel from inside his belly. In due process of time, he was seized by a raging headache as he walked by the shores of Lake Triton, so that his skull seemed about to burst, and he howled for rage until the whole firmament echoed. Up ran Hermes, who at once divined the cause of Zeus’s discomfort. He persuaded Hephaestus, or some say Prometheus, to fetch his wedge and beetle and make a breach in Zeus’s skull, from which Athene sprang, fully armed, with a mighty shout.” Ibid., p. 46.

⁷¹ Robert Graves, *ibid.*, p. 99.

⁷² However, Graves claims that “it would be a mistake to think of Athene as solely or predominantly the goddess of Athens. Several ancient acropolises were sacred to her,” including Argos, Sparta, Troy, Smyrna, Epidaurus, Troezen, and Pheneus. All of them are pre-Hellenic sites. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁷³ Robert Graves, *ibid.*, p. 96.

Mistress of horses, goddess of clear-sighted skill,
of technical fluency, manual facility,
the working edge of the soul.
The clean cut of the shipwright, the potter's glaze,
the navigator's knowledge and the measurement inherent
in the glance, and in the lucid gaze.

C, p. 27.

The third part of the poem is a most elegant tribute to the goddess' qualities and virtues. Gray-eyed Athena is celebrated for the kind of light and intelligence she gives humans so generously. As opposed to Apollo's intense daylight or Artemis' pale moonlight, Athena's 'gray light of measured day' is meant as a kind of light that lingers somewhere in the middle and allows a better perception of the world in its manifold details. In this respect, she is the very embodiment of perfection, the 'absence of error', because of her sensibleness, her practical reason, and her common sense in providing human beings with devices to come to terms with the world. Athena is always there where man's will is confronted with the stubborn materiality of things he tries to bring under his control:

And in the gray light of measured day one sees
farther than in full sunlight, sees detail, motion
and features in full relief; Athena
is absence of error,
mallet and chisel making visible the mandatory form
at will's intersection with material.

C, p. 27.

Athena is also a war goddess. In Homer's *Iliad*, she was presented as the goddess of martial skill, and in numerous scenes she inspired and fought alongside the Greek heroes against the Trojans in the long siege of Priam's high-walled city. In the Olympian pantheon there is, however, another god of war, Ares, but Athena's moral and military superiority to the other warlike divinity of Greece derived in part from the fact that she represented the intellectual and civilized side of war and the virtues of justice and skill,⁷⁴ whereas Ares largely represented mere blood lust. This is clearly manifest from all his occurrences in the Homeric poems,⁷⁵ or from the closing lines of Bringham's poem, where an image of the goddess armed with a Mycenaean spear is evocatively painted through words:

Slightly more slowly
light inside the air leaps, keeps
the air's own character,
reaps every latent image in the air,
oak into amber, the form cut
clean, taking count of the grain,

⁷⁴ In Robert Graves' words, "although a goddess of war, she gets no pleasure from battle, as Ares and Eris do, but rather from settling disputes, and upholding the law by pacific means. She bears no arms in time of peace and, if ever she needs any, will usually borrow a set from Zeus. Her mercy is great: when the judges' votes are equal in a criminal trial at the Areiopagus, she always gives a casting vote to liberate the accused. Yet, once engaged in battle, she never loses the day, even against Ares himself, being better grounded in tactics and strategy than he; and wise captains always approach her for advice." *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁷⁵ In the *Iliad*, Athena was the divine form of the heroic, martial ideal: she personified excellence in close combat, victory, and glory, and wore upon her shield the aegis of Zeus which inspired irresistible fear in her opponents. Athena appears in the *Odyssey* as the tutelary deity of Odysseus, and myths from later sources portray her similarly as helper of Perseus and Heracles (Hercules). As the guardian of the welfare of kings, Athena equally represented the qualities of good counsel, prudent restraint, and practical insight.

it is the Mycenaean spear.

C, p. 28.



Hermes, often identified with the Roman Mercury, was son of Zeus, who begot him on Maia, daughter of Atlas, who bore him in a cave on Mount Cyllene in Arcadia. This was reputed to be his birthplace and so it became the earliest centre of his cult. There he was especially worshipped as the god of fertility, and his images were ithyphallic. In cult Hermes was usually worshipped as a divinity in charge of the protection of cattle and sheep, and was closely connected with vegetation deities, especially Pan and the nymphs. But, above all, he is known as the messenger of the gods and his duties included “the making of treaties, the promotion of commerce, and the maintenance of free rights of ways for travellers on any road in the world.”⁷⁶ As a messenger he may also have become the god of roads and doorways, and he was the protector of travellers (and hence both merchants and thieves). Hermes’ proclivities as a god of thieves were then absolutely natural. Treasure casually found was thought to be his gift, and any stroke of good luck was attributed to him. As for iconographical representations, in archaic art Hermes was portrayed as a full-grown and bearded man, clothed in a long tunic and often wearing a cap and winged boots. Sometimes he was represented in his pastoral character, bearing a sheep on his shoulders; at other times he appeared as the messenger of the gods with the *kerykeion*, or herald’s staff, which was his most frequent attribute. From the latter part of the 5th century BCE he was portrayed as a nude and beardless youth, a young athlete.

In his poem, Bringham explores the main attributes of this equivocal and versatile deity, capable of both honest feats and deeds of dubious morality. Pound himself had attempted something similar in a poem entitled “Surgit Fama”, in which he depicts a world where the ancient gods are still a powerful presence.⁷⁷ The opening three verse lines focus on Hermes as the god of chance and good luck, but also as the companion of thieves. As in the previous compositions, this one opens with the name of the god, which is followed by a long apposition, a long sequence of phrases qualifying the nature of this elusive deity, which is difficult to grasp:

Hermes, the god in the windfall, god of good luck
and of bad, clandestine, uncanny, companion
of perjurers, burglars and thieves,
the shape-changer,
claim-jumper, odd god, guide into the darkness, guide
out of darkness into half light at his leisure.
Purveyor of dreams and of all things achieved but
unasked for, distraction, surprise, sudden
silence in speech.

C, p. 28.

⁷⁶ Robert Graves, *ibid.*, p. 65.

⁷⁷ The verse lines in “Surgit Fama” concerned with Hermes read as follows: “The tricksome Hermes is here; / He moves behind me / Eager to catch my words, / Eager to spread them with rumour; / To set upon them his change / Crafty and subtle; / To alter them to his purpose”. The poem is published under the section “Poems of *Lustra*, 1913-1915”, in *Personae. The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*, New York: New Directions, 1990.

As can be seen from the second part of this poem, Hermes had an amazing ability to metamorphose himself all the time, so as to confuse humans and gods alike. Hermes was considered a dream god, and, in fact, the Greeks offered to him the last libation before sleep. This might have something to do with the fact that he was capable of travelling both directions in the Greek metaphorical arrangement of the world, which is divided by a horizontal line: above it is the realm of daylight and life (the realm of the Olympian gods and goddesses) and below it is the realm of darkness and death (the realm of Hades). Thus, Hades also engaged him as his herald, and he summoned the dying gently and eloquently, by laying the golden staff upon their eyes. Hermes was the conductor of the dead to the underworld, where Charon was dutifully awaiting them to take the newly-arrived souls on his boat across the Styx, or the lake of forgetfulness. However, Hermes did belong to the realm of daylight, action and creativity as well. In many respects he was Apollo's counterpart; like him, Hermes was a patron of music and was credited with the invention of the kithara and sometimes of music itself.⁷⁸ He was also god of eloquence and presided over some kinds of popular divination. The closing words in Bringhurst's poem, "sudden silence in speech" might well evoke this facet of Hermes as a god concerned with the intellectual precision words can convey when masterfully managed in speech.⁷⁹ Silence punctuates at last this hard attempt at characterizing Hermes' nature, which has been linguistically crystallized into a long enumeration of the qualities of the gods' messenger.



To the Greeks Aphrodite was the goddess of beauty and sexual love. Her name possibly derives from the Greek word *aphros*, which means "foam". According to the legend, the goddess was born from the white foam surrounding the severed genitals of Uranus, the primordial god who was castrated by his son Cronus. Then he threw them into the sea and from the waters emerged Aphrodite, who was also worshiped as a goddess of the sea and of seafaring. In Homeric mythology she was presented as the daughter of Zeus and Dione.⁸⁰ In the Greek pantheon she was the goddess of love, beauty, and fertility. However, Aphrodite's origins as a fertility goddess are to be sought outside the Greek civilization. Her worship came to Greece from the East, and many of her characteristics must be considered Semitic. She was worshipped in Syria and Palestine as Ishtar, or Ashtaroth. Her close association with Eros, the Graces (Charites), and the Seasons (Horae) emphasized her role as a promoter of fertility. She was honoured as *Genetrix*, the creative element in the world. In fact, life began in the sea.

⁷⁸ Graves explains that "some hold that the lyre invented by Hermes had seven strings; others, that it had three only, to correspond with the seasons, or four to correspond with the quarters of the year, and that Apollo brought the number up to seven." *Ibid.*, p. 65. This might be connected with the fact that the sacred number of Hermes was four, and the fourth day of the month was his birthday.

⁷⁹ According to Graves, he "assisted the Three Fates in the composition of the Alphabet, invented astronomy, the musical scale, the arts of boxing and gymnastics, weights and measures (which some attribute to Palamedes), and the cultivation of the olive-tree." *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁸⁰ In his *Theogony*, 188-200 and 353, Hesiod tells about the birth of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and fertility, who even presided over marriage. Graves paraphrases the story as follows: "Aphrodite, goddess of Desire, rose naked from the foam of the sea and, riding on a scallop shell, stepped ashore first on the island of Cythera; but finding this only a small island, passed on to the Peloponnese, and eventually took up residence at Paphos, in Cyprus, still the principal seat of her worship. Grass and flowers sprang from the soil wherever she trod. At Paphos, the Seasons, daughters of Themis, hastened to clothe and adorn her. Some hold that she sprang from the foam which gathered about the genitals of Uranus, when Cronus threw them into the sea; others, that Zeus begot her on Dione, daughter either of Oceanus and Tethys the sea-nymph, or of Air and Earth. But all agree that she takes the air accompanied by doves and sparrows." *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Aphrodite's main centres of worship were at Paphos and Amathus on Cyprus and on the island of Cythera, an important centre of Cretan trade with the Peloponnese, where her cult probably originated in prehistoric times. In fact, Homer called her "Cyprian" after the island chiefly famed for her worship. On the Greek mainland Corinth was the chief centre of her worship. Among her symbols were the dove, pomegranate, swan, and myrtle. Doves and sparrows were noted for their lechery, and so were naturally associated with Aphrodite, famous for her adulterous indiscretions, promiscuity and love-making. In the *Odyssey*, Aphrodite was married to Hephaestus, the lame smith god, though she had an affair with Ares, the quarrelsome god of war, by whom she became the mother of Phobus, Deimus, and Harmonia. Of Aphrodite's innumerable mortal lovers, the most celebrated were the Trojan shepherd Anchises, by whom she became the mother of Aeneas, and the handsome youth Adonis (in origin a Semitic deity and the consort of Ishtar-Astarte), who was killed by a boar while hunting.

Bringham condenses Aphrodite's birth story into six terse verse lines, pervaded by the eloquent force and intense lyricism of metaphor. Against the background of immensity of the blue ocean, Aphrodite's birth is pictured as the fruit of a crime committed against the primordial element. The sea is the place where life began after all. No mythic characters are mentioned at all, but the story is well-known by all Westerners familiar with Greek mythology. The 'scythe' stands for Cronus and the 'sea-froth' stands for Uranus. The mystery inherent in Aphrodite's birth is that her body was woven out of sea-froth and 'unmuscle water' – there were no bones, no cartilage involved in her birth. Paradoxically enough, she was the daughter not of love-making, but of an act of vengeance whereby Cronus deposed his father. She emerged out of Uranus' blood, mixed with the sea foam, and she became the consuming flame of love, which has not got the consistency of meniscus, or silver, or the cedar's grain:

Aphrodite, scythe out of sea-froth, the sea-spun
cloth, the web of the unmuscled water over
basalt jaws, like a gull on the sea-god's shoulder.

Blood surface dusted with light, the sleek gleam of flame,
neither molten gold's meniscus nor the harsh, clear
color of unworked silver, nor the cedar's grain.

C, p. 29.

The closing lines evoke Aphrodite's close connection with Eros, with love as the ultimate grace which sets everything in motion in the universe. When life is reduced to its bare essentials, there seems to be nothing else apart from Love and Thanatos, love and death; somewhere in between is humans' motion in time and space in their lifetime, whose primordial impulse is love. Here is a goddess of liquid consistency, born on the surface of the sea, out of a most curious alchemy of bleeding genitals, sea water, foam, and light. What was an act of castration begets the supreme lord of the world – love, which brings things and people together and keeps them in permanent motion. It all began with *"the flowing action of an empty hand,"* probably Cronus' hand, which did hold a scythe: *"Superfluity, superficiality, / ancillary grace become the fundamental / motion, the flowing action of an empty hand."* (C, p. 29.)



Bringhurst's extended meditation on the six great Olympian deities closes with a composition on Ares, the quarrelsome, bloodthirsty and uncivil god of war. From at least the time of Homer, Ares was recognized as one of the Olympian deities and as the son of Zeus and Hera. His fellow gods and even his parents, however, were not fond of him just because of his love of blood and violence. Nonetheless, he was not alone in this inclination: he was accompanied in battle by his sister Eris (Strife) and his sons (by Aphrodite) Phobos and Deimos (Panic and Rout). Also associated with him were two lesser war deities: Enyalios, who is virtually identical with Ares himself, and Enyo, a female counterpart. As Robert Graves points out in his entry on the unpopular god:

Thracian Ares loves battle for its own sake, and his sister Eris is always stirring up occasion for war by the spread of rumour and the inculcation of jealousy. Like her, he never favours one city or party more than another, but fights on this side or that, as inclination prompts him, delighting in the slaughter of men and sacking of towns. All his fellow-immortals hate him, from Zeus and Hera downwards, except Eris, and Aphrodite who nurses a perverse passion for him, and greedy Hades who welcomes the bold young fighting-men slain in cruel wars.⁸¹

The mythology surrounding the figure of Ares is not extensive, probably because of his widespread unpopularity. Because Ares indulges in war and blood-shedding, the first and larger part of Bringhurst's composition is entirely devoted to exploring his love of violence, and not other attributes of this *flat* (as opposed to such *round* deities as Apollo or Athena) deity. The sense of sudden, horrifying death on the battlefield, in other warriors' hands, is dramatically conveyed in a flux of line verses that seem to do without punctuation, in an attempt to faithfully depict the urgency inherent in the gratuitous slaughter of men. The world of war is reduced to bare essentials: motion or the absence of motion, that is to say, life or its counterpart – death:

Ares, the coral foam
on the colorless lip

the quaking the suction the sudden
absence of suction,
retrieving the blade from the belly

the quaking and the bright bright colors how they fade
the fresh bowels lying in the dirt and light

shattered bone in the blood, the thud
of big guns taking place of the earth's pulse,
darkness sucked in,
darkness sucked up as if sustenance,
viscous, sucked in.

C, p. 30.

The description of warriors' death is done through a relentless chain of metonymies. First, lips turn pale, which is an indication that the soul is about to depart to Hades, to the country of the dead. The 'coral foam' is probably intended here as a reference to Ares' partner, Aphrodite, who was born out of the most curious alchemy brought about by Uranus' bleeding genitals, severed by his treacherous and vengeful son Cronus, and the foam of the sea. In fact, Ares was associated with Aphrodite from earliest

⁸¹ Robert Graves, *ibid.*, p. 73.

times, who was known locally (for instance, at Sparta) as a war goddess, apparently an early facet of her character. Occasionally, Aphrodite was Ares' legitimate wife, and by her he fathered Deimos, Phobos, and Harmonia⁸². Secondly, the sword blade deep inside the belly takes life away with the ease of a hand's gesture. Then colours fade, which means that one's vision of the world turns blurred, the bowels are out in the open air, the bones are shattered, and blood is mercilessly shed everywhere. Finally, the victory of weapons over mother earth's sustaining and life-giving pulse takes on the form of utter darkness, in a literal and figurative sense, since darkness is the absence of light, and the absence of life for that matter, and it stands metaphorically for the realm of death. That darkness can be sucked in is only indicative of Ares' irrational enjoyment of death and violence. The war deity feeds on the warrior's death, it is his main nutriment, the very basis of his diet.

But the Greeks were not very fond of war or the deity who stood for it. In fact, Ares' worship was largely established in the northern areas of Greece, such as Sparta, a warring community, and his cult had many interesting local features and variants. At Athens he had a temple at the foot of the Areopagus ("Ares' Hill"). On the contrary, the worship of Ares' Roman counterpart, Mars, was much more extensive in the Roman Empire, where people were naturally inclined toward action and the spreading of their empire rather than to the inquisitive conquest of the world, which seems to us to be a feature inherent in the Greek ethos. The Romans' reverence for the war god is the concern of the second part in Bringham's poem:

Men of Rome, finding Ares untutored,
in the Iliad a coward, uncivil, short of glory,
transferred light from the image of Phoebus Apollo to Mars
pro patria mori,

darkness made to flow in the vein
as if under harness.

C, p. 30.

The *territorial imperative* – i.e., the need to spread the limits of the Empire and to preserve newly conquered lands – was of paramount relevance in Roman times, so that Apollo, the god of light and reason, one of the principal deities among the Greeks, was promptly relegated into the background and Ares was given much more prominence instead. It is no happy coincidence that the essence of this Roman war pragmatism should be crystallized into the Latin words *pro patria mori* right at the centre of this part of the poem – soldiers must be willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake (and excellence) of their native land. The light Apollo stood for was replaced in Roman times by the “darkness made to flow in the vein”, i.e., by the love of war and blood-shedding Ares symbolized.



The conclusion to “The Third Generation” is a short lyric poem that has got the perfection, beauty and clarity of crystal. Three of the principal Olympian deities are juxtaposed here in an attempt to keep things distinct and clear. All three are crucial in the pantheon of gods and goddesses governing the world in the Greek framework of mind and worldview. Apollo stands for music, sunlight and the incisive power of human intelligence; Athena is the war goddess of practical reason; and Artemis, the archeress goddess, is the

⁸² By Aglauros, the daughter of Cecrops, he was the father of Alcippe. He was the father of at least two of Heracles' adversaries: Cynus and Diomedes of Thrace.

sylvan deity of the woods and wild animals. This is the most uncomplicated, straightforward interpretation of the poem, one in which each god and goddess is presented by reference to his/her main attribute. But syntax allows for yet another potential reading of these verse lines if the focus is on the Saxon Genitive in the first verse line. Apollo is the spirit of the song, Athena is the soul of the song, and Artemis is the impulse behind the song. Seen from a metaliterary perspective, the song could even be Bringham's poem itself. In this way, we approach a wider plane of possible meaning which is not overtly stated, but rather obliquely suggested or evoked:

Apollo song's spirit,
Athena the soul,
but the impulse
is Artemis.
Ridiculous
to ask who has
the clearest eye.

C, p. 31.

The enigmatic ending brings all three gods and goddesses together, inasmuch as light seems to be common to all of them: they are deities dwelling in the realm of light, as opposed to the realm of darkness, or country of the dead. They represent different facets of life that must have been crucial in ancient Greeks' opinion – the love of song and music and art in general (Apollo), the intellectual inquiry into the essence of things and the technical ability to make things with their hands (Athena), and their fondness for outdoor life and hunting (Artemis). At this point, it is ridiculous to ask who has the clearest eye because all three deities play a part in humans' lives in one way or another, all of them are endowed with superhuman faculties that make them more powerful and wise than human will ever be. In this respect, they are a symbol of perfection, and the embodiment of the best human virtues.



“The Greenland Stone” *A Land with no Mythology*

Whereas “Kerry Shawn Keys” and “The Third Generation” are poems concerned with exploring the possibilities of myth to sensibly account for the essence and intrinsic mystery of the world, “The Greenland Stone”,⁸³ another perfect crystal-like lyric, offers a view of the world from which the gods and goddesses of antiquity *seem* to have departed. Things stop making sense the moment human beings stop breathing through their feet, that is to say, cease to pay attention to the fact that their *being* does not really end where their skin meets the world. Precisely at that moment things cease to cohere, the world becomes an alien *res extensa* that must be controlled and exploited at any cost, and the emotional integrity of humanity vanishes. At root, the result is a world devoid of the presence of the deities of the Olympian pantheon of ancient Greece, or of the Mesoamerican pantheon of

⁸³ “The Greenland Stone” was later published in *Mundus Artium: A Journal of International Literature and the Arts* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) 8.2 ([Winter] 1975): 130-133, along with “Jebel Saneen, Lebanon” and “Portrait in Blood” (from *The Shipwright's Log*, 1972), and “Song of the Summit” (also included in *Cadastré*, 1973). Afterwards, it was also published in *American Poetry Review* 20.3 (Spring 1982): 26-27, along with “Strophe from Sophocles” (also included in *Cadastré*, 1973). It was reprinted in A.6, A.14, A.47, A.92, C.27 and C.36.

the Aztec people for that matter. The strong resonances in the background of this poem are uncannily reminiscent (or better, anticipatory) of Robert Bringhurst's words in his entry on the meaning of 'mythology' in *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*:

When humans cease to feel they are surrounded by the world, and come instead to feel that they have the world surrounded, the perspective on which mythic thought depends has been inverted. Social mythologies, framed on the assumption that humans are surrounded only by other humans, not by a real world, are the usual result.⁸⁴

The very title of Bringhurst's poem, "The Greenland Stone", is mysterious and evocative in a way. Greenland, the land of the Inuit (Eskimo), is the world's largest island, lying in the North Atlantic Ocean, and it is noted for its vast tundra and immense glaciers. There might still be room for myth in a land covered by ice, if only because it remains the province of absolute whiteness, and whiteness is the absence of colour. The pun implicit in the name itself (*green-land*, with all the sylvan connotations associated to the wilderness) suggests that maybe humankind has not spoiled it completely yet, that if gods were to roam aimlessly across the world and look for a haven to hide in, they would probably choose an inhospitable, cold land like this. The first stanza of the poem is an extended simple sentence which emphasizes the notion of a world without gods through a structural device recurrent in myth, which is to say parallelism:

Gods immersed in the masked
North American air
vanish like cryolite,
vanish like the kayak's
white stone anchor hitting
bright blue arctic water.

C, p. 32.

We are told twice that gods vanish relentlessly in the cold landscape of Greenland: they vanish like cryolite and like the ephemeral foam in the kayak's wake. However, if we listen attentively and intently to the meaning of the silent words on the page, the message turns out to be altogether different. Cryolite is a word of Greek origin, deriving from *cryo* (chill) and *lithos* (stone). It denotes an uncommon mineral identified with the once large deposit at Ivigtût, on the west coast of Greenland, which ran out in 1987. Cryolite occurs as glassy, colourless crystals, which are translucent to transparent. In fact, if immersed in water, cryolite becomes virtually invisible. Therefore, the first simile is eloquent enough after all – the gods are not completely absent from the world, they have just become invisible to us, like cryolite submerged in water. Reading Bringhurst's poem we get a feeling of the way that everything exists in layers as it were, that nothing really disappears – it just gets hidden sometimes. The second simile sets up a comparison between the vanishing gods and the kayak's anchor hitting "*bright blue arctic water.*" The Inuit people had a mythology of their own, which featured their own gods and goddesses, stemming from the natural surrounding world they knew from first-hand experience. Inuit mythology is not the same as Greek or Mesoamerican mythologies, and yet we know with reasonable certainty that myth is universal, a compulsion inherent in human beings of all epochs and civilizations, and that myth is concerned with timeless things and tries to unveil a secret order in the world.

⁸⁴ W. H. New (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*, entry on 'mythology', pp. 792-793.

This secret order of the world is what the last stanza is about. We are plunged headlong into the cold landscape of Greenland – a landscape which appeals to the heart, the eye, and the mind. Once again, a triple parallelism is at the centre of these verse-lines, in which the conjunction of snowfall and lightfall in the world outside is compared to the inner activity of *sensing* and *thinking* that the perceiving *I* is doing. At some point, the barrier between inside and outside vanishes: the heart is endowed with the capacity of thinking, the eye becomes what it sees – ‘mossy chalcedony’, a mineral covered with moss – and the mind has got, all of a sudden, a physicality symbolized by the ‘wet marrow’. Turning over words like *heart, mind, eye, thought* – mainstays of Bringhurst’s lexicon – the poet approaches the *thinking mind* as equally an intellectual affair as a physical entity. We do not quite understand what is going on these lines, but something of value, with the texture of transcendence, is being communicated here:

The snowfall in the stone
clears when the lightfall slows
the way the heart’s thought, the eye’s
mossy chalcedony
and the mind’s wet marrow
clarify when it quickens.

C, p. 32.

The world is not a place gods have left for good, and the snowfall and the lightfall betray their hidden presence beneath natural phenomena. It is no coincidence that this first section of *Cadastré*, overtly concerned with forms of ancient wisdom, should close with a meditation on the destiny of deities in a world where humankind seems not to believe any longer in what it cannot see. At root, “The Greenland Stone” is Bringhurst’s frank reflection on the presence of gods in a secular era, written in the contemplative but direct vein of the previous poems in *Cadastré*. Ultimately, it is this degree of transparency, the simplicity of the language, the degree of honesty and perplexity in the face of the grandeur of Nature that set this poem apart as a thoughtful inquiry into the persistence of deities in a secular world. Bringhurst puts it beautifully as he utters these words on the page:

Mythtellers often say they *listen* to the world and *see* the myth unfold. The patterns and connectors that emerge in the telling of the myth are reflections of an order that is sensed, not an order that is built by humans. The presumption of mythology is always that the world has more knowledge and more power than any human being could possess, and that the order of the world is richer and more meaningful than any order humans could impose.⁸⁵

It is just a matter of paying attention, of acknowledging the fact that the world is wiser than humans, if only because it has lived longer, and more deeply, and because it has got an order of its own that refuses oversimplifications imposed by humankind’s not altogether fruitful attempts at making things cohere.

⁸⁵ W. H. New (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*, entry on ‘mythology’, p. 793.

SECTION II

Consult the Ancestors: Homage to the Past Masters

I · “Four Love Poems from Vidyakara’s Anthology”: *Sanskrit & Love Poetry*

The second part of *Cadastre* is comprised of five poems: “A Portrait”, “Four Love Poems from Vidyakara’s Anthology”, “Lullaby for Brendan”, “Antistrophe from Leopardi”, and “Le Debat du Cuer et du Corps de François Villon”. Three of them are translations from literary masters of the past. In translating poems by other authors, Bringham is following the example set by Ezra Pound, who translated Greek, Latin, Provençal, Italian, Japanese and Chinese literature into English. Those literary feats were exercises in intellectual gymnastics intended as studies in prosody, stemming from Pound’s tireless attempt to master the music of past ages. In an early essay entitled “A Retrospect”, Pound encourages poets to practise translation in their search after a language to use and think in: “Translation is likewise good training, if you find that your original matter ‘wobbles’ when you try to rewrite it.”⁸⁶ Bringham could have found his own poetic programme in Pound’s words concerning the practice of translation on the part of the poet aspirant, the relationships between poetry and music, advice on masters of the past to be revisited and read attentively, and the search after a pristine use of language that brings about a new knowledge of reality. Thus, following Pound’s injunction, Bringham translates texts from three different authors and traditions – from Sanskrit, Italian and French, respectively – which seem to coexist and float in the same immortal air for a moment in time. The effect of the juxtaposition is simply amazing: the love poems from Vidyakara’s *Treasury* (an anthology of Sanskrit poetry) have unusual resonances when read in conjunction with a version of the intense lyricism of Leopardi’s masterpiece “L’Infinito” and the late medieval allegorical mode of thinking pervading François Villon’s “Debat”. In this way, the poet tessellates a brilliant tapestry out of luminous words rescued from shattered fragments from the past. His versions are characterized by intellectual honesty and by transparency in the sense that one sees through to the original, beyond the actual verbal form that the text assumes in the target language.

In their elegant minimalism and emotional containment, the “Four Love Poems from Vidyakara’s Anthology” encapsulate the wisdom of the Orient. There is, in this context, a potent dichotomy that might be worth remembering: that between West and East, between the realm where the sun sets and the realm where the sun rises. This dichotomy is literal as well as symbolical. In the history of humankind, the East represents ancient wisdom and has got an irresistible appeal to Western civilizations, which seem to dwell in the realm of more than Apollonian cool reason. Traditionally, the East has held an irresistible fascination for the Western mind on account of what it stands for and what it has to offer in the form of philosophy, meditation, art, or lifestyle. The mysticism and mythic dimension inherent in the East make it a fascinating geographical and imaginative destination that has been revisited time and again throughout the history of humankind. Let us not forget that the East is traditionally thought to be the cradle of humanity in many senses: the first traces of writing, the first sophisticated forms of government, the earliest literary manifestations, a profound philosophical concern with humans’ essence and condition came probably into being in the East. Therefore, Europe cannot but be

⁸⁶ See Pound’s brilliant essay entitled “A Retrospect”, included in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, edited by T. S. Eliot, London: Faber and Faber, 1954, p. 7.

enthralled by classical Sanskrit poetry, probably the epitome of the exquisite Indian sensibility.

In the Anglo-American tradition this fascination becomes palpable and self-evident for the first time in the poetry of the Romantics, who made use of exotic, Oriental settings for many of their poems (consider, for instance, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's magnificent poem entitled 'Kubla Khan'). In fact, critics often speak of 'Romantic Orientalism' to refer to this recurrent use of things remote in time and space from Europe. Later, the so-called Post-Romantics (Tennyson, Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and others) and the *fin-de-siècle* Aesthetes or Decadents (Wilde, painters and art collectors of the 1890s) would also revisit and refashion the East in their works of art. More recently, only in the first half of the 20th century, Ezra Pound and those who embraced the basic tenets of Imagism, looked to Oriental literature in search of models of literary minimalism and communication through images.⁸⁷ For instance, Pound himself would revisit time and again Chinese literature and history in his translations in *Cathay* (1915), in *The Cantos* (a *work in progress* for a long time), in his translations of Confucius, and in his work on Ernest Fenollosa's papers on the nature of written Chinese characters.

India has preserved from the past a vast literature of classical Sanskrit poetry. It comes as no surprise that Bringham should have chosen to translate a handful of love poems from this compelling literary tradition. In the final notations to *Cadastre*, he tells us that "the Vidyakara poems arise from D.H.H. Ingalls' English versions⁸⁸, not from contact with originals." The source of Ingalls' translation is Vidyākara's *Treasury*, originally entitled *Subbasitaratnakosa*, the oldest general anthology of Sanskrit verses. It is an anthology of Sanskrit verses compiled by a Buddhist scholar named Vidyākara⁸⁹ who lived in Bengal from the latter half of the 11th century to ca. 1130 CE. The first edition of this anthology, containing over a thousand verses, was prepared by Vidyākara shortly before 1100 CE. This first edition's palm leaf manuscript was discovered at the Ngor monastery in central Tibet. A second edition of the *Subbasitaratnakosa* (meaning literally 'treasury of well turned verse'), increased in size by about one third, containing 1738 verses, was compiled by Vidyākara himself not later than 1130 CE. A paper manuscript of this expanded edition was found in the private collection of the Nepalese Rajaguru, Pundit Hemaraja.

Vidyākara's anthology is then but one example of the many collections that have survived the devastating effects of the passing of time,⁹⁰ though it remains the oldest of

⁸⁷ Consider Pound's famous haiku-inspired poem "In a Station of the Metro": "The apparition of these faces in the crowd: / Petals, on a wet, black bough."

⁸⁸ See Daniel H. H. Ingalls, *Sanskrit Poetry from Vidyākara's "Treasury"*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968.

⁸⁹ About Vidyākara, the compiler of the *Subbasitaratnakosa*, no details are known. Research by renowned D. D. Kosambi has shown that he was a monk at the Jagaddala monastery (in Varendra) and in the compilation of his anthology he used the manuscripts kept in the library of that monastery. From the arrangement of verses it appears that Vidyākara compiled his anthology over a long period, probably as a life-long hobby. Of the 275 authors quoted in the *Subbasitaratnakosa*, only eleven seem to be earlier than the seventh century CE. Vidyākara shows a special predilection for eastern and Bengali authors who were close to him in time and place (Vallana, Yogeshvara, Vasukalpa, Manovinoda, Abhinanda), belonging to a period from 700 to 1100 CE. However, he also quotes verses of classical authors like Kalidasa, Rajashekhara, and Bhavabhuti. The *Subbasitaratnakosa*, which consists of 50 sections, is eventually an anthology of the middle classical period (700-1050 CE) of Sanskrit. Vidyākara's liking for love poetry is manifest in verses on love in sections 14-26. These, as translated by Ingalls, are the source of inspiration for Bringham's versions.

⁹⁰ In his General Introduction to *Sanskrit Poetry from Vidyākara's "Treasury"*, Daniel H. H. Ingalls, claims precisely that "one of the mysteries of Sanskrit literature is where such verses come from. At present they are found only in anthologies and we know nothing of the works in which they originally stood." *Ibid.*, p. 18.

those that have been preserved. Sanskrit was used as the medium for composing a large corpus of literary texts, as well as works on philosophy, logic, astronomy, and mathematics. The earliest compositions are the Vedic texts. There are also major works of drama and poetry, although the exact dates of composition of many of these works and their creators have not been definitively established.⁹¹ The word ‘Sanskrit’, from *samskṛta*, is a curious word in itself; it originally meant ‘adorned’, ‘cultivated’, ‘refined’, ‘perfected’ or ‘purified’. Sanskrit is “that language which was refined or regularized, from the spoken language of North India of about 500 BCE, by the great grammarians, especially by Pāṇini (fourth century BCE) and by Patañjali (second century BCE).”⁹² Classical Sanskrit was thus elegantly described in one of the finest grammars ever produced, *Aṣṭādhyāyī* (“Eight Chapters”) composed by Pāṇini.⁹³

Imaginatively speaking, the first manifestations of Sanskrit poetry inhabit the same time span as the Presocratics in ancient Greece. The subliminal message to be read in between the lines is crystal-clear: all traditions are simultaneous and coexist on the same atemporal plane, regardless of whether they are far apart from one another in geographical terms. This is the *Tradition*, with an initial capital letter, that Bringhamst embraces in *Cadastre* and seeks to enrich with the contributions of his own poetic enterprise. He could not simply turn his back on Sanskrit and everything it represents in the tradition of a *Weltliteratur*. Sanskrit, an elaborately inflected language, became the vehicle of expression of an impressive corpus of texts that still have an appealing, inexhaustible beauty to our Western sensibility. However, as Daniel H. H. Ingalls points out in his book, the Sanskrit language and literature have peculiar traits: the possible infinite variations of word order deriving from its being an inflected language; its artificiality,⁹⁴ owing to the fact that it was learned through formal instruction rather than acquired through spontaneous exposure and imitation; an enormous vocabulary, a larger choice of synonyms and a large amount of synonymous constructions; its magical means of evocation and suggestion; the impersonality of Sanskrit verse; and the sudden revelation of universal truth.

As pointed out above, Bringhamst’s four poems are versions based on Ingalls’ translations from the Sanskrit original texts. We presume that there must have been substantial changes with respect to the original poems. However, the original compositions by Sanskrit poets become wonderful versions in English in the hands of the translator. *Traduttore, traditore*: to translate from a source language into a target language is somehow an act of betrayal, since part of the meaning inherent in the creative act of composition is lost somewhere in the whole process. From the translation it is impossible to gather a fair idea of what the original sounds or looks like, since English has nothing whatsoever to do with Sanskrit. The original poems are said to be extremely beautiful on account of their musicality and colourful word choice. From the above said, we deduce that Sanskrit poets were superb craftsmen who were always at pains to choose *le mot juste* to carve a perfect ‘ivory relief’ in and through words. The main stylistic features and thematic concerns of

⁹¹ See the entry on ‘Sanskrit’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Global Edition*, vol. 25, p. 14683.

⁹² D. H. H. Ingalls, *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹³ In the same Pāṇinian tradition there was a long history of work on semantics and the philosophy of language, the pinnacle of which is represented by the *Vākyapadīya* (“Treatise on Sentence and Word”) of Bhartrhari (late 6th-7th century CE).

⁹⁴ Ingalls claims that it is artificial in much the same way as medieval Latin was artificial. What is more, only people belonging to “the priesthood or the nobility or to such a professional caste as that of the clerks, the physicians, or the astrologers” (pp. 5-6) would learn Sanskrit after they had mastered their natural mother tongue by simple exposure. Sanskrit was not a language used for everyday purposes; it was “not a language of the family” (p. 6). Hence it was divorced from the emotional responses of everyday life and “from an area of life whence the poetry of what I would call the natural languages derives much of its strength.” (p. 6)

Sanskrit poetry we as readers can infer from the texts are clear-crystal. As has been explained above, Sanskrit poetry is characterized by an amazing musicality and colour, by careful word choice, by an amazing power of evocation and suggestion, by impersonality and by a sort of sudden revelation or epiphany that usually comes at the end of the poem. As for the main thematic concerns, an effort is being made to sing the passion and the pain of finite yearning after the distant and infinite and to explore the distances, physical as well psychological, separating lovers. This is a muscular poetry dwelling on heights unknown to most of us, a kind of poetry that Bringhurst translates sympathetically, as it somehow touches a fundamental part of his own poetics.

Reading Vidyākara's sequence of love poems, we are delighted to be reminded that human nature is marvellously constant despite the passing of time and the change to which outward appearance seems to be subject. Essences remain somehow unchanging, universal, and common to humanity in its entirety. The first of the love poems in Bringhurst's sequence is characterized by an intense lyricism built upon masterly miniature brush strokes. Here is actually a miniature in motion. The total effect is that of a string of images, autonomous and intertwined at the same time, that evoke a mood of nostalgia associated to the theme of love-in-separation, central to Sanskrit poetry. The miniature strokes are fitted like gems into a neat grammatical frame, and the neatness is increased by the sound harmony pervading the whole poem as a subtle undercurrent (notice, for instance, the subtle repetition of phonemes like /l/ in *fireflies*, *inlaid*, *lightning*, *flash*, *elephant*, *call*, *blossoms*, *falling*, *will*, *long*, *love*). Here is the first love piece:

Fireflies inlaid
in cloth of darkness; lightning flash;
storm of a size I can guess at
from the thunder; elephant's call;
scent of first ketaki blossoms
open on the east wind; falling rain.
No knowing how a man will stand
these nights, a long way from his love.

C, p. 39.

The verse lines produce a muscular effect that is achieved by simple enumeration in the first part of the poem, where mere juxtaposition accomplishes an intense lyricism. The chief force of the poem may well lie in the kinaesthetic effect it has on readers, as there are a number of stimuli in the natural setting that appeal to different senses: there is the light/darkness dichotomy as exemplified by the *fireflies* and the *lightning flash* reverberating in the dark (sight); there are aural stimuli under the guise of the *thunder* and the *elephant's call* (hearing); there is the scent of *blossoms* (smell); and there is *falling rain* (touch). That there should be so many external stimuli partly accounts for the fact that there is such a proliferation and concentration of nouns – which might be due to the tendency inherent in the Sanskrit language to generate compounds. In a tradition highly stylized, worked on for over two thousand years, poetic language becomes strongly codified in the hands of poets working with the same tools that, nevertheless, afford them infinite word combinations and ramifications. And yet, in his translation, Bringhurst manages to preserve something of the pristine freshness the original text must surely possess. The closing lines evoke the loneliness of the lover in the monsoon season, far away from his beloved. The phenomena of the monsoon storms are, in fact, a recurrent motif in Sanskrit poetry, as Ingalls' illuminating words on this point suggest:

As the monsoon gathered it was usual for civil and military officials to return to their residence at court. Travel and warfare were impossible during the rains and these three months were given over to family reunions and public festivals. The sight of gathering clouds immediately suggests to the Sanskrit poet these days of sexual satisfaction and domestic happiness. And if a wanderer is left in foreign land or a captain delayed on the frontier at this season, his case strikes the poet as doubly sad. There are thousands of verses playing on these associations.⁹⁵

Sanskrit poetry is the work of a supreme culture, but it appears as much the growth of the common soil as the ketaki blossoms, the grass and the rushes. Acknowledging somehow the superiority of this ancestral East over the mechanized West, Bringhamst conveys the sense that Sanskrit poetry is a product of a particular environment – a particular homeland, with its typical natural sceneries and people. This is the mental, imaginative landscape where Sanskrit poetry is cultivated, and it cannot but pervade this poetry – which is one more product of the spirit – with the *genius loci* (‘the spirit of the place’). It is not just a simple matter of ‘permeability’; Sanskrit poems grow out of tradition and out of the soil itself, as if they were flowers, trees, stones, something alive and infused with a kind of organic life. This organic view of poetry has strong Romantic resonances indeed.

The second love poem is like a well-cut diamond in its concision and intensity. In its simplicity and brevity it illustrates what evocation can accomplish in Sanskrit poetry: by a skilful use of suggestion the poet may put into words as much meaning as might be contained in endless, thick volumes of prose. There is an element of anthropomorphism in these lines – the moon is endowed with a capacity to feel jealous in the face of the lover’s beauty. The harmony of the visual imagery is perfect. The moon casts its shadow somewhere else, “in a dark place”, because nothing compares to the “long-eyed lover’s face.” The poem is built around one single complex sentence, consisting of a causal clause and a main clause:

Because it cannot bear
comparison to my long-eyed lover’s face
the moon continues to recast
itself in a dark place far from here.

C, p. 39.

Possibly the most striking aspect about this poem is the glimpses it gives of the impersonality of much Sanskrit verse, its lack of reference to specific individuals. Ingalls points out that “in the five hundred or so verses that deal with love in Vidyākara’s anthology one will not find the name of a single lover.”⁹⁶ Anonymity is a crucial feature of Sanskrit poetry. In fact, we know nothing of the personal lives of Sanskrit poets or of their patrons. But impersonality, far from being a handicap, became a virtue in preserving the intellectual traditions of India from one generation to another. The point of stripping off the personality, the individualism we usually find in Western poetry, was that “something permanent, unchangeable, and unitary” could be arrived at. In this sense, “to the Sanskrit

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 12. Ingalls quotes another short poem by Yogeśvara (number 220 in his anthology) that is strongly reminiscent of this one Bringhamst has chosen to translate: “After the rain a gentle breeze springs up / while the sky is overlaid with clouds; / one sees the horizon suddenly in a flash of lightning; / moon and stars and planets are asleep; / a heavy scent is borne from *kadambas* wet with rain / and the sound of frogs spreads out in utter darkness. / How can the lonely lover spend these nights?” The constellation of words and images in this short lyric closely resembles that in Vidyākara’s poem.

⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

poet the removal of the person was felt not as a limitation of art but as a chance for freedom, an opportunity for suggestion to bring the reader to a sudden view of the universe within the minute compass of a verse.”⁹⁷ Thus, the intrusion of particulars would destroy the universality and the ultimate revelation of truth Sanskrit poetry aims at. In this sense, impersonality is a crucial prerequisite – and suggestion or evocation is the main instrument – so as to achieve an epiphany in Joyce’s conceptualization as a moment of sudden revelation about the true nature of reality.

The third poem is by the Sanskrit poet Rājaśekhara, who came from a family of authors. Normally most poets, critics, grammarians and philosophers came from a family of authors, in fact. It was not common for a man from an unlearned family to devote himself to literature. Kālidāsa, who came from a peasant family, is probably the most well-known exception to this rule. The scene of this other miniature poem is a natural landscape. The language is simple and consciously stripped of unnecessary ornament, but the magical means of evocation discovered by Sanskrit poets centuries ago are at work here. In just six lines the poet manages perfectly well to evoke a sort of erotic mood. Rājaśekhara/Bringhurst builds the poem around two basic images: that of the blossom that is about to reach full bloom and the musical note in the cuckoo’s throat. Both may be signals heralding the coming of spring. The closing lines come as a surprise to the reader in that they convey the irruption of Love into this natural scene. The season seems to be propitious for Love to triumph and conquer human hearts:

The blossom swells in the bud, the leaves
still hide inside the sprout, the note
in the cuckoo’s throat
anticipated now but not yet heard.
If Love lays hold of his bow now, just two days
of practice will do; he’ll win the world.

C, p. 40.

The last poem in the sequence is also by Rājaśekhara. Curiously enough, it is entitled “Poem Against the Classic Sanskrit Similes”. So, to begin with, this is a poem that speaks of resources characteristic of Sanskrit poetry; it is metapoetic inasmuch as it becomes self-reflexive in a way. The poem is articulated around two clearly differentiated parts: the former consists of a chain of five images crystallizing the beloved’s beauty, and the latter comes as an intellectual and ironic resolution to the preceding lines.

Where her face is seen, no mention is made of the moon.
Against her skin, the gold grows wan.
If a man’s eye meet with hers, his thought is not of waterlilies.
Seeing her smile, first pressing of moonlight seems stale.
Her brow draws back like Love’s bow – though more beautiful.
... But of course, it is well known,
the god would not have thought her
with tautologies.

C, p. 40.

The system of contrasts upon which the imagery is cumulatively built in the first five verse lines matches traits of the beloved’s beauty with some natural element to which it is traditionally compared in Sanskrit similes: face-moon, skin-gold, eyes-waterlilies, smile-

⁹⁷ D.H.H. Ingalls, *ibid.*, p. 28.

moonlight, brow-love's bow. The paradoxical dimension inherent in the poem is precisely that, even if it is intended as a refusal or deconstruction of the set formulae and similes characteristic of Sanskrit poetry – highly stylized and regularized over centuries of attentive craftsmanship on the part of so many poets –, the author is ultimately making use of the same similes in a way. Not only is the beloved's beauty superior to nature and precious things in every single way, but god's act of creation would have been redundant if he had "thought her / with tautologies." In other words, her beauty stands no comparison to anything else in Nature, as it is precious and unique in itself.



II · Leopardi's "L'Infinito": *The Call of Eternity*

"Antistrophe from Leopardi"⁹⁸ is a translation of Giacomo Leopardi's well-known lyric poem entitled "L'Infinito".⁹⁹ Born on June 29, 1798, in Recanati, in the Papal States, Leopardi is a renowned Italian poet, scholar, and philosopher, and one of the great writers in the history of the world literature of the 19th century. A precocious child of noble but insensitive parents, Leopardi quickly mastered several classical and modern languages on his own. At the age of 16 he had independently learnt Greek, Latin, and several modern languages. And here the thought inevitably occurs: Bringham, a lover of languages himself, both human and non-human, must have admired Leopardi's untiring devotion to human knowledge and languages, which ruined his health and sight over long periods in his lifetime. So Leopardi was not only endowed with a special sensibility, but also with an immense, overwhelming erudition that pervades and informs his writing. Among his most fundamental works are a verse collection entitled *Canzoni* (1824); an enlarged collection of poems called *Versi* (1826); *Operette morali* (1827), an influential philosophical exposition; and *I Canti* (1831), a masterpiece of superb lyric poetry that has been revisited time and again by modern criticism and poetry. His inner suffering and solitude, his existential pain and frustrated hopes found their best outlet in his poetry, characterized by a rare lyric intensity, by polished and brilliant linguistic surfaces, and by what looks like an effortless musicality. "L'Infinito", the poem Bringham has chosen to translate for publication in *Cadastre*, is one of his finest poems and unsurpassed achievements. Doubtless, Leopardi was a man of talent and genius. He died at an early age, when he was only 39, on June 14, 1837, in Naples. His death meant a great loss to humanity. Had he lived longer, he might have produced great works of art for sure.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ "Antistrophe from Leopardi" was also published in *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* (Boston) ns 1.4 (1973/1974): 561-575, in a sequence entitled "Eight Poems and Translations", comprising a revised excerpt from "The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods", "Strophe from Sophocles", "Herakleitos", "The Petelia Tablet", "Four Glyphs", "Isthmian", "A Short History", and "Antistrophe from Leopardi". Bringham's version was then published, together with two more pieces, "Poem about Crystal" and "The Poet, Having at Last Encountered the Muse", under the title "Two poems and one translation" in *Quarry* 4 (Spring 1974): 33-34. It was reprinted in B.67, C.10 and C.22.

⁹⁹ Leopardi probably wrote this poem in the winter of 1819. It was published in Bologna in his collection *Versi* (1826), together with "Alla luna", "La sera del dì di festa", "Il sogno", and "La vita solitaria" under the title "Idillii" (the poem entitled "Lo spavento notturno" was later excluded from this sequence). This is the original Italian text: "Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle, / e questa siepe, che da tanta parte / dell'ultimo horizonte il guardo esclude. / Ma sedendo e mirando, interminati / spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani / silenzi, e profondissima quiete / io nel pensier mi fingo; ove per poco / il cor non si spaura. E come il vento / odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello / infinito silenzio a questa voce / vo comparando: e mi sovvien l'eterno, / e le morte stagioni, e la presente / e viva, e il suon di lei. Così tra questa / immensità s'annega il pensier mio: / e il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare."

¹⁰⁰ See the entry on 'Giacomo Leopardi' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica Global Edition*, vol. 25, pp. 9784-9785, for further bio-biographical information.

Upon closer inspection, Bringhurst's translation of the original text turns to be not a literal rendering of Leopardi's poem, but rather an intelligent version in English. And yet, much of the lyrical intensity and profundity of thought of the Italian text have been preserved or improved upon in Bringhurst's rendering. The comparison of their differences is full of fascinations. Again, the indisputable master, Ezra Pound, had set the example and the path to follow with his numerous translations.¹⁰¹ Surprisingly enough, he wrote a poem entitled "Her Monument, the Image Cut Thereon", which is a translation *from the Italian of Leopardi* (included in the section "Poems of 1908-1911" in the 1990 New Directions edition of *Personae. The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*). Somewhere else, apropos of Italian literature, Pound praises Leopardi in these terms: "It is possible that only Cavalcanti and Leopardi can lift rhetoric into the realm of poetry. With them one never knows the border line. In Leopardi there is oral sincerity, such fire of sombre pessimism, that one can not carp or much question his manner."¹⁰² That "Antistrophe from Leopardi" belongs to a phase in his literary career at which Bringhurst was in search after his own poetic voice is demonstrated by the fact that it would not be reprinted or included again in any other subsequent book by the author. What seems to be crucial is the gesture itself: in translating a masterpiece from an acknowledged master, Bringhurst is doing an exercise of intellectual gymnastics in prosody, exploring the sound system of a language other than the mother tongue, straining the expressive possibilities of English to convey what was originally conceived in a completely different language.

Unlike the original poem, which consists of 15 hendecasyllables, Bringhurst's "Antistrophe from Leopardi" consists of only 14 verse lines. Here is the translation in full:

This hill has been standing in my heart a long time,
thick with brush that cuts off much of the horizon.
I sit here, I look out and I think about things –
about long spaces beyond this place, and silence
that is superhuman; about the deep quiet
that happens sometimes in the heart and that almost
replaces the pulse.

Whenever there is wind here
I compare its pronunciation of the leaves
to all that silence. And whenever I do that
I think of eternity and the centuries
of the dead as if here living with the present
and the wind's sound. Then my thought drowns, but I find it
sweet, like sweet water, going down in that great sea.

C, p. 42.

The three opening verse lines in Leopardi's poem: "*Sempre caro mi fu quest'ermo colle, / e questa siepe, che da tanta parte / dell'ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude*" are condensed into Bringhurst's two opening lines. Significantly enough, the adjectives modifying *hill* ("ermo colle") and *horizon* ("ultimo orizzonte") in the source text have been omitted in the target text. Bringhurst has stripped the poem of unnecessary ornamental adjectives. The much more naked result is closer to our sensibility. The first part of the poem thus depicts with a

¹⁰¹ Pound translated poems by Cavalcanti, one of the Italian poets of the so-called *dolce stil nuovo* in the 14th century; his poem entitled "Rome" is translated from the French of Joachim du Bellay; and his "Translations and Adaptations from Heine" are translated from the German of Heinrich Heine. Needless to say, he also translated from classical Greek, Latin, Provençal, Japanese, and Chinese authors.

¹⁰² See Pound's essay entitled "The Renaissance", included in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, edited by T. S. Eliot, London: Faber and Faber, 1954, p. 217.

surprising economy of elemental brush strokes the natural scene that prompts the poetic voice's *itinerarium in mentis*. The use of the demonstrative *this* with such an intense deictic value preserves much of the force of the original, which strongly relies on the repetitive use of deictics (*questo, questa, quello*) to mark the *hic-et-nunc* immediacy of the natural landscape – which is central to the spiritual experience the poetic subject is going through. The Romantic notion that significant experience occurs in isolated moments of great intensity is already subtly announced in the first two lines of the poem. We are about to participate in a transient or evanescent moment of revelation.

The second part of the poem (lines 3-7) is about infinite space, as one of the basic Kantian categories which, together with time, constitute the essential framework where human experience takes place. While the occurrence of the first-person personal pronoun is procrastinated in the original text, the poetic *I* enters the poem's universe early in line 2 in Bringham's poem. In this sense, the Italian expressions "*ma sedendo e mirando*" (line 4) and "*io nel pensier mi fingo*" (line 7) are transmuted into something completely different in the English version: "*I sit here, I look out and I think about things.*" The voice is probably closer to a modern sensibility in the three breath pauses it takes to utter the whole verse line. The emphasis is characteristic of the Romantic intimation that the self may well experience a sense of spiritual communion with Nature, which is the true home to humankind. In the presence of the sublime grandeur of the universe – as seen from the top of the little hill where the perceiving *I* that does the sensing sits and looks at the vast expanses before it –, the poetic self dwells on spiritual heights unknown to most of us, thinking about infinite spaces and a sort of silence of a superhuman nature. In such a heightened state of consciousness, the mind is brought to a state of quiet expectation that almost paralyses the beating heart. The reader witnesses a privileged moment in time when the poetic subject is experiencing something endowed with the texture of transcendence, as if some revelation were at hand, as if some transforming evidence were encoded in the landscape, in the book of Nature. In the realm of the natural world there are *signatura rerum*, as if Nature asked to be read like a book. There seems to be a code other than the purely linguistic one characteristic of human languages: the code of the objects in the world, pointing always to something beyond their stubborn physicality.

In fact, the third part of the poem (lines 8-10), which serves as a transition forward to the fourth part, explores the semantic layers of one of the *signatura rerum* to be found in the landscape – the wind. In much the same way that *die Sprache spricht*, the wind seeks to communicate a message of its own through its own speech organs, which are the trees and the vast spaces in Nature. While the original Italian words ("*E come il vento / odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello / infinito silenzio a questa voce / vo comparando*") highlight the condition of the wind as just one more natural force that happens to rustle the leaves of trees, the English version emphasizes precisely the willful action on the part of the wind when making the leaves utter Nature's words: "*Whenever there is wind here / I compare its pronunciation of the leaves / to all that silence.*" The interplay between the voice of the leaves speaking and infinite silence is expressive of a world of opposites. Again the use of demonstratives is deliberate: there is a most eloquent contrast between *questa voce* and *quello silenzio* in Italian, as between *wind here* and *all that silence* in English.

The fourth movement of the poem (lines 10-13) speaks of infinite time and departs in a magnificent manner from the original text. Thus, the circle begun in the second part is completed. The moment with a feel of transcendence that started unfolding in lines 3-7 is made possible by an awareness that all planes of time are somehow coexistent and simultaneous then and there. The utterances of the wind have summoned "eternity" and "the centuries of the dead", and, by a curious alchemy, transmuted them into a never-

ending present. After all, that seems to be the literal meaning of eternity – time that does not quite move toward a definitive end, or time that cancels time itself. The past, the present and the future are all brought together into a gyrating vortex that annihilates History as we know it: a chain of events linked by an inescapable cause-effect relationship. What is left is the fundamental Romantic tenet that, in those rare moments when the self is confronted with Nature, the intimation occurs that it might be possible just for a while to live in a realm of existence beyond time and space, where a transcendent experience of revelation, epiphany, or sudden insight into the nature of things occurs in a completely unexpected manner.

In the fifth part, the closing lines of the poem, which also depart from the original, offer a synthesis and resolution to the well-wrought, tightly-woven lyric. In an act of spiritual and emotional surrender, the self vanishes, drowns and confounds itself in the waters of the great sea, which might be both literal and figurative. Water is the primordial matter out of which all living things are made, after all, so that it comes as no surprise that the self should willingly dissolve into sweet water. While the original reads “*il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare*,” the English version resorts to the use of repetition to evoke the sense of giving oneself up over completely to a state of heightened consciousness that leads ultimately to the unveiling of a transcendent truth: we humans are but a tiny, irreplaceable part of the universe.



III · François Villon: “Le Debat du Cuer et du Corps”

“Le Debat du Cuer et du Corps de François Villon”, a translation from François Villon’s original poem in French, the opening line of which Bringhurst uses as an epigraph, was first published as C.4 in *Concerning Poetry* (Bellingham, Washington) 6:2 (Fall 1973): 1214. Under the title “Three Translations”, it was also published shortly afterwards together with “The Ode of Imr el-Qais” (a translation from Arabic) and “Je suis François, dont il me poise”, translated from the French of Villon too, in *Contemporary Literature in Translation* (Mission, British Columbia) 16 (Fall 1973): 1114, 1920, 1921. Bringhurst’s rendering of Villon’s poem is quite a literal rendering of the original source text, and a wonderful translation in that it preserves the colloquial tone and naturalness characteristic of the French author, who lived at the end of an epoch – the waning of the Middle Ages. François Villon was born in Paris in 1431 and is known to have died after 1463, when he was condemned to banishment from Paris owing to a prolonged criminal history. Despite this dark side to his life, despite his having led a life of criminal excesses and dissipation that brought him several prison sentences in his lifetime for a number of charges, he remains one of the greatest French lyric poets. Among his chief works are *Le Lais* (also known as *Le Petit Testament*), *Le Grand Testament*, and various ballads, chansons, and rondeaux. It is precisely one of his most well-known ballads, “Le Debat du Cuer et du Corps”, that Bringhurst translates for publication in *Cadastré*.¹⁰³

Why should have Bringhurst chosen the French author for an exercise in translation? The question turns to be critical in this context. As early as 1908, in *A Lume*

¹⁰³ François Villon’s poem entitled *Le Lais* (*The Legacy*), otherwise known as *Le Petit Testament* by editors, is also some sort of subterranean presence in Bringhurst’s *The Stonecutter’s Horses* (1979), on Petrarch’s last will and testament. In a similar way, Villon’s work takes the form of a list of ‘bequests’, ironically conceived, made to friends and acquaintances before leaving them and the city.

Spento, his first poetry book, Ezra Pound had published “A Villonau: Ballad of the Gibbet, or The Song of the Sixth Companion”, a translation from Villon’s chanson opening “Frères humains qui après nous vivez”. Furthermore, Pound praised Villon’s poetic achievement in a number of essays.¹⁰⁴ So, once again, the indisputable master set a precedent. But there is much more to it. The romantic notion of Villon’s life as that of the ‘accursed poet’ (a conception reinforced by Arthur Rimbaud in the 19th century) has been challenged by modern critical studies. Above all, Villon was a man concerned with producing serious literature: texts were made to yield literal, allegorical, moral, and spiritual meanings. That Villon was a man of culture familiar with the traditional forms of poetry and possessing an acute sense of the past is evident from the poems themselves. Thus, he informs his own work with depth of thought, meaning, and universal significance. In this, Bringhurst shares strong affinities with him. The paradox still lies in the criminal history of Villon, a talented man who seems to have wasted much time and energy on enterprises of dubious morality. In poems like those included in *Le Testament* he reviews his life and expresses his horror of sickness, prison, old age, and his fear of death. With poignant regret, he broods on his wasted youth and squandered talent, as he recreates the atmosphere of the Paris underworld he knew firsthand, the taverns where he spent much of his time with his old friends in drunkenness and dissipation.

Bringhurst must have admired the ironic detachment, the unsentimental and scathing tone with which Villon composes most of his poems. He is a poet of genius, the author of a work charged with meaning and great emotional form. Villon’s technical ability is indeed that of a virtuoso. His poetry makes a direct unsentimental appeal to our emotions, while, at the same time, it displays a remarkable control of rhyme and reveals a disciplined composition that suggests a deep concern with form and not just random inspiration. The burning sincerity of his poetry (stemming from the fidelity to genuine, painful, personal experiences) was the inspiration of a poetry concerned with shattered illusions, the regrets for a lost past, the bitterness of love betrayed, the hideous fear of death. The impending presence of death just round the corner is in fact a recurrent theme in his work and his life. In 1463 the Parliament condemned him to be hanged and strangled, but his sentence was eventually commuted to banishment from Paris for ten years. Nothing was ever heard from him again after that. It is not known when or where he died, but his work remains an immortal contribution to world literature.¹⁰⁵

In “Le Debat du Cuer et du Corps de François Villon”, the arrangement of stanzas seems to follow a determined order, certainly not the result of happy accident. This is an enlightening example of the kind of deeply moving poetry Villon is capable of writing, in which he speaks with marvellous directness of the existential paradoxes the self is usually confronted with. The poem takes the form of a dialogue or medieval *debat*, where two characters discuss some transcendent issue concerning morality. Here the poetic voice we

¹⁰⁴ See *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. by T. S. Eliot (1954). In “A Retrospect”, he writes: “If you want the gist of the matter go to Sappho, Catullus, Villon, Heine when he is in the vein...” (p. 7). In “How to Read”, he insists that “After Villon and for several centuries, poetry can be considered as *floritura*, as an efflorescence, almost an effervescence, and without any new roots.” (p. 28) In “The Renaissance”, he writes: “... one could, at a pinch, do without nearly all the French poets save Villon. If a man knew Villon and the *Sea-farer* and Dante, and that one scrap of Ibycus, he would, I think, never be able to be content with a sort of pretentious and decorated verse [...], or with a certain sort of formal verbalism...” (p. 216). In fact, T. S. Eliot, in the Introduction to the volume, claims that “Pound performed a great service (especially in *The Spirit of Romance*) for the English-speaking reader in emphasising the greatness of Villon” (p. xiv). According to Pound, Swinburne made magnificent adaptations from Villon (see the essay entitled “Swinburne versus his Biographers”, p. 292).

¹⁰⁵ See the entry on ‘François Villon’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Global Edition*, vol. 29, pp. 17478-17480, for further basic bio-bibliographical information on François Villon’s life and works.

hear throughout the poem is split in two: that of the body and that of the heart. Each of them embraces a completely different notion of what the right lifestyle should be like. The voice of the heart is that of the conscience or inner *daimon*, which supervises and censures all the actions undertaken by the body, namely the outward, perishable shell of human beings. The poem is arranged into five stanzas or movements. In the first one, the heart criticizes the body's *carefree ways*, which have a negative impact on the heart itself. This is the heart speaking:

Your heart,
suspended, flayed
on a frayed thread.
Strength, substance, lifeblood
gone
when I see you so –
lonely, withdrawn,
in the corner like a covered dog.

C, p. 43.

The stanza closes with a refrain which is repeated over and over again at the end of each stanza: the heart refuses to say anything else, while the body insists on its determination to manage and resist.

The second movement is concerned with age, with the passing of time and its devastating effects on the body, and with the inevitable folly inherent in the human race throughout the history of humankind. When asked what its plan is, the heart replies movingly with the words "*To be an honest man*", which have a special resonance in the face of Villon's criminal history and vital experiences which ended up in banishment from medieval Paris. Thus, the third movement of the poem is an entreaty for the body to react sensibly and leave folly aside. The heart once again condemns his stupidity: "*Either your head is hard as a pebble, / or you hold that this / misfortune is better than honor.*" (C, p. 45.). The body's response is one of utter nihilism and reminiscent of the medieval intimation that humans live *in haec valle lacrimarum* and that an afterlife of bliss and eternal joy awaits us all in Heaven. Therefore, death will positively put an end to human pain and suffering.

In the fourth part of the poem, the body broods on ill fortune and the fierce determinism that seems to govern human lives. In its turn, the heart embraces freedom, convinced that the power of free will can cope with all obstacles in life. We are here in the presence of deeply moving poetry, which reveals Villon's deep compassion for all suffering humanity, and tells unforgettably of humans' capacity to overcome all sorts of contingencies that constrain liberty and free will. Bringhurst manages to capture this moving quality by means of a colloquial tone and language that appeals to our modern sensibility. In fact, Pound advised young poets to care, above all, for the beauty of the original, and to convey the sense of the original to readers. To that purpose, the essential prerequisite is perhaps to be absorbed in the subject matter of the original, so that a new beauty is created in the process of translating from one language to another:

That's ridiculous!
You're master of these things
and behave like a slave.
See what Solomon wrote in his scroll:
"A wise man," he says,
"has power over planets,

strength beyond the planetary pull.”

C, p. 45.

The last part of the poem is about the body’s instinct of survival and its determination to live in spite of the disheartening mediocrity of reality. Again, Pound claimed that “the only thing worth bringing over is the beauty of the original”.¹⁰⁶

Don’t you want to live?
I pray for the strength to do so.
Then you have to...
What?
Follow your conscience. Read
unceasingly.
Read what?
Read metaphysics.
Stay away from fools.
I’ll see to it.
Now don’t forget.
I’ll tie your words like string
around my finger.
Don’t procrastinate. Don’t wait
for further damage.
Now I’ll say no more.
I’ll manage.

C, p. 46.

Here is a programmatic path for the would-be poet. “*Follow your conscience. Read / unceasingly*” seems a direct injunction addressed to the aspiring poet himself. “*Don’t procrastinate*” are words of special import in that they remind him that there is no time to waste. Bringhurst is truly an accomplished translator, as this version of Villon’s poem makes clear. With great mastery, he captures the sense of ease and the naturalness of language of the original text.



IV · “Lullaby for Brendan”

In the second section of *Cadastré* there are two more poems, “A Portrait” and “Lullaby for Brendan” which have nothing to do, at least at first sight, with paying homage to the literary masters of the past. “Lullaby for Brendan” is a short lyric poem which has the nature and perfection of crystal. Below the poem there is musical notation on a pentagram accompanying the original text. In the very first opening line of the poem is the straight statement that the “*wind is the world’s voice*”; this is the starting point for the elegant unfolding of the whole composition. The six verse lines of which the piece consists have the quiet, incantatory cadences of a lullaby, probably owing to the rhythmical patterns induced almost onomatopoeically by alliteration (*wind-world, singers-songs, winds-within, moving-many*), by abrupt run-on lines (enjambment) and by the insistent repetition of key noun phrases throughout the composition. Hence, “A Lullaby” evokes its subject matter by an almost incantatory use of rhythm:

¹⁰⁶ See Pound’s essay entitled “Early Translators of Homer”, included in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, edited by T. S. Eliot, London: Faber and Faber, 1954, p. 271.

Wind is the world's voice but there are
very many singers, many
songs, many singers, and the
great still wind that is the
sky has many winds within it
moving, moving many ways.

C, p. 41.

In the end, the whole sky (*"the great still wind"*), the whole of Nature, is alive with many winds that seek to sing songs of knowledge, to sing a comforting lullaby to humankind in its entirety. The sounds that Nature utters constitute *the speech of being* in the multitudinous forms it assumes in the universe. Hence, reading this little poem we are reminded that language itself is a form of spontaneous poetry, emerging from the very texture of the things that make up the universe – out of the earth, the sky, the trees and stones, and the wind, which is pure air in motion. If in "Antistrophe from Leopardi" the rustling wind utters profound words when passing through the leaves of trees, once again the wind has got a voice of its own in this original lullaby. The thought occurs that, had he had the chance, Herder would have enjoyed reading this poem very much for obvious reasons to the Romantic sensibility. In 1771 the German poet-philosopher published *Ursprung der Sprache* (*The Origin of Language*), a landmark work in which he postulates the theory that language is a living organism that emerges from all living (human and non-human) things. Herder "imagines the first vocabulary collected from the sounds of the world."¹⁰⁷ "From every sounding *being* echoed its name."¹⁰⁸ In the face of the sublime grandeur of the universe, it is the poet's role to transcribe what the book of Nature says (*signatura rerum*) into words that the man in the street might understand and enjoy: "And hearing the speech of all things and reading their signatures, the bard composes on their behalf utterances pervaded by their rhythms."¹⁰⁹ Thus, the first language would have been basically an affair of sounds, not of abstract concepts or ideas (*the affinities of ideas are with writing*, says Kenner), which partly accounts for poets' concern with sounds and music when composing memorable poetic works. Sound perpetuates in some ways the original impulse out of which poetry emerged in an attempt to record a tiny part of the beauty of the world. Once again, Hugh Kenner gives us the essential clue for a proper understanding of the Romantic/Modernist enterprise:

The Romantic quest for purity, the one Pound's generation inherited, took the form of a tracing backward. [...] Herder [...] imagined early man naming sounding things with the sounds they made, and naming non-sounding things with cries prompted out of some *sensorium commune* where all senses intertwine. [...] And was this first language, asks Herder, "eine Sammlung von Elementen der Poesie?" – "A Dictionary of the Soul, at once mythology and wondrous epic of the actions and voices of all being! Thus a stable mythopoeia for the passions and the mind! – What more is poetry?"¹¹⁰

To think of languages in constant change, almost as living organisms in a state of perpetual flux or metamorphosis, was an intellectual achievement of Comparative Philology in the 19th century. To think of languages as a work in progress endowed with a life of their own means to acknowledge that people speak them, sing them, think in them. The philological enterprise of the late 18th and 19th centuries was an immense effort on

¹⁰⁷ Bringhurst's notion of 'echolocation' as formulated in his Foreword to *The Calling* (1995) has something to do with Herder's notion. We shall turn to this concept later in our dissertation.

¹⁰⁸ Herder's words are quoted by Hugh Kenner in *The Pound Era*, p. 106.

¹⁰⁹ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 106.

¹¹⁰ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 109.

the part of our ancestors to find out the primordial energies of Language supreme, “to recover the deepest memories of the tribe.”¹¹¹ It was made possible by the emergence of an historical awareness inherent in the Romantic sensibility. In the romantic quest for an ancient purity, for a sort of primitive wisdom and the very roots of what makes humans *human*, Herder and the later Romantic poets sought evidence of ancient men giving voice to Nature in their communion with the natural forces in the universe. But it is our contention – and Robert Pinky’s, in his groundbreaking essay *The Situation of Poetry* – that there is no such a dramatic shift or discontinuity between Romanticism and Modernism after all, although the latter seems to move toward a new, more objective focus in its claim of impersonality and craftsmanship, and in its rejection of sentiment and overtly personal emotion.

In this sense, Bringhurst is also a Romantic bard in that he gives tongue to impassioned communion with the earth and the sky, with stones, mountains and trees, and with all living creatures in his poems.¹¹² This is probably one of the reasons why Bringhurst’s poetry (and Pound’s poetry before him, particularly *The Cantos*) resonates with so many voices – those of the ancestors and those of Nature –, which are but one single voice, that of the sky, which “*has many winds within it / moving, moving many ways.*” The many winds are the many languages that have produced the many songs that are the many poems that have managed to perpetuate the ancient wisdom of our ancestors. Reading Bringhurst’s poetry we are reminded time and again of how marvellously constant humanity is after all. For language is a most precious instrument, the natural vehicle whereby tradition and knowledge, and the best that has been thought and felt by our fellow human beings, are preserved and passed on from one generation to another throughout history.



V · “A Portrait”

“A Portrait” is a peculiar kind of poem. The language is direct, spontaneous, and conversational, as if this piece were a bit of living discourse. The reader might be well under the impression that the poetic voice is making a confession in the first person, hesitating at some points. Though it might look a bit conventional, upon closer inspection, we come to learn that this poem hides a wealth of meaning: it is literal and figurative, a poem with a narrative strand to it and also a meta-poem, and a piece in which we get to hear two distinct voices. At first, it seems that this piece concerns the portrait (not a self-portrait) of a leaf in the form of a metal replica. The poetic persona speaks of this leaf as being a gift he gave a woman. Though it was a gold leaf, simple enough to “*hold two pearls,*” it turned out to be no more than “*a high-class cardboard cutout / of a candle flame.*” And yet he intended it to be a faithful reproduction of a real leaf, as if mimesis (or the faithful representation of reality) were of the essence:

I meant, however, as I say, only
to give her a metal leaf – that is
a piece of metal anyone would take to be at least

¹¹¹ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 110.

¹¹² Consider, in particular, such ambitious book-length poems as *Tzibalem’s Mountain* (1982), *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986), *Conversations with a Toad* (1987) and *New World Suite N° 3* (2005), which we shall analyze in depth in the following chapters.

SECTION III

Satire, Irony and Occasional Verses

I · “The Poet, Having at Last Encountered the Muse”

Nil novum sub sole. Aspirant poets have to cope with a number of difficulties and obstacles, including the literary establishment itself and the indifference or incomprehension on the part of critics and editors. In the early decades of the 20th century, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound sought to procure an audience for the new kind of poetry they were producing at the time, by means of articles sent to influential papers, lectures, and manifestos intended to attract the public's attention to works that deserved close attention. Doubtless, little magazines, journals and periodicals, scholars' critical attention, and printing houses and publishers do play an essential role not only in getting new works across to the right target audience, but also in sanctioning certain works and including them in the canon. This is the core essence of the third section of *Cadastre*, which comprises seven poems of a very different nature: “The Poet, Having at Last Encountered the Muse”, “A Document”, “Poem of the Sexton's Tinnitus”, “Three Ways of Looking for the Northwest Passage in the Shipyards of Bristol and Rouen”, “Words to Be Sung into a Piece of Paper at 216 Beacon Street”, “Three Epigrams”, and “The Rhythms of Irene”. What all of them seem to have in common is their satiric and ironic tone, as well as their being occasional verses, poems emerging from the vital experiences of the poet at their particular time of composition, as the very long titles of the poems themselves suggest at first sight. To a certain extent, most of them are of a metaliterary nature, for they explore different aspects related to the act of literary creation. Echoes of the voices of the acknowledged literary masters of the past – W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens – are heard time and again in between the lines, as we shall try to prove in what follows.

“The Poet, Having at Last Encountered the Muse” is a piece of harsh, ironically conceived invective against a lady that must have criticized the author's work in some way or other. In its tone it is, *mutatis mutandi*, strongly reminiscent of Pound's “Portrait d'une Femme”, “The Garden” and “The Bath Tub”, which were intended as a criticism of the emotional anaemia of the decadent bourgeoisie at the turn of the century, though these pieces were more overtly critical and sarcastic. To begin with, the title of the composition is most ironic and eloquent. There is no poetic persona here taking the place of the flesh-and-blood poet: it is the poet himself who utters these words full of bile upon encountering the muse. Traditionally, the muses are known to bring poets inspiration and a special ability to produce memorable art works of beauty and truth. However, the muse the poet encounters here looks more like a savage demon than an ethereal creature dwelling on heights unknown to us. She is said to have “*ladled thirst / like milkmaids out of the buckets of their eyes / and tried to make me drink it down.*” The most salient formal devices, the recurrent alliteration (*lord-lady, pursed-puckered, belly-bloat-burst*) and insistent rhyme patterns on key words (*pursed-nursed-burst-cursed, down-crown*) are brought to the service of ridicule and heartless derision:

I'll rhyme her ass until it's pursed
and puckered like a mouth that's nursed
a cactus into a flower twice her size
and wear that blossom like a crown.

C, p. 50.

The poem closes with a benediction in the last stanza, which spells a scathing curse on the lady in question and her progeny: “*O may her belly bloat and burst / and her progeny all be ugly, cursed / with critics, bibliographers and flies.*” The scatological connotations are obvious here. Pound’s words against the establishment’s absurd conventions ring somehow in the background: “... all great art, all good art, goes against the grain of contemporary taste”, and “Defy the subversive pressure of commercial advantage, and of the mediocre spirit which is the bane and hidden terror of democracy.”¹¹³



II · “A Document” and “Poem of the Sexton’s Tinnitus”

The two poems “A Document” and “Poem of the Sexton’s Tinnitus” have striking affinities with some of Pound’s early poems¹¹⁴ addressed to critics who proved unfavourable to the kind of new, hard (as opposed to weak and sentimental) poetry he was striving to produce at that time. Both poems are closely connected to one another in that they deal with the fact that Bringhurst’s contribution has been rejected by a Chestnut Tree Review, and both use a façade of what looks like arrogant indifference toward the editor so as to protect a literary enterprise at once vulnerable and precious. Doubtless, Bringhurst’s harsh tone here is brought to the defence of a grave dedication to poetry. Endowed with a spirit of complete personal independence and intellectual hunger, Bringhurst positions himself against the mediocrity of the times and the present commercial system of publication. Like his predecessor Pound, he makes courageous statements regarding the conspiracy of ignorance and interest against thriving great literature.

As the very title suggests, “A Document” purports to be an ironic, if faithful, record of a letter the poet receives from the Chestnut Tree Review (possibly an ironical name) informing him that the material sent by the poet “*does not / meet the needs of / the Chestnut Tree Review.*” In its use of short lines, the poem is strongly reminiscent of William Carlos Williams (consider poems like “This Is Just to Say” or “The Red Wheel-Barrow”). The opening stanza tessellates four well-chosen, resonant adjectives to give an idea of the unnecessary paraphernalia and vain self-complacency characteristic of certain periodicals and magazines: “Under the *overweight, parachute-shaped / deciduous* signet, Mr Smith’s / *glossy* ink gaped.” (C, p. 51.). That the review should take its name from a deciduous tree is not the result of happy accident, as deciduous trees lose their leaves in the autumn: the

¹¹³ See Pound’s essay entitled “The Renaissance”, included in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, edited by T. S. Eliot, London: Faber and Faber, 1954, pp. 223 and 224.

¹¹⁴ For instance, early in his career, Pound’s thirst for a sense of kinship with fellow writers that dwell on similar heights is palpable in “In Durance” (1907): “And I am homesick / After my own kind that know, and feel / And have some breath for beauty and the arts.” His intellectual superiority (arrogance) is also manifest in “And Thus in Nineveh”: “I / Am here a poet, that doth drink of life / As lesser men drink wine”. In “Tenzone” (included in *Lustra*) Pound presents the case against the literary establishment and says: “I beg you, my friendly critics, / Do not set about to procure me an audience. / I mate with my free kind upon the crags.” In “Salutation the Second” (also in *Lustra*), Pound celebrates the value of his own poems: “Go, little naked and impudent songs, / Go with a light foot!” In “Ité” (published in *Lustra*), convinced of the intrinsic value of his poems, Pound writes: “Go, my songs, seek your praise from the young and from the intolerant, / Move among the lovers of perfection alone.” There are other such poems (“Coda”, “Famam Librosque Cano”, “Further Instructions”, “Monumentum Aere, Etc.”), in which Pound encourages his own poems to go naked and impudent, against all forms of oppression, against the absurd conventions set by the literary establishment. “Dum Capitolium Scandet” (from *Lustra*) is especially illuminating in this context as it addresses his future heirs, who are secretly and invisibly united by their love of naked language, beauty and perfection: “Fruit of my seed, / O my unnameable children. / Know then that I loved you from afore-time, / Clear speakers, naked in the sun, untrammelled.” Bringhurst is no doubt among Pound’s progeny.

suggestion is that the periodical might well be doomed to failure beforehand. That the editor should have such a run-of-the-mill surname seems to be no coincidence either.

The second and third stanzas incorporate all the conventional set expressions of formal letters: “*We thank you / for your interest in...*” and “*After careful consideration / we have decided...*” In its telegraphic economy, the text has the feel of formal, well-written prose, but it is devoid of life-blood or a force of its own. The last stanza echoes and ridicules this excess of formality and decorum by recourse to irreverent words resonant with phallic connotations: “*With careful desideration / one is guided, / so subtly, to / “meet the needs of” / the Chestnut Tree Review.*” (C, p. 51.) *Desideration*, a pun deriving from the combination of *desire* and *consideration*, seems to point to sexual desire. Of course, the word game lies also in the figurative meaning the expression “meet the needs of” has in the third stanza, as opposed to the literal meaning it takes on in the last stanza when written in inverted commas. On closer inspection, the word *gaped* at the end of the first stanza makes more sense once the end of the poem is reached. The subtlety of the criticism levelled against the periodical has been sustained by purely linguistic means and intelligence.

In the companion poem entitled “Poem of the Sexton’s Tinnitus”, Bringhurst rejects the transient attractions of easy success, the *clatter of aphorism, musical belles lettres and political gongorism* in favour of something grander and more sublime: a poetry closer to harsh reality and therefore more likely to be durable. It is no surprise that the integrity of his enterprise and vocation should prevent him from participating in the *electrified ding-dong* of the literary scene favoured by certain periodicals and editors. The use of the Latin word *tinnitus* (meaning literally ‘metallic sound’) in the title of a poem concerned with literary immortality recalls the practice of Ezra Pound in such early poems as “Erat Hora” and “Horae Beatae Inscriptio”, which were born out of very specific circumstances and described transient experiences happening just once in the course of fleeting time. Pound’s early poetry books are, in fact, full of polyglot titles in several classical and modern languages, as an eloquent symptom that the whole compass of tradition is his spiritual and intellectual province. The epigraph of the poem lifted from E. A. Poe reads: “What a world of solemn thought their monody compels!” The words refer to editors like the Mr Smith of the Chestnut Tree Review, who cannot discriminate between *beautiful and lethal*, to quote Bringhurst’s translation from the French of Villon. So once again “*there is further / communication / from under the Chestnut*”, the poet informs us:

“Nothing here,”
says the editor’s letter,
“rings the bell from you.”

C, p. 52.

But the poet interprets the words as being “*a resonant clue / to eventual success.*” The master, Pound, is invoked again as being an authority on these instruments (those used by the literary establishment) that are dated after three thousand years sustaining the ancient tradition of serious, muscular poetry have elapsed. Great poetry has tirelessly sought to reach to future readers, lovers of perfection only, and posterity, in search of a sacred niche on Parnassus. In pursuit of an idiosyncratic, personal literary voice of his own, the poet does not give himself up to the “*glory of celestial / cuckoos and glockenspiels*” which even European poetry seems to have fallen prey to. He despises the “*new bugles and sousaphones*” and the “*insistent / gable and groans / of elves / in the rust-proof barns*” that “*underlie the orchestral / big deals / and boondoggles.*” (C, p. 54.) The last stanza is worth quoting in full, as the poet,

‘polyarchitectonical metamellifluphors’ (from *metaphor* + *mellifluous*) and ‘polyetceteras’ suggest. The poet plays the role of a *chef de cuisine* who combines words in exotic ways (making use of figures of speech) to convey a message of his own instead of cooking dishes out of the conventional ingredients we usually find in a kitchen. As a result, this kind of poetry satisfies the immediate needs and voracious hunger of the human appetite, it “*soothes the savage beast*,” but it does not lead to any sort of transcendental teaching about the true essence of things. Its final destination is bodily purgation or oblivion, as the pun on *corpus* (a word of Latin origin) seems to suggest: the *corpus* is, literally speaking, the body itself, and, in another regard, the whole *body* of literary works of art. The scatological connotations are clear from the last lines of the second stanza and the whole third stanza: “*But they lie, often, to say the very least, / loose, on reaching the lower intestine. / This, perhaps, is their purpose. / In the end, their apparent constitution / indicates intentional / purgation of the corpus.*” The sharp clear quality of the sounds in the poem is enhanced by the alliteration in many words (*soothe-savage, marled-multitudinous, lie-least-loose-lower, perhaps-purpose-purgation, indicates-intentional*), so that the result is a perfectly articulated aural network of sounds throughout the whole poem.

The second part of the poem is entitled “Exemplum: The Poet as Chickenfarmer”. In its haiku-like minimalism, it puts forward the conception of poetry as being a set of words embodying an altogether unassailable enigma, the unravelling of which will yield a fundamental moral lesson to be learnt by all readers. Since the times of classical antiquity, literature in general has been thought to serve a twofold purpose which has been masterfully encapsulated in the Horatian motto *docere et delectare*, that is to say: to teach and to entertain. An *exemplum* is, in fact, a piece of writing with a didactic purpose to it. The poet as chickenfarmer breeds chickens that lay eggs that are enigmas for the reader to decode. Thus, the poem consists of three little sections which are truly enigmatic, three statements which resist straightforward interpretation. The first statement is purely tautological; it communicates nothing new to the reader: “*The sun comes up. / It is round!*” If it does communicate anything at all, it is the sense of wonder experienced by the individual in the face of the sublime in Nature. The second one is illustrative of the mechanisms at work beneath a simile, even if the perfectly grammatical sentence does not make any sense at all: “*Some cows walk past me, / moaning like repentant fascists.*” The last statement makes the circle full, as it presents “*windmills turning slowly overhead.*” The overall visual pattern or composition is that of an idyllic landscape in the open air, made up of sun, cows and windmills. The mystery remains as to the fundamental message that the poet as chickenfarmer is trying to convey.

The third, last part of the poem is entitled “Encounter: The Poet as Volcano”. It presents the view that poetry could be seen as being fundamentally a matter of self-expression, of delving into the inner territories of the mind and the heart, and of allowing “*eruptions from volcanoes of the soul / like molten bone*” to come up to the surface. In this respect, and contrary to William Wordsworth’s intimation that “poetry is emotion recollected in tranquillity” (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798) and to T. S. Eliot’s statements concerning the impersonality of poetry in his groundbreaking essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, poetry is a turning loose of emotion and the unproblematic expression of a personality whose experiences can be easily traced in a reliable, transparent language which is ultimately capable of faithfully conveying one’s impressions about the feel and texture of reality. Thus, there is no sense of decorum or self-restraint on the part of the poetic voice in this view of *poetry of experience* as being *poetry as confession*:

He preaches wildness, less control,
eruptions from volcanoes of the soul

like molten bone.

A lavaflow the mouth could mold
would harden like ancient bubble gum
and we could trace the toothprints...

I roll cool agate and onyx on my tongue
to mirror the flavours that are already on it.

C, p. 58.

Needless to say, Bringhurst embraces neither of these conceptions of what great poetry should be. In his poetry he does not seek to give vent to feelings and emotions which are solely his own, based on his autobiography. The experiences of a lifetime are transmuted into something else which aspires to achieve the very condition of what is universal and atemporal. Hence his search is after a naked hard poetry (as opposed to soft, sentimental poetry), characterized by simplicity, linguistic austerity, and intellectual precision.



IV · “Words to Be Sung into a Piece of Paper at 216 Beacon Street”

“Words to Be Sung into a Piece of Paper at 216 Beacon Street” is inspired by the poem by W. B. Yeats “To Be Carved on a Stone at Ballylee”. The epigraph itself contains the two opening lines of the Irishman’s poem which serves as point of departure for the young poet’s piece. The original poem was published in Yeats’s important volume *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1920), in a limited edition of 400 copies by the Cuala Press, Churchtown, Dundrum, in the County of Dublin (Ireland). It consists of only six verse lines:

I, the poet William Yeats,
With old mill boards and sea-green slates,
And smithy work from the Gort forge,
Restored this tower for my wife George;
And may these characters remain
When all is ruin once again.¹¹⁵

The comparison between Yeats’s poem and Bringhurst’s version is full of fascinations. To begin with, both poems seem to have a strong autobiographical dimension to them, both emerge from concrete life experiences in their lifetime, and both are addressed to the poet’s beloved. In addition, they share titles that try to capture the *hic-et-nunc* experiential circumstances which gave birth to their composition. While Yeats’s title insists on the writerly dimension of poetry (these are words to be carved on stone, that is, meant to endure despite the passage of time), Bringhurst’s playful title points to the oral/aural dimension inherent in poetry (these are words to be sung into a piece of paper, which is ephemeral). According to Ezra Pound, there are three kinds of *melopoeia*: poetry meant to be recited, to be chanted, or to be sung. This short composition falls under the third

¹¹⁵ Yeats’s poem is quoted from page 24 of a special facsimile edition of *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1920), reprinted in 1970 by photo-lithography in the Republic of Ireland for the Irish University Press, Shannon, by T. M. MacGlinchey, Publisher, & Robert Hogg, Printer. The 1920s were productive years in Anglo-American Modernism. Curiously enough, 1920 also witnessed the publication of T.S. Eliot’s influential collection of essays on literature *The Sacred Wood*.

category. However, this is not an exemplification of serious poetry, nor of poetry meant to last for posterity. It looks more like a pastime, a parody, or an exercise in intellectual gymnastics. Again, hints from Pound's essays may have put the young Bringhurst on the right trail: "Be influenced by as many great artists as you can, but have the decency either to acknowledge the debt outright, or to try to conceal it."¹¹⁶ The poet acknowledges the source for his poem straightaway from the very beginning, as can be gathered from the clues embedded in the title itself and the short two-line epigraph. This poem shows how Bringhurst was experiencing a process of discovery, making his own voice by consulting the ancestors' insights into the craft of poetry. Obviously, he was in search of a language to use and a language to think in, and the Modernist master poets – and Yeats was one of them – had much to teach him. It is no happy coincidence that Yeats himself had been an acknowledged master to Pound around 1913-1914, when the American young expatriate was working as a personal secretary for the celebrated Irish poet in his cottage in Sussex.

Bringhurst's poem evokes its subject matter by an almost incantatory, insistent use of rhyme in a sequence of couplets grouped in three stanzas:

I the poet Robert Lee
 Bringhurst, with used mahogany
 I was given and broken marble I found
 in the dooryard when I levelled the ground,

 with used nails and borrowed tools,
 a bent square and two half-illegible rules,
 but nothing precut with one side sticky
 rebuilt this cellar for my lover Miki,

 and I don't give a damn if these words remain
 when this fine old house lays open to the rain,
 but I wish by god that great songs and old cities
 had a higher place in life than dumb-ass ditties.

C, p. 59.

Let us return to the striking parallelisms subtly uniting the two poems across spatial and temporal barriers. From a structural point of view, Bringhurst's poem closely resembles Yeats's in that it consists of two clearly differentiated parts. The first part opens with the poetic *I* overtly stating the poet's name and enumerating all the items required to build Yeats's tower and Bringhurst's cellar. Enumeration is an important structural device in many of Bringhurst's early poems, since it contributes to create a sense of rhythm in the compositions. Whereas this first movement deals with the ephemeral nature of purely material things made by the hand of human beings, the second one highlights the immortality of great works of art. More specifically, Yeats speaks of the immortality of the words carved on a stone at Ballylee, which are meant to outlive the tower the poet built for his beloved in spite of the harsh weather and the devastating effects of time, *edax rerum*. Bringhurst does not care whether "*these words*" in particular (those of his poem) survive "*when this fine old house lays open to the rain.*" He laughs in a way at the playfulness of his own composition and wishes that 'great songs' (literature) and 'old cities' (architecture), that is to say, serious and great art, had the attention it deserves. The potent dichotomy at the heart of both poems is crystal clear: things made by humans are perishable or ephemeral, while

¹¹⁶ See Pound's early essay entitled "A Retrospect", in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. by T.S. Eliot, London: Faber and Faber, 1954, p. 4.

great art challenges the destructive power of time. In this sense, both poems are strongly reminiscent of many of Shakespeare's sonnets and of Percy Bysshe Shelley's short lyric "Ozymandias".



V · "Three Epigrams" and "The Rhythms of Irene"

"Three Epigrams" and "The Rhythms of Irene" are closely connected to one another in that they are ironical, irreverent poems concerned with literature itself, written in cadences typical of colloquial speech. In "Three Epigrams", written in the best tradition of Catullus' and Martial's epigrams, Bringham achieves a high degree of concentration, precision and density of haiku-like resonances in only three small sections. The epigraph is attributed to T. E. Hulme, a contemporary of Ezra Pound again, who was also involved in Imagism¹¹⁷ and the search after precise images conveyed through words. Hulme's words – "Beauty is the marking-time,... the feigned ecstasy of an arrested impulse unable to reach its natural end" – seem to embody a definition of what beauty is. The three epigrams are of a fragmentary nature, as they refer each to a part of a lady's body that is being scrutinized: the folding of hands, her "*sumptuous ass*" and "*high hard tit*", and her "*carriage of high nobility*." Beneath the literal meaning and the mocking nuances, there seems to be an implicit reference to the art of writing poetry and to prosody. Prosody is an essential part of the making of poems, and technique is, after all, *the test of a man's sincerity*, to paraphrase Pound's words. The first epigram speaks of "*archetypical style, just as it stands*," of the elegance that harmonizes sound and motion; the second epigram refers to the "a candycane curve" that extends from the sumptuous ass to the high hard little tit, which has not got very positive overtones; and the third one, entitled "Marking Time in Stiff Meter", explores from an ironical standpoint what happens when stiff metre is employed in poetry:

"A carriage of high
nobility" – otherwise known
as:
"She walked
like somebody'd stuck
a broomstick up her ass."

C, p. 61.

"The Rhythms of Irene" is another epigram-like poem. The words in the epigraph are from the lyrics of a song by the American blues singer Robert Johnson (1911-1938): "*She's got Elgin movements from her head down to her toes. / She breaks in on a dollar most anywhere she goes.*" The word 'Elgin' has strong resonances in a poetic context like this: we are reminded of the beauty of the Elgin Marbles from the friezes and tympani in the Parthenon, which

¹¹⁷ The poetic program had been formulated about 1912 by Pound – in conjunction with fellow poets Hilda Doolittle, Richard Aldington, and F.S. Flint – and was inspired by the critical views of Hulme himself, in revolt against the abstraction, mistiness, derivativeness and sentimentality of much Post-romantic poetry. The gist of Imagism was to write succinct verse of dry clarity and hard outline in which an exact visual image made a total poetic statement. Hulme was also involved in the publication of the celebrated anthology entitled *Des Imagistes* (1914), but there were three more Imagist anthologies: *Some Imagists*, 1915, 1916, 1917. The little magazines *Poetry* and *The Egoist* published the work of a dozen Imagist poets as well. When Pound turned to Vorticism in 1914, it was Amy Lowell who took over the leadership of the group. Imagism was highly influential; Pound himself, T.S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore all were influenced by it in their poetry.

the British government acquired for the British Museum in 1816, and of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn", an everlasting meditation on truth, beauty, and the immortality of great art. It is then no surprise that Johnson's words should point to the theme of beauty, which constitutes the gist of the poem. But whereas Johnson speaks of a lady's irresistible physical beauty, the poetic voice is concerned with a different kind of beauty – that which is forged through the careful, sensible, intelligent choice of words in the writing of poetry. Thus, the poem seemingly opens with a serious meditation on beauty and on the importance of music and rhythm in poetry. But the final irony of the poem lies on the ambiguity implicit in the phrase 'rhythm method', which Irene interprets at its face value as having to do with sexual intercourse:

The rhythm method of controlled birth
of beauty in language means what Irene
thought it meant in another regard.

"The rhythm method?" asked Irene,
"I always thought that what that meant was
doing it... you know... that is... to music."

C, p. 62.

Not to compose in the sequence of the metronome, but in the rhythms of music, advised Pound in his celebrated and groundbreaking essay "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste". *Doing it to music* means both what Irene thought it meant and what it means to a poet with as serious and grave a vocation as Bringham: creating a new kind of beauty out of the skillful combination of words on the page, intended to produce a music of their own. This is the ultimate elegance.

SECTION IV

Nahuatl and Arabic Translations

I · Introduction: Pound's Example as Translator

As T. S. Eliot puts it in the Introduction to *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, *il miglior fabbro* "cared less for his personal achievement than for the life of letters and art. One of the lessons to be learnt from his critical prose and from his correspondence is the lesson to care unselfishly for the art one serves."¹¹⁸ There is a rare, precious coherence and consistency in Pound's criticism and poetry, as his own practice and his precept "compose a single *oeuvre*"¹¹⁹ demonstrates. This, of course, betrays the intellectual honesty and ambitious integrity of his literary achievement. One has to read both his poetry and his criticism, and travel constantly in both directions to achieve some degree of stereoscopy. The Pound's image Eliot presents is that of a passionate teacher and campaigner. Eliot emphasizes that his decisive contribution by "calling our attention to the merits of poetry of remote or alien societies – Anglo-Saxon, Provençal, early Italian, Chinese and Japanese, to say nothing of his beneficial, though irritating and sometimes disputable knocking about

¹¹⁸ See Eliot's Introduction to *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. xii.

¹¹⁹ See Eliot, *ibid.*, p. xiii.

of accepted valuations on Latin and Greek literature – is immense.”¹²⁰ His generosity is proverbial. What he learnt from study of the authors about whom he wrote, from his own poetic practice and translations, and from his own critical meditations about neglected authors and literatures, he communicated with an unusually passionate urgency to others, as he cared unselfishly about the art he served and he wanted intelligent and creative minds to write well at all costs, to revitalize the literature of his time, to *make it new*. Good writing had to be produced, no matter who did it. Therefore, his is “the *least dispensible* body of critical writing”¹²¹ of the early decades of the 20th century. He forced upon would-be serious artists’ attention whole areas of poetry, not strictly of Western ascent or lineage, which could not be ignored any longer by those poets whose province was *the whole of literature* produced by Babel-speaking humanity in its entirety.

The indisputable master has got innumerable fragments of meditation on translation scattered in his writings: on its undoubted value for the poet aspirant while in his apprenticeship stage, as a way to train himself and to get into close contact with the best that has been thought and said in the literary masterpieces of the past; and on its heralding an epoch of invaluable and lively literary activity. At some point of this extended meditation, Pound says that “a great age of literature is perhaps always a great age of translations, or follows it.”¹²² And somewhere else he says that “... the classics should be humanly, rather than philologically taught, even in class-rooms.”¹²³ Translation is an exercise in intellectual gymnastics that allows poets, on the one hand, to gain first-hand knowledge of the literary achievements of the past, no matter whether in their mother tongue or in foreign languages, and, on the other, to look for a genuine poetic voice of their own firmly grounded on the knowledge of what has already been successfully accomplished by others who were seriously committed to the advancement of the same art. That an epoch of healthy cultural splendour is marked by a proliferation of high-quality translations seems to be out of the question; that schools and universities have the moral responsibility of rescuing, rehabilitating, and bringing the best classical texts into the classroom is also unquestionable. However, Bringham, like Pound, has got a generous conception of what it means to embrace a *corpus* of classical texts. It is not just a matter of acknowledging the superiority of the classical texts of the Western tradition, as there are innumerable texts whose invaluable lessons and insights into the essence of the world should not be overlooked at all. Bringham, like Pound before him, embraces a sort of *linguistic and literary ecology*, in the context of which classical literature comes from a number of traditions, has been composed in different languages, at different times in the history of humankind, across boundaries of all sorts, and has been preserved in a number of forms. Oral literature is the unquestionable mother of what came to be written literature. Speech preceded writing, as life precedes art.

The fourth part of *Cadastré* comprises two important poems. One of them, “The Song of Macuilxochitzin”, is a translation from the Nahuatl, via the renowned Mexican historian Miguel León-Portilla’s Spanish rendering, so that the text is *a translation of a translation*. In a number of senses, the odyssey of the original Nahuatl text has been astonishing and fascinating; it belongs to a corpus of texts that have travelled a long way to reach our ears and minds. These literary texts were born out of lively words emerging from a living body, they were recited or sung in Nahuatl to the first Spanish missionaries who set foot on Meso-American ground, and painted and written down in the form of glyphs on

¹²⁰ See Eliot, *ibid.*, p. xiii.

¹²¹ See Eliot, *ibid.*, p. xiii.

¹²² See Pound’s essay “Notes on Elizabethan Classicists”, included in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 232.

¹²³ See Pound’s essay “Notes on Elizabethan Classicists”, *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 241.

beautiful codices (some of which have been fortunately preserved), and then transcribed into Roman characters. Out of first-hand contact with the Nahuatl codices, which combine images and characters in a tantalizing layout, León-Portilla translated the original text into Spanish in his *Trece poetas del mundo azteca* in the 1980s. This has been the basis of Bringhurst's English version of the 15th-century text, the author of which turns out to be a woman, the only one included in the historian's tantalizing anthology. The second text, "The Ode of Imr al-Qais", is a translation of one of the venerated pre-Islamic texts called *Mu'allaqāt*. Imr al-Qais was a picturesque king-wanderer who enjoyed the pleasures of good wine and beautiful women. His ode is one of the acknowledged masterpieces of classical Arabic literature. The spatio-temporal axes are completely different in this case: in reading Bringhurst's version we are plunged in the middle of the Arabian desert, surrounded by palm trees, occasional oases, and camels, in the 6th century CE. Bringhurst's rendering of al-Qais' poem is a superb composition which testifies to the poet's solid knowledge of Arabic literature and masterly command of the English language.

None of these translations from two different languages, traditions and socio-historical contexts are included in Bringhurst's unpublished MFA Thesis (1975) entitled *Carmina propria et opuscula translata*, preserved nowadays at the University of British Columbia. We know for sure that there are other translations from Arabic¹²⁴ which were included in his thesis, a compilation of his early translations from different cultural traditions, and that Bringhurst was really interested in the life and work of Imr al-Qais, as the essay entitled "Some Notes on Imr-al Qais" published in the 1973 issue of *Contemporary Literature in Translation*¹²⁵ demonstrates. Once again, Pound must have shown him the path to follow. Pound's example as translator is to be found in a seminal book entitled *The Spirit of Romance* (1910), published over one hundred years ago. Whereas Pound explored the passionate intensities and musicality of Provençal poetry, Bringhurst gave himself over to the exotic music and prosody lessons he could gain from familiar contact with Meso-American and Arabic literatures. Let us not forget that he spent ten years of his lifetime learning Arabic and that he lived for long periods of time in Arabic-speaking countries like Lebanon, where he served as a private in the army in the late 1960s. He also spent some time in Panama and other South-American countries.

¹²⁴ Consider these instances: 1/ "Fragments Attributed to el-Samau'al", a translation from Arabic, is partially included in his MFA Thesis; it had been originally published in *Stoney Lonesome* (Bloomington, Indiana) 3 (1972): 13-15, with three other poems ("Poem, 1971"; "Self-Portrait for a Sansei Girl" (published as "Self-Portrait: The Sansei Poem" in *The Shipwright's Log* in 1972) and "Poem Authored Jointly with the Posthumous De Gaulle"). 2/ "Two Poems" by Badr Shakir el-Sayyab ("You Went Away" and "City of Mirage"), of which only the latter was included in the MFA Thesis and reprinted in *Bergsbrund* in 1975. They had been originally published in *Quarry* (Bloomington, Indiana) 2 (Fall 1972): 33-38, along with "The Beauty of the Weapons". 3/ In 1974 Bringhurst guest-edited *Contemporary Literature in Translation* (Mission, British Columbia) 19 (Summer/Fall 1974): 4, 18, 24, which was an Arabic literature issue (the cover photograph, "Strafed Train in Sinai, 1967", was also by Bringhurst). It included four translations from the Arabic: "City of Mirage", by Badr Shakir el-Sayyab; "The Cry of the Mallard", by Badr Shakir el-Sayyab; "Waiting for Them", by Mahmoud Darweesh; and "Elegy", by Tumadir el-Khansa. All of them were included in his MFA Thesis in 1975. The same issue included "A History of Semitic Literature in One Quarto Page", on page 3. Bringhurst has contributed indefatigably to little magazines and journals, and has given thought to whole areas of poetry and neglected authors and literatures, like Pound before him.

¹²⁵ Bringhurst's essay on the sixth-century Arab poet was published in *Contemporary Literature in Translation* 16 (Fall 1973): 15-18. About the same time he also published "The Koran, the Wake, and Atherton", in *A Wake Newsletter* (Colchester, Essex) ns 10.6 (December 1973): 92-93, which is a discussion of some Arabic sources used in *Finnegans Wake*, with reference to Chapter 12, "The Koran", from James S. Atherton, *The Books at the Wake: A Study of Literary Allusions in James Joyce's Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959). A few years later, he published a review of *Les Mou'allaqat ou Un peu de l'âme des Arabes avant l'Islam*, ed. et trad. Jean-Jacques Schmidt, in *World Literature Today* 53.2 (Spring 1979): 344.

II · Nahuatl Poetry: “The Song of Macuilxochitzin”

Whereas “Four Glyphs”, the four-poem sequence poem inspired by Meso-American mythology we have already analyzed above, was a creative work that aimed at being an evocative reconstruction of the mythopoeic compulsion inherent in the Aztec ways of world-making or world-view, “The Song of Macuilxochitzin” is a version of an ancient Nahuatl text composed in Tenochtitlan, the great Aztec metropolis, *circa* 1476. In the centuries immediately prior to the Spanish conquest, an exquisite poetic tradition flourished among the Nahuatl speakers of the central Mexican highlands. Painted in codices rich in glyphs, the fragmentary remnants of this essentially oral tradition survived through a few alphabetic transcriptions of the early colonial period as they were read or sung to conquering priests and transcribed in Roman letters. However, Bringhurst’s version is not the result of direct contact with the Nahuatl text, but rather with the Spanish renderings produced by the renowned Mexican historian Miguel León-Portilla, who is a leading specialist in Nahuatl culture. In the notations at the end of *Cadastre*, Bringhurst himself explains that “This version of the Macuilxochitzin Icuic owes virtually everything, of course, to Miguel León-Portilla’s Spanish rendering”.

The source of Bringhurst’s translation is to be sought then in León-Portilla’s Spanish renderings published in his well-known book *Trece poetas del mundo azteca*,¹²⁶ an ambitious book that anthologizes tantalizing selections from two great manuscript collections of Nahuatl verse from the 100-year period surrounding the Spanish conquest of Mexico that indicate the high intellectual achievement of the Meso-American culture. Imagery is vivid and sophisticated, and the poets, we learn, were frequently kings or military captains of satellite principalities to the Aztec metropolis, in a society which was strictly hierarchical. Although León-Portilla provides full Nahuatl transcriptions of all poems, along with the quite literal Spanish renderings, much of the extraordinary sense of the rhythm and rhetoric of the original poets is somehow lost somewhere along the way. However, León-Portilla, who has an amazing scholarship and erudition regarding the Nahuatl language and historical background, offers profuse introductory material dwelling on the biographies of the king-poets and on the socio-historical context.¹²⁷

In total, León-Portilla presents biographies of fifteen composers of Nahuatl verse – fourteen men and one woman – and organizes the material (reproduced in both Nahuatl and English in the edition consulted) in terms of geographic regions and individual poets. So the book consists of several parts. In Part Two, entitled “Poets of Mexico-Tenochtitlan”, chapter VIII is devoted to the only woman poet included in the anthology: Macuilxochitzin, an Aztec princess who lived in the middle of the 15th century, of whom only one single poem has been preserved, “The Song of Macuilxochitzin”. This is the poem Bringhurst translates into English. The source of the original Nahuatl poem which León-Portilla translated into Spanish is the manuscript entitled *Cantares mexicanos*, fol. 53, v.,

¹²⁶ Miguel León-Portilla’s *Trece poetas del mundo azteca*, 5th edition, México, Universidad Nacional, 1983. There is an English translation, *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World*, published by Oklahoma University Press in 1992, which is the edition we have consulted here. He is also the author of other important books such as *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1990.

¹²⁷ Miguel León-Portilla touches only briefly on textual analysis or the critical appraisal of the works, deflecting the reader from the complex inner lives of the poems themselves and preferring the otherwise fascinating approach to the historical circumstances surrounding the creation of the Nahuatl texts. Thus his approach is essentially that of a historian, intent on collecting objective data and minute details, aimed at faithfully reconstructing the social milieu that witnessed the creation of these little masterpieces unknown to many who deem the ancient roots of the Western tradition as the benchmark of humanity’s *odyssey* on Earth. But it is ultimately the poetry anthologized and translated in the volume that makes it a valuable book.

now preserved in the National Library of Mexico. According to the Latin-American scholar, the indigenous chroniclers report the existence of several Nahuatl women versed not only in the art of cooking, weaving and embroidery, but also in the art of poetry. Macuilxochitzin was one of such talented women who had first-hand knowledge of what happened in her time and the ability to verbalize it into a lasting literary work of art. Not much is known about this Aztec princess:

There is a magnificent poem in the same manuscript, the creative work of a woman, whose name is known. This poem is attributed to Macuilxochitzin, a Mexica woman of noble lineage born around 1435. She was a native of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, where she probably lived during most of the remaining years of the 15th century. Her father was the renowned counsellor of several Mexica high rulers, Tlacaelel. The chronicler Tezozomoc provides the following information about the offspring of Tlacaelel: "The other twelve children of the aged Tlacaelel Cihuacoatl, each one had a different mother, and were engendered in different places. Here are their names... These two were women, the seventh called Macuilxochitzin. Of her was born the prince Cuauhtlapaltzin."¹²⁸

So this woman of noble lineage, daughter of the powerful Tlacaelel and wonderful composer of songs, was carefully educated from childhood. She was fortunate enough to live in the days of greatest Mexica splendour. While still a young girl, her native Tenochtitlan became the chief centre and metropolis of the Aztec empire; to it flowed all sorts of tributes, goods, merchandise, and precious jewels brought by merchants from those remote regions under the Aztec rule. Macuilxochitzin was interested in the triumphs and conquests that the advice given by Tlacaelel, her father, on behalf of Tenochtitlan made possible. In those days she must have contemplated from palace the departure of warriors who returned home victorious, accompanied by a great number of captives and precious riches, the booty of their conquests.¹²⁹ It is no coincidence that the only poem of hers that has survived is about one of the most important conquests planned by her father and carried out successfully by Axayacatzin, who had been installed as high ruler in 1469 and was instrumental in achieving a sweeping victory of the Mexica over the enemy. The territorial imperative was felt to be fundamental in affirming the Mexica's superiority over conflicting neighbouring peoples. Once more León-Portilla provides a detailed explanation of this campaign:

In the year 10-Flint (1476), the Mexica once more made ready for war. This campaign was directed against the Matlatzinca and the Otomi in the Valley of Toluca. Macuilxochitzin may even have known the words of Tlacaelel spoken to Axayacatl on that occasion. The chronicler Tezozomoc recalls that the great counselor, desirous of a complete victory, gave his advice to the supreme Mexica ruler [Axayacatl] in this form: "Now, my son, I am already very old, after my death I do not know what will happen with this affair, and therefore the authority is in your hands, that you now go against them and destroy them, so that they come under our rule and pay tribute, without any leniency."¹³⁰

Macuilxochitzin, knowing all about this war, not only about the final outcome or sweeping victory over the enemy, but also about other minor details such as the mishap suffered by the leader Axayacatl, who was seriously wounded in the thigh by an Otomi captain called Tlitatl, decided to compose a song in memory of one of the last conquests planned by her father. "The Song of Macuilxochitzin" is then a long poem spoken by a

¹²⁸ M. León-Portilla, *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World*, p. 176.

¹²⁹ M. León-Portilla, *ibid.*, p. 178.

¹³⁰ M. León-Portilla, *ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

first-person poetic voice, that of Macuilxochitzin, who has been a witness to the historical events she relates in her composition. It celebrates the Mexica's war victory over the enemy. In fact, Tlacaelel's daughter makes her intention perfectly clear in the opening verse lines of Bringham's version of the poem:

I raise my songs high,
I, Five-Flower,
gladden the god our father with my songs.
Start the dance!

C, p. 66.

Princess Macuilxochitzin wants to thank their supreme Aztec god for their victory over neighbouring opponents and record the triumph of her people over the enemy for posterity. She calls herself "Five-Flower", and she could have been called by this name because she was born on a 5-Flower day of the sophisticated Mexica calendar, which is what her name means. It appears that Macuilxochitzin was "one of the titles by which the god-goddess of art, songs, and dance was invoked" and that "whoever was born on that day was destined to be a composer of songs."¹³¹ In its simplicity and intense lyricism, the opening stanza manages to convey from the very beginning a sense of the vulnerability of human beings, whose fate is in the hands of their gods. The poem is then conceived with a two-fold purpose in mind: on the one hand, in her capacity as Tlacaelel's faithful and loving daughter, Macuilxochitzin wishes to pay sincere homage to the Giver of Life that has ensured the Mexica's victory, and, on the other, in her capacity as a composer of songs, she wants to immortalize in the form of a poem an event of paramount relevance in the history of her people for posterity – and herself, for that matter, in the process. She admits though that she is not sure whether her songs will reach the dwelling place of their supreme god or will just end up leading a precarious form of existence, here on Earth:

Wherever,
however it is... do the songs go
up to the house of the god?
Or do your flowers only
grow on the ground?
Start the dance!

C, p. 66.

It is fascinating to learn that 15th-century Nahua were interested in such notions as the immortality of literature, which seems to be an atemporal anthropological universal across cultures and civilizations. This second stanza betrays Macuilxochitzin's anxiety about the destiny of her own song: Will it meet the needs for which it was conceived or will it fall into oblivion as soon as its words are sung or recited? Is literature a form of achieving glory and immortality among the gods and human beings, or is it condemned like flowers to an ephemeral existence? In this respect, Miguel León-Portilla has translated a wonderful contemporary poem entitled "El diálogo de flor y canto",¹³² also included in four folios of the same manuscript of the *Cantares mexicanos*, which is concerned with the so-called

¹³¹ M. León-Portilla, *ibid.*, p. 177.

¹³² See Miguel León-Portilla, *Cantos y crónicas del México antiguo*, Crónicas de América, Madrid: Dastin, 2002, pp. 167-179 for the whole poem translated from the original Nahuatl text preserved in the invaluable manuscript *Cantares mexicanos*, Fol. 9 v. – Fol. 11 v., in the National Library of Mexico.

“flower and song” theme as well.¹³³ Tecayehuatzin was an outstanding sage among the most celebrated sages of the Puebla-Tlaxcala region. However, his life was not primarily that of a man dedicated to poetry and meditation, but rather that of a ruler. He had become the lord of Huexotzinco due to his lineage and by the election of his people, and various sources show him acting in this capacity in the early 16th century. In spite of the anxieties connected with state affairs, he was deeply inclined to music and poetry. In this *flower and song* dialogue, Tecayehuatzin plays an important role: he appears in it as the one who called together his friends, other sages and poets to elucidate the ultimate meaning and value of flower and song, poetry, art, and symbolism. The meeting convened by Tecayehuatzin was probably held in a garden near his palace in Huexotzinco, where the various guest poets and sages were seated, enjoying a good conversation as well as “the tobacco and the foaming chocolate drink that were passed around.” Tecayehuatzin opens the dialogue with a eulogy of poetry and an invitation for the guests to speak their minds. Different views on the nature of poetry are presented by the poets and sages attending this meeting.¹³⁴ Flowers and songs are conceived as being a gift of the gods, as the best kind of remembrance humans can leave behind on Earth when they leave for the afterworld, as the most honourable way to invoke the supreme Giver of Life, as the only way to utter true words of lasting value on Earth, and as the only thing that makes friends’ meetings like the one they are holding possible.¹³⁵

A good portion of this Nahuatl poem is a celebratory eulogy of Axayacatl, the artificer of the victory planned by Tlacaelel. The exotic names of remote places and chiefdoms ring powerfully in these lines, intended as an apology of Lord Axayacatl and his decisive role in conquering the Matlatzinca. The martial prowess, bravery and valour of this warrior is celebrated in the central part of the poem, where there is a whole constellation of the typical imagery of much Nahuatl poetry: flowers (eagleflowers, warflowers, sanctified flowers), which are closely associated to songs and are offered in rituals in honour of the supreme god; the recurring imagery of butterflies that are subtly reminiscent of the fragility of both flowers and songs; and a whole array of references to war, such as feathers, shields, and the shaved heads and arms of valiant soldiers. Similarly, alliteration, as a way of producing musicality in the poem, and parallelism, one of the main stylistic devices of

¹³³ The Mexican historian informs us that “en ocasiones se reunían los sabios y poetas para darse a conocer sus creaciones y para dialogar sobre ellas. Por fortuna, el manuscrito de la Biblioteca Nacional de México nos conserva el testimonio de una de esas reuniones de poetas que tuvo precisamente como propósito esclarecer el más hondo sentido de la poesía. El diálogo tuvo lugar hacia 1490. Varios maestros de la palabra, venidos de diversos lugares, se reunieron en la casa del señor Tecayehuatzin, príncipe de Huexotzinco. Los invitados se acomodan en esteras bajo la sombra de frondosos ahuehuetes en algún huerto cercano al palacio de su huésped Tecayehuatzin. Como es costumbre, antes de dar principio al diálogo, los criados distribuyen el tabaco y las jícaras de espumoso chocolate.” *Cantos y crónicas del México antiguo*, p. 129.

¹³⁴ According to M. León-Portilla’s account of this famous dialogue, “Las preguntas de Tecayehuatzin reciben muy distintas respuestas: una a una, los varios invitados las van formulando. Entre otras cosas, los participantes afirman que flor y canto, poesía, arte y símbolo, son un don de los dioses, son acaso posible recuerdo del hombre en la tierra, quizás camino para encontrar a la divinidad. Para otros, flor y canto es, al igual que los hongos alucinantes, el mejor medio de embriagar a los corazones y olvidar tristezas. Otras opiniones expresadas insisten en ideas como éstas: se recogen las flores para techar con ellas la propia cabaña, es decir el hogar del hombre en la tierra; flor y canto puede ser camino para alcanzar la divinidad. Tecayehuatzin, el príncipe de Huexotzinco que convocó esta reunión, sigue creyendo que flor y canto es la única manera de decir palabras verdaderas en la tierra. Pero como tiene conciencia de que su punto de vista no es aceptado por todos, expresa una última idea que se gana simpatía universal: flor y canto, poesía y arte, es precisamente lo que hace posible la reunión de los amigos.” *Cantos y crónicas del México antiguo*, p. 130.

¹³⁵ See M. León-Portilla, Chapter X, “Tecayehuatzin of Huexotzinco. The Ruler and Sage Who Called for a Dialogue on the Meaning of Flower and Song”, in *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World*, especially, pages 200-206. The chapter includes a transcription of the original Nahuatl text and an English rendering of the same.

Nahuatl poetry, are used in the hopes of ensuring that the resonant echoes of the original text are heard in the English rendering:

The Matlatzinca are yours,
my lord Itzcohuáztin.
And you, Axayácatl,
took Tlacotépec.
Over that city your flowers
and butterflies hovered.
This is great joy.
The Matlatzinca are there
in Toluca, and in Tlacotépec.

Patiently he offered
flowers and feathers
up to the god our father.

He put the shields of eagles
in the arms of men,
in the war's hearth,
in the center of the field.
Like our songs,
like our flowers,
you, soldier with the shaved head,
gladden our father the god.

C, pp. 66-67.

The apology extends for three more stanzas written in the same celebratory vein – “*Everywhere he went / Axayácatl's army won battles.*” Special emphasis is laid on the joy, drunkenness and glory brought about by the victory over the enemy both to the Mexica and their allies. The final part of the poem recalls the serious wound Axayacatl suffered in the leg as he was attacked by an Otomi captain called Tlilatl: “*Now he returns. / In Xiquipilco / he was hit – speared in the leg by an Otomi / soldier named Tlilatl.*”¹³⁶ The timely arrival of Mexica forces saved Axayacatl from death and immediately defeated the enemy. In the closing lines of the poem, Princess Macuilxochitzin emphasizes the important role played by a group of Otomi women who intercede in favour of Tlilatl and save the captain's life by their pleas to Axayacatl:

And Tlilatl went to the women
and said to them,
“You be the brave ones.
Fix up a splint and a bandage and go to him.”
He lay there shouting,
“Bring me the Otomi
who gave me this legwound.”

¹³⁶ M. León Portilla provides an interesting account of the attack recorded by one of the chroniclers: “The hardy soldiers caught up with those of Toluca and said to them: Surrender, surrender, for it is your ill luck to have to pay tribute to us and be our vassals. Arriving at Tlacotepec, again there were many people on the side of those of Toluca waiting for the Mexica so as to attack them on the flank. When Axayacatl arrived with forces, and as soon as he saw them, he began to sound a tambourine which they called *yopibuehuatl*, from joy, and then with his plumage he went so fast and ran with such undaunted courage that his enemies trembled. At that moment an Otomi captain by the name of Cuetzpal [with another name, Tlitatl], a valiant warrior, was hidden under a century plant and suddenly, as Axayacatl passed, he came out and wounded him in the thigh, which made him fall on his knees.” *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World*, p. 179.

And the Otomi was scared,
and he said,
“They’ll kill me for sure.”
And he brought a gigantic piece of worked wood
and the skin of a deer
and expressed an immense reverence
for Axayácatl.
And his women are here now,
begging,
pleading with Axayácatl.

C, p. 68.

This is Bringhurst’s homage to Nahuatl poetry and his own personal version of a work composed over five centuries ago by a woman-poet who lived in a world of war, flower and song. She was an accomplished craftswoman and so her poem has survived in spite of the passing of time. It still somehow manages to speak to the modern reader’s sensibility with a powerful sense of urgency that is a pleasure to experience.

III · The Call of the Orient and Arabic (pre-Islamic) Poetry – “*The Ode of Imr El-Qais*”, a poem by a wandering king of the 6th century CE

Social & Historical Background: Mu‘allaqāt and pre-Islamic Poetry

Robert Bringhurst’s poem entitled “The Ode of Imr El-Qais” is a translation of the *Mu‘allaqa* or golden ode (*qasida*) by the pre-Islamic Arab poet Imru’ al-Qays, considered to be one of the greatest masterpieces of ancient Arabic literature and of the Arabic literature of all times. It has been revisited time and again, and translated into English and other modern European languages on several occasions by different hands. But in order to fully understand its significance, as well as its impact on Bringhurst’s poetic imagination, it might be worthwhile to trace its origins back in time and to delve into the socio-historical background in which the original work saw the light of day for the first time thanks to the talent of the much admired *Wandering King*, who would court the Muses since early in his youth disobeying his father’s injunction to do otherwise. Mohammed might prove a useful or convenient point of reference in time to place the man and his work in space and in time. Al-Qays lived in the first half of the sixth century CE, in the days before Islam, called in Arabic *Jābilīyya*, which is to say ‘the age of ignorance or barbarity’ before the coming of Mohammed, the true prophet or messenger of Allah. It was during that time that some of the greatest classical Arabic poetry was composed. We say *composed* and not *wrote* rightly, because few men could write in those days and, being endowed with beautifully creative minds, they would compose their memorable works orally, which tradition would preserve from generation to generation through orality as well.

The social pattern of ancient Arabia in pre-Islamic times was primarily tribal. In those days, the Arab Peninsula was divided into small kingdoms governed by quarrelling tribes that had solid first-hand knowledge of life in the desert, as well as a vast lexicon and a precise language to subtly refer to the flora and fauna of their surrounding world, which was second nature to them. The tribes were perennially engaged in feuds and vendettas which sometimes expanded into wide hostilities, broken from time to time by an uneasy

truce. However, in this tribal society the poet played a recognized and important political role as a sort of public relations officer of his tribe. Second only in importance to the chief of the tribe, there was a poet in each of them, who was responsible for keeping the history and genealogy of the tribe alive despite the devastating effects of the passing of time. Poets were responsible for immortalizing the deeds of glory and eternal fame of their tribe, and this they did in a vigorous and majestic language. In ancient Arabia men were endowed with prodigious memories and were capable of learning by heart long poems that they would pass on from one generation to another to keep the living legacy of the tribe going. The poems were treasured repositories of the wisdom of the people, and they celebrated the glory of the tribe and mocked the flaws of its enemies.

The *Mu'allaqāt* is the title of the most famous and celebrated anthology of pre-Islamic poetry, which enjoys a unique position in the history of Arabic literature, as it represents the finest of early poetry in this tradition.¹³⁷ Commonly known as 'the Seven Long Odes' among philologists, it consists of a collection of ancient Arabian odes, generally reckoned to be seven in number, although some Arab commentators and theoreticians extend their number to nine or ten. Taken together, these poems provide an excellent picture of Bedouin life, manners, and modes of thought in a style which A. J. Arberry has adequately characterized as exhibiting "an extraordinary precision of language", "a pregnant brevity", and "dramatic intensity and epigrammatic terseness."¹³⁸ Their language and imagery embody a complex system of ethical values passed from generation to generation through the poetry. The name *Mu'allaqāt* applied to this collection has a doubtful meaning (perhaps 'esteemed precious'). An often-repeated legend that originated in the 10th century states that the poems were written down in golden letters on scrolls of linen that were then hung, or "suspended" (*mu'allaq*), on the walls of the Ka'bah in Mecca in pre-Islamic times.¹³⁹ Most probably, the name *Mu'allaqāt* in this context is a

¹³⁷ For more exhaustive information on the 'Seven Golden Odes', see A. J. Arberry's intelligent discussion in his classic *The Seven Odes. The First Chapter in Arabic Literature*, New York: The Macmillan Company (1957), pp. 21-23. Consider also the entry on the '*Mu'allaqāt*' in the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, vol. 2, pp. 532-533, and the entry on '*al-Mu'allaqāt*' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2009 Global Edition, vol. 20, p. 11543.

¹³⁸ In the epilogue to his ground-breaking *The Seven Odes*, Arberry summarizes the essential features of the classical Arabic ode as he tries to explain the essential inadequacy of translation when it comes to satisfactorily translating the *Mu'allaqāt* into English. First, he mentions the *monorhyme*, "that compulsion laid upon the poet to fashion sixty or more couplets with the same combination of terminal consonant and vowel. [...] It [this extraordinary restriction] is very basic to the intelligent appreciation of Arabic poetry, and the realisation of its vital function intensifies the translator's awareness of his foredoomed failure to do justice to the original." (p. 249) Secondly, he speaks of *extraordinary precision of language* as an outstanding characteristic of ancient literature: "The desert poets, gifted with very keen powers of observation, strove strenuously to match their visual detection of minute differences with an equally sensitive choice of words. The vocabulary at their disposal was extremely large, and rich in near-synonyms, perhaps a result of the fusion of many dialects. [...] Whereas the original Arabic, when wielded by a virtuoso, is remarkable for a *pregnant brevity*, any translation is bound by comparison to appear flaccid and diffuse." (pp. 249-250) And thirdly, he speaks of the *Mu'allaqāt* as exhibiting "two Arab virtues – dramatic intensity and epigrammatic terseness – to a degree approaching perfection. When it is said of them that they are obscure, it needs to be added that their obscurity is not so much of language (for the words, though often rare, are never imprecise) nor of imagery (the themes being clearly defined and accurately portrayed), but of personal and historical reference." (p. 250)

¹³⁹ According to A. J. Arberry, Hammād al-Rāwiyah was "the man who first put into circulation the *Mu'allaqāt*, the 'Suspended Poems'. The title was not his invention; though apparently current already in the ninth century, it was not in general use even as late as the end of the tenth. [...] Poets ambitious for recognition would, it was alleged, recite their choicest compositions at an annual fair held at 'Ukaz, near Mecca [...] and the poems voted worthy of the award were transcribed in letters of gold on fine Egyptian linen and suspended in the Kaaba, Mecca's immemorial shrine." (p. 21) Arberry is prompt to point out that this legend has been unanimously rejected by European scholars. Then he discusses other scholars' proposals, Sir Charles Lyall's among them, according to whom 'the name is most likely derived from the world *'ilk*, meaning "a precious thing, or a thing held in high estimation", either because one "hangs on" tenaciously to

derivative of the word *‘ilq*, “a precious thing”, so that its meaning would be “the poems which are esteemed precious”.

None of the odes can be dated with precision because they seem to be the products of oral composition. They are all thought to have been composed in Arabia before Islam (i.e., during the first half of the 6th century CE or earlier), although they were only collected together some two to three centuries later. The idea of grouping these masterpieces together is commonly attributed to Hammād al-Rāwiyah (d. ca. 772), an 8th-century collector of early poetry considered to be the compiler of the ‘Seven Odes’. In bringing together the odes, he already seems to have drawn upon older collections. The poems show a remarkable variety in style, content and structure, and in their poets’ character and background. The list usually accepted as standard names poems by seven poets: Imru’ al-Qays, Tarafh, Zuhayr, ‘Antarah, ‘Amr ibn Kulthūm, al-Hārith ibn Hilliza, and Labīd.¹⁴⁰ Of the authors, the earliest is Imru’ al-Qays, who lived in the first half of the 6th century. The others belong to the latter half of that century. Zuhayr and Labīd are said to have survived into the time of Islam, but their poetic output belongs to the pre-Islamic period. Of the seven poets included in the *Mu’allaqāt*, Bringham himself says:

A number of poets wrote Arabic in the century prior to Mohammed. Or let us say they *composed* orally and did not in fact “write” literally. Seven of these earliest known Arabic poets are represented, one poem each, in a specially honoured anthology, the *Mu’allaqāt*. Talking English, the collection is more conveniently called the Seven Odes – where in the Arabic name for the form used by all seven poems, the *qasida*, is translated “ode.” The Ode of Imr el-Qais is one of the seven; by no means Imr’s only extant poem, but the largest extant and the one most prized.

Ninth, tenth and eleventh-century collections under the title *el-Mu’allaqāt* contain anywhere from seven to ten poems. At some point the charm of having a septentrion to set compass by seems to have cost several contenders their place in the canon. The seven authors, as now beatified by scholarship, are Imr el-Qais, Tarafa, Zuhair, Labīd, Antara, Amr, and el-Hārith. Zuhair and el-Hārith are forgettable; among the remainder Imr in particular is not. In the early days of the compilations, various editors put the poems in various orders: Imr’s entry seems always to have been placed first. Tradition accounts him the earliest poet in Arabic to whom we can now put a name.¹⁴¹

The *Mu’allaqāt* odes are all in the classical *qasida* pattern, which some Arab scholars believed to have been created by Imru’ al-Qays. After a conventional prelude, the *nasīb*, in which the poet calls to mind the memory of a former love, most of the rest of the ode consists of a succession of movements that describe the poet’s horse or camel, scenes of desert events, and other aspects of Bedouin life and warfare. The main theme of the *qasida* (the *madīh*, or panegyric, the poet’s tribute to himself, his tribe, or his patron) is often disguised in these vivid descriptive passages, which are the chief glory of the *Mu’allaqāt*. Their vivid imagery, exact observation, and deep feeling of intimacy with nature in the

it, or because it is “hung up” in a place of honour, or in a conspicuous place, in a treasury or storehouse’. (p. 22) For his part, he proposes that the *Mu’allaqāt* are so called because “they had been abstracted from the *Dīwāns* of the seven poets, so to speak half-divorced from their authors’ works and kept apart in a separate collection”. (p. 23) And “the oldest book in which the *Mu’allaqāt* are reproduced as a separate collection is the *Jamharat ash‘ār al-‘Arab*, an annotated anthology of Arabic poetry compiled by one Abū Zaid al-Qurashī.” (p. 23)

¹⁴⁰ This is the list recorded by Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi. However, such authorities as Ibn Qutaybah count ‘Abid ibn a-Abras as one of the seven, while Abu ‘Ubaydah replaces the last two poets of Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi’s list with al-Nabighah al-Dhubyani and al-A’sha.

¹⁴¹ “Some Notes on Imr El-Qais”, *Contemporary Literature in Translation*, no. 16, Fall 1973, p. 15.

Arabian desert contribute to the *Mu'allaqāt's* standing as a masterpiece of world literature. The lively description of a desert storm at the end of Imru' al-Qays's *qasida* is a splendid example of such passages. Imru' al-Qays's ode, the most famous Arabic poem ever composed, consists of 82 lines. Its structure does not fit the conventional categories though, as it starts with a *nasīb* which develops into a vivid portrayal of a series of erotic adventures. The second half of the poem is made up of the description of a horse in a hunting episode, and a concluding storm scene, which is considered to be one of the most accomplished scenes in the history of Arabic literature.

As pointed out above, the *Mu'allaqāt* are the earliest surviving examples of ancient Arabic poetry, although many aspects of their structure suggest that they do not stand at the beginning of a tradition, but rather represent a tradition in full flower. But this tradition was oral¹⁴² in nature, and no prototypes or precursors have come down to us. As A. J. Arberry points out,

The Seven Poems are the most famous survivors of what appears to have been a vast mass of poetry, composed in and about the Arabian desert during the sixth century A.D. [...] which seemingly was not written down in the first instance. [...] Here it suffices to remark that Arabia has not yielded so far any ancient inscriptions in verse, that no old codices or papyri from the pre-Islamic period have come down to us, and that the oldest book in Arabic literature, in the usual sense of the term, is the Koran. Yet by the end of the eighth century men were beginning to collect and edit, of course in manuscript, the 'works' of individual poets believed to have lived before Islam.¹⁴³

The nature of the poetry that issued in the Arabian desert before the rise of Islam was representative of the life, inclinations, and lifestyle of pre-Islamic Arabs, even if in the 1920s there was much controversial debate about the authenticity of the earliest extant samples of Arabic poetry. In his polemical essay "The Origins of Arabic Poetry" (*Journal of The Royal Asiatic Society*, 1925, pp. 417-449), David Margoliouth argued that pre-Islamic poetry was but a latter-day forgery by the Muslims. Two years later, in his case and personal crusade against the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry, Taha Hussein cast serious doubts on the reliability of the many transmitters of the ancient poetry and on the genuineness of pre-Islamic literature, which he considered to be a forgery, simply fabricated after the coming of Islam. His infamous theory that the poems we know of as pre-Islamic verse were actual forgeries of a later Islamic period was much debated and proved to be both unfair and incorrect by a number of scholars. Nowadays the masterpieces collected in the *Mu'allaqāt* are thought to be original work of men who could not write or needed to, which their contemporaries thought worth preserving just because they encapsulated a tiny part of their truth and their world – a universe of wandering nomads, with no fixed home, that would roam in the desert and live in close contact with the elements and the natural world.

¹⁴² Pre-Islamic poetry was oral, which means that, because literacy was not still widespread, people would memorize what they deemed to be precious verses that kept the spirit and tradition of their life in the desert alive. In this respect, M. Zwettler points out that "the poetry of Arabs, in the ages which preceded the rise of Islamism, was perpetuated by oral tradition; for in ancient times, when writing was not used or scarcely used, memory was exercised and strengthened to a degree now almost unknown." Reciters "got by heart numerous songs of their poets, and recited them, occasionally, in public assemblies and private parties. This impression, in essence, has been shared by a great majority of medieval and modern scholars who have dealt to any degree with Arabic poetry." *The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry: Its Character & Implications*, Ohio University Press (Columbus), 1978, p. 12.

¹⁴³ A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, p. 14.

Life & Work of Imr al-Qais

Imr al-Qais,¹⁴⁴ also known as Imru' al-Qays ibn Hujr, was a pre-Islamic poet and the author of one of the celebrated *Mu'allaqāt*, which Bringham himself translated into English in 1973, quite at the beginning of his literary career. As pointed out above, he lived in the first half of the 6th century CE and the story of his life is told with many variants and much legendary embellishment. But, according to A. J. Arberry, Imr al-Qais was a nickname; "the true name of the man of whom we are speaking was Hunduj, son of Hujr, son of al-Harith, a descendant of that royal Kinda who gave his name to a famous South Arabian tribe."¹⁴⁵ Hujr was slain as he slumbered in his tent and upon the youngest of his sons, Imr al-Qais, fell the duty of avenging his father's death. From his early youth Imr al-Qais had conceived a passion for poetry. When his father learnt that his son composed verses, with all the traditional king's contempt for those who courted the Muses, he ordered one of his servants to put his own son to death. However, the loyal servant spared the young prince, which turned out to be a good idea after all, for the king repented of his anger and was relieved to see his son returned sound and safe to court. The son would not give up poetry and so the father had no option left but to banish him. Thus, Imr al-Qais began his wandering life among the outlying tribes.

While he kept the company of the never-do-wells, he greatly developed his poetic talent, but his reputation diminished more and more with the passing of time. No honest woman was safe from his attentions, such was his eagerness to conquer women's hearts. As a matter of fact, in his verses he made boasts of his wild exploits with an explicitness and sincerity that have a fascinating grip on the modern reader's attention. So in his youth the poet, who had a voracious appetite for life, engaged in licentious pleasures, until his father, king of the Kinda, was killed in an uprising of the Banū Asad. From then on, Imr al-Qais devoted his life to avenging his father and restoring the power of Kinda, which earned him the surname 'the wandering King'. An Arab vagabond, a fugitive, seeking protection of one tribe after another and finding at best only temporary security, Imr al-Qais's wanderings through Arabia were truly legendary. He sought allies among the tribes, and finally reached the court of Justinian, gaining his support. But, on his way back, he was presented with a 'shirt of Nessus' which he had been sent as token of Emperor Justinian's esteem, and which had actually been steeped in poison as punishment for seducing the emperor's daughter, and so he died of its poison near Ankara about 550. His untimely death as he put on the mantle is surrounded by a legendary halo too.¹⁴⁶

The fame of Imr al-Qais was widespread during his lifetime; after his death he gained even greater renown. "Men treasured jealously the verses that he had spoken, and

¹⁴⁴ For detailed biographical information on the poet, see the entry on 'Imru al-Qays' in the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, ed. by Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey, London: Routledge, 1998, vol. 1, pp. 394-395, and also the information provided by A. J. Arberry throughout the first chapter devoted to the poet in its entirety in his brilliant book *The Seven Odes*.

¹⁴⁵ A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, p. 32.

¹⁴⁶ In his short and brilliant 1973 essay "Some Notes on Imr El-Qais", Robert Bringham says: "There are many stories about Imr, and some of them, presumably, are not fiction. [...] Imr el-Qais has been depicted as a vagabond, a Kindite prince, Justinian's houseguest, a fellow named Hunduj using a fourth-century Lakhmid alias, a Christian, a pagan, a figment of Hammād the Reciter's imagination, or a reincarnation of Heracles, done in by an exotically poisoned shirt. Or he is confused with the Kaisos who appears in Procopius' *History of the Wars*, Book I. My own preference is that he was an early sixth-century Arab poet; further biographical considerations are of tertiary importance." *Contemporary Literature in Translation*, no. 16, Fall 1973, p. 16.

transmitted them from mouth to mouth [...] until all Arabia echoed with his songs.”¹⁴⁷ Imr al-Qais’s accomplishments were many and early recognized in the Arab world. “Among his inventions are enumerated the comparison of women with gazelles, wild cows and eggs, and the likening of horses to eagles and staffs – he excelled in the use of metaphor and simile; he was also the first to separate the erotic prelude from the rest of the ode.”¹⁴⁸ The poet’s fame justly rests on his *Mu‘allaqa*, “the most famous, the most admired and the most influential poem in the whole of Arabic literature.”¹⁴⁹ In the *nasīb* he weeps ‘at the deserted campsite’; in fact, he is often credited with the invention of the motif. He then remembers former love affairs and sorrowful, sleepless nights, describes his horse and a hunt for antelopes, followed by a banquet, and ends with a magnificent depiction of a thunderstorm. The sequence of themes is unusual, although the poem’s deep structure has been analysed repeatedly by many scholars worldwide. It is still much admired on account of its rich imagery and the individual character and eroticism of its love episodes, which are unparalleled in pre-Islamic poetry. In addition, Imr al-Qais’s ode abounds in splendid descriptions and brilliant images, and some of the animal descriptions have a ferocious muscularity and sharpness. “There is general agreement that the storm scene with which the ode concludes shows the Arab poet at his most vigorous and most imaginative.”¹⁵⁰ But, of course, when it comes to translation, the daring images and the exquisitely worded pictures of life in the desert set the translator a hard task, which partly accounts for the fact that a number of attempts have been made at rendering the original poem into satisfactory English since Sir William Jones first embarked on the difficult enterprise in the late 18th century. Jones inaugurated a long, fruitful tradition in the Occident. Orientalism, or the interest in eastern lore began with the Romantics, reached its height between 1850 and 1925, when there was a flood of translations, travel books, and studies all connected with Arabia, her people and language. This accounts also for the existence of such books as FitzGerald’s rendering of the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Kayyam, which was immensely popular in Victorian England.



Translations of Imr al-Qais’s Ode into English

Translating classical Arabic poetry into English is a hard task. The *Mu‘allaqāt* prove to be no exception; they are difficult to translate, and several attempts have been in fact made by

¹⁴⁷ A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, pp. 39-40. Arberry speaks of “the overwhelming impact made by the poetry of Imr al-Qais on the minds and imaginations of later composers. Many of his phrases acquired the universal currency of proverbs.” (p. 41)

¹⁴⁸ A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, pp. 40-41.

¹⁴⁹ A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, p. 41. The preservation of his ode was made possible by the eminent philologist al-Asma’ī, “the earliest scholar to ‘edit’ the assembled poetry of Imr al-Qais”. “All the verses of Imr al-Qais that we possess,” he is reported to have said, ‘have come to us by oral transmission from Hammād, save for a small portion that we owe to Abū ‘Amr ibn al-‘Alā’.” (p. 41) Arberry devotes quite a few pages to al-Asma’ī’s research method, which was crucial for the preservation of al-Qais’s ode and many other poems that would have otherwise been lost to oblivion. “Imr al-Qais’s editor was not content to take his information at second hand, even though his informants were men so reputedly stuffed with desert lore as Hammād and Abū ‘Amr. Numerous anecdotes tell of his expeditions among the Bedouins, doubtless to check up so far as he could on those minutiae of language, geography, flora and fauna, tribal matters and customs and local legend which would guarantee a sound understanding of what the old poets said, and form a judgment on what might be accepted as authentic. His initiative was admirable, and it was not his fault if his memories of the desert were as unreliable as those of the professional reciters in the cities.” (p. 47) All these men lived “in an age when the old lore of the desert, though dying, was not yet quite extinct, and they preserved for us [...] a large quantity of acceptable documentation without which the meanings of the old Arabic poetry would be beyond unravelling.” (pp. 47-48)

¹⁵⁰ A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, p. 52.

a number of authors to render them into natural, euphonious English. To begin with, their vocabulary is archaic, and there are many verses whose meaning is obscure even to experts in Arabic literature. The language of ancient Arabic poets in particular is an amazingly rich language, in which complex notions can be expressed with very few words. The style of this ancient poetry, characterized by A. J. Arberry as exhibiting ‘pregnant brevity and epigrammatic terseness’, poses both philological and stylistic difficulties for the translator. The richness and precision of the Arabic lexicon in a number of contexts, such as the description of desert animals, is a serious obstacle for translators. Furthermore, there is the whole cultural universe behind the poetry: the ancient world of deserted Bedouin encampments which the odes typically evoke, the desert flora and fauna which are described in such a meticulous way, and the arcane lore and tribal traditions seem to be altogether foreign to a modern Western reader’s sensibility. Another major problem confronting the translator seems to stem from the very structural features of Arabic poetry: it is almost impossible to stick to the isometric monorhymed couplets of the Arabic language and to stand up to the exacting prosodic discipline imposed on the native poets. In the end, the taste, sound and texture of the original is inevitably lost. The long sequences of monorhymed verse lines, as well as the incantatory and auditory aspect of poetry, seemed to be essential in the non-literate tribal society of ancient Arabia. In the hands of a virtuoso, the formal constraints gave poets an opportunity for technical excellence and creativity. As a matter of fact, the *Mu‘allaqāt* are great poetry: they are supremely fine poems technically, and beyond their purely technical excellence, they have achieved the status of cultural icons in Arabic literature and have exerted a powerful grip on the Arab poetic imagination.

A short overview of translations of the ode throughout history demonstrates that no rendering of the ode proves to be final or perfect. The ode contains much that only a full commentary can make intelligible for Western readers brought up in the Western canon.¹⁵¹ In this respect, there are several translations of Imr al-Qais’s ode into English. In fact, the *Mu‘allaqāt* were among the first Arabic literary works to attract the attention of European orientalists in the 18th and 19th centuries. Sir William Jones (1746-94), an important British jurist, translator and philologist, was the first to translate the *Mu‘allaqāt* into English. He specialised in Oriental languages and throughout his lifetime he translated into English works in Persian, Sanskrit, Chinese and other Oriental languages, including Hebrew and Arabic. The first English translation of the *Mu‘allaqāt* appeared in 1783 under the title *The Moallakāt or Seven Arabian Poems, which were suspended on the Temple at Mecca; with a translation and arguments* [reprinted in *The Works of Sir William Jones*, ed. Lord Teignmouth, London 1807, x. 1-193.]. The main reason why he translated ancient Arabic poetry was the deep appreciation he felt towards the Arabic language and the whole tradition of literature written in it. Though now obsolete, and in places inaccurate, in its time his translation was a huge step forward in the study of ancient Arabian poetry. He had started translating the poems in Paris in 1780 and apparently finished the work in 1781, but it was only in the beginning of 1783 that he published his book. A. J. Arberry quotes the words of Lord Teignmouth, Jones’s biographer:

Mr. Jones published his translation of the seven Arabian poems, which he had finished in 1781. It was his intention to have prefixed to his work, a discourse on the antiquity of the Arabian language and characters, on the manners of the Arabs

¹⁵¹ As A. J. Arberry points out quoting R. A. Nicholson’s point of view, “their finest pictures of Bedouin life and manners often appear uncouth or grotesque, because without an intimate knowledge of the land and people it is impossible for us to see what the poet intended to convey, or to appreciate the truth and beauty of its expression; while the artificial framework, the narrow range of subject as well as treatment, and the frank realism of the whole strike us at once.” *The Seven Odes*, pp. 245-246.

in the age immediately preceding that of Mohammed, and other interesting information respecting the poems, and the lives of the authors, with a critical history of their works; but he could not command sufficient leisure for the execution of it.¹⁵²

Echoing Arberry's words, "it is impossible not to regret the irrecoverable loss of the larger discussion which he originally proposed."¹⁵³ Goethe greatly appreciated Jones's many-sided genius; he is reported to have affirmed that "die Verdienste dieses Mannes sind so weltbekannt und an mehr als einem Orte umständlich gerühmt."¹⁵⁴ Sir William Jones's version is a prose translation, and its English is of the eighteenth century, polite, latinized, and little suggestive of the wild vigour of the original Arabic in Arberry's opinion.¹⁵⁵ Though the text was written more than two centuries ago, it is still amazingly accurate, and it sounds quite elegant and fluent to the modern reader's ears.

In the late 19th century at least two other important translations of the *Mu'allaqāt* into English were brought to light. A British civil servant in India as well as an important orientalist, Sir Charles J. Lyall published a translation of some excerpts in his *Translations of Ancient Arabian Poetry* (1877). However, Lyall's version of Imr al-Qais's ode is confined to the concluding passage, which he continues to put into an unrhymed adaptation of the 'long metre'.¹⁵⁶ He did not rhyme the poem and used blank verse instead. On the other hand, Captain F. E. Johnson of the Royal Artillery (1894) was responsible for the next complete English translation: *The Seven Poems Suspended in the Temple at Mecca*, which was, in Arberry's words, quite a literal word-for-word rendering of the Arabic poems in unadorned prose, "without the least literary value." For a more accomplished translation, lovers of Arabic poetry would have to wait till the early years of the next century. At the beginning of the 20th century, in 1903, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, a British poet and diplomat, and his wife Lady Anne Blunt, made a worthier attempt at rendering into English the original Arabic ode in their *The Seven Golden Odes of Pagan Arabia*. Having spent a long time in the Middle East and having gained an insight into the desert inhabitants' customs and cultural practices, they made up their minds to translate the Arabic odes into 14-syllable metre in blank verse. "What they give us is true poetry, a new flower of a strange and interesting kind added to the body of our English classics."¹⁵⁷ They adopted a free-handed method of translation, thus espousing the literary approach characteristic of Edward FitzGerald's version of the poetry of the Persian poet Omar Kayyam in his *Rubáiyát*, first published in 1859, which had proved enormously popular with the Victorian reading public. As serious translators committed to faithfully rendering the original texts into English, the couple "felt that an elaborate biblical style of English would represent more closely the archaic Arabic."¹⁵⁸ The result was quite an accomplished version of the Arabic odes, but the book has never been reprinted again.

At the height of High Modernism, a new attempt was made at translating the *Mu'allaqāt* into English. An important orientalist and expert in Arabic literature, Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, published his book *Translations of Eastern Poetry and Prose* in 1922, which includes a short segment of the ode by Imr al-Qais. Even if he does not employ the original metre, he manages somehow to keep the spirit of the original by using a light and

¹⁵² A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, p. 12.

¹⁵³ A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, p. 13.

¹⁵⁴ A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, p. 25.

¹⁵⁵ A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, p. 28.

¹⁵⁶ A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, p. 55.

¹⁵⁷ A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, p. 30.

¹⁵⁸ A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, p. 57.

rhythmical rhyme. His translation is deemed to be amazingly beautiful and accurate, probably one of the best translations of the Arabic ode. Nevertheless, one of the most complete and exhaustive recent translations of the seven odes is that of Arthur John Arberry, *The Seven Odes. The First Chapter in Arabic Literature* (1957), which is also an invaluable study we have drawn quite intensively on for enlightening historical and literary background information. He chose to translate the odes in a 14-syllable metre in blank verse. Even if it is accurate and fluent, his version is deemed to sound somewhat uninspired to the ear. He has written an excellent book on the seven odes, though, with extensive historical background information on the time and place which witnessed the composition of these masterpieces. His book also includes samples of the translations of the odes into a number of Western languages (German, Italian, French, and even a Latin translation by a Dutch scholar that Sir William Jones used as an example of philological accuracy for his own translation). For more recent renderings of Imr al-Qais's ode we have to wait till the 1990s. In 1990 the Irish poet Desmond O'Grady (b. 1935), an accomplished translator of Arabic, Greek and Welsh poetry, produced what is considered to be one of the best translations ever made of the seven odes in his *The Golden Odes of Love*. Laying aside the original metre of the poems, he produced free verse versions, taking great poetic licence. However, the essential inadequacy of translation still remains palpable. To fully appreciate and understand this poetry, it might be best to return to Jones's advice to study the language and read the poems in the original.



Genesis of Robert Bringhurst's Version of Imr al-Qais's Ode

Being a constant student of the poetry and philosophy of different literatures and traditions, Robert Bringhurst is a poet characterized by a voracious appetite for life and knowledge. And being absolutely convinced that the essential vocation of human beings is learning, it comes as no surprise that he should be equally caught in the golden aura of the Orient since early in his literary career. Given his intellectual curiosity and his wide reading, the Orient had to hold a great fascination for him, so that it is equally not surprising to find Bringhurst interested in Arabic literature. The result was such astonishing poems as "The Ode of Imr el-Qais" (*Cadastrre*, 1973) and "City of Mirage" (*Bergschrund*, 1975), which are probably the best poems he translated from Arabic.¹⁵⁹ Despite the essential inadequacy of

¹⁵⁹ Chronologically arranged, these are the poems Bringhurst translated from the Arabic language: 1/ "The Ode of Imr el-Qais", first published in *Cadastrre* in 1972 and reprinted in *Contemporary Literature in Translation* (Mission, British Columbia) 16 (Fall 1973): 11–14, and accompanied in the same issue by the short essay "Some Notes on Imr el-Qais" (pp. 15-18), a brilliant text on the sixth-century pre-Islamic Arab poet. 2/ "Fragments Attributed to el-Samau'al", first published in *Stoney Lonesome* (Bloomington, Indiana) 3 (1972): 13–15, along with "Poem, 1971", "Self-Portrait for a Sensei Girl", and "Poem Authored with the Posthumous De Gaulle", and included in part in *Carmina propria et opuscula translata*. 3/ "City of Mirage", from the Arabic of Badr Shakir el-Sayyab, first published in *Quarry* (Bloomington, Indiana) 2 (Fall 1972): 33–38 [along with "The Beauty of the Weapons" and el-Sayyab's "You Went Away", though only "City of Mirage" was later included in Bringhurst's MFA Thesis *Carmina propria et opuscula translata* in 1975] and reprinted in the special Arabic issue of *Contemporary Literature in Translation* 19 (Summer/Fall 1974): 4, 18, 24, guest-edited by Bringhurst, along with el-Sayyab's "The Cry of the Mallard", Mahmoud Darweesh's "Waiting for Them", and Tumadir el-Khansa's "Elegy", all of which were included in *Carmina propria et opuscula translata*, and the short essay "A History of Semitic Literature in One Quarto Page" (p. 3), with a cover photograph entitled "Strafed Train in the Sinai, 1967" also by Bringhurst. 4/ *Carmina propria et opuscula translata*, Bringhurst's unpublished MFA Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1975, consulted at the Special Collections of the University of British Columbia Library, Vancouver, in July 2010, consists of two parts. The first part consists of *carmina* or original poems by the author, whereas the second part is made up of *opuscula translata*, namely translations from Arabic and classical Greek: El-Samau'al, "Fragment"; El-Khansa, "Elegy"; El-Ma'arri, "Five Poems";

translation, these versions from the Arabic seem to preserve some of the sound texture and charm of the original texts. As a matter of fact, we tend to take for granted that the translation of poetry presents all sorts of obstinate problems, but we often forget that certain versions give lasting pleasure and satisfaction, and have even proved themselves to possess the creative quality of original compositions.

It was aesthetic appreciation which urged Bringhurst to bring the masterpiece of Imr al-Qais to the notice of the Canadian public. "The Ode of Imr el-Qais" was thus first published in *Cadastre* in 1973 and reprinted in *Contemporary Literature in Translation* the same year, accompanied in the same issue by the short essay "Some Notes on Imr el-Qais" – a brilliant text written in elegant prose on the sixth-century pre-Islamic Arab poet. As the poet confesses in his autobiographical essay "Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation" (*Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* 1986), he spent ten years studying Arabic; he also spent a long period of time studying Comparative Literature at the University of Indiana. In 1974 he published a number of translations from the Arabic in the special Arabic issue of *Contemporary Literature in Translation*, for which he served as guest editor. In a way, in confronting some of the masterpieces of the literary tradition in the Arabic language, he was not just tuning his ear into a new prosody, into the sound texture of another literature, but also somehow shaping his own personal view of *Weltliteratur*, nourishing himself on the achievements of the masters of the past from a number of literary traditions. In the opening lines of his essay "Some Notes on Imr el-Qais", he highlights the importance of the Arabic literary tradition and its centrality to the enterprise of any serious poet who wishes to make a lasting contribution to great literature:

Imr el-Qais stands with a few confreres at the summit of Arabic literature. It is a small high place, not a minor landmark; the work is not jerkwater writing. These are rudimentary facts, but they have had rather little circulation among people who do not read Arabic. [...] From the close of the Greek Anthology to the rise of the Provençal [*sic*] troubadours, most of the pre-eminent poetry of the Occident is written in Arabic: the language in which, over the same term, a bulk of classical learning was preserved.¹⁶⁰

Of the centrality of Arabic literature he speaks somewhere else. In his equally short essay "A History of Semitic Literature in One Quarto Page", published in *Contemporary Literature in Translation* in 1974, Bringhurst argues that the literature of an important era of Middle Eastern civilization, beginning "a century or so before the rise of Islam" and ceasing "with the collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate circa 1055" has, "in Europe and the Americas, been principally ignored." He then proceeds to shape or fashion an essential canon of Arabic literature *à la* Ezra Pound, i.e., reminiscent of such groundbreaking Poundian essays as "How to Read":

A minimal list of Arabic authors, starting in the sixth century A.D., might run roughly as follows:

Imr el-Qais, his *Divan* (that is, his *Works*).

The best of his near contemporaries: Antara, Tarafa, el-Samau'al, Ta'abbata Sharran, el-Shanfara, and the poetess el-Khansa'.

Badr Shakir el-Sayyab, "City of Mirage" and "The Cry of the Mallard"; Mahmoud Darweesh, "Waiting for Them"; "The Petelia Tablet"; Aeschylus, "Four Fragments"; Empedokles, "Seven Fragments". 5/ "Five Poems from *The Necessity of the Unnecessary*", by Abul'ala [ibn] Ahmed el-Ma'arri, included in *Carmina propria et opacula translata* (1975), and published in *Black & White: A Review of the Arts* (Little Rock, Arkansas) 1 (Winter 1976): 19–23.

¹⁶⁰ See Bringhurst's "Some Notes on Imr al-Qais", *Contemporary Literature in Translation* (Mission, British Columbia) 16 (Fall 1973): 15.

This carries us to the time of Mohammed. “His Koran has become a stupid piece of prolix absurdity,” said Carlyle, who read it in a bad translation. There are no good translations. There may never be. Thereafter:

Abu Nuwas, 747-813, chief among the authors of Harun el-Rashid’s time.

El-Mutanabbi, 915-965, a writer well worth comparison with Villon.

El-Ma’arri, 973-1058, a blind man residing in a Syrian village named “Bloodstain.”

There is very little in the extant work of Europe between the deaths of Catullus, Horace and Ovid and the births of Arnaut, Cavalcanti and Dante which will stand against the writing of these Arabs.

Add to the list, but at indeterminate date, the *Alf laila wa laila*: that is, *The Thousand Nights and a Night*.

And in this century, new writers – beginning, for instance, in Arabic, with Badr Shakir el-Sayyab. They are authors who have nourished themselves on Europe, adding our heritage to theirs – which is enough, unless we read them with care, and read their forebears, to make them literarily that much richer than ourselves.¹⁶¹

The thoroughness with which Robert Bringhurst aimed to accomplish his task is indicative of his desire to gain a solid acquaintance with the most representative works not just of the Western canon – ranging from the Presocratics to the Bible –, but also of other traditions such as the Arabic one. In this he was also following the example of the master, Ezra Pound, who wrote a poem entitled “The Tomb at Akr Çaar” in *Ripostes* (1912). In this respect, there are striking parallelisms between both authors. So Bringhurst applied his will to the complex task of translating Imr al-Qais’s ode, splendid indeed but of ferocious difficulty. The herculean labour beneath it all was, we guess, his desire to make himself acquainted with the human species in all its varieties. Needless to say, Arabic literature exercised a great formative influence on the poet’s early education and he was most devotedly attached to it out of admiration of its sturdy independence, love of freedom and beauty. In this new literature he found poems worthy of immortality, most beautifully written, which sounded like music to his ears. However, the difficulty of the undertaking – translating the Arabic masterpieces into English – was obvious and crystal-clear, as the text of Imr al-Qais’s ode is itself obscure because modern readers lack the knowledge of much of the cultural background beneath the poem. As a result, a thorough knowledge of the language, of Arabic literature, of the *Weltanschauung* behind the language, and of the desert and desert practices seems to be required if the translator is to approach the whole enterprise with a certain degree of success. In discussing the difficulty of the undertaking and his own translation method, A. J. Arberry claims that:

the problem which confronts the translator is the usual one, how best to convey in his own idiom the impression made upon his mind by words uttered fourteen hundred years ago, in a remote desert land, at the first dawn of an exotic literature. Most of those who have faced this enigma appear to have felt that ‘antique’ Arabic demands for its adequate presentation some kind of ‘antique’ English. For my own part I cannot share this view; Imr al-Qais and his kind speak into my ear a natural, even at times a colloquial language; such, I feel sure, was the effect they produced on their first audience. In the versions which I have made I have sought to resolve the difficulty of idiomatic equivalence on these lines; and I think that the result is a gain in vigour and clarity. I have also tried to follow the original rhythms, without rhyming, but not so slavishly as to be compelled by the rigour of the verse to contract or to interpolate.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ See Bringhurst’s “A History of Semitic Literature in One Quarto Page”, *Contemporary Literature in Translation* (Mission, British Columbia) 19 (Summer/Fall 1974): 3.

¹⁶² A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, pp. 59-60.

Bringhurst does not say much of his own translation method, but one closer look at his version of Imr al-Qais's ode will prove to be most eloquent. Imr al-Qais and his kind speak into my ear a natural, even at times a colloquial language, claims Arberry, and this looks like a most appropriate description of the short verse-lines, the natural speech and the colloquial language Bringhurst makes use of in his rendering of the masterpiece. In one of the notations at the end of *Cadastre*, the poet points out that "Mohammed Bakir Alwan's immense scholarship is concealed in the Ode" and, at some point in his essay "Some Notes on Imr El-Qais", he concedes that "there is of course a carapace of scholarship built around the poem. I have tried, where I saw them, to sidestep the standardized misreadings."¹⁶³ In his attempt at recovering the original spirit of the poem, Bringhurst has sought to preserve what he most admired about Imr al-Qais: "The inheritance is at least threefold. There is the liveliness, the live stance. The precision of terminology, the lexical tactility. And the music, the sheer command of song."¹⁶⁴

At this point it might be wise to ask what was so fascinating about Arabic literature for Bringhurst's poetic sensibility. In the first place is prosody, pure sound, or the musicality of Arabic poetry. Since early in his literary career, the poet was eager to explore the prosody of poetry, the way human sounds became the most essential *materia poetica* out of which poetry was made. The ode he set out to translate was "a masterpiece of sound", a technical accomplishment, an expression of the immense talent of the pre-Islamic poet. In this respect, the author admires the Arab's command of prosody in his own mother tongue: "Imr's metric is enormously sophisticated, utterly unlike the metric of old Hebrew and very distinctly like that of certain old Greek."¹⁶⁵ These words betray more than a profound familiarity with different prosodic systems of different classical literatures. But for Bringhurst, all literary traditions are but tiny parts of a grander design, that of World Literature, which comprises all the literary works of art that have been composed, are being composed and will be composed, no matter whether in one language or another. The important thing is that great literature be written at any cost; it does not matter much who does the writing. Then, because he has got a general overview of world literature in his mind, he looks for the literary affiliations of the Arab in the Western canon. Thus, al-Qais stands not with Homer, but "with Archilochos, and he stands with Villon. The themes and stances reappear in another beginning – Imr visible clearly as a brother to Arnault Daniel."¹⁶⁶ In the second place, to Bringhurst's mind and ear, the precision, concision and clarity of the Arabic language and the literature composed in this language appears to be of paramount importance:

Arabic itself is ordinarily advertised as flowery; sometimes, instead, it is reputed to be guttural [*sic*] and terse. There are, to be sure, Swinburnians in the repertoire; but the language itself and the best of its writers are not of that sort. There is an epitaph by Ibn el-Khubbaza which speaks to the point:

Your life was of the form
of Arab eloquence.
Story: short; words: few; meaning:

¹⁶³ See Bringhurst's "Some Notes on Imr al-Qais", *Contemporary Literature in Translation* (Mission, British Columbia) 16 (Fall 1973): 17.

¹⁶⁴ Bringhurst, "Some Notes on Imr al-Qais", p. 17.

¹⁶⁵ Bringhurst, "Some Notes on Imr al-Qais", p. 16.

¹⁶⁶ Bringhurst, "Some Notes on Imr al-Qais", p. 16. Somewhere else, Bringhurst says: "Imr is no small poet, nor a small-minded man. He has the keen eye and the ribaldry of Chaucer, the rigour and verse of Catullus or Villon. Like them he is neither distracted nor constricted by the strictures of his form, refuses to walk stiffly even in ceremonial clothes. The freedom of his speech resonates in the tonic reed of his line." (p. 17)

immense.¹⁶⁷

In the third place, there is a muscularity of expression, a certain unselfconsciousness, a confidence, a freshness and originality in ancient Arabic poetry which is characteristic of all great art. For Arberry, the Seven Odes are “supremely fine poems” which remained “prime models of excellence” throughout the history of Arabic literature, and the miracle is that they cannot “fail to delight and move to wonder even fifteen hundred years” after they were uttered for the first time.¹⁶⁸ Imr al-Qais’s ode is the work of a virtuoso of the Arabic language, and his ode remains a well-wrought urn “81 lines long in the eleventh-century redaction of el-Zauzani, with 28 syllables each line.”¹⁶⁹



A Brief Critical Analysis of the Ode

Imr al-Qais’s ode is written in the form of the classical *qasīda*,¹⁷⁰ which has got a highly conventionalized scheme. The restrictions imposed on the poet were twofold – of a formal

¹⁶⁷ Bringhurst, “Some Notes on Imr al-Qais”, p. 16.

¹⁶⁸ A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, p. 254.

¹⁶⁹ Bringhurst, “Some Notes on Imr al-Qais”, p. 17.

¹⁷⁰ See the entry on ‘*qasīda*’ in the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, edited by Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey, pp. 630-632. There the *qasīda* is defined in the following terms: “Generic term denoting a polythematic poem with identical metre and rhyme, usually beginning with amatory verses, the *nasīb*, and ending with the poet’s praise of himself or his tribe, or with a panegyric. It was the principal genre of pre-Islamic Bedouin poetry, the main expression of tribal norms and values. [...] The earliest specimens of the genre probably date back to the end of the fifth century CE and give the impression of a well-established tradition. They were composed and transmitted orally and present several characteristics of oral poetry, e.g. a high percentage of formulaic expressions, semantic repetition, additive style and independence of detail, which means that each section of the ode retains a certain degree of autonomy. A *qasīda* varies in length from about 30 to 100 verses. It consists of short narrative and descriptive units, sometimes introduced as comparisons, depicting typical situations of tribal life, the Bedouin’s most precious possessions, camel and horse, and the landscape and animal world of the desert. Although the poet always speaks in the first person, he does not refer to his individual experience, except in the concluding section, where he may treat issues of personal concern. In the preceding parts of the ode he recreates the collective experience of tribal society, thus offering a model for identification; he is the ‘Bedouin hero’ who encounters problems and provides solutions in accordance with the accepted values of the tribe. The *nasīb*, the only kind of love poetry preserved from the *jāhiliyya* [‘time of ignorance’, a designation for the pre-Islamic period], always refers to a relationship of the past. In spring, the season of abundant pasture, neighbouring tribes camp together and affairs are conducted between their members. This was evidently approved of by Bedouin society, since poets boast of it in their self-praise. However, when the tribes separate lovers must part, for individual relations are subordinated to the interest of the group. The poet conforms to tribal demands, but his emotions are still involved. This is the situation treated in the *nasīb* by several conventional motifs. The most favourite motif is the poet’s stopping at the traces of a deserted campsite, which he recognizes as the place where he once spent happy days with his beloved. He remembers her beauty, weeps and complains, but finally regains his equanimity and resolves to forget his futile sorrow. Other motifs fulfil the same function. The poet, while resting by night, is haunted by the ‘vision’ of his beloved, whom he knows to dwell in a distant place. Or he observes the preparations of his beloved’s tribe for departure, and watches her litter disappear in the distance. After deciding to forget love and the beloved, the poet usually turns towards his camel for consolation. He elaborately describes its excellence and emphasizes its strength and endurance by comparing it to an animal of the desert, e.g. an antelope, a wild ass, an ostrich or, very rarely, an eagle. These comparisons often develop into lively narratives which represent the animals in their typical behaviour and surroundings. The sequence of *nasīb* and camel theme seems to have constituted an early convention in the history of the ode. The concluding sections reveal a higher degree of variation. The following patterns are most frequent: (a) the poet compensates the melancholy mood of the *nasīb*, enhanced by allusions to his old age and failing success with women, by memories of youthful pleasures and pursuits; (b) he treats a political issue of tribal life, often in connection with satirical verses and threats against his adversaries; (c) he ends with a panegyric upon a tribal chief or a king.”

and thematic nature. As for the form, the composition was “expected to be of substantial length, upwards of sixty couplets all following an identical rhyme. The poet was free to choose between a considerable variety of metres fixed quantitatively, but having made his choice he had to keep to it.”¹⁷¹ The technical demands were inflexible and the poet had to be a true artificer of words to comply with the formal prerequisites of the *qasīda*: writing long sequences of monorhymed couplets was no easy task at all. As for the content, a specific sequence of themes was expected to unfold throughout the poem in a fixed order. In a passage that has been frequently quoted of his classic *Poetry and Poets*, the medieval theoretician Ibn Qutaiba (d. 889) enumerates the topics and the order in which they were to be treated in the ode:

The composer of Odes began by mentioning the deserted dwelling-places and the relics and traces of habitation. Then he wept and complained and addressed the desolate encampment, and begged his companion to make a halt, in order that he might have occasion to speak of those who had once lived here and afterwards departed; for the dwellers in tents [...] moved from one water-spring to another, seeking pasture and searching out the places where rain had fallen. Then to this he linked the erotic prelude, and bewailed the violence of his love and the anguish of separation from his mistress and the extremity of his passion and desire. [...] He went on to complain of fatigue and want of sleep and travelling by night and of the noonday heat, and how his camel had been reduced to leanness. [...] After representing all the discomfort and danger of his journey, [...] he entered upon the panegyric, and incited him [the person to whom the poem was addressed] to reward, and kindled his generosity by exalting him above his peers and pronouncing the greatest dignity, in comparison with his, to be little.¹⁷²

Now, the great majority of Arabian odes fit this pattern and description, but Imr al-Qais’s ode exhibits a somewhat different structure. As can be deduced from this often quoted excerpt, roughly speaking the classical *qasīda* exhibits a tripartite structure. Firstly, in the *nāsib* the poet describes his arrival to the campgrounds of his beloved’s tribe and his discovery that the tribe has left the place in search of other pastures. The poet halts the friends that have ridden with him and he sits down to cry as he remembers the love that has been and is now gone. Secondly, in the so-called *ribla* (or journey), which is usually longer than the *nāsib* and has a faster pace, the poet describes the many dangers of the desert and celebrates the virtues and loyalty of his riding animal in contrast to women’s disloyalty. Finally, in the third and main part of the *qasīda* the poet praises the traits of the ideal man by glorifying himself or his tribe, or by tongue-lashing and criticizing other tribes. However, Imr al-Qais’s ode does not exactly comply with the literary conventions of the *qasīda*: it opens with a short description of the deserted campground, follows with the poet boasting of his love exploits and former success among women, then comes a *ribla* segment which includes a long description of the poet’s horse, and finally a description of a storm, which is celebrated as being one of the most accomplished passages in the history of Arabic poetry.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, p. 15.

¹⁷² A. J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁷³ At first, reading the pattern of Imr al-Qais’s ode is not easily discernible. The outline of the ode (the story behind the verses) was excellently set forth by Sir William Jones in his pioneer 1783 essay, written in the elegant English prose of the 18th century. As the text has been seldom reprinted and it is quite rare and inaccessible, it might be worth quoting in full from A. J. Arberry’s book *The Seven Odes*, pp. 49-51:

“The poet, after the manner of his countrymen, supposed himself attended on a journey by a company of friends; and, as they pass near a place, where his mistress had lately dwelled, but from which her tribe was then removed, *he desires them to stop awhile*, that he might indulge the painful pleasure of weeping over the deserted remains of her tent. They comply with his request, but exhort him to show more strength of mind, and urge two topicks of consolation; namely, *that he had before been equally unhappy, and that he had enjoyed his full*

Translation is always unavoidably a form of interpretation, as language is more than just a handful of meaningful and beautifully resonant words. There is always the world behind the speech, the culture of the people speaking that particular language, and an idiosyncratic perception of reality conditioned by historical and social factors embedded in the words. In coming to terms with al-Qais's masterpiece as he set out to translate it into English, Bringhurst had to make a number of decisions regarding minute details related to the language employed by the author, the stylistic configuration of the ode, and the worldview treasured behind the poem. Inevitably something of the pristine grandeur of the original text must have been lost in the process, but we intuitively feel that something has been gained in translation in this particular case. The original ode must be ferociously difficult to translate; it must have truly represented an intellectual and technical challenge for the poet. Poetry has much to do with a craftsmanship of words in which the poet is the one who creates *ex nihilo*, out of words – poetry comes from the Greek verb ποιέω, 'to make'. To render the Arabic ode into fluent, natural English, and to find a genuine voice for a sixth-century Arab poet speaking to readers living in the late twentieth century, must have been a demanding task.

The structure of al-Qais's ode has been scrutinized time and again by experts in Arabic literature from all over the world. Before proceeding into further analysis, we must confess our inability to improve upon what has already been accomplished by other scholars. To analyze Imr al-Qais's ode (as translated by Bringhurst) in depth would expand this brief analysis into the dimensions of a full-length dissertation. Furthermore, for the analysis to be absolutely precise, a thorough knowledge of Arabic would be required, and a thorough comparison should be drawn with other renderings of al-Qais's ode both into English and other European languages. So I should leave it for minds better-equipped than mine to thoroughly compare Bringhurst's translation with the original Arabic text, and to study the virtues of what turns out to be a wholly original composition. For the present

share of pleasures: thus by the recollection of his passed delight his imagination is kindled, and his grief suspended.

He then gives his friends a lively account of his juvenile frolics, to one of which they had alluded. It seems, he had been in love with a girl name *Onaiza*, and had in vain sought an occasion to declare his passion: one day, when the tribe had struck their tents, and were changing their station, the women, as usual came behind the rest, with the servants and baggage, in carriages fixed on the backs of camels. *Amriolkais* advanced slowly at a distance, and, when the men were out of sight, had the pleasure of seeing *Onaiza* retire with a party of damsels to a rivulet or pool, called *Daratjuljul*, where they undressed themselves, and were bathing, when the lover appeared, dismounted from his camel, and sat upon their clothes, proclaiming aloud, that *whoever would redeem her dress, must present herself naked before him*.

They adjured, entreated, expostulated; but, when it grew late, they found themselves obliged to submit, and all of them recovered their clothes except *Onaiza*, who renewed her adjurations, and continued a long time in the water: at length she also performed the condition, and dressed herself. Some hours had passed, when the girls complained of cold and hunger: *Amriolkais* therefore instantly killed the young camel on which he had ridden, and, having called the female attendants together, made a fire and roasted him. The afternoon was spent in gay conversation, not without a cheerful cup, for he was provided with wine in a leathern bottle: but, when it was time to follow the tribe, the prince (for such was his rank) had neither camel nor horse; and *Onaiza*, after much importunity, consented to take him on her camel before the carriage, while the other damsels divided among themselves the less agreeable burden of his arms, and the furniture of his beast.

He next relates his courtship of *Fatbima*, and his more dangerous amour with a girl of a tribe at war with his own, *whose beauties he very minutely and luxuriantly delineates*. From these love-tales he proceeds to the commendation of his own fortitude, when he was passing a desert in the darkest night; and the mention of the morning, which succeeded, leads him to *a long description of his hunter, and of a chase in the forest*, followed by a feast on the game, which had been pierced by his javelins.

Here his narrative seems to be interrupted by *a storm of lightning and violent rain*: he nobly describes the shower and the torrent, which it produced down all the adjacent mountains, and, his companions retiring to avoid the storm, the drama (for the poem has the form of a dramattick pastoral) ends abruptly.”

purpose, it must suffice to highlight some of the best passages in Bringhurst's translation. And it is intuition, and not knowledge of the Arabic ode in the original, which will guide my steps in this process.

The first part of the ode (the *nāsib*) in Bringhurst's rendering of the poem will give the reader quite an accurate idea of the force of the original text. The verse lines are short and irregular, of an epigrammatic texture, intensity and precision reminiscent of Arberry's characterization of the Arabic language. There seems to be no room for pure subjectivity, narcissism or self-complacency, as the poetic voice strives hard to convey the sense of painful dejection experienced on the deserted campsite of the beloved from a purely objective standpoint. The resulting lines are decidedly untranscendent and down-to-earth. In this context, the deserted campsite turns out to be a pretext for nostalgic remembrance of past bliss and plenitude, of a time when the poet would court women, enjoy their carefree company and have his *share of goods days with women*. However the desert remains a physically palpable and objective entity in the poem, so intense and precise is al-Qais' and Bringhurst's mastery use of language:

Rein up
 and we weep here, mourn
 a house, a girl –
 where the cornice
 of that sand reef curls
 between Miqrat and Toodih, Haumal and Dakhool.
 North wind, south
 wind interweave; wind
 mutilates the traces.
 Stag dung is spattered like peppercorns
 where the yards and cisterns were.
 They loaded up one dawn
 by these acacias.
 It was
 like biting a colocynth.

Tending their mounts, my companions
 are saying:
 Don't die grieving. Find
 some seemly end.
 I cry again. Tears cure.
 No solace here.
 Not even enough ruin
 left to lean on.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ In *The Seven Odes*, p. 61, Arberry's translation of al-Qais's ode opens on quite a different tone. The verse lines are longer than Bringhurst's, as the scholar translated the poem in a 14-syllable metre in blank verse. When compared with the freshness, the colloquial style and the faster pace of Bringhurst's rendering, Arberry's version sounds a bit awkward to the ear of the modern reader:

Halt, friends both! Let us weep, recalling a love and a lodging
 by the rim of the twisted sands between Ed-Dakhool and Haumal,
 Toodih and El-Mikrát, whose trace is not yet effaced
 for all the spinning of the south winds and the northern blasts;
 there, all about its yards, and away in the dry hollows
 you may see the dung of antelopes spattered like peppercorns.
 Upon the morn of separation, the day they loaded to part,
 by the tribe's acacias it was like I was splitting a colocynth;
 there my companions halted their beasts awhile over me

when he tips oil to the twisted wicks.¹⁷⁵

[...]

Mount Thabeer, in the thickets of rain,
loomed like a greybeard bundled in his robes.
And at dawn the summit of Mujaimir rose
out of skeins of stormwrack
like a spindle-cap.
And the storm laid out its wares on the desert plain
like a Yemei unpacking his latest load.

And it seemed, in the early light,
that the valley larks gathered over
nectar laced with nutmeg,
and the carcasses of cougar
drowned down the canyon overnight,
far out in the eye's gaze,
were uprooted onion.

Such a prodigious version of al-Qais's poem could only come from a writer whose poetic sensibility took shape under such multifarious influences as the Bible, the Pre-Socratics, the Oriental sages, the poetry of Mesoamerica, the Western literary canon since its beginnings with the Greek and Latin masters up to the present, and Eastern literatures like that whole *corpus* of works written in Arabic.

¹⁷⁵ In Sir Williams Jones's translation the storm scene opens as follows: "O friend, seest thou the lightning, whose flashes resemble / the quick glance of two hands amid clouds raised above clouds? / The fire of it gleams like the lamps of a hermit, when the oil, / poured on them, shakes the cord by which they are suspended." Quoted by A.J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, p. 52.

Bergschrund

Of Light Sublime, Mountains and Stones

Biblical Figures, Presocratics & Co.

INTRODUCTION

Certain human beings are fortunate enough to have perfect lives which look like impeccable works of art. To make of one's life a masterwork is no easy endeavour, though; it is probably the most difficult task one might undertake. A perfect life looks like a circle, and has the simplicity and organic coherence found only in natural things, which seek nothing else apart from *being* genuinely themselves through a solid loyalty to their true calling. 1975 was an *annus mirabilis*, or a miracle year, in one of such lives – that of Robert Bringhurst. After hours, days, and years of constant, indefatigable study, labour, and meditation, he produced a masterpiece entitled *Bergschrund*, which is indubitably a landmark in his own poetic development and literary career. “Gone are the exercises in style and the imitative homage of the apprentice books; gone too is the early social and literary satire, replaced by searchingly metaphysical poems of earth and air.”¹ This was no minor achievement, if we bear in mind that he had written only a handful of poetry books, chapbooks and broadsides, besides contributing some poems and prose pieces to small magazines, periodicals and journals. *The Shipwright's Log* (1972) and *Cadastre* (1973), written while still an undergraduate, were followed by the publication of a beautifully designed broadside entitled *Pythagoras* (1974), two long poems – *Deuteronomy* (1974), a dramatic monologue spoken by Moses, and *Hachadura* (1975), first published in *Poetry* (Chicago), conceived as a metaphysical anatomy of *nothingness* –, and a chapbook entitled *Eight Objects* (1975), an impressive sequence of eight poems that gives voice to the philosophy of the ancient Presocratics. Though Bringhurst has remained a constant student all his life and feels that he owns no field of knowledge at all, that there is no discipline in which there is nothing left to be learnt, 1975 also witnessed the completion of his academic career – he finished his MFA in Poetry at the University of British Columbia with a thesis entitled *Carmina propria et opuscula translata*, which includes poems of his own invention along with translations from a number of languages, literatures, and traditions from all over the world – ranging from classical Greek and Arabic to modern Western languages like Italian or French. In his beginnings were contained, as if in a nutshell, all the seeds of all the fruits and flowers that the future held for him. In so short a time span (of roughly four years) he went through an astonishing poetic development, which, seen in retrospect, only a talented genius and craftsman could have known.²

Bergschrund is an all-round, complex and difficult book, despite the fact that the poet's voice is crystal-clear throughout the whole collection. In the masterful use of language displayed in the collection, it looks forward to mature Bringhurst. It is a book about air, fire, water and stones, about what it means to be on the summit of a mountain,

¹ Iaian Higgins, entry on Robert Bringhurst, in *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada* (2002), ed. W.H. New, p. 153.

² According to Jane Munro, “*Bergschrund* is not the only work by Bringhurst worth reading. *Cadastre*, which preceded it, is interesting if you wish to see something of his poetic development. The two publications which follow it, *Jacob Singing* and *The Stonecutter's Horses*, are both works of remarkable quality.” See “Bringhurst's Range: Essential Information”, in *CVII [Contemporary Verse Two]* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81): 38-41, particularly p. 39.

breathing through the whole body, feeling the invisible currents of the world, and partaking of some kind of universal harmony.³ It is a book almost completely devoid of human presence,⁴ which seeks to become a beautiful and durable statement about the reality of the world. The title itself is strange enough for those who have no knowledge of mountains and stones. But stones, in their stubborn silence, do have something of value to tell human beings, if we but listen attentively to what they have to say. Some sort of communion with Nature sublime, endowed with the texture of transcendence, is being explored in these pages by a poet who followed the example of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who truly revered the natural world, and is aware that Earth is the only true home humans have ever had and will ever have. In fact, the meaning of *bergschrund* is one of the keys to understand the book in its entirety, as well as the recurrent imagery throughout the whole collection. It is a geological term which refers to the crevasse that separates the stationary from the moving ice in a glacier.⁵ Bringhurst himself explained the meaning and appropriateness of this title in an interview:

... the bergschrund is... the name of that crevasse at the head of a glacier where the mobile ice which the glacier is splits off from the stationary snow pack above it... this is a book largely about mountains, the condition of the mind in the mountains, which is one of predominant clarity, I hope.⁶

Bergschrund is a beautiful made object, a perfect artifact in itself – an *art object*, in fact. It was handsomely produced by Sono Nis Press, and it was a considerable achievement, especially for a poet who had published his first collection of poems (*The Shipwright's Log*) less than four years earlier. All small matters and design details have been carefully meditated. The picture on the cover is “a splendidly appropriate photograph of a pocked, eroded, chipped, almost natural stone fountain. The frontispiece is a [...] reproduction of what must be an extraordinary photograph of a crevasse in the Blue Glacier (the light has to be going in, but it appears to be streaming out).”⁷ The arrangement itself of the poems into five sections is no coincidence either; the collection shows an organic structure in which all the poems fall exactly into place. In any case, in *Bergschrund* we find at least three of the four recurrent categories of poems that Geoff Hancock identifies in Bringhurst's *oeuvre*:

³ See Stephen Spender, *Journals 1939–1983*, ed. John Goldsmith, London: Faber & Faber, 1985. The entry for 4 April 1982 (pp. 442-443) recounts a meeting with Bringhurst in Vancouver and describes Spender's first encounter with *Bergschrund*: “In bed, as soon as I woke (at six) this morning I read the volume of poetry Bringhurst had given me and was bowled over. They were poems about ice and stone and light – of a dazzling purity – something so elusive and yet so controlled – and linking up the Arctic continent and the North Canadian experience with ancient Greek mystical philosophy and Pythagorean geometry – pure form yet given the precision of mathematics. The work of a mind dwelling on great geographical and historical heights, completely unlike anything else, showing the utter commonplaceness of the confessional writing fashionable now. [...] To read Bringhurst was to enjoy his work for its own sake and yet to glimpse (I thought) new possibilities in my own writing.” This is an epiphany-like moment of revelation for Spender: a window with a vista onto new poetic possibilities, a nourishing experience for him and his own career as a poet, as an artificer of words.

⁴ As Iaian Higgins points out, “Except for the reimagined Presocratics and the prophetic figures from the Pentateuch, these poems are almost entirely devoid of human presence.” *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*, p. 153.

⁵ See Raymond J. Smith's review of *Bergschrund*, “Poetry Chronicle”, in *The Ontario Review. A North American Journal of the Arts* (Windsor, Ontario) 4 (Spring/Summer 1976): 104-110. “The title, a geological term denoting a large glacial crevasse [*sic*] that separates the stationary from the moving ice, points to the recurring geological imagery of the book and suggests the poet's concern with fissures, edges, blades, especially in the long, richly lyrical, meditative poem “Hachadura.”” See p. 108 in particular.

⁶ Jane Munro, “Bringhurst's Range: Essential Information”, in *CVII* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81), p. 38.

⁷ William Meads, “The Holes in the Stone”, *Kayak* (Santa Cruz, California) 44 (February 1977): 60-65. See, in particular, page 64.

Bringhurst's poems are complex, but tend to fall into four main patterns. First are the dramatic monologues spoken by characters as diverse as Moses, Jacob, and Petrarch. A second group of poems is erudite and difficult, though not obscure, with elusive, often enigmatic references to pre-Socratic philosophers, Egyptian pharaohs, and primitive South American gods. A third group includes haunting poems with strong individual images, precise, often stark diction, and controlled lines. Much of his poetry in the 1980s [...] has been written for polyphonic performance by multiple voices.⁸

There are in this collection dramatic monologues like "Deuteronomy"; erudite poems like the ones in Part II on the Presocratics' thought, written in an intensely lyrical language; and jewel-like lyrics of haunting images and evocative musicality – which makes abundantly clear Bringhurst's masterful use of images, rhythm and sound to illuminate his erudite subjects. There are no musical suites, or poems for several voices, but the notion that poetry is a sort of music is somehow already anticipated in the prosody of these formidable poems.

Bergsbrund consists of five parts⁹ in which the range and relevance of the issues dealt with by Bringhurst is simply impressive. Thus, Part I is concerned with exploring the bare world of light and the four elements (water, earth, air, fire), sharpened edges and holes, in poems ringing with echoes from Pre-Columbian times and full of scientific observation and objective measurement of the world. Part II is the formidable section devoted to the Presocratics' philosophy; instead of Hebraic/Biblical myths, Bringhurst uses the wisdom (thought and ideas) of classical Greek philosophers such as Herakleitos, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Empedokles, Anaximander, Anaximenes and Pherekydes as the subject matter of poems of unsurpassed beauty, depth of thought, and musicality. The poet is high on intellectual contemplation in this eight-part sequence. What is at stake here is nothing less than Bringhurst's immense talent, his intellectual rigour, his love of precision, his determination to keep things distinct – all of these virtues are characteristic of a *claritas* of mind rare and precious among poets today. In these luminous, tattered fragments of

⁸ Geoff Hancock, entry on "Robert Bringhurst", in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, 2nd edition (1997), ed. E. Benson & W. Toye, p. 143. Iain Higgins, in his entry on Robert Bringhurst, *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada* (2002), ed. W.H. New, draws a similar taxonomy we have drawn on in our section devoted to a detailed analysis to *The Shipwrights Log* (1972) above. "Like the books that followed it, *Bergsbrund* contains three types of poem: the sculpted lyric (Bringhurst's fine extension of imagist poetics); the dramatic monologue (at times deriving almost straight from Pound and Browning, although without the latter's intense interest in revealing the speaker's psyche; at other times alluding to ancient or Eastern thinkers in order to rethink ideas attributed to them); and the musical suite. Often taking its formal shape in one of the previous kinds is a fourth: the reworked myth." (p. 153)

⁹ See Douglas Barbour, "Canadian Poetry Chronicle: vi." *Dalhousie Review* (Halifax) 58.3 (Autumn 1978): 555-578, a review of many books, including *Bergsbrund* (p. 569). He writes: "The title of Robert Bringhurst's *Bergsbrund* announces great heights, great cold, a cutting edge and possible vertigo. As well it should, for these are the poems of a stern, unbending intelligence turning a cold eye on history and humankind. Like the crystal of his 'Poem about Crystal,' his poems teach 'clarity's nature, / . . . the stricture / of uncut, utterly / uncluttered light.' They are hard, demanding, intellectually and emotionally severe, but the best of them (and in this collection that's two-thirds at least, a very good percentage) will fully engage you and offer the rewards that come from strength. The lines quoted above reveal Bringhurst's control of sound. He also commands a surprising control over the language of abstract thought. In the second section of *Bergsbrund*, he offers poems on Heracleitos, Parmenides, Empedokles and Pythagoras among others, poems which are not only full of barbed historical wit but which confront their subjects on philosophical home ground. Then, in Part III, he takes on the Old Testament, emerging victorious, especially in the case of 'Deuteronomy,' a brilliant meditative monologue in the persona of Moses. He follows this with a poem sequence exploring a terrifying modern ontology, and concludes with a series of poems on various subjects. The final poem is 'Ararat,' a fitting reminder of the heights Bringhurst inhabits in his poetry. It is not an optimistic poem; it is darkly ambiguous, like the poetic vision which animates the whole book. Bringhurst is good. He is not at all easy; his poems are full of strictures but they are also uncluttered, full of cold but bracing light. *Bergsbrund* is a powerful, even passionate, intellectual experience; it's one I recommend."

wisdom rescued from remote times, we witness his mind (and the Presocratics' minds) immersed in intellectual contemplation of great heights.¹⁰ Part III comprises several Biblical pieces based on the Old Testament (on the Pentateuch, to be more precise), in which the poet deals with such figures as Noah, Moses or Abraham in poems written in astonishingly naturalistic common speech.¹¹ Part IV is the impressive long lyrical poem "Hachadura", which betrays the influence of Wallace Stevens's "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle". It is an evocative poem consisting of twelve sections, and an extended meditation on the metaphysical concept of *nothing*. According to Iaian Higgins, "Hachadura", "instead of imitating its precursor, Stevens's "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle", answers it section by section in a brilliant and enigmatic meditation on *nothing*, undoing Stevens's negative Euro-American understanding of the concept with a Buddhist-inspired poetic enactment of its positivity."¹² And Part V consists of an impressive array of what Iain Higgins has called *sculpted lyrics*, or jewel-like concise poems, where Bringhurst shows an unparalleled mastery over imagery, rhythm and musicality. A poet of apparent simplicity, Bringhurst has the ability to restore the most commonplace objects to their pristine strangeness and endow them with unexpected resonances. In this respect, his poems are truly inquisitive, intensely lyrical, and his pieces are the fruit of a patient, talented craftsman weaving words into beautiful wholes.

In any event, *Bergsbrund* is no common book; it is a Babel-like library on its own, a repository in which Bringhurst's long-life interests and passions find their proper place. He writes with the weight of tradition on his shoulders and a solid knowledge of the age-old achievements of the past in his bones.¹³ To borrow a verse line from Ezra Pound, he has managed to *gather from the air a live tradition*.¹⁴ His poetry is thus enriched by a thorough knowledge of the past. A versatile culture historian, he is as much at ease with ancient Greek philosophy as with Pre-Columbian poetry or the modern achievements of a number of scientific disciplines. He draws, in fact, on a number of sources as diverse as Presocratic philosophy, Biblical episodes, Arabic poetry, and Meso-American (Nahuatl) theology.¹⁵ All

¹⁰ "The second section of his book regards, among others, Herakleitos, Parmenides, Empedokles, Pythagoras, and the musings of "the fat-headed presbyter," Hippolytus, about the wiser sayings of Anaximander. These poems, like those on Old Testament figures, demonstrate his serious concern with the high points of past cultures; some of them, however, are as cryptic as the most obscure Pre-Socratic fragments." See William Meads, "The Holes in the Stone", *Kayak* (Santa Cruz, California) 44 (February 1977), p. 61.

¹¹ As Raymond J. Smith explains, "among Bringhurst's more readily accessible poems are those based on the *Old Testament*, dealing with such figures as Noah, Moses, and Abraham – imaginative, naturalistic, irreverent fleshings out of episodes from familiar [...] old tales. The best of these is "Deuteronomy", where the poet takes on the persona of Moses leading his people to the Promised Land." Review of *Bergsbrund*, "Poetry Chronicle", published in *The Ontario Review. A North American Journal of the Arts* (Windsor, Ontario) 4 (Spring/Summer 1976), p. 108.

¹² Iain Higgins, entry on Robert Bringhurst, *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*, p. 153.

¹³ See John Biguenet's article, "Stones Are to Silence as Darkness Is to Light", in *West Coast Review* (Burnaby, British Columbia) 11.2 (October 1976): 39. Biguenet claims that "*Bergsbrund* is not a book; it is a library. In a sense it contains its traditions. What we need to know about the Presocratics in order to appreciate "Hachadura" is provided in translation and commentary as Part II of *Bergsbrund*. But because Part II is poetry and it is as well formed and startlingly imaginative as "Hachadura", their relationship does not disrupt the book. In fact, the five sections join like fingers into a fist." (p. 39)

¹⁴ *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, New York: New Directions, 1998. See, in particular, Canto LXXX, p. 542.

¹⁵ Elsa Linguanti, in "Allo-Fanie: I Poeti Canadesi Della West Coast", *Letterature d'America. Rivista trimestrale* (Bulzoni) 2.7 (Primavera 1981), p. 150, writes that "Le divinità della mitologia locale – e alcune dell'America del Sud, tolteche, azteche – le voci degli sciamani, si affiancano nella poesia di Bringhurst alle voci profetiche che hanno risuonato nella storia della cultura dell'occidente, sia dalla Bibbia che dalle scuole filosofiche dell'antica Grecia, o dall'Islam e dall'India. Il flusso ininterrotto della catena dell'essere, come in Eraclito, l'essere come punto fermo che tutto include, come in Parmenide, gli elementi e la processualità dello scambio tra di essi come in Talete, Anassimandro, Anassimene; e Noè dopo il diluvio o Mosè che racconto il suo dialogo con Dio."

these literary and philosophical threads are woven into a magnificent book that conveys to the reader a sense of absolutely effortless naturalness and profundity of thought. This organic sense of completeness seems to be somehow inescapable, a natural growth stemming from the way the poems have been arranged to form a consistent whole, an overall *Gestalt* where all the pieces have their own place:

Bergschrund is so thoroughly composed a volume that its final effect is of peace. [...] Read “Hachadura” for the majesty of its form and for the beauty of its parts. Read “City of Mirage” for its embrace. Read “The Meadow” for sweetness, “Deuteronomy” for its story, “Pherekydes” for richness, “Pythagoras” for knowledge, “Herakleitos” for fire. But, best of all, read the whole book from beginning to end because it is, in its entirety, one poem.¹⁶

Reading *Bergschrund*, we feel that we are in the presence of a powerful intellect indeed, in the presence of an author with an impressive knowledge of many things, capable of writing *intelligent* poetry, which might sound paradoxical nowadays.¹⁷ *Intelligent* comes from the Latin verb *intelligere*, which denotes the ability to gain an illuminating insight into the essence of things somehow. This is closely connected to the poet’s unquestionable *claritas* of mind. Epistemology provides much of the groundwork of this poetry volume. Much of the time, Bringham is concerned with defining things and concepts with as much accuracy and precision as possible. Some of his poems in *Bergschrund*, such as “A Quadratic Equation”, “Poem About Crystal” or “A Lesson in Botany”, are literally attempts at achieving satisfactory definitions of the objects under scrutiny at that particular moment. However, the most striking definitions come usually unannounced in the midst of a poem or a line, for the mind has unexpected edges and inscrutable ways. For instance, in section IV of “Seven Fragments of Empedokles”, we find such a perfect example of discerning definition: “*Thought / is, in fact, the blood around the human heart.*” This concern with defining, with keeping things distinct while not forgetting their ultimate interconnectedness, and with dwelling on intellectual heights, is most original. And what is more, Bringham does not just seek to define things and concepts *per se*; perception, intellectual apprehension, and conceptualization become a creative act whereby the author sees something that was not entirely there before. And he makes *us* see – which is a most welcome gift. This depth of thought and intellectual complexity are clearly palpable in the wide range of themes and disciplines that engage the author. As Raymond J. Smith puts it,

Bergschrund is in the more classical tradition of Nemerov and Olson. Though Bringham has completely eschewed traditional forms, he is a careful craftsman and his poetry is even more intellectual, philosophical, learned – and difficult – than theirs. This poet knows a great deal about such things as philosophy, anthropology, Scripture, optics, and geology, which give him subjects for his poems, as well as enrich his vocabulary.¹⁸

With the publication of *Bergschrund*, Bringham reveals his own poetics: he is determined to write poetry of intellectual depth and complexity, of crystal-clear language

¹⁶ Jane Munro, “Bringham’s Range: Essential Information”, in *CVII* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81), p. 39.

¹⁷ Guy Davenport, a poet also concerned with Presocratic philosophy, the author of the splendid translations of the fragments in *Herakleitos* (Peter Koch Editions), explains: “In a time when the genus Poetry has proliferated into a bewilderment of species abundant in pseudomorphs and sports, Robert Bringham keeps to the true and ancient lyric tones. He is one of a very small cadre of poets who write with intellectual passion, objectively and with high skill. His precision is both musical and philosophical, his eye sharp and his ear alert.” See praise for Bringham’s collection on the back of *Bergschrund*.

¹⁸ Raymond J. Smith’s review of *Bergschrund*, “Poetry Chronicle”, in *The Ontario Review. A North American Journal of the Arts* (Windsor, Ontario) 4 (Spring/Summer 1976), p. 108.

and perfect musicality. His is a poetry of erudition that ranges from a profound rethinking of Biblical images and concepts to a meditation based on scientific details of geology and botany.¹⁹ His poetry has sharpness of image and phrase, and displays the author's acute ear for the musical possibilities intrinsic in the English language. After all, it is his perfect command of the English language that distinguishes Bringham's poetic achievement above all other things.²⁰ And yet his language cannot be divorced from his thinking, from the way he renders reality through resonant words, from the way he perceives the world. Seeing and thinking²¹ are inseparable in Bringham's framework of mind. To put it differently,

The extraordinary thing about Robert Bringham is that he really knows how to see. And he takes his seeing seriously: seeing is his way of thinking, of knowing, of being. His images, even the most daring ones, are never merely invented; they have, to borrow a phrase, the look of things that are looked at. He has looked, for example, at crystal, and written "Poem about Crystal".²²

This extraordinary capacity for seeing the world may partly account for Bringham's mastery of imagery throughout his collection. Light plays a most important role in the book, in a way reminiscent of Ezra Pound's concern with light in *The Pisan Cantos*.²³ Unlike other authors, who have found a source of inspiration in domestic life, in the manifold manifestations of human love, or in the subjective narcissism of self-expression, Bringham's formidable talent sings of light. But light is not the subject or main theme in *Bergsbrund*; it just provides much of the driving force behind the poems, which are concerned with the basic stuff or elements out of which the cosmos in its entirety is made. The recurrent images in the book are edges in a multitude of manifestations, stones, mountains, summits or peaks, holes, light, water, earth, fire, and air. In this respect, in his lucid essay William Meads writes:

If light is Bringham's predominant image, edges of things [...] are almost as frequent. If you try to define 'something,' nothing becomes important; and the edge at which something meets nothing (or vice versa) is the critical line. [...] "Hachadura" presents the detailed anatomy of Nothing – not for its own sake, but as a means of dressing the edge. [...] Bringham's poetry is full of holes of every description. There are gorges, caverns, the excavations of sea urchins; furrows and footprints and the furrow on the tilting light; fissures in rock, the wave, wind, and the brain; pitted blood, sea-eaten iron, lime-eaten rocksalt, star-eaten stone; rust-pocked, chipped, uneven edges of the sun.²⁴

¹⁹ Chaviva Hošek, entry on "Poetry in English 1950 to 1982", in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, 2nd edition (1997), ed. E. Benson & W. Toye, p. 939.

²⁰ Elsa Linguanti, in "Allo-Fanie: I Poeti Canadesi Della West Coast", *Letterature d'America. Rivista trimestrale* (Bulzoni) 2.7 (Primavera 1981), p. 153, writes that "Bringham compie un'operazione complessa con un linguaggio il cui apparato formale mostra la tensione espressiva di un'avventura stilistica nuova. La meditazione intellettuale, altera, distaccata, ma giocosa allo stesso tempo, si muove nei versi di *Bergsbrund* [sic], con la grazia di un linguaggio pienamente dominato; su una sostanza di contenuto vigorosa, lucida, vibrante, che copre un territorio estremamente ampio. Affascinato dalla luce e dai colori del mondo, dalla chimica organica e inorganica, dai metalli, Bringham esercita la nominazione sulle pietre dure e le loro varietà, sulle vene e sulle arterie, su oggetti lucidi, duri, taglienti, perfetti."

²¹ In this respect, Elsa Linguanti, in "Allo-Fanie: I Poeti Canadesi Della West Coast", *Letterature d'America. Rivista trimestrale* (Bulzoni) 2.7 (Primavera 1981), p. 153, claims that "non si può non osservare che Bringham rifonda uno statuto poetico coerente e funzionale in cui la fenomenologia si fa ontologia."

²² William Meads, "The Holes in the Stone", *Kayak* (Santa Cruz, California) 44 (February 1977), p. 60.

²³ Consider, for instance, Canto LXXXIII: "*lux enim / ignis est accidens*" (i.e., 'for light is an attribute of fire'), "*omnia, quae sunt, lumina sunt*" (i.e., 'all things that are, are light'), p. 548.

²⁴ William Meads, "The Holes in the Stone", *Kayak* (Santa Cruz, California) 44 (February 1977), p. 64.

On the other hand, sharpened things are also truly abundant in *Bergschrund*. For instance, in “Song of the Summit”, the opening poem in the collection, air is the first of the four elements to appear. Fire, water and earth play an important part in the poem and in the whole collection.²⁵ At some point, air becomes “*a long fang*”, which introduces the image of a sharpened thing early in the volume. It recurs under a number of guises throughout the whole book, since “*Bergschrund*, bristles with teeth, talons, antlers, blades, cores, chisels, fins, arrows, nails, tools, quills, razors, beaks, tusks, harpoons, keels – with those sharpened things (like summits or poems) which cause fissures and take measure, which can impale or eat or hollow or carve or otherwise change things.”²⁶ Most of this imagery is put to the service of some kind of revelation or epiphany: “*Bergschrund* is redolent with revelations, spiritual and intellectual, and with the stories of those moved by something to break off from the common mass and become part of the large flows of understanding which have shaped what we think we know. The intellectualizations in this book occur viscerally.”²⁷

Bergschrund has got the seeds of permanent, durable literature. As John Biguenet puts it, “Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully,” according to Wallace Stevens. I can imagine no better description for the poetry of Robert Bringhurst’s *Bergschrund*. [...] His poetry will last because he carves it in the hard, high light beyond the tumult of voices that clutter this moment, always.”²⁸ There is a tantalizing visual dimension to his poems, but also an aural dimension that testifies to Bringhurst’s command of prosody. Indeed he has spent a long time studying metrical systems of different languages and literary traditions in search of his own distinct poetic voice. His dexterity of technique is simply arresting. Language turns into music in his hands; he writes a perfectly natural idiom: “he has absolute control of his rhythms”, “there is a barely audible, almost poignant, tone of sadness in the Old Testament pieces”, his words fall exactly in place, and “everything is in a natural speech rhythm” though “its taste on the tongue seems somehow distilled.”²⁹ Of poetry and music, Jane Munro writes thus:

So much of poetry is music, the music of the mind as it hums and taps, ruffles, and runs, returns, interprets, expands, and finds its way through to nothing – as it harmonizes or tightens to its own clear song, begins, happens, and ends. So much of composing poetry is finding the buds of music that will petal into fullness, is knowing and blessing the wilderness of the soul, is giving that undistracted attention which is fluency, the service itself an utter freedom. [...]

Among the poets, the one whose music seems most conscious and developed, most considered and allowed, is Robert Bringhurst. Others sing otherwise, as is right for them, but Bringhurst’s music is fluent with the evocative precision of notes which arrive from a studied genesis and become prophesy. It is not a stray music, one of chance moments. It is a song he can sing because he has arrived at

²⁵ See Robert A. Lecker’s review of *Bergschrund* in *Quill & Quire* (Toronto) 42.5 (April 1976), p. 46, writes: “Take the elements – earth, wind, fire, water – add light and absence to the primary colours of life, combine blood with the meaning of myth, join man to the crust of his earth. True, these are only the partial ingredients of Bringhurst’s poems, but no list will ever do justice to this achievement – no description can hope to contain the meaning that Bringhurst holds in a line. The poems are not easy. They demand that we listen, that we see, and above all that we abandon ourselves to Bringhurst’s search for a clean transparent totality of time and space. Every poem seeks after “the dressed edge of the air,” the “bright blade of blue sunlight,” “the clarity of the talon.” And the critic concludes by saying that “*Bergschrund* is an inventory of existence, and of being in the word – the objects, the tastes, the lies, the mistakes, the ugliness.”

²⁶ Jane Munro, “Bringhurst’s Range: Essential Information”, in *CVII* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81), p. 39.

²⁷ Jane Munro, “Bringhurst’s Range: Essential Information”, in *CVII* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81), p. 39.

²⁸ John Biguenet, “Stones Are to Silence as Darkness Is to Light”, in *West Coast Review* (Burnaby, British Columbia) 11.2 (October 1976), p. 39

²⁹ William Meads, “The Holes in the Stone”, *Kayak* (Santa Cruz, California) 44 (February 1977), p. 65.

the summit where it is clearly possible. He has laboured to get there and he makes use of where he is. [...] Bringham's music has the final urgency and grace of mind in awe of death.³⁰

PART I

Air, Water, Fire & Earth

I · INTRODUCTION

Bergschrund is the most achieved poetry collection of this period in Bringham's literary career. It was welcomed by readers and critics alike, celebrated as a landmark of the poetry being written in that decade, as a feat of intellectual rigour, linguistic mastery, and emotional intensity. Part I of *Bergschrund* consists of ten poems: "Song of the Summit", "The Greenland Stone", "Four Glyphs", "Three Deaths", "The Dogs of New Spain", "Poem about Crystal", "The Identity Moving", "The Meadow", "Stone-Lathe and Wing", and "For Robert Grosseteste". Tracing the genesis, origins and evolution³¹ of the poems in

³⁰ Jane Munro, "Bringham's Range: Essential Information", in *CVII [Contemporary Verse Two]* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81), p. 38.

³¹ This is the editorial history of the poems in part I of the collection: 1. "Song of the Summit" was published in *Cadastre* (1973) in book-form and in *Mundus Artium: A Journal of International Literature and the Arts* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) 8.2 ([Winter] 1975):130-133, along with "Jebel Saneen, Lebanon" and "Portrait in Blood" (from *The Shipwright's Log*, 1972), and "The Greenland Stone" (also included in *Cadastre*, 1973). 2. "The Greenland Stone" was published in *Cadastre* (1973) in book-form and in *Mundus Artium: A Journal of International Literature and the Arts* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) 8.2 ([Winter] 1975): 130-133, along with "Jebel Saneen, Lebanon" and "Portrait in Blood" (from *The Shipwright's Log*, 1972), and "Song of the Summit" (also included in *Cadastre*, 1973). 3. "Four Glyphs" was first published in *Cadastre* (1973) in book-form and later also in *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* (Boston) ns 1.4. (1973/1974): 561-575, under the title "Eight Poems and Translations" –along with an excerpt from "The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods" (a revised version of the original poem previously published in *Cadastre*, 1973), "Strophe from Sophocles" (a translation from one of the choruses in Sophocles's *Antigone*), "The Petelia Tablet" (a translation from Greek published in *Arion* for the first time, later included in Bringham's MFA Thesis *Carmina propria et opuscula translata*, 1975, and also incorporated into the 12-poem sequence "The Old in Their Knowing" in *The Beauty of the Weapons*, 1982, in *The Calling*, 1995, in *The Old in Their Knowing*, 2005 and in *Selected Poems*, 2009), "Herakleitos" (published in *Cadastre* for the first time in 1973), "Isthmian" (a revised version from *The Shipwright's Log*, 1972), "A Short History" (also included in *Carmina propria et opuscula translata*, 1975, and in *Eight Objects*, 1975, and reprinted not only in *Bergschrund* (1975), but also in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), *The Calling* (1995), *The Old in Their Knowing* (2005) and *Selected Poems* (2009)), and "Antistrophe from Leopardi" (a translation from the Italian of Leopardi, already published in *Cadastre*, 1973). 4. & 5. "Three Deaths" and "The Dogs of New Spain" are published here for the first time. 6. "Poem about Crystal" was first published in *Cadastre* in book form in 1973 and re-published in *Quarry* 4 (Spring 1974): 33-34 (along with "The Poet, Having at Last Encountered the Muse" and "Antistrophe from Leopardi"). 7. "The Identity Moving" was first published in *Kayak* (Santa Cruz, California) 35 (June 1974): 63-65, along with "Babylon" (which is also included in *Carmina propria et opuscula translata*, 1975, and in the third part of *Bergschrund*). 8. "The Meadow" was first published in *Stuffed Crocodile* (London, Ontario) 2.3 (September 1974: 46-50) along with four more poems: "Stone-Lathe and the Wing" (revised from an earlier version published as "The Stone and the Wing" by the University of British Columbia, *Alumni Chronicle* 28.2 (Summer 1974): 19); "Phoenix" (also included in *Carmina propria et opuscula translata*, 1975, and also published in *Littack* (Epping, Essex) 3.2. (March 1975): 151); "Some Ciphers" (also included in *Carmina propria et opuscula translata*, 1975, revised in *The Beauty of the Weapons*, 1982 and further revised in *The Calling*, 1995); and "Genesis Frozen" (also included in *Carmina propria et opuscula translata*, 1975). 9. "Stone-Lathe and Wing" was first published under the title "The Stone and the Wing" by the University of British Columbia, *Alumni Chronicle* 28.2 (Summer 1974): 19, and later republished in *The Beauty of the Weapons* in 1982. 10. "For Robert Grosseteste" was first published in *The*

Bergschrund is no easy task, as Bringhurst's poems constitute a living *oeuvre* or repertoire (or better, a living organism) relentlessly changing over time, taking on new layers of meaning, becoming more and more perfect with every re-publication or public reading. Not only does he care about the final printed incarnation of his poems – usually published in limited fine editions, often on handmade paper, in broadsides, chapbooks and books designed by himself, an expert typographer –, but also about the public performance of his work, for Bringhurst's poems live as much in writing as in the bard's voice. The voice is not just the manifest instrument of breathing; it is also a potent instrument for conveying meaning to a receptive audience. As a matter of fact, Bringhurst belongs among that category of poets who have an impressive talent for reading dramatically, who sound absolutely alive and in full possession of their intellectual and emotional qualities alike as they resurrect what lies silent on the page through the sheer potency of the semantically charged air they breathe. As Harold Enrico puts it,

Robert Bringhurst, by virtue of the way he reads and by the way he writes, belongs among them. His is a first-rate ear, a first-rate voice. He is a first-rate poet in an era of second and third raters. I have never heard a poet in person or on recording who approaches Bringhurst except the great Pound, who really did not read as well. In an age that often prefers the infantile and the simple-minded in poetry and prose and sheers away from the difficult and the intricate – Pound, Faulkner, Joyce – it is encouraging to hear and read a poet whose poems are difficult, complex, echoing with the most cunning resonances.³²

The first epigraph in *Bergschrund* is a quotation lifted from Saint-John Perse's *Anabase*. Following closely the example of T. S. Eliot, who provided extensive, erudite notes at the end of *The Waste Land* (1922) to help readers elucidate the meaning of such a complex Modernist monument, Bringhurst himself tells us about the source of this most felicitous quote early in his collection, right after the acknowledgements section. Linguistic thresholds or *paratexts* (i.e., the linguistic matter surrounding the main body of a text) are of utmost importance in his personal conception of poetics – one that strongly relies on the literary achievements of past masters and conceives of literature as a shared affair and a gigantic *corpus* of texts perpetually in the making. *Corpus*, that is to say *body* – a living entity or a living organism that keeps on evolving with the passing of time. And this may partly account for the multitude of references to other authors, the intertextual allusions to those works that may shed some inspiring light on his own poetic enterprise, and the infinite ramifications to which poetic language lends itself. St.-John Perse's quote reads as follows:

... je sais la pierre tachée d'ouïes, les essaims
du silence aux ruches de lumière...

... I know the stone spotted with holes, the swarms
of silence about the hives of light...

Borrowing William Meads' insight into the matter, we are not sure whether these illuminating words were “either a most happy find after the fact, or else the inspiration of much of Bringhurst's imagery”³³ in *Bergschrund*. The first part of the collection is, in fact, about mountains and stones, about the four elements, and is pervaded by a feeling for the

Ontario Review: A North American Journal of the Arts (Windsor, Ontario) 1 (Fall, 1974): 76-77, and later included in *Carmina propria et opuscula translata* (1975) and reprinted in *Bergschrund*, 1975.

³² See Harold Enrico's short bio-biographical note on Bringhurst and praise for his poetry included in the inner dustjacket of *Bergschrund*.

³³ William Meads, “The Holes in the Stone”, *Kayak* (Santa Cruz, California) 44 (February 1977), p. 64.

sublime, more palpably in the natural world, but also in human nature. So his choice of themes is not trivial, nor random. There is a most curious kinship invisibly uniting the bard's voice and the ascetic nature of mountains and stones.

His interest in mountains and stone seems linked to an unyielding quality in the voice of his poems and in his deployment of images. There is an authority in these images, and in the way he uses his erudition. Bringhurst is a wordfinder, with a remarkably discerning though daring ear, and an acute mind. His poems on Old Testament figures, or figures from Greek thought and literature, have a genuine ease and wit; but his rather remote oratorical voice inspires respect rather than a warm identification with the poet.³⁴

II · THE POEMS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

“The Identity Moving”

Robert Bringhurst's Poetics in Miniature

“The Identity Moving” constitutes a straightforward statement in miniature on Bringhurst's poetics in two distinct parts. Here the poet uses his distinctive music and diction to produce what looks like an unusually quick-paced poem but remains a reflective composition concerned with the nature of poetry. Bringhurst accomplishes this by placing an ironic speaker at the centre of the poem. Finally, the serious vocation with poetry defeats the detached voice of irony, which gives a new resonance to the ending of the poem, where we find a clear statement on his own poetics. Hence the tone is detached and ironic throughout the whole piece, but there is a poetic persona with a distinguishable voice behind the verse lines, saying something of transcendental value about the enterprise the poet has embarked on. As pointed out above, *Bergschrund* is a collection of poems apparently devoid of human presence; the emphasis is on the observable natural world outside, though sometimes the emphasis is laid precisely on its objective impact on the perceiving mind. However, this poem is as close to an autobiographical meditation as we may expect from a collection marked by a pervasive sense of Eliotian impersonality and detachment. In many subtle ways, it is anticipatory of a later prose meditation by the author entitled “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, included in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986).

“The Identity Moving” is witty and entertaining. No one, however, reading the poem could doubt the irony and passionate engagement of the poet. The short lines become daggers of irony. The poem reminds us that the role of poetry in our time can also be that of a vehicle of political resistance; poetry can make a secret and powerful claim on the reader. Furthermore, the structure of the poem (a question-answer pattern) relies on the use of conversational speech and some sort of dialogue to convey vividly its meaning. The shape and rhetoric of the poem are all defined by its roots in spoken interaction, in ordinary, day-to-day speech. The poem consists of two clearly differentiated parts, the first of which is entitled “The Form” and the second, “The Interrogation”. In the former, the poetic persona fills in the blanks in a form, providing the conventional pieces of information that commonly occur in such an instance of purely pragmatic language use.

³⁴ Chaviva Hošek, “Poetry in English 1950 to 1982”, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, 2nd edition, 1997, ed. E. Benson & W. Toye. There are some scattered reflections on Robert Bringhurst's poetry throughout the entry devoted to the poetry of that time span. Among the volumes analyzed is *Bergschrund*, celebrated as the most achieved collection of the author in the seventies. See page 940 in particular.

The poet's name is clearly hinted at in the pun or word-play in the opening line, which is reminiscent of the puns favoured by James Joyce, another difficult author, in his complex novel *Finnegans Wake*. "Roe Bard of Burring Hoarse" is a phonetic echo or almost exact homophone of 'Robert Bringhurst'. The linguistic alchemy in the pun is no happy coincidence, as there are implicit references to the natural world in the names of such animals as the *roe* (deer), the *burr* and the horse (*boarse* is a homophone). Central to the witty combination is the word *bard*, which denotes a poet endowed with a visionary capacity to sing of the essence of things. So here is a poet, who sees himself as a bard, determined to connect his work inextricably to the rhythms of the natural world.

As his address the poetic voice gives "*Tibet / or somewhere.*" The indeterminacy, the utter ambiguity inherent to the poet's words, is perfectly calculated. However, upon closer inspection, Tibet stands for the Orient, which holds a great fascination for Bringhurst, especially if we think of his dramatic impersonations of the Buddhist monks in *The Book of Silences* (2001), a sequence of poems dealing with Zen sages which has been a work in progress for a long time:

Tibet
or somewhere; wherever offers
good grazing for the lean imagination:
a balanced diet of rocks and books,
affordable wine and cantankerous
conversation.

B, p. 22.

In "Breathing Through the Feet", an important essay from which we have already quoted abundantly on a number of occasions, Bringhurst acknowledges that the true poet feels at ease and at home anywhere he happens to be. Deep inside, the poet is a cosmopolitan individual, or a citizen of the world, in the literal and strictly etymological sense of the word. He has no definite address and no conventional home, as the Earth in its entirety may be considered his real home. The author resembles a migratory bird in that he is a consummate wanderer in search of food for thought and occasions for meditation, but by no means is he a rootless exile or an alien creature. Geographical barriers are natural demarcations imposed by Nature itself; political borders or frontiers are institutional divisions the author does not acknowledge as worthy of much attention. *Being human* is enough to belong in an age-old *genus*, the origins of which can be traced back to the beginnings of the human species. Humanity at large is a human being's family. History is his/her family tree or genealogy, and language is the primeval, invaluable legacy. Earth is home. And nothing has been lost *en route*³⁵. There is not much he is asking for – just a place that offers creative stimuli for his imagination, a handful of good readings (there are not many essential, indispensable books, after all), an opportunity to walk in the mountains, some cheap wine, and little conversation with other humans. A picture of the modern poet as a tremendous loner is very far from the figure of the bard or the traditional poet who composed poems close to the members of a community. The old communal links with an audience has been lost, and a new concept of the poet emerges as a result.

³⁵ Johann Gottfried Herder puts it beautifully in his *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1771): "Kein Gedanke in einer menschlichen Seele war verloren, nie aber war auch *eine* Fertigkeit dieses Geschlechts auf einmal ganz da wie bei den Tieren: Zufolge der ganzen Ökonomie war sie immer im Fortschritte, im Gange, nichts Erfundnes, wie der Bau einer Zelle, sondern alles im Erfinden, im Fortwürken, strebend. In diesem Gesichtspunkt, wie groß wird die Sprache! *Eine Schatzkammer menschlicher Gedanken*, wo jeder auf seine Art etwas beitrug! *Eine Summe der Wirksamkeit aller menschlichen Seelen.*"

These are the words of a misanthrope, some may argue. They are not. Rather they are the plain words of someone who cares too much about the world to spend much time in the company of his fellow human beings, and seeks the solitude of rocks and mountains instead, so as to think deeply about human nature (and elucidate it) and the true reality of the universe. This seems to be the message as he declares his occupation to be “*Preoccupation with, in this order, / the echo of blood and the deep-grained / bark of a star.*” (B, p. 22.) The shift is simply impressive: from *man* as a tiny microcosm (‘the echo of blood’) to the *cosmos* in its entirety (as embodied in the stars), the poet seeks to embrace the whole of creation in his work. *Nihil humanum alienum me puto*. Everything human and non-human is the concern of the serious, wandering poet, in search of some form of truth and ultimate revelation. From the very beginning of his literary career, the author is clear about what he wants to do and achieve in his poetry. It is no easy task to try to embrace the whole universe within the humble compass of such perfect, condensed lyrics as his – *to see a world in a grain of sand, to hold eternity in an hour*, as William Blake’s lucid mind once envisaged it.

It is only natural that the poet should invoke then a constellation, that of Orion, to refer to his date of birth: “*Orion’s buckle / struck me early in the teeth*”. He gives his place of birth as “the autumn’s eye”, instead of a physical place. Not only does the poet connect the date of his birth with a constellation in the sky; he also connects it with the ancient rituals of Eleusis. In ancient Greece Eleusis was a sacred place near Athens where ceremonies were held in honour of Demeter and Persephone in the form of rituals in October³⁶. The love of effort and of difficult things may be partly accounted for by the fact that the poet was the only child of a long labour. As a matter of fact, Bringhurst was born on 16 October, in mid-autumn, at night, we learn from these enigmatic verse lines:

Day: None. Night. The swamp-dark
 deep in the Eleusis of the calendar, dead-centre
 in October, when the blood begins
 to thicken over the opened flesh of summer.
 I have heard it said my mother
 was three days in labour, and these ways
 of birth are buried somewhere in my brain
 like broken mirrors.

B, p. 22.

In “The Interrogation” the author faces up to three different questions posed by the customs official. As for the luggage he is taking with him, he declares to the customs official that he is bringing with him just a few possessions. His luggage is not heavy; he has not much to declare. In an astonishing enumeration, he gives a list of trivial objects (coffeepot, ashtray, cups, table, chairs), but then an unexpected shift occurs as he mentions “*Fossils of live words dug out of the air*” as part of his luggage, words that are fossils of their

³⁶ The well-known Eulisinian Mysteries, a major Athenian religious festival, were celebrated at the sacred precinct of Eleusis, which was excavated after 1882. They “began with the march of the *mystai* (initiates) in procession from Athens to Eleusis. The rites that they then performed in the Telesterion, or Hall of Initiation, were and remain a secret. Something was recited, something was revealed, and acts were performed, but there is no sure evidence of what the rites actually were. [...] It is clear that neophytes were initiated in stages and that the annual process began with purification rites at what were called the Lesser Mysteries held at Agrai (Agrae) on the stream of Ilissos, outside of Athens, in the month of Anthesterion (February-March). The Greater Mysteries was celebrated annually in the month of Boedromion (September-October). It included a ritual bath in the sea, three days of fasting, and completion of the still-mysterious central rite. These acts completed the initiation, and the initiate was promised benefits in the afterlife.” See *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Global Edition, 2009, vol., p. 5193.

former life as it were. It is not words found in books that he is taking with him; he is rather in possession of flesh-and-blood words, traced in the air, probably during his walking tours in the mountains, which he preserves for the making of his own poems. Poetry is not quintessentially made up of words, though; it is made up of true experiences undergone in the real world, which leave but a fossil impression on the senses and the mind. In much the same way, the poet's identity is in the making; it is a wandering identity, moving from one place to another. Therefore, when asked what his destination is, he declares he has no destination whatsoever. It does not make much sense to talk about destination when one is always on the move, when one's own identity does not remain still for even a short while. This is, of course, reminiscent of the Heraclitean belief in flux as the ultimate essence of all things.

The closing stanza of the poem is a straightforward affirmation of Bringhurst's poetics. He is willing to commit himself to the serious vocation of poetry. To the customs official he announces his intention:

I am plainspoken: I mean to sing
songs, and I mean to sing them so
that the words will be perfectly clear
and you will not hear them.

B, p. 23.

His poetics is contained in so short a compass. It is not poems he means to write, but songs he means to sing. Music is thus inextricably linked to the way he conceives of poetry. The words he is to use in the making of his poems are plain and crystal clear, but the message has a complexity and profundity of thought we are not accustomed to. The words will turn out to be invisible, clear as they are. But if we pay attention, we will manage to listen to them and see what they are trying to convey in the form of an unannounced revelation – a most precious gift.



Pre-Columbian Theology “Three Deaths” & “The Dogs of New Spain”

The first part of *Bergschrund* comprises three pieces concerned with Pre-Columbian cultures, which constitute a coherent sequence in three movements: “Four Glyphs”, which we have already analyzed in depth, along with a translation from a poem by a Nahuatl princess (“The Song of Macuilxochitzin”), in our chapter devoted to *Cadastre* (1973), “Three Deaths” and “The Dogs of New Spain”. These two poems provide a most precious opportunity to resume the meditation we started in our critical analysis of the 1973 book. Both are short lyric poems, endowed with intense imagery and powerful musicality. Both share the same historical background or substratum – that of the Mesoamerican peoples who lived in peace in what is now Mexico and the surrounding lands in Central America before the first bearded Spaniards (the men of Castile) set foot on the American continent. These poems come as no surprise, for Bringhurst's intellectual appetite is omnivorous; his interests are varied, far-ranging and passionate. They are also *atemporal*, in that he shows no respect whatsoever for geographical barriers, political divisions, or temporal

oversimplifications as practised in historical periodization. All epochs or times in the history of humanity are simultaneous, or at least have an outstanding relevance and an inescapable bearing and powerful impact on the present. Before turning his attention to the northern hemisphere and the oral literatures of the First Nations in North America (to the Haida, above all of them), he devoted much time and thought to the Aztec culture, as the poems in his collections amply demonstrate.

In “Three Deaths” and “The Dogs of New Spain” the decisive clues for a proper understanding are to be found in the epigraphs of the former and in the very title of the latter, respectively. Quaint fragments of forgotten mythology are being rescued here. Dwelling on some basic information regarding the historical context might be worthwhile the effort, provided it sheds light on the interpretation of the poems now under scrutiny. Established in 1535, the Viceroyalty of New Spain was a political extension of the Castilian court created to govern the Spanish conquered lands in the New World. Initially, it comprised all land possessions north of the Isthmus of Panama under Spanish control. At a later stage in its development (there were four viceroyalties in total), the Viceroyalty came to include upper and lower California, the area that is now the central and southwestern portion of the United States, and territory eastward along the Gulf of Mexico to Florida. Under the jurisdiction of New Spain were also Spain’s Caribbean possessions and, after 1565, the newly conquered Philippines. In practice, the power of the Viceroyalty was largely confined to central and southern Mexico, a vast territory that had originally been the ancestral home of such people as the Aztecs. There the viceroys of New Spain aided in converting the native population to Christianity, developed an array of educational institutions meant to civilize the uncivilized, *savage* Indians, and oversaw an economy based almost entirely on mining and ranching. The Viceroyalty managed to survive the early attempts at Mexican independence, and despite periods of flagrant decadence, it survived until 1821.³⁷ Needless to say, the impact of the newly-arrived colonizers proved to be disastrous and devastating for the indigenous population. During the first century of Spanish rule, the native population of New Spain declined from an estimated 25 million to 1 million as a result of maltreatment, disease, and disruption of their cultures. What got lost is simply invaluable: not just the indigenous population’s right to exercise their free will in their own homeland, but also their dignity and all the ancestral manifestations that made up their culture and identity as a people, including their language and oral literature.

At this point the pertinent question to ask is: *What gets lost every time a human language dies?* Languages have historically disappeared without even leaving a trace behind them for a number of different reasons. Some languages get lost because their native speakers are massacred by enemies or die in a war (think about the local languages of Tasmania or the abundant instances of racial and ‘linguistic genocides’ in the history of humanity). Others disappear in the face of invasions by foreign usurpers and after troubled confrontation with alien cultures. Thus, the Aztec languages in Mexico were finished off upon the arrival of Spaniards in the New World. Another commonly cited illustration of the way languages disappear as the result of violent cultural confrontation is the case of the First Nations in North America. The supremacy of the white man (and this they took for granted) entailed the supremacy of the languages they spoke over those of the local people, which they despised and underrated as a matter of fact. Whenever and wherever a relationship between coloniser and colonised is set up, there is no chance for equality and justice – there is simply no room for mutual understanding. And this is exactly what happened in the pristine lands of America when the Mayflower pilgrims arrived at the newly conquered forests, rivers and lakes of the New World, which they pictured in their imaginations as an

³⁷ See entry on ‘New Spain’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Global Edition, 2009, p. 11924, vol. 20, p. 11924.

unannounced paradise on Earth. They settled in a land which was not a private property of their own, fished in rivers which they did not even bother to borrow from the local Indian tribes, and cut down the trees of big expanses of forest to build their houses. All they wanted to do was tame an environment they considered absolutely hostile to their survival. In the process, they brought about only havoc and utter devastation to the Indians, who saw themselves deprived of their own land, had to put up with the devastating effects of war on their own communities, and started suffering from measles and other highly contagious European illnesses. Worst of all, they saw their sacred traditions and languages spoiled and profaned by blood-thirsty imperialists who would seek only material profit. No wonder that the numbers of native population fell down drastically and that their languages and oral literatures became extinct at an alarming rate in the end. Reserve camps, alcohol and social ostracism became the norm as they progressively assimilated into the culture of the invaders. The rest of the story is well known and not worth re-telling.³⁸

Too much gets lost every time a natural language dies, as languages are real *living organisms*. It seems then a truism to affirm that it is essential to preserve languages, just for a number of sensible, perfectly logical reasons. To begin with, it is a fact that the relationship between language and environment is bidirectional, which means that the language (and the local people) tends to be pervaded by the *genius loci* (spirit of the place) where it happens to be spoken, and that the place is largely seen through the kaleidoscopic glasses of the language that happens to grow out of that particular soil – the American Transcendentalists Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson were deeply convinced that this was the case. Every time a language gets lost, the local knowledge of the surrounding natural world is also lost. Secondly, language embodies a *Weltanschauung* (or worldview) which is unique and inherent in a particular community or people. Speaking a given language is tantamount to perceiving the world from the standpoint of certain assumptions and axioms everyone in a given community takes for granted. There are so many cultural meanings embedded *in* and *through* language that we are hardly aware that this is the case. Therefore, an alternative view of the world also gets lost every time a language disappears. Last, but not least, languages are themselves inexhaustible sources of new words for other languages, and this is part of the reason why linguistic interaction proves so fruitful all the time. English is a perfect example of what it means to appropriate words both from classical and modern languages as different as Swahili, Japanese, Spanish, German and Russian.

In a nutshell, it must be acknowledged that preserving languages is of crucial relevance, particularly these days, when the popularity of English as a *lingua franca* (literally, ‘a language with no frontiers’) worldwide poses such a real threat to the survival of other equally invaluable languages. Needless to say, there are no first- and second-rate languages;

³⁸ The compulsion to conquer and subjugate other peoples has been a recurrent motif throughout history: from Caesar’s famous motto *veni, vidi, vici* and August’s desire to take the confines of the Roman Empire always one step further, through Charlemagne’s ambitious plan, the Spanish empire on the European continent and overseas, the British Empire in the nineteenth century (comprising a quarter of the world’s land surface), to Napoleon’s dreams of grandeur, to Hitler’s struggle (he spoke literally of ‘mein Kampf’ in his book), which brought about such dramatic effects as the Holocaust and the Jewish genocide. Needless to say, it is easier to destroy than to create. *Creating* requires talent, originality, creativity, imagination and time, whereas destruction feeds on chaos and the systematic violation of human rights. This can be best seen in wars, no matter whether they are civil wars or world wars or oil-biased wars like the ones we are unfortunately accustomed to witnessing these days, when war is a routine piece of news on TV and the radio and governments embark on a wild goose chase in search of mass destruction weapons. Wars bring about only disaster and pain, and the loss of people, things and living creatures (including languages) that are unique and irreplaceable in their own way. Is it that the will to conquer, that the blood thirst, cannot be resisted or appeased? So it seems if we look back in History and see what lessons it has to teach us. Why do humans have to go and make things so complicated?

all of them are equal inasmuch as they allow human beings to complete a number of everyday tasks like spontaneous social interaction, exchanging scientific findings which help take social advancement one step further, preserving human knowledge and wisdom, leaving a written and/or spoken record of decisive historical events, creating verbal artefacts and works of art, reaching agreements of paramount relevance to peace and solidarity on an international scale, etc. It is then a pity that any single language should get lost, for it is not only a part of the legacy future generations should enjoy, but also a part of us humans that gets lost whenever a language dies.³⁹



“Three Deaths”

The origins of “Three Deaths” and “The Dogs of New Spain” are to be found in Bringhurst’s passionate interest in the oral literature of Mesoamerican peoples like the Aztecs. The songs produced in the learned circles of Tenochtitlan (and other important urban centres in the Aztec Empire in Pre-Columbian times) lingered there for hundreds of years before they made their journey into English poetry via Bringhurst’s study of and meditation on the ancestral knowledge embedded in the mythology of the Nahuatl people. Miguel León-Portilla’s renderings into Spanish of the original Nahuatl glyphs might have been a decisive source of inspiration for the poet. But his approach is that of the historian, an objective recorder of past patterns of behaviour; Bringhurst’s is that of the poet, who seeks illuminating insights into human nature in times now past. After all, poetry, Aristotle said, is more philosophical than History in its concern with the universal. When these renderings fell into the hands of Bringhurst, he adapted them to his own uses and interests. Whereas “The Song of Macuilxochitzin” follows closely León-Portilla’s Spanish translation of a poem composed by a princess in the second half of the 15th century (it is *the translation of a translation*), “Four Glyphs”, “Three Deaths” and “The Dogs of New Spain” are original compositions, or rather snapshots rescued from an ancient culture and mythology that give quite an accurate idea of the sort of worldview the Aztecs embraced. They offer in distilled form the lessons Bringhurst learnt after long hours of study and meditation. In the process, they show what the poet might have been interested in in revisiting these ancient works of art. Mythology is universal and is concerned with the timeless in the history of human beings on Earth, despite the surface changes undergone by successive civilizations. The way humans conceptualized the world and the subtle living mesh of natural phenomena, the way they saw deities incarnate or embodied in natural elements, the sense of interconnectedness that made the world into a living organism, must have been appealing and fascinating to Bringhurst, a cultural historian determined to seek regularities across time, to identify the pattern on the carpet.

³⁹ Language is inescapably a politically charged weapon as well. George Orwell’s essay on the English language is the paradigmatic text on the matter. Language, power and politics go hand in hand. Whoever manages to control language (mass media, journalists, politicians, and so on) can also determine somehow the way people perceive reality. Language is always mediating humans’ relationships and humans’ approach to the world. If we have a look at history, we realize that language has also been a powerful weapon in the hands of public speakers and orators of all times, such as Cicero, Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, who have made an attempt to change the way things go by means of speech. Speech becomes then a special sort of civil disobedience. For instance, Gandhi is a highly illuminating paradox in that he accused the English language of being a ‘cultural usurper’ whose impact had to be resisted, while he made his indictment in English. India, the jewel of the British crown, managed to gain her independence from the metropolis largely thanks to Gandhi’s mediation in the conflict. A true heir of Thoreau’s conviction that it is the citizen’s duty to disobey the state’s commands whenever injustice is flagrant, Gandhi could not but get actively involved in his country’s determination to become a sovereign state.

“Three Deaths” is a quiet meditation on death, on the Aztecs’ belief in an afterlife and on the possibility of an afterworld where bliss and unperturbed joy were a possibility. The poem is full of imagery of sharpened things and edges, which are recurrent images in *Bergschrund*. Three forms of death are explored in an astonishing chain of images, juxtaposed to produce a fine, well-wrought jewel of a poem, the words of which have been carved out of live air, as announced in “The Identity Moving”. In a lifetime there are chances to lead an authentic live, and chances to die an honourable, dignified death. Sometimes there are not simply many opportunities to exert one’s free will and choose the right option out of an abundant set of possibilities. One cannot choose the way to be born, as much as one cannot choose the way to die. The first form of death is commonplace and the most frequently allotted to the majority of humans: death by disease:

Through the chipped air and the black blades of the wind
to the nine lands. No mountain image or sunlight
or starlight or bright rain,

the blood-cage and the blood
homogenizing into
one dampness: the death by disease.

B, p. 19.

The two opening lines of the poem present the passage from the land of the living to the country of the dead. In Aztec religion, people embraced the belief that the present Earth was the last in a series of creations and that it occupied a position between systems of thirteen heavens and nine underworlds. This partly accounts for the reference to ‘the nine lands’ – those where the dead dwell for eternity. There was room for reincarnation among the Aztecs, though; brave warriors fallen in the battlefield were thought to reincarnate themselves into hummingbirds (a recurrent image in Nahuatl poetry) after a set period of time. The realm of the living is where air and wind make themselves felt on people’s faces and skin. But there is already something menacing and ominous implicit in the adjectives accompanying the nouns ‘air’ and ‘wind’ – *chipped air* and *black blades of wind*. What gets lost once the departed souls leave what in Western thought was designated with the Latin words *in haec valle lacrimarum* is the enjoyment of such simple things as mountains, sunlight, starlight, and rain. A profound sense of communion of the Nahua people with the natural world is communicated in just a few words. Blood played an important role in Aztec ceremonies and rituals, where propitiatory human and animal sacrifices were offered to the gods to ensure the continuity of the life-giving sun god. Here the ‘blood-cage’ looks like a kenning typical of Anglo-Saxon poetry (we are inevitably reminded of *bon-hus*, meaning ‘the body’) to refer to the thorax, where blood accumulates. As a result, the victim dies of what looks like consumption – because of *dampness* in the lungs.

A second form of death is explored immediately afterwards – death by accident amid an apparently hostile natural world. The poet dwells on different forms of violent death brought about by fate or ill-luck. The Aztecs must have spent long periods of time travelling from one place to another, either in their pursuit of commercial transactions with other communities within their vast Empire, or in their military campaigns against their opposing enemies. And Nature must have proved ruthless on some occasions. Fighting against the elements is no easy task, though the Aztecs, like the Spartans in ancient Greece before them, were trained from infancy to endure heat and cold, hunger and thirst, and all sorts of discomfort. The hard passage across mountains, lakes and forests, across unknown territory, is evoked with an impressive economy of strokes in the opening lines of the

second movement of the poem, where Orizaba is a reference to a volcano in Mexico, located on the site of an ancient Aztec city:

The veined green, the garden submerged in the gunmetal
twilight over Orizaba's icecap; the unmapped
air above the last black moss:

death in open water, death by the loose stone,
by lightning, by hunger, by darkness,
never by weakness but alone.

B, p. 19.

There are hidden references to the Aztec pantheon in these lines that are worth elucidating for a proper understanding of the poem. Tlaloc, whose name derives probably from *tlāl-*, 'earth', and *-oc* "[he] lies", hence literally "He Who Lies on the Earth" or "He Who Rests on the Land", was the Aztec rain god, and one of the main deities in the Aztec pantheon. He was usually represented wearing a peculiar mask, with large round eyes, a labial band, and long fangs. Tlaloc had been one of the main deities of agricultural communities of central Mexico, when the northern tribes invaded and brought with them the astral cults of the sun (Huitzilopochtli) and the starry night sky (Tezcatlipoca). Aztec syncretism placed both Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc at the head of their pantheon. Tlaloc was not only revered, but he was also greatly feared. He could send out the rain, cause devastating storms, or provoke drought and hunger. Certain illnesses, such as dropsy, leprosy, and rheumatism, were said to be caused by Tlaloc and his fellow deities. Although the dead were generally cremated, those who had died from one of the special illnesses or who had drowned or who had been struck by lightning were buried. Tlaloc bestowed on them an eternal and blissful life in his paradise, Tlalocan.⁴⁰ So a sort of special paradise awaited those who were fortunate enough to die one of these deaths by accident, or directly or a death indirectly caused by rain and water.

The third type of death explored in the poem is of a mysterious nature. Some form of valour is being embraced here in the face of absolute nothingness. There are latent questions beneath the surface of words: What if there is no afterlife, no afterworld? What if humans have but one single chance to live an authentic life on Earth? In that case, there is not much left, just the mystery and awe-inspiring presence of stars (humans are dust fallen off the stars), the light of the sun making life possible on the planet, the pure joy of being alive for a while and the sense of belonging in a scheme of things (human and non-human) more sublime than isolated human beings lost in space:

The star's core, the taut marrow of light,
the white severing: death by turning
the back on nothing and spinning,

facing out always at them all.

B, p. 19.

It does make sense now to consider again in a new light the Aztecs' concern with the calendar and the course of heavenly bodies up in the sky. There were enough mysteries available in this life; there was no need to wait for the surprises an afterlife held in store.

⁴⁰ Basic information lifted from the entry on 'Tlaloc' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Global Edition, 2009, vol. 28, p. 16629.

“The Dogs of New Spain”

We are back in time, in a different milieu – New Spain. The bearded men of Castile have set foot on the American continent and the Aztecs have succumbed to their military superiority. The Mexican historian Miguel León-Portilla has devoted a lifetime of erudition to the research of the grandeur and majesty of such Pre-Columbian cultures. In fact, his Spanish renderings of Nahuatl poetry in *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World* served as the acknowledged source of inspiration for Robert Bringhurst’s translation of “The Song of Macuilxochitzin”, included in *Cadastre* (1973). The Aztec glyphs, the combination of pictures and letters in black and red ink on *amate* paper, were masterpieces of the human imagination, not the creation of an inferior culture. The Aztecs had a complex and sophisticated calendar to count the succession of days, months and years most accurately. Like the ancient Greeks, they had their own beliefs, theology and mythology: their own pantheon of gods with their corresponding attributes, their own rituals and propitiatory sacrifices to honour them, and their own cosmogony (or stories about the origin of the universe) to account for the existence of everything around them. The sun was king among them; the Aztecs revered it because it gave them the warmth and light that made life possible on Earth. Wherever they turned to look at the natural world, they discovered deities personified or *em-bodied* in the rain, in the wind, and in the generous abundance of life, human and non-human alike.

Bringhurst’s poem is enigmatic, a true puzzle, probably because we are no longer familiar with the code or the key that opens the lock of the treasure chest. We do not quite understand what is going on in this poem, but we do know for sure that the three dogs mentioned in the text might well be literally real dogs and metaphorical dogs at the same time. Whether there is a connection with Aztec theology, or whether they are the incarnation of some Aztec deity (*dog* is *god* spelled backwards), we are not certain either. This is the poem, or the mystery rendered in words:

Black, white and golden. And only the golden
dog will carry you over, his teeth
like red eyes in the firelight, leashed for the passage
only, and unleashed across the water.

The black dog has rolled in the darkness. The white
has just been bathed of the afterbirth
by the tongues of the fire, and the black dog
is his brother. The golden is his sire.

B, p. 20.

The dogs belong to the same family (two brothers and a father), and, upon closer inspection, their colours turn out to be not random at all. The golden dog is uncannily reminiscent of Cerberus, the underworld three-headed dog in Greek mythology which was in charge of attentively watching the entrance to the country of the dead. Charon was the old boatman who took the souls of the departed across the Styx to the main entrance of Hades, or the underworld, provided the customary obolus was conveniently placed under the deceased’s tongue. No souls, apart from those of the bravest heroes, like Hercules or Orpheus, Psyche or Aeneas, were allowed to leave the place once they had entered the realm of the dead. From the characterization itself (fiery eyes like teeth illuminated by firelight) we learn that the golden dog does not quite belong to this world, to the world of the living, but it does not belong to the world of the dead either. It is lingering somewhere

in the middle, between both realms, as it has the strange privilege of being able to go unharmed in both directions. The mystery remains whether it is precisely the golden dog that is in charge of carrying humans over to a different place, an afterworld, once life is over. On the other hand, the black dog and the white dog are the golden dog's breeding. The former is closely associated to darkness, and possibly also to death, whereas the latter seems to be connected to the realm of light and life. In fact, it 'has just been bathed of the afterbirth', is a newly born creature come into this world, rendered brand new by the purifying flames of what looks like a sacred fire. So there is not much after all: there is life/ ἔρος (the white dog) and there is death/ θάνατος (the black dog); somewhere in between is the mediatory figure of the golden dog, which takes humans to an altogether different form of existence or afterlife in an ambiguous afterworld.



“The Meadow”

Back to Greek mythology

The short lyric “The Meadow” is unique in the first section of *Bergsbrund* for a number of reasons. In its brevity and concision it is akin to “The Greenland Stone”, “Poem about Crystal” or “Stone-Lathe and Wing”. But whereas these are basically concerned with singing of light and are pervaded by a lexicon that resembles that of scientific discourse in its search of detached observation and objective recording of reality, “The Meadow” is different in the way it approaches the main theme it deals with. It is an enigmatic composition which might be interpreted as a piece of Greek mythology, written in the style of “Kerry Shawn Keys” and “The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods” (*Cadastre*, 1973), two poems overtly concerned with the Greek world and its Olympian pantheon of gods and goddesses. In “The Meadow” the approach is essentially oblique; the reader is expected to gather the clues scattered in the poem, bring the puzzle pieces together, and ask the right questions so that the ultimate meaning springs to life. The verbal texture of the poem is itself obscure and compact, as the poet relies too much on noun compounds and makes use of only two verbs in the whole composition. If we have not misinterpreted the clues, it seems to us that the myth being revisited beneath the eight verse lines is that of Demeter and Persephone:

Daymother, deathmother,
benefactor, stealer,
fathermother, firemother,
wool and cool water,
your devirginated daughter
and all death's other mistresses
smell of mint
and it grows sweeter.

B, p. 24.

The poem opens with a non-stop row of attributes that might help in identifying the main characters in the story. Demeter (Δημήτηρ), daughter of the deities Cronus and Rhea, sister and consort of Zeus, is an ancient goddess of agriculture and vegetation at large in Greek religion. Demeter appeared most commonly as a grain goddess, but her influence was not confined to grain but extended to vegetation generally and to all the fruits of the earth, except the bean. In that wider sense Demeter was akin to Gaea (Earth), with whom she had several epithets in common, and was sometimes identified with the

Great Mother of the Gods (Rhea, or Cybele). A number of agrarian festivals were held in honour of Demeter, goddess of growing vegetation, where sacrifices to the goddess were intended as an act of propitiation and prayers were offered for an abundant harvest, before the land was plowed for sowing. Other festivals were meant to improve the fruitfulness of the seed grain, and even thanksgiving festivals were held in her honour in autumn after the harvest. On the other hand, Demeter was also worshipped as a divinity of the underworld at Sparta, and she also appeared as a goddess of health, birth, and marriage. In Demeter's iconographical representations, her attributes were connected chiefly with her character as goddess of agriculture and vegetation – ears of grain, the basket filled with flowers, grain, and fruits of all kinds. The pig was her favourite animal, and as an underworld deity she was accompanied by a snake.

By Zeus Demeter begot her only child, Persephone (Περσεφόνη, Proserpine in the Roman pantheon), a virgin goddess who did not care much about marriage. It is said that she grew up carefree and happy in the company of nymphs in the open air. To her disgrace, Hades, king of the underworld, Zeus's brother and therefore her uncle, fell in love with her. In the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter", the story is told of how Persephone was gathering flowers in the Vale of Nysa when she was seized by Hades and removed to the country of the dead. Upon learning of the abduction, her mother, Demeter, went in search of her daughter and, during her journey, revealed her secret to the people of Eleusis, who had hospitably received her. In her misery, she became unconcerned with the harvest or the fruitfulness of the Earth. Her distress at her daughter's disappearance was said to have diverted her attention from the harvest and a great famine ensued as a result. Zeus therefore intervened: he ordered Hades to set Persephone free and restore her to Demeter. Persephone could not be completely released, as she had eaten a single pomegranate seed in the underworld. In the end, it was agreed that she would remain one-third of the year with Hades as his consort, spending the other two-thirds with her mother. The story was probably meant to account for the succession of the seasons – for the barren appearance of Greek fields in full summer (after harvest), before their revival with the autumn rains, when they are plowed and sown.

In the light of this background information, the meadow mentioned in the title might well refer to the Vale of Nysa, where Persephone was abducted by Hades while she was gathering flowers (a white lily). *Daymother*, *deathmother* and *benefactor* could be interpreted as being attributes of Demeter. To begin with, she is an Olympian deity in the Greek pantheon of gods and goddesses. In the Greek conception of the world a horizontal line separates the realm of daylight and life (where Zeus is king among the deities) from the underworld, a place of darkness and death (governed by Hades). Secondly, she is *deathmother* because she was also worshipped as an Underworld deity, particularly at Sparta, probably because of her association to Hades after the god removed her daughter into the underworld. And, lastly, she is benefactor of humankind because she is the goddess of vegetation and agriculture, and she is a potent metaphor for fertility. She is *fathermother* too, or a woman who played the role of father and mother at the same time; though she begot Persephone by Zeus, it seems that only she really cared about their daughter's upbringing and welfare. *Wool* and *cool water* are the embodiment of abundance and fertility in the natural world: sheep provide humans with wool to keep their bodies warm when it is cold, and streams give them water to appease their thirst when it is hot. On the contrary, the *stealer* is Hades, who deprived Demeter of the company of her daughter ('your devirginated daughter') and forced her down into the country of the dead. Now, the first four verse lines look like a long, extended vocative addressed to Demeter (though Hades was mentioned in passing), and then comes the true syntactical subject of the sentence in the last four lines.

Seen in retrospect, the whole poem looks like one of those prayers people must have prayed at the Eleusian Mysteries. The rhythm and musicality are most subtle, and achieved through alliteration (*daymother-deathmother, fathermother-firemother, devirginated-daughter*) and through rhyme (see, for instance, *wool-cool* and *water-daughter*). The closing image in the poem appeals to the sense of smell: Persephone and other mistresses who are now in the country of the dead smell of mint, and the smell “grows sweeter”. Probably because spring is come and Persephone is back with her mother. *Possibly*.



Singing of Light Divine

Singing Light, Light Singing

“Stone-Lathe and Wing”

Light is of paramount importance in the recurrent imagery that pervades *Bergsbrund*. Like the acknowledged master, Ezra Pound, who sings the mystery of light in *The Pisan Cantos* in an unparalleled, pristine language, Bringhurst explores light from an inquisitive standpoint in a number of poems in his book. In the first part of his poetry collection there is light in “Song of the Summit”, in “The Greenland Stone”, in “Four Glyphs”, in “Three Deaths”, in “The Dogs of New Spain”, and in “Poem about Crystal”. What is more, there are at least two poems which are overtly concerned with light – the short sculpted lyric “Stone-Lathe and Wing”, where stone and light are celebrated in their raw physicality, and “For Robert Grosseteste”, a longer piece of subtle and obscure erudition. In both cases, light is ancestral and primordial, for it makes vision possible, and vision makes human knowledge possible. Light is the precondition for learning to occur, as it were. And where there is light there is also darkness, of course. This is an elemental pair of opposites.

“Stone-Lathe and Wing” displays the essential lyric qualities of being musical, brief, and memorable. The imagistic compression and architectural design of the whole composition make it an enduring poem indeed. Two images are being juxtaposed at the heart of the poem: that of the stone being worked on by the chisel and that of the wing of a moth climbing the thumb. Thus, a parallelism is drawn between poetic craft and the cutting of stone. These are two apparently unconnected images, but upon closer inspection their very juxtaposition appears to evoke the subtle interconnectedness of all things in the universe, the living mesh of things – no matter whether they are animate or inanimate entities. The stone and the moth live together in the realm of impalpable air, suffused by the same primordial substance, which is light. Reading this poem, we must be prepared to see not only stone but air, as Bringhurst looks at ideas in the same way he looks at a stone.⁴¹ Back in an elemental world inhabited by stone, air and light we return to a vivid awareness of what it means to lead a purely physical existence, confined to matter, which is palpable, measurable, and can be touched and felt somehow through the senses. The result is a snapshot rescued out of the flux of life, frozen in time, immortalized into a handful of resonant words. Of course, there is an untranslatable stuff in life which resists being caught, fully interpreted or apprehended, carved up into manageable pieces and confined into the limits of a poem. There is no doubt that poetry cannot replace life as it is lived

⁴¹ William Meads, “The Holes in the Stone”, in *Kayak* (Santa Cruz, California) 44 (February 1977), p. 61.

from one second to another. The changing essence of life leads a precarious existence, a sort of pseudo-existence, when confined to a well-wrought urn like this one, but it is also a gift, unexpected and generous, to have the opportunity to experience a slice of fleeting life caught mid-air and set to musical words by the talented patience of the poet. These might well be *fossil words*, but they are the fruit of paying attention to the world and being surprised by its very existence and its inexhaustible richness:

The spindrift of the stone
over the motion of the chisel,
latticed into the crosscut of the light,

and the glistening umber
dust off the caught
wing of an uncaught moth

climbing the thumb,
a pumice with a glint like
agate evaporating,

agate reassembling the air.

B, p. 25.

The two key words around which the whole poem revolves are *stone* and *wing*. The constellated words around these two poles progress forward in three movements. The first part of the poem explores the point at which both stone and light meet, and conveys a vivid sense of motion and activity despite the absence of conjugated verbs. Human presence is not important in this moment in time which has the texture of transcendence. Impersonality is accomplished in a straightforward manner: the human hand holding the chisel and working on the stone remains absolutely invisible, far removed in the background. What matters, what is the object of scrutiny and close attention, is the intersection of such basic elements as the stone and light. That the stone should be associated with the sea through the word *spindrift* comes as no surprise then, as both (stone and sea) stand for two even more elemental ingredients out of which the cosmos is made – earth and water.

While concentrating on the tiny particles off the wing of a moth, the second movement of the poem presents what looks like a paradoxical image: an invisible human finger touches the caught wing of an uncaught moth, thus interrupting its ascent up the thumb. This gesture sets the dust free, which ends up floating in the air and surrounded by light. In the closing movement of the poem, two types of stone (pumice is a rock and agate is a mineral, in fact) are combined in a magnificent metaphor which helps define the sense of amazement at the beauty of the moth. The *umber dust* of its wings resembles the colour and texture of the pumice (dark and porous), whereas their glint is reminiscent of the glistening elegance of agate, a mineral essentially made up of quartz. It all has been subtly propelled forward, as the second movement at the centre of the poem is essentially metonymic in nature; from the dust the reader progresses onward to the wing, and from the wing to the moth in full. However, the final image is not one of stasis, but rather one of perpetual motion. This is one of the central paradoxes at the core of this jewel-like lyric: the fact that, in spite of the absence of conjugated verbs, the poet manages to convey a sense of relentless motion and incessant flux, possibly through enjambment. Motion is the essence of all living things, after all. And this is exactly what we find in the closing verse lines. Not being accustomed to standing still for long, the moth will surely take flight some

moment, so that the image of the agate evaporating, reassembling the air, evokes the flapping of wings on the part of the moth – a creature of air and light. At this point, the circle is full and complete, because the stone at the opening of the poem has been now subtly connected to the moth, and both have been made to dwell in the realm of pure light and air. It is no happy coincidence that the closing word of the poem should be precisely *air*.



“For Robert Grosseteste”

“For Robert Grosseteste” has the texture of a mosaic made up of live, not fossil, words, instead of tessellae or little stones. In Bringhurst’s extended meditation on light, the attentive and careful reader will find a poetic rendering of the theories of Robert Grosseteste, which hold light as the origin of corporeity. This erudition of thought is not merely noted, but rephrased and reconsidered in an astonishing poetic, intensely lyrical language in Bringhurst’s poem.⁴² More than a passing acquaintance with Chemistry, Physics, and the theories of a forgotten bishop is necessary to produce a poem like this. Among Bringhurst’s interests were the findings of modern science, and light was an age-old concern in the history of science which gave him a precious opportunity to explore a natural phenomenon from a poetic and scientific perspective. Grosseteste’s intense life and original thinking gave him food for thought and the *materia poetica* out of which a powerful poem could be composed.

Robert Grosseteste was born in Suffolk (England) *circa* 1175, and he died in Buckden (Buckinghamshire) on October 9, 1253. He was educated at the University of Oxford, where he was Chancellor and a celebrated lecturer from 1215 to 1221. There is precisely in Bringhurst’s poem an ironic aside on the much more lively intellectual activity at the Oxford of that time. Later, he held different important ecclesiastical positions, preferments and sinecures, from which he resigned in 1232. From 1229 or 1230 to 1235 he was first lecturer in Theology to the Franciscans, upon whom he had a powerful influence. To this pre-episcopal period belong works such as a commentary on Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics* and *Physics*, many independent treatises on scientific subjects (optics, light, colour, astronomy, and psychology), and several scriptural commentaries. 1235 was an important year in his career, as he became Bishop of Lincoln, an office he held until his death in 1253. During his career as a bishop he translated Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* from the Greek, among other works. He had a rebellious mind, and he attacked overtly ecclesiastical corruption, the belief in the cure of souls, the conviction of the superiority of the church over the state, and the hierarchical conception of the church, which brought him conflict with the papal authorities. Needless to say, Grosseteste had a lucid and discerning mind in matters concerned with religion and science alike, his appetite for knowledge was immense, and he tried to conveniently combine his facets as bishop and scholar as best as he could throughout his entire life. He was a man as prone to an active life as to intellectual meditation. As a matter of fact, Grosseteste played a crucial role in introducing into the world of European Christendom Latin translations of Greek and Arabic philosophical and scientific writings which were decisive in the impressive unfolding of the human imagination at that time. Indefatigably he searched for a rational scheme of things, both natural and divine. The resulting philosophical thinking was a somewhat eclectic blend of

⁴² See John Biguenet, “Stones Are to Silence as Darkness Is to Light”, in *West Coast Review* (Burnaby, British Columbia) 11.2 (October 1976), p. 39.

Aristotelian and Neoplatonic ideas, anticipatory of the advent of Scholastic thought in the 13th century.⁴³

So Grosseteste's theories about light, one of those mysterious presences in the physical world which renders eyesight meaningful, are being reconstructed, resurrected by Bringhurst in the form of a poem entitled "For Robert Grosseteste". Possibly it is meant as a posthumous tribute to the bishop-scholar, and it tessellates precious words from the original treatises by the British bishop (in italics in the poem, lifted, we presume, from the scholar's original texts) and Bringhurst's own words, which are those of a poet impressed by the clarity of his thought and the precision of his language – *An infinity of nothings is all somethings*. At its root, science is no subject matter alien to poetry; both science and poetry are similar in their pursuit of truth, in their search after universal principles and ultimate truths, indeed. What is more, poetry, philosophy and science are in essence much the same kind of imaginative, intellectual and creative activity. They are a form of accuracy, a gesture on the part of the human beings of all times and places to try to capture and convey the truth, which is elusive like a butterfly, in one form or another. Grosseteste had an intensely scientific and poetic mind at the same time. He looked at the world and, wherever others noticed nothing worthy of much attention, he discovered an ineffable grandeur in creation which was observable, measurable, and scientifically ascertained. In Bringhurst's poem we are, in fact, allowed to have a look at his laboratory – the man is alone trying to fathom or elucidate the essence of light and he achieves the decisive, revelatory moment the very instant he realizes that light brings matter into being:

The abrasive: light. The particles
embedded in the darkness grind the lens.
And immaculate light left miraculous rings
in the Bishop of Lincoln's retorts and beakers

one autumn, when he added alkaline
light to black acid, yielding
something that seemed only
a new allotrope of nothing.

B, p. 26.

In an elemental world of tiny particles, matter, form and empty spaces, light and darkness coexist side by side and take part in a primordial act of creation. Light, which is immaterial, brings matter into existence and gives it a distinct, recognizable shape. The use of scientific terminology reinforces the sense of intellectual accuracy which the poet is striving to convey to the reader, as well as the attempt at producing an accurate definition of the object under scrutiny – light, an entity which remains ethereal and difficult to pinpoint, even for scientists. A cosmogony in miniature is being enacted in these lines, where Bringhurst seems to give voice directly to the bishop's own words and astonishment at his newly discovered intuition:

*Light distils, into interminable
decimals. Light condenses
into chemicals. Light solidifies into
instantaneous darkness – which*

⁴³ See entry on 'Robert Grosseteste' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Global Edition, 2009, vol. 12, pp. 7001-7002.

may sublimate under the interstellar
emptiness or the right formulation of words.
*Light extends, carrying with it
matter and form, into the ultimate*

*circumference of its sphere, where
matter lacks all potential of further
impression, due to its physical
condition: utter rarefaction.*

B, pp. 26-27.

Then a most interesting and pertinent distinction is drawn between *lux* and *lumen*. Two Latin words are used to convey a most subtle distinction which the English word *light* does not manage to convey successfully – that between *light* as a quality that pervades existence and surrounds objects in the universe in an intangible halo, and *light* as the emanation coming out from objects in the world, radiating in all directions and producing reflections and refractions and chiaroscuro effects when it meets darkness:

Lux: the corporeal,
spherical, fully elastic crystal.
Lumen: the emanation, a spiritual
body or, if you prefer, a corporeal

spirit, beyond which one finds the reflections
of light against light, the refractions
of light in illumination, and the darkness
on the heath this day in Lincoln.

B, p. 27.

Most scientists seem to be agreed on one thing regarding the nature of light, which has been a controversial issue in the history of Western science: it is a combination of particles and electromagnetic waves. Light is that portion of electromagnetic spectrum visible to the human eye, ranging from the red end to the violet end of the spectrum. Like all electromagnetic radiation, it travels through empty space at the incredible speed of about 300,000 km/sec. In the mid-19th century, light was described by James Clerk Maxwell in terms of electromagnetic waves, but 20th-century physicists showed that it exhibits properties of particles as well; its carrier particle is the photon. Most importantly, light is the basis for the sense of sight and for the perception of colour. Light has also been an important concern in the history of art and philosophy (consider Neoplatonism and Giordano Bruno); it has been the permanent concern not only of scientists, but also of painters of all times, trends and schools. Light modifies the surface appearance of things, depending on its quality and source. Rembrandt, Velázquez, and most of the Impressionists were aware that light was a decisive element in the configuration of a painting, in the way a slice of reality was captured within the confines of a canvas. In this poem, Bringham explores instead the fascination of a medieval bishop with what normally passes unnoticed to most human beings: whereas language seems to be the very air we breathe, we tend to forget that we see precisely because light exists and makes sight meaningful. Grosseteste's contribution to the permanent investigation of light, the theme of light as the agent that brings about corporeity, is at the very centre of this meditation on the nature of light and on the fascination it has held throughout history for humans' imagination.

PART II

Biblical Pieces

*And concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah you shall say,
“Thus says the Lord: You have burned this scroll...”*
From Jeremiah XXXVI: 29.

I · INTRODUCTION: THE BIBLE & LITERATURE

The English word ‘Bible’ is derived from the Greek word βιβλία (neuter plural), which means simply “books” – the total of seventy-three books accepted by the Roman Catholic church. However, the Bible represents much more than a simple collection of ancient books, heterogeneous by nature, that were a long time in the making. It is unquestionable that, for nearly two millennia, the Bible has been the cardinal text for Judaism and Christianity. Its stories and characters, its motifs, imagery and idiom, are part of both the repertoire of Western literature and the vocabulary of educated women and men worldwide. Even before a canonical list of books considered sacred scripture or holy writ was established, the writings we now call the Bible were considered normative, authoritative in a way: they laid down the essential principles of how human beings should deal with God and with each other. In its concern with humanity as a universal, it has become an inexhaustible source of inspiration, an object of critical study and interpretation, and a source of inspiration for many original works of art and philosophical or theological investigations. The Bible has been both the basis for and stimulus to reflection on a wide range of theological topics and human concerns, on such perennial issues as afterlife and immortality, creation, death, faith, hope, and love, which are fundamental questions for all human beings of all times after all. The Bible has thus had an immeasurable influence on Judaism and Christianity, and on the cultures of which they have formed a part.

So the Bible is not just *one* book, but rather a many-voiced text, a complex multi-layered *oeuvre*, and a work in progress for a long time. Although the Bible has traditionally been treated as a single book for much of its history, it is in fact many books, an anthology of the literatures of ancient Israel, and, for Christians, also of earliest Christianity. The Bible thus speaks with many voices, and, from the time of its emergence as an authoritative sacred text, readers and interpreters have noted its many repetitions, inconsistencies, and contradictions. Since the Enlightenment, critical consideration of the Bible has irreversibly affected what may be called the ‘pre-critical’ understanding of the Bible as simply a unified text, God’s eternal, infallible, and complete word. Discoveries of ancient manuscripts (such as the Dead Sea Scrolls) and of literatures contemporaneous with, or earlier than, those preserved in the Bible (such as stories of creation and the Flood from ancient Babylonia), as well as innumerable archaeological finds, have deepened our understanding of the Bible and the historical and cultural contexts in which its constituent parts were written. Needless to say, the formation of the Bible as a multi-layered text was a complex process. The Bible is just the final product of a series of stages, including orally transmitted traditions, shorter and longer written units, collections edited and in some cases translated in ancient times, and final selection by various religious communities as canonical scriptures. Then along came the transmission, diffusion and circulation of the Bible. Once selected as an authoritative sacred text, the Bible has been continuously translated, reproduced and disseminated into innumerable languages spoken around the globe. In this sense, *the book of*

books has been instrumental in spreading literacy, especially after the invention of the printing press.

Though *The New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) is the most recent authoritative translation of the Bible into English, produced by an interfaith committee of scholars and published in 1990, all the quotations in the critical analyses below are from the 1611 King James Version Bible, which was truly a landmark in English prose and an influential text for many of the subsequent works in the history of English literature. The Bible is not just an authoritative text when it comes to religious issues; it has had an immense influence on British, North American, European, and other literatures, as well as on art, dance, music, law and philosophy. Indeed the influence of the Bible on European literatures has been so pervasive as to be almost incalculable. Both as a collection of sacred texts and as the source of the various creeds, codes, and cults of Judaism and Christianity, the Bible is the most essential document in the Western world. It is no exaggeration to acknowledge that the Bible is one of the essential cornerstones that have served as the foundation for Western Christian culture.

The Bible is too central a text to the Western canon as to remain invisible to Bringham's omnivorous literary appetite. As pointed out above, the Bible is not just sacred scripture or holy writ for Judaism and Christianity; it is also an essential part of the Western tradition, as well as an invaluable literary work of art in itself, *per se*. We tend to forget that the Bible exhibits many of the features that we usually associate with imaginative literature. In our reading and interpretation of the Bible, we usually forget that it is, in significant ways, a work of literature, and that an awareness of its literary qualities can enhance the enjoyment and appreciation of the Bible.⁴⁴ Three basic impulses are threaded into the living fabric of this complex text:

Three impulses and three corresponding types of material exist side by side in the Bible: the didactic or theological impulse to teach religious truth, the historical impulse to record and interpret historical events, and the literary/aesthetic impulse to recreate experiences and be artistically beautiful. This combination of religious, documentary, and literary interests in the Bible has made the literary study of the Bible different from the study of other literature.⁴⁵

The Bible is a literary work of art and an imaginative book. The Bible shows itself to be a work of imagination, seeking the memorability, affective power, and truthfulness to lived experience that are characteristic of literature. In addition, there are several essential ingredients that make it an imaginative book: the reliance on figurative language and rhetorical devices, an interest in artistry as something intrinsically valuable, and stylistic excellence. Literature uses distinctive resources of language, which is most evident in poetry, for poets think in images and figures of speech. In this respect, it is noteworthy how much of the Bible is poetic in form. The whole realm of figurative language looms large in any consideration of the Bible as literature. Everywhere we turn in the Bible we find figurative language, and, in fact, it is hard to find a page of the Bible that does not contain figurative language. On the other hand, the pervasive use of parallel sentences or clauses is characteristic of the biblical style – one of strong oral reminiscences.

Literature is an art form, and one of the criteria by which we classify something as literary is the presence of beauty, form, craft, and technique. The artistic spirit regards these

⁴⁴ See the entry on 'Literature, The Bible As' in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 1994, pp. 460-463.

⁴⁵ See the entry on 'Literature, The Bible As', *ibid.*, p. 460.

as having inherent value. The Bible contains artistic and literary masterpieces, and it exhibits qualities of conscious artistry. The stories of the Bible are models of concise shapeliness, with every detail contributing to the total effect. The Bible shows similar evidence of artistic patterning and a conscientious search for unity. Whereas unity is evidence of an artistic urge for order, shapeliness, and wholeness of effect, artistry intensifies the impact of what is said, but it also serves the purposes of pleasure, delight, and enjoyment. Literature is also concerned with truth; not scientific or logical truth, but rather poetic truth, which is of a different nature. The truth that literature portrays is primarily truthfulness to human experience in the world. Literature portrays universal human experience and is interested in the universal, always-recognizable human experiences of humankind over time. In this respect, the Bible is consistently rooted in the concrete realities of human life in this world. Adam, Noah, Moses, Abraham and Jacob are paradigms of the human condition as well as figures in historical narrative. Human experience is constantly viewed in a religious and moral light. The literature of the Bible invests human experience with a sense of ultimacy.

Northrop Frye is probably one of the most lucid minds Canada has presented the world with. That he should have devoted so much time and attention to the study of the Bible should be no surprise, endowed as he is with such voracious appetite for knowledge. Bringhurst, who is an admirer and an attentive reader of Frye's work, must have been for sure aware of the paramount importance of Frye's discussion of the Bible as foundational literature in *The Great Code* (1982) and *Words with Power* (1990). No author is miraculously transformed overnight into an accomplished poet; much reading of the accomplishments of past masters seems to be required. Since early in his literary career, Bringhurst was aware of the centrality of the Bible to the Western canon. It was out of an aesthetic impulse that he felt he had to read the Bible and respond to it poetically in his own work. Therefore, he draws heavily on the Bible to encode and enrich his work, whether in such early poems as "Sinai" (*The Shipwright's Log*, 1972) and "A Study for an Ecumenical Window" (*Cadastre*, 1973), in short jewel-like lyrics like "An Augury", "Genesis Frozen", "Essay on Adam", "Patrimony", "Babylon", "Ararat" (*Bergschrund*, 1975)⁴⁶, or in such lengthy dramatic monologues as *Deteuronomy* (1974) or *Jacob Singing* (1977). In writing biblical poems, Bringhurst was not a complete innovator, though. W. B. Yeats wrote "Adam's Curse" and "The Second Coming"; T. S. Eliot, for his part, wrote "Ash Wednesday" (1930) and the magisterial *Four Quartets* (1935-1942), to cite but a few luminous examples. Their example must surely have reverberated in the echo-chamber of his mind as he set out to master a poetic voice truly his own.

⁴⁶ This is the editorial history of the poems in part III of *Bergschrund*: 1. "An Augury" was first published in *Pegasus* (Vancouver) 6.3 (Christmas 1974): 35 and included in *Carmina propria et opuscula translata* in 1975, and also published in *Prism International* 14.2 (Summer 1975): 14-15, along with "Pherekydes". "An Augury" was later published as a broadside and a flyer (in a reduced size) in 1984 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Council on Creative and Performing Arts), issued as a promotion piece for a reading. 2. "Genesis Frozen" was first published in *Stuffed Crocodile* (London, Ontario) 2.3 (September 1974: 46-50) along with four more poems: "Stone-Lathe and Wing", "The Meadow", "Phoenix" and "Some Ciphers". 3. "Essay on Adam" was first published in the *West Coast Poetry Review* (Reno, Nevada) 3.3 (Spring 1974): 50-52, along with "A Quadratic Equation" and "Four Fragments" (translated from the Greek of Aeschylus), all of them incorporated into Bringhurst's MFA Thesis *Carmina propria et opuscula translata*, 1975. Later it was also published by the University of British Columbia, *Alumni Chronicle* 28.2 (Summer 1974): 19, with two more poems – "Love Song" and "The Stone and the Wing". 4. "Patrimony" is published for the first time in *Bergschrund* (1975). 5. "Deuteronomy" was first published as a limited-edition chapbook by the Sono Nis Press in 1974 and then in *The University of Windsor Review* 10.2 (Spring/Summer 1975): 39-43, along with "Empedokles' Recipes" (which is included in Bringhurst's MFA Thesis as well). 6. "Babylon" was first published in *Kayak* (Santa Cruz, California) 35 (June 1974): 63-65, along with "The Identity Moving", and is also included in Bringhurst's MFA Thesis.

But we have to move further back in time in search of the first instances of the Bible as a source of inspiration for literary works of art⁴⁷. The origins of the central, vital influence of the Bible upon the main fabric of English literature can be dated to the Middle Ages. Since early in the history of English literature, the Bible played a prominent and influential role. In his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Venerable Bede (673-735) recounts the story of Caedmon, an unlettered cowherd who was miraculously transformed overnight into an accomplished poet. Caedmon's first composition was a hymn drawing on the Book of Genesis in praise of creation. Like Caedmon before him, Bringhurst will also draw on the Book of Genesis for several of his biblical pieces in *Bergschrund*. In the large body of literary texts of the Anglo-Saxon period, the Bible had a vast influence by virtue of the formative role free translation of the Bible had in the development of self-conscious English narrative style. Even in the great non-Christian epic *Beowulf*, biblical allusion is a significant feature.

Nowadays erudite poets like Bringhurst cannot depend on an intimate familiarity with the Bible on the part of popular audiences. Poetry usually puts a greater burden of interpretation on a reader than straightforward expository prose does; Bringhurst's biblical pieces are particularly demanding in this respect. The problem is that the Bible has ceased to play such a central role even in learned people's consciousness. In the past, biblical allusion in post-Reformation England, at least until the time of Milton and Bunyan, was ubiquitous, and it salted every kind of learned discourse. The 1611 King James Version Bible, rightly regarded as the high-water mark of English literary prose, had an immense influence on subsequent works. In the 17th century in England, the effect of the Bible on literary language was all-pervasive. The poetry of John Donne, George Herbert and Henry Vaughan (the so-called Metaphysical Poets) is replete with biblical imagery and subject. The influence of the Bible on political writings was also decisive: even Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) is rich in biblical quotation and allusion. In his desire to write a great English epic, the classically trained John Milton (1608-1674) chose the biblical story of fall and redemption for his *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Paradise Regained* (1671), which represent a high point of biblical influence on English literature.

In much the same way that William Blake created his 'own myth' by drawing heavily on biblical materials in such poems as *Songs of Experience* (1794), *Book of Thel* (1789), *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), *Milton* (1808), *The Everlasting Gospel* (1818), and *Jerusalem* (1820), Bringhurst creates his own reading of the Bible, somehow illuminating traditional understanding. The Bible is rewritten in his poems to suit his poetic purposes. As Northrop Frye indicated in *The Great Code* (1982), Blake becomes a harbinger not only of modernist approaches to the Bible in literature, but also of postmodernism in both literature and criticism. Of course, Bringhurst has not much in common with Blake; whereas the latter is the epitome of early Romanticism in Britain, the former is one more heir to the immense legacy that High Modernism as embodied by Pound and Eliot has left in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Both have a visionary quality about their works, though; Bringhurst's poetic language is prophetic at times, the voice of the poetic persona beneath many of his poems sounds like that of a Romantic bard or seer.

⁴⁷ For a detailed discussion on the impact of the Bible on Western literature, see the entry on 'Literature and the Bible' in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, pp. 438-460. There we learn, for instance, that the Bible has been a central text to European literature, and, in particular, to English Literature. However, since World War II the influence of the Bible on English literature has been markedly reduced in comparison with its influence on literature being written in America (United States and Canada) and the Commonwealth (Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa, and Africa in general).

Bringhurst works leading figures from the Bible – especially from the Pentateuch – into his vast tapestry, as represented by such splendid poems as “Deuteronomy”, concerned with Moses, or “Jacob Singing”, which retells Jacob’s biblical story. Of course, the livelier intertextual relationships created in his poems demand considerable biblical literacy from his readers. This poetry is simple, direct, and unassuming, colloquial at times, but still resonating with biblical idiom and diction. In fact, it appears that, in his rewriting of biblical narrative, Bringhurst’s characteristic reading of the Bible is governed by an unusually attentive look into details that might usually remain unnoticed to the common reader. His rich mastery of biblical idiom, motif and allusion brings splendid poems, central to his own *oeuvre*, to completion. His extensive mastery of the entire biblical corpus makes it possible for him not just to deal with biblical characters and stories in a completely new light, but also to somehow evoke and re-create the biblical language in his own poems. Upon closer inspection, it is poems devoted to a biblical theme, marked by biblical idiom and diction, that Bringhurst is producing as part of his creative response to an attentive reading of the Bible. Thus, biblical phrasing flavours many of his poems; extensive use is made of parallelism and figurative language reminiscent of the one we find in the Bible.



Chaos & Creation: Back to the Beginning

The Book of Genesis constitutes an indisputable source of inspiration for the biblical pieces included in part three of *Bergschrund*, as well as for two more poems, “Ararat” and “A Study for an Ecumenical Window”, both included in section five of the same poetry book. Apparently the poet must have had his reading of the Bible also in mind when he wrote “Sinai”, an early poem published in *The Shipwright’s Log* in 1972. In any case, it might be worth going back to the beginning, for Genesis is the book of beginnings, particularly as far as chapters 1 to 11 are concerned. The very word ‘genesis’, an ancient word of Greek origin, is conceptually linked to ideas of birth, beginning and origin. Upon closer scrutiny, the book reveals itself as the true and sole source of inspiration of such short lyrics as “An Augury”, “Genesis Frozen”, and “Essay on Adam”. However, it is also part of the threads of the *materia poetica* braided into the making of other longer poems included in the same section like “Patrimony” and “Babylon”. In an unpublished interview conducted at the *Facultad de Filosofía y Letras* of the University of Córdoba (Spain) on 7th April 2010, the author declared that Genesis in particular was a most peculiar book in that it brought disparate materials from different sources together to form a coherent whole. As a matter of fact, the Book of Genesis as we know it nowadays was a long time in the making and it was the final product of a long process extending over centuries. It is only the final stage of a complex process in which oral tradition played a decisive part. There were probably several hands involved in the writing of the final book, but the question of the identity of an individual author in the modern sense of the word seems to be absolutely irrelevant in this particular case.

As a complex set of multiple layers of stories, Genesis 1-11 turns out to be a coherent unity and an elaborate account of the primeval history of humankind, extending from the creation of the universe and the human race (chapters 1-2) through its near destruction and survival in the universal deluge that the Flood was (chapters 6-9) to the spread of humankind over the entire earth’s surface (chapters 10-11). As in the case of many monuments of oral literatures around the world, an organic structure seems to be the invisible architectural design sustaining the Book of Genesis. The basic building blocks out of which the whole book is made are of two kinds: (1) simple narratives (the creation

narrative in chapters 1-2; the story of Adam and Eve's rebellion against God in chapter 3; the crime of Cain against his brother Abel in chapter 4; the Flood catastrophe brought about by the corruption of humankind in chapters 6-9; and the narrative of the tower of Babel and the subsequent scattering of tribes and tongues), and (2) genealogies (the genealogy from Adam to Abraham in chapter 5 and the table of nations in chapter 10), which make the events recounted in the book a coherent story. In a nutshell, while the narratives cover the beginnings of the world and human beings, as well as stories of wrongdoing and punishment based on individual and collective transgression of the boundaries set by God (Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden and Cain's fratricide, on the one hand, and the entire humanity's *hybris* behind the Flood and Babel stories), the genealogies explore the spread of humankind through the course of time (chapter 5) and through the reach of space (chapter 10).

What is relevant above all other things is that the stories threaded into the *Gestalt* that Genesis *is* embody the particular understanding of God, of the universe and of human beings' place in it of an ancient people at a time when there were no clear-cut distinctions being drawn between knowledge and belief, between science, philosophy and poetry, or between history and religion. The fundamental question at the heart of Genesis is a passionate inquiry about humankind's origins, which turns out to be much of an anthropological universal after all – a principle common to a number of cultures and peoples across chronological and geographical divisions. No doubt, the ultimate question about origins has been asked in all cultures and civilizations throughout the history of humankind, especially in early human history. Out of sheer curiosity, humans have felt a compulsion to pose the same question time and again, and have sought a satisfactory answer with admirable determination on their own. This partly accounts for the universality of creation stories and myths (cosmogonies) across cultures, but also for the secular unfolding of art, philosophy, and science over time. In the face of the grandeur of the universe and the mystery that we are an essential part of it all, humans from all ages and places have sought to devise a mythical or rational explanation to account for the awe-inspiring existence of *what is*. Art is just one of the possible responses to this, but science and philosophy share in essence the same impulse to grasp what is going on at all in the world. Historicity is also irrelevant in this context then. Genesis is not to be interpreted as an accurate account of actual events that took place some time in a remote past, but rather as one of the earliest attempts on the part of the human mind and imagination to describe creation, and, by describing it, to grasp the world, and humanity, as a whole.

We have mentioned the word *myth* (from the Greek word *mythos*) quite in passing, but it turns out to be a key concept for a proper understanding of Genesis 1-11, which displays a distinct mythic nature. Prototypically a myth is a story transmitted orally from one generation to another before it is given a material and solid incarnation in writing. Also, myth involves superhuman beings as its main characters and is set in otherworldly or cosmic time and space. Despite their non-scientific and naïve appearance, myths in a culture form an ecosystem, according to Bringham himself, and manage to communicate fundamental meanings central to a particular culture's conception of the world and humanity. They have an accuracy of their own. Turning back to Genesis, we realize that, strictly speaking, only the account of the creation of the world and the human race in Genesis 1-2 is set in remote space and time, and features a superhuman being (God) as its main character. The rest of biblical narratives appear to focus on flesh and blood human characters living on earth in real historical time. However, the stories of the Garden of Eden and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, the narrative of the universal Flood and the survival of Noah and his family, and the construction of the tower of Babel

feature characteristics which are mythical in essence as well. The exact geographical locations of humans' idyllic home in Eden and the plain of Shinar where the tower of Babel was built, are not places of this world. Furthermore, the exact chronology of our ancestors' expulsion from Eden and of the Flood is not really a specific moment in time that can be fixed on a historical time line. On the other hand, whereas the characters in these narratives (Adam, Eve, Noah, etc.) are not gods, they do not lead normal lives as we know them to be: they live for incredible long time periods and they even speak to God directly, face to face as it were.



I

Back to the Origins of the Universe & Humankind “An Augury”, “Genesis Frozen” and “Essay on Adam”

“An Augury”

When Noah set forth the raven and the dove

“An Augury” is the first biblical piece in part III of *Bergsbrund*. It is a jewel-like short lyric, perfect in its concision, clarity and sonorous statement. The language is pure and elegant like a circle. Like the longer poem “Ararat” (included in part V of *Bergsbrund*), it was part of Bringhurst's response to his reading of this particular biblical episode, but it focuses on just one tiny moment of the Flood narrative recounted in chapters 6-9 in Genesis. The biblical Flood story is also found in a Babylonian narrative of the epic of Gilgamesh, and both are likely to depend upon a common older source belonging to an ancient oral tradition. In both narratives, which display astonishing parallels, the deity is angry at humanity's degradation and decides to destroy the world. However, a pious hero (Noah) finds grace with God and is warned by the deity to build a great ship (ark) and to load it with his family and couples of all living beings so as to escape the coming deluge. Once all life has been annihilated upon the face of the earth after a forty-day deluge, the ship comes to ground on a mountain in Armenia (Ararat in the biblical narrative), birds are released to make sure that the waters have abated⁴⁸, and a sacrifice is offered to please and appease the deity. After that, God promises never again to send a flood to destroy the earth (9.8-9.10) and a covenant with Noah (9.12-9.17) inaugurates a new phase in the history of humanity, bound now by responsibility to God. The whole earth is then repopulated anew. In any case, whether such a flood occurred, or not, is impossible to prove now. Though the Genesis account of the Flood may suggest a global deluge, the narrative could only report a deluge limited to the author's known world, for the Hebrew word translated as ‘earth’ also means ‘land’ or ‘country’.

The original text in Genesis 8.7-8.12 recounts the episode in which Noah decides to set forth first a raven and then a dove to see if the earth has already dried or not. The episode is tantalizing and full of resonant echoes. These are the exact words found in King James Bible:

And he sent forth a raven, which went forth to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth. Also he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were

⁴⁸ The Babylonian version describes the hero releasing birds to seek vegetation, but the clay tablets on which the earlier text is recorded have been damaged where that episode might have occurred.

abated from off the face of the ground. But the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned unto him into the ark, for the waters were on the face of the whole earth: then he put forth his hand, and took her, and pulled her in unto him into the ark. And he stayed yet other seven days; and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark; and the dove came in to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf pluckt off: so Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth. And he stayed yet other seven days; and sent forth the dove; which returned not again unto him any more.

In the biblical account not much information is provided concerning the raven's flight to see if the waters have abated. The focus is rather on the dove throughout. While the raven turns out to be a more individualistic bird, the dove, faithful and obedient, turns back to Noah's ark to let the surviving humans know that the earth is still covered with water. Number symbolism is important too: up to three times does Noah send forth the dove to make sure they can safely abandon the ark. First, the dove flies back to Noah because there is no dry place where it can rest; secondly, it comes back with an olive leaf in its beak to let him know that the land has dried at last; and finally it flies away to return no more. In this respect, the biblical account is simple and straightforward, but Bringhurst's rendering of the biblical episode is, by comparison, an even more austere account that relies heavily on ellipsis and evocation. It consists of only four verse lines and one coordinate sentence:

The raven preceded the dove
out of the ark and for seven days circled
water, waiting for a perch, and for seven more
circled, waiting for the dove.

B, p. 51.

In his poem, Bringhurst has chosen to direct readers' attention precisely to the raven itself, thus illuminating a part of the Flood story that is left obscure in the biblical text. While we know exactly what the dove does every time it leaves the ark, not much is known of the raven's whereabouts or intention. So, upon closer inspection, Bringhurst's rendering of this tiny part of the Flood narrative happens to be pervaded by a sinister tone from beginning to end, if it is really possible to have a beginning, a middle, and an end in such a small compass of a poem. The raven does leave the ark before the dove, but instead of helping Noah and the seeds of all living creatures awaiting their return aboard the gigantic ship, it spends a week circling until the waters abate and then it spends yet another week waiting for the dove. In the meantime, the dove has been busy going to and fro from the ark to inspect the surrounding environment. By contrast, the raven does not really care about humans' lot aboard the ark. It is inevitable for it to obey his natural instinct and to want to satisfy its appetite. The raven is a bigger bird than the dove, and a carnivore for the matter. We can perfectly imagine what the raven is waiting the dove for: to ensure its survival, it is determined to kill the dove.

Part of the evocativeness of this little poem stems from its technical perfection. Every word falls in place and musicality is achieved through simple linguistic strategies like repetition and parallelism. The very repetitions and parallelisms in the poem (*'waiting for a perch'/'waiting for the dove'*) create an incantatory atmosphere and suggest that the raven is ready for hunting its prey. Reading the poem, we feel that the reader has to get actively involved in the exegesis process to make sense of the message being conveyed in this well-wrought composition or verbal artefact. Ideally, a thorough knowledge of the biblical episode is required for a proper understanding and interpretation of Bringhurst's poem.

The title sheds light on the interpretation path the reader is to follow: an augury, from the Latin *augurium*, means ‘omen’ or ‘prediction’. So the story presented in the four verse lines in the composition is to be interpreted as an augury for something else. As pointed out above, after the Flood God promises never again to destroy the earth and a covenant with Noah ensues, the visible symbol of which is the rainbow. The earth is repopulated; humans are given a new opportunity to make a fresh start. However, the raven’s behaviour is already a horrifying sign that evil and selfishness have not been swept away by the forty-day universal deluge. In the echo-chamber of our minds still ring powerful echoes from Cain’s crime against his brother Abel, and from Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden into a life of hardship and misery. There is no way of annihilating evil from the face of the earth – that seems to be the final message to be read in between the lines.



“Genesis Frozen”

In chapters 1 and 2 of the Book of Genesis there are two distinct accounts of the creation of the world and of humankind. Thus the two narratives found together in Genesis 1.1-2.4 and 2.5-2.25 tell of the creation of the physical world and of the creation of humanity respectively. Though these were originally independent elements, they were braided together into a coherent whole eventually. Needless to say, these extended descriptions of creation are not to be interpreted as providing a scientific account of the origin of the universe and of human beings. They are a mythic account instead, a cosmogony arising out of curiosity, stemming from humans’ sense of awe in the face of the grandeur of the world. In addition, as part of a sacred scripture, they are religious statements meant to emphasize God’s omnipotence and greatness, the result of theological reflection by which the older mythology was radically transformed to express Israel’s distinctive faith. However, even if they are not scientific in character, they do display a distinct type of accuracy inherent in mythical explanations of the world. The well-wrought design and the polished surface of the linguistic texture of the text are explicit signs that the authors involved in its creation were striving after such accuracy, which does not differ much from the aim of science in its search of objectivity and intellectual precision in its apprehension of the workings of the world.

From a chronological perspective, the older narrative of the two (Genesis 2.5-2.25) is the story of the creation of human beings. By contrast, the later narrative (Genesis 1.1-2.4) emphasizes the creation of the physical world over that of the human race. However, it is precisely the account of the creation of the universe that comes first in the opening pages of Genesis. Let us have a brief look at each of these accounts for a proper understanding of Bringhurst’s response to it in the form of two most curious poems entitled “Genesis Frozen” and “Essay on Adam”. The narrative of the creation of the world is generally attributed to a sixth-century BCE author who seemed to depend on a much older tradition. As pointed out above, the Book of Genesis incorporated various elements from ancient oral traditions and was a long time in the making indeed. In form the account of the beginnings of the universe is a poem or a hymn, as the repeated refrain (“And God saw that it was good”) indicates. This refrain signifies that creation was good in God’s eyes, or that it was in accord with God’s purpose. As in “An Augury”, number symbolism is again of paramount importance: its seven-day structure is simply no happy coincidence and may be due to its having been recited during an annual festival in the Jerusalem Temple in antiquity. The distribution of creation over seven days forms thus a temporal unity that recalls the natural ordering of time into units called ‘weeks’ and its culmination in the

Sabbath, a day for rest from labour, and it suggests that the history of creation and humanity is not a random process but has got an aim under God's attentive look instead.

In the beginning was chaos. The chaotic state before creation is an empty, formless reality, and God's defeat of the forces of chaos, present in the form of water in Genesis 1.2, is a necessary prelude to creation. This is a foundational text or a cornerstone in the history of Western tradition, presenting a cosmogony, or a mythical account embodying the inquisitive look of humans into the essence of reality. Creation is depicted from the beginning as Yahweh's triumph over irrational, obscure forces that are left unspecified. But, for a proper understanding, the biblical account is to be viewed in the larger context of ancient Near Eastern mythology, which may shed some light on its nature and conception. The myths of creation of ancient Israel's neighbours often describe a battle between the creator, prototypically a storm god, and primeval forces, most frequently watery. Creation is represented as the deity's victory over the forces of chaos, symbolized by threatening waters. In this respect, there are astonishing parallels between ancient Near Eastern myths of creation (or cosmogonies) and the biblical account⁴⁹. Canaanite mythology could have well been its immediate source. In the Jerusalem Temple God's victory over primeval chaos was celebrated in a great annual festival. In any case, in biblical tradition there is more than enough evidence that these ancient myths had an impact on the narratives of which the Bible is made up of. The sea, the deep, Leviathan: all of them embody chaotic powers that must be kept under control. Just to give an idea of the mythical texture of the opening chapters of the Bible, we shall consider Genesis 1.1-1.10, which reads as follows:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament; and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day. And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good.

In the Hebraic conception of language, words are endowed with magic power. They somehow create reality out of the blue. In this sense, God creates in unfettered freedom by his word or command, and creation is brought about by the separation of the elements of the universe. The result is eventually an ordered and habitable world, meant for

⁴⁹ As for the general mythic nature of Genesis 1-11, there are astonishing parallelisms in Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbours: Egypt, Canaan, and, in particular, Mesopotamia. The story of creation in Genesis 1.1-2.4, which begins with the wind of God hovering over a watery chaos, finds parallels in the Babylonian creation myth, *Enuma elish*, which describes a primordial battle between a goddess of watery goddess, Tiamat, and Marduk, a god of wind and storm. The story of Noah should be compared to a fragmentary third-millennium flood myth from Sumer, the myth of Ziusudra, and to two later Akkadian versions of the same myth found in the epic of Atrahasis and in the epic of Gilgamesh. Both the Atrahasis and Gilgamesh epics also contain parallels to the story of Eden: in Atrahasis, as in Genesis 2.7, humans are moulded from the clay of the earth (this tradition can also be found in Egyptian myths about the potter god of creation, Khnum); in the Gilgamesh epic, as in Genesis 3.22, there is a magical plant, that, once eaten, yields a godlike state of immortality. The story of the tower of Babel similarly finds its roots in Mesopotamian sources, as the very name *Babel*, the Hebrew equivalent of *Babylon*, suggests.

humans' comfort and plenitude. Hence creation is not so much dealing with absolute beginning or creation from nothing (*ex nihilo*) as with the world order as perceived by human beings. God imposes some order upon pre-existent materials out there according to a human conceptualization of what it means to live in an ordered cosmos. This concept of *logos* is closely linked to the notion of the creative word of the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis 1, everything that exists has its origins in God's commanding word: not just the physical universe, but also human beings, who are created "in God's image", which means that they are special creatures, different to the rest of creation, with whom God can communicate. The creation of light and darkness (day and night), of the firmament with the sun and the moon, of the earth and the seas, as well as the creation of plants and animals according to species, and of human beings as the crown of existence is made possible by God's creative word.

At this point, it is worth noting that it is possible to draw *a genealogy of language as knowledge*, and trace the idea that language is a system of knowledge back to antiquity. "In the beginning was the Word", tells us John in the Bible. The logocentric compulsion that Poststructuralist and Postmodernist discourse regards as something deeply rooted in Western thought is to be sought and found in such a landmark text as the Bible itself, as can be seen from the passage just quoted above. The obsession with and awareness of the *λόγος* is already present in the opening words of this Hebraic-Christian collection of books. In the Book of Genesis God is reported to have created the world *ex nihilo*, out of the blue, by solely uttering the exact words that bring objects into existence. It is precisely at the intersection of word and object that we find reality, though the former is much more important than the latter. In the Hebraic conception of language, the *λόγος* is prior to the thing, and therefore naming a thing implies creating it. As a result, it could not be otherwise, for an essentialist connection holds between words and objects. This is the source of magic, of shamanism and, most important of all, of myth. Thus, at the beginning of time *to name was to know*.⁵⁰

If in Hebraic philosophy language takes precedence over reality, it seems to us that it is rather the other way around in classical Greek philosophy. *What is real is real*, language is subsidiary to thought and reality, and written language is even much more removed from true reality than speech is. This is one of the reasons why much of ancient philosophy is oral, as can be seen from the Pre-Socratics in their knowing, from Socrates' teachings, and from Plato's dialogues. Philosophers make philosophy out of intense talks and walks in public places like the *agora* or the market. This is only to mention Western thought, but we should not forget that something similar happens in ancient Oriental philosophy. Walking in the open air activates the philosopher's mind in close contact with the natural elements. Plato and Aristotle, and the Pre-Socratics before them, are the makers of the central thread pervading the whole of Western philosophy: the human being confronted with reality, or how human beings get to know the world, the others and themselves. Plato is responsible

⁵⁰ Words weigh thousands of tons in ancient mythology for they imply *an act of creation and of knowledge*, inasmuch as to dissect reality into sections entails an act of interpretation, the adoption of a particular stance in the face of an overwhelming reality, which is the constant flux of sensation. Human beings must make such multifarious reality into manageable units, group bits of reality under categories and concepts, and assign them certain linguistic labels. After Babel such linguistic labels (or the Saussurean *signifiant*) have assumed a different material incarnation in a huge number of natural languages. In this respect, Babel installs linguistic chaos and diversity where there was uniformity and homogeneity before. It has been argued that all human languages might well stem from one single language, from an ancestral *Ursprache* common to all humankind. Then, with the passing of time, and due to the fact that languages are organic beings with an internal logic to them, a number of varieties would have arisen and begun their expansion through vast geographical areas. On the contrary, others claim that there is no such thing as a *linguistic pangenesis*: many different languages would have sprung at the same time in different places of the planet, instead.

for a crucial split in man's nature that has survived up to the present. Man is made up of a body and a soul, the former belonging to the realm of things and shadows, which is the world of mutability, change and decay; the latter belonging to the realm of ideas, which are permanent, eternal, and universal. For Plato ideas are innate: humans carry ideas within their heads from the very moment they are born. When they see things, they are only seeing, and remembering, a pale reflection or shadow of true, immutable and eternal essences, which are embodied in ideas.

On the contrary, for Aristotle, for man to arrive to the realm of ideas, he has to start from experience, which is the point of departure. Aristotle is responsible for the first theory of categorization in Western thought, which is vastly illustrated by his own work on taxonomies in *Metaphysics*, *Politics*, *Ethics*, and so on. The universe of objects is the only real thing which human beings should be concerned with. Thus, in the well-known painting by Michaelangelo, while Plato points upwards with his forefinger to the transcendental realm of ideas (and celestial Heaven in Christianity), Aristotle points downwards to Earth, with his feet pressing firmly the ground. The world of objects can be conceptualized into strictly neat categories, which have their own linguistic counterpart or label. Things are made of an essence or defining property (*genus*) and a number of peripheral or secondary properties (*accidence*) which are added to their core structure. Categories are precisely built on the basis of shared essence, which means that things are grouped into categories if and only if they share a set of defining inherent characteristics, even though they may differ as to certain nuances. This is also the basis of similarity and difference of particular instances of individual members in a category. For instance, even if Democritos, Socrates and Plato are not exactly the same, they all share a number of necessary and sufficient conditions in common as to be subsumed under the category of *man*. The same applies to tables, plants, animals, stones, dogs, houses, and all the objects in this world. The important thing worth noticing is that it is possible to draw clear-cut boundaries between different categories and that such boundaries are not problematic as such.

At first sight, Bringhurst's response to the biblical episode of the creation of the world, a poem entitled "Genesis Frozen", looks like a literal transcription and arrangement of the original text in line verses to form a short lyric of polished surface and simple, straightforward language pervaded by musicality. These are the words found in the opening lines of the Bible (Genesis 1.1-1.4); in italics are highlighted the exact words that Bringhurst uses in his poetic rendering of this cosmogony: "*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.*" This is Bringhurst's concise rendering of the creation of the world:

In the beginning God made heaven and earth
and heaven was formless and void and darkness
hung deep on its face like an ice wall, looming
toward avalanche. Light knifing into a fissure
or a tremor or a shout would have done it, but the Spirit
of God moved across it. That's what it was that did it.

B, p. 52.

As in "An Augury", Bringhurst isolates one single moment in time and freezes it for eternity. If "An Augury" focussed on the ominous raven waiting for the dove (its prey) to leave the ark, "Genesis Frozen" emerges precisely out of the intersection between light

and darkness that chaos represents at the beginning of time and creation. The poet's subtlety of thought is keen and sharp, like the blade of a knife. The repetition of some of the words from the biblical episode verbatim should not lead us to conclude that the poem is the result of simply arranging prose into verse lines. While the Book of Genesis presents the earth as an entity "without form, and void", in Bringhurst's rendering it is heaven⁵¹ that is "formless and void". In addition, the biblical account depicts the act of creation as the triumph of God over dark, menacing forces represented by "the waters". By God's commanding word, light comes into existence to defeat the irrational forces of darkness. Bringhurst's poem enacts a true reversal of the facts as recounted in the Bible. Darkness is, in fact, represented as a threatening presence hanging deep on the face of heaven, "looming toward avalanche", but it is precisely God's presence, hovering over the whole scene, that brings about the collapse of darkness (figuratively represented as "an ice wall") toward heaven. Bringhurst's ironic detachment rings beneath his hypothesis that light or a tremor or a shout could have brought about the collapse of the ice wall. Ironically enough, God "moved across it" and, by hovering above it, brought about havoc and destruction. The original biblical account of creation as a benevolent act whereby God separates elements and makes the world a habitable place for human beings is thus completely reversed.

At this point, it is reasonable to think that there are two possible readings for the very title of the poem. "Genesis Frozen", as pointed out above, signifies that Bringhurst has isolated or "frozen" a tiny part of the biblical cosmogony and dwelt on an alternative interpretation of the facts presented in the sacred scripture. His interpretation focuses on the ominous, the sinister, and the terrifying side to creation. On the other hand, the title suggests that the act of creation is literally frozen, since God's entering the scene where the world is being brought into existence somehow causes the collapse of darkness onto heaven to happen. Hence, instead of the original waters mentioned in Genesis, the poet chooses to use the words "an ice wall" to refer to a threatening presence in primeval times. As in the original text, the evocative underlying dichotomy is that between light (reason and good) and darkness (irrational and menacing forces of evil). If darkness is depicted as an ice wall, light is conceptualized as being a knife that could have produced a fissure in the ice wall and cause it to fall down. The unexpected conclusion to the poem is that God himself did it. The power of God's word to create reality has been completely ignored or overlooked, and the emphasis has been placed on the existence of good and evil side by side from the very beginning of existence. And it is the menacing element, "darkness", that seems to triumph in the end.



⁵¹ It is important to note that in the Hebrew Bible the word designating 'heaven' is plural; English translations sometimes use 'heaven', sometimes 'the heavens'. In Genesis 1.6-8, the creation of the firmament is described, "and God called the firmament Heaven". This was regarded as an overarching vault resting on pillars at the end of the earth. Above it was the celestial ocean, and above this the dwelling of God. In the firmament were openings of windows through which the upper waters came down in the form of rain (Genesis 7.11). At times, the term 'the heavens' refers to the expanse in which the birds fly (Genesis 1.20), at times at the starry heavens, and at other times still to the highest heaven above the firmament. The starry heavens are regarded as a witness to God's being and creative power. These heavens remind humans of their littleness and the wonder of God's concern for them and of his omnipresence. The notion of heaven as the final abode of God's people is hardly to be found in the Hebrew Bible. See *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, entry on 'Heaven', pp. 270-271, for further information.

“Essay on Adam”

A Theological Treatise in Miniature on Humankind's Fall

The first chapter of Genesis culminates the creation of the world with an account of the creation of humankind as the crown of the universe, “to have dominion” over all other creatures (Genesis 1.26-1.30). Human beings are also created by separation into male and female, made in the image of God, which means that, unlike the rest of creation, humans are beings to whom God can speak and who can respond to him in turn because of their likeness to the deity. Human dignity is based on humans’ likeness to God and the human race receives the divine blessing to have dominion over the whole world. The closing lines tell of God’s rest on the Sabbath and of his happiness at seeing that all he has made is perfect and complete in the created order of the universe. But there is yet another account of the creation of humankind in the Bible: an originally separate and older account of the creation of humanity is to be found in Genesis 2.5-2.25. Generally attributed by biblical scholars to J (the author who uses the name *Jahweh* to refer to God), the second creation account is essentially similar but its form is very different. It is a folktale in which there are pervasive signs of the concerns and interests of a peasant society. Behind its surface simplicity and naïveté, there are profound insights into the essence of the world. Hence it has been claimed that the main focus of this second account is the creation of the human race and that the creation of the world is directed to providing humans with a suitable agricultural environment.

Though Bringham’s poem entitled “Essay on Adam” is concerned with man’s fall, as we shall see below, it might be instructive to have a look at the bare essentials of the narrative of the human race according to the second creation account at Genesis 2.5-2.25, which emphasizes the creation of the human race and is intertwined with the story of its failure (the limits of sin and death are an integral part of human existence) as recounted at Genesis 3. Adam, the first man in the history of humanity, is moulded by God from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2.7), which is a recurrent idea found in a number of cultures around the world. That the first human being is formed from earthly elements and given life by receiving God’s breath signifies that humans are part of the natural order. Afterwards, Eve, the first woman and Adam’s companion, is moulded from one of his ribs while he is asleep. However, they are given a unique status as God breathes into them the divine breath and become living beings out of the inert matter. Nonetheless, they remain creatures in all aspects of their existence, vulnerable in their very physicality and in a number of realms:

- (1) They inhabit a particular territory, the garden of Eden, an ideal place of delight or a luxurious paradise on earth. At Genesis 2-3 it is depicted not only as an ideal place of delight or a paradise on earth, an idyllic home full of trees and lush vegetation planted by God for humans’ comfort (Genesis 2.8-2.14), but also as a place tended by humans who live, work and eat there (Genesis 2.15). The meaning of the word ‘Eden’ in Hebrew is uncertain, but some biblical scholars have suggested a connection with a Sumerian word meaning ‘wilderness’ or ‘plain’; some others have proposed a derivation from the Hebrew word for ‘delight’ or ‘pleasure’. In any case, even if Genesis 2.8 places the garden “eastward in Eden” in an unspecified location, four rivers are mentioned, two of which are known (the Tigris and the Euphrates), which indicates Mesopotamia as the probable location of this mythic place. In any case, there is no way of drawing definitive conclusions as to its precise geographical location.
- (2) They have to labour (the tilling and keeping of the garden) and they need to eat food, basically the fruit of the garden which they must conscientiously tend to their own benefit,

which signifies that the growth of humankind involves human effort and the advancement of culture. At the centre of the garden of Eden are the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, of whose fruit God strictly prohibited humans to eat. The command about the trees in the garden implies responsibility toward their maker, which is part of what is meant by humanity as being made in the image of God. Eden is a sort of paradigm of the unbroken relationships between God and the first human beings, and between humans and nature, but they step on the deity's explicit prohibition. As a result, their expulsion from Eden occurs after the first's couple disobedience of God's command.

- (3) They cannot live alone; they need to live in community instead. Hence God's creation of the first woman, depicted as "the mother of all living" and the female ancestor of the entire human race, to be a corresponding (not subordinate) companion to the man. No doubt the fact that Eve is created secondarily from Adam's rib (Genesis 2.21-2.22)⁵², instead of directly from the dust of the ground, corresponds to the position of the male in a patriarchal society and to women's submission in a man-ordered world. It is no coincidence that Adam should name the woman at Genesis 3.20 as he had earlier named the animals, thus indicating dominion over her. However, the story originally seems rather to stress the unity of the sexes, their complementary nature, and their mutual need. So whereas the first creation account ends with the religious institution of the Sabbath (Genesis 2.3), the second, which is directed to humankind in community, ends with the social institution of marriage (Genesis 2.23-2.25).
- (4) They need language to order (and 'tame') the surrounding world, hence the call and naming of the rest of creatures in the world by Adam at Genesis 2.19-2.20. Adam's naming of the animals is indicative of his dominion over them, and is parallel to God's creation of the world by his commanding word in Genesis 1. As explained above in our critical analysis of "Genesis Frozen", in the Hebraic conception of language the *logos* is conceptualized as a sort of creative word that calls things into their being. While God used language to create reality anew by his commanding use of words, Adam, made in the deity's image, is endowed with the astonishing capacity to order existence through linguistic means. He is thus expressing his dominion over the rest of creation, including woman, to whom she gives the name 'Eve' at Genesis 3.20.
- (5) They are sustained by their relationship to God, but they fall in the end, because they are human and fallible after all (*errare humanum est*, said Seneca). The narratives of wrongdoing and punishment are to be found in chapter 3 (the fall and the subsequent expulsion from the garden of Eden) and in chapter 4 (the narrative of Cain and Abel). Created by God, the human creature is endowed with free will, which means that there is a possibility that humans might turn against God and thus incur guilt. And this they do in fact. In chapter 3 of Genesis the source of temptation is the 'subtil' serpent, though no explanation is provided as to the provenance of evil. Although it has been suggested that the serpent addresses the woman as the more gullible of this primeval couple, Genesis 3 gives no precise indication why this is the case. Both Adam and Eve are together when the temptation episode occurs. The New Testament offers a very negative view of Eve, though, presenting her as embodying the alleged weakness of woman. The man and the woman together discover their nakedness, together make fig leaf garments, and together hide from the deity. Because Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, thus breaking God's basic command, the punishment is expulsion from the garden, from God's presence and from access to the tree of life, even if mortality is already part of the human condition. Furthermore, both are destined to a life of pain (though none is cursed): the man is destined to toil as a farmer in fields of thorns and thistles (Genesis 3.17-3.18), and the woman is destined to suffer pain in childbearing (Genesis 3.16). In chapter 4, Cain's crime

⁵² "And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man."

against his brother, Abel, augments the disobedience to God's command⁵³. The implications are crystal-clear: separated from God, human beings become capable of murder and of dishonouring their parents.

As pointed out above, "Essay on Adam" is a poem that explores the theological background of man's fall. It is an essential poem in the canon of Bringham's total *oeuvre*. First published in little magazines, it would be included in *Bergschrund* (1975) and reprinted in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), *The Calling* (1995), and *Selected Poems* (2009) with significant textual variations with respect to its original version. This is the original text published in *Bergschrund*; all the textual variations of subsequent incarnations of the poem are indicated below in a footnote:

ESSAY ON ADAM

There are five possibilities. One: Adam fell.
Two: he was pushed. Three: he jumped. Four:
he only *looked* over the edge and it unsteadied him. Five:
nothing worth mentioning happened to Adam.
The first, that he fell, is too simple. The fourth,
fear, has been tried and proved useless. The fifth,
nothing happened, is dull. The choice is between:
he jumped or was pushed. And the difference between these⁵⁴

is only an issue of whether the demons
work from the inside out or from the outside
in: the one
theological question.

B, p. 53.

The theme at the core of Bringham's short lyric poem is the Fall. As a key biblical concept, the Fall refers to the disobedience and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden. According to the account found in chapters 2-3 of Genesis, the primordial

⁵³ Genesis 4.1-4.16 recounts the curious story of two brothers, the children of the primordial couple: Cain (meaning perhaps 'smith'), the firstborn of Adam and Eve, and Abel (meaning probably 'emptiness'). Cain, a farmer, offers a sacrifice of grain to Yahweh, while Abel, a shepherd, offers a sacrifice of the firstborn of his flocks. While Abel finds grace with Yahweh, Cain's sacrifice is rejected for no obvious reason. After Yahweh offers some moral advice to Cain, the biblical siblings come into conflict and Cain murders his brother in the field. The cause of Cain's evil nature is left unexplored, and though he feigns ignorance of Abel's whereabouts, the spilt blood on the ground betrays his heinous fratricide. As punishment, God condemns the murderer to wander the earth and to receive no crops from the land. Cain pleads for mercy (which reveals a certain degree of repentance) and God places an unspecified sign on him that will prevent people from murdering him. East of Eden there is a land called Nod where Cain finally departs to wander aimlessly. Beyond surface simplicity and naïveté, this biblical story braids a complex set of interrelated themes, including sibling rivalry, the attraction of sin, crime and punishment, the futility of pretence before God's omnipotence, and the powerful dichotomy between civilization and barbarism. At the beginning of the biblical story, Cain is presented as a farmer who tills the earth to make a living, but after committing his heinous crime, he is forced to leave the realm of civilization and enter that of barbarism, where there is no human warmth or protection. Separation (moral, geographical, economic) from other humans proves a fatal error. See *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 97, for further details on this episode.

⁵⁴ These are all the textual variations undergone by the poem: (1) the original *Bergschrund* (*B*) "it unsteadied him. Five:" is different in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (*BW*) and in *The Calling* (*C*) versions, which read "one look silenced him. / Five"; (2) the original *B* "has been tried and proved useless" becomes "we have tried and found useless" in the *BW* version and "we have tried. It is useless." in the *C* version; (3) the original *B* "The choice is between" becomes "The choices are these" in the *BW* and *C* texts; (4) the *B* and *BW* "these" becomes "them" in *C*.

couple (which represented humanity in its entirety) initially enjoyed a life of ease and comfort, and had a close intimacy with their creator. However, their desire to become like gods, “knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3.5), prompted them to break God’s basic command not to eat from the tree of knowledge placed at the centre of the garden of Eden. Like Gilgamesh in the Mesopotamian text, Adam gained knowledge in eating of the fruit of the tree of good and evil, but not immortality. They were punished with expulsion from paradise and condemned to a life of suffering that was passed on to their descendants. According to Paul’s explanation in the New Testament (1 Corinthians, 15.21-15.22), it was Adam who first introduced sin and death into the world⁵⁵, and this notion led Saint Augustine to develop the doctrine of original sin in the 5th century CE: Adam’s fall degraded humanity and his original sin was passed by hereditary transmission from one generation to another. From a general anthropological standpoint, it is worth noticing that, like all myths of a lost paradise or golden age, the story of the Fall gives voice to humanity’s yearning for a better world. It constitutes an attempt to account for the problems of evil and human suffering inherent in the world. As a matter of fact, the Fall narrative is similar to other stories that sharply contrast a primeval state of bliss and perfection in ancient times with a present state of suffering. The biblical account is unique in that the emphasis is placed on humanity’s free will – on the fact that humanity’s degradation is brought about by its own free choice.

Bringhurst’s poem analyzes all theological possibilities that may have brought about man’s Fall (following his overstepping of the basic boundaries set by God, namely the strict prohibition to eat the forbidden fruit) and expulsion from Eden. It does so in a straightforward language, within the framework of a tripartite structure, and one step at a time, or better, one thought at a time, embodied in simple, declarative sentences. Being a special kind of theological essay in miniature on the figure of Adam, the poem displays a well-wrought design consisting of three movements for the mind: the first stanza is concerned with presenting the five possibilities that may satisfactorily account for Adam’s fall; the second is what could be called, in terms of philosophical logic, a *reductio ad absurdum*, whereby all the different hypotheses are scrutinized and rejected by turn on the basis of excessive simplicity or nonsense; and the final stanza offers a definitive conclusion. There is a subtle mind at work in this poem, caught in mid-thinking, following the deductive course characteristic of logical thought.

The poet’s ironic detachment is already present in the opening line of the poem. “Essay on Adam” starts almost *in medias res* and takes for granted all the background information that has been made explicit in the preceding paragraphs of this critical analysis. The five possible hypotheses accounting for Adam’s fall are thus presented straightaway in a non-stop enumeration in the first stanza. Though used in quite a literal sense of the word, the verb *fall* (in the past tense form, ‘fell’) at the end of the first verse line already points to the theme of the composition. The five possibilities are simple enough and are presented in transparent language that betrays the poet’s concern with intellectual clarity and accuracy. If Adam fell, then (1) he could have fallen naturally or quite by accident, and there is no more to it, or (2) someone could have pushed him, or (3) he decided to take his life by jumping into the abyss, or (4) fear could have made him fall as “he looked over the edge” (“one

⁵⁵ In Romans 5-7, Paul elaborates the view that sin, like death, originated with Adam. Christ’s death was the expiatory sacrifice that liberated human beings from their enslavement to the power of sin. See the entry on sin in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 696, where sin is defined as an offence against God. Although by sinning people cannot do God any actual harm, they do act against God by despising him and his commandments, and by injuring others (or themselves), since the person injured is also an object of divine providence and protection.

look silenced him”, reads the later version in *The Beauty of the Weapons* and *The Calling*), or (5) it does not make any sense to waste one’s time thinking about this issue because nothing of essence really happened to Adam.

In the second stanza the poet proceeds to a deconstruction of all five hypotheses to reach an uncompromising conclusion of sorts. The *reductio ad absurdum* of all previous explanations is carried out in just a few authoritative strokes. The first explanation, that Adam fell naturally, or by accident, is dismissed as being too simple. The fourth possibility, that it was fear that made Adam fall, is said to have been tried and “proved useless”. The fifth, that nothing really happened to Adam, is rejected as being boring. At this point of the *reductio ad absurdum* there seem to be only two possibilities left: either “he jumped or was pushed” (the order has been reversed with respect to the first stanza), or, to put it differently, either he was made to fall or he decided to fall freely. According to the poet, both are in essence the same. It all depends on whether the demons “*work from the inside out or from the outside / in.*” The logical reasoning unfolding throughout the second stanza leads relentlessly to this conclusion in the last stanza. Evil is pervasive in the universe, inside and outside of human beings, and so the fact that Adam was made to fall or opted to fall is only a matter of perspective: it does not matter much whether some threatening force (probably the ‘subtil’ serpent in the account in Genesis 3, which is seen as a source of evil) caused him to fall or he himself decided it was better to fall (as man is endowed with free will and the capacity to choose freely what he wants to do about his life). This is viewed as “*the one / theological question*”: is evil out there in an endangered world present as a menacing force, or is it rather part of the human condition?

The word ‘demons’ has strong resonances in Bringham’s poem. Notions about ‘demons’ or evil spirits exist in all cultures, in all times, and they are an index to humans’ preoccupation with the existence of evil and suffering in a God-made universe. The Bible turns out to be no exception in this respect. In the Old Testament there are animistic notions in the recognition of spirits inhabiting trees, mountains, rivers, animals, and storms. There are also ideas about demons, and in this context the emphasis is often laid on the role of evil spirits, more or less capricious or baleful, in producing erratic and unexpected behaviour in human beings. Allusions to demons are much more frequent in the New Testament, though, where they are depicted as evil creatures and obedient servants of Satan, the ultimate adversary of God. Prototypically, demons are forces external to human beings that manifest their evil power by causing blindness (both spiritual and physical), deafness, epilepsy, and madness. Even if they are forces external to humans, their power seems to depend also on internal forces operating at subconscious levels of the human psyche. The conjunction of demonic and human wills (the external evil forces and the internal dark compulsion in human beings) creates a sort of captivity that God only has the power to terminate. There are numerous biblical episodes recounting Christ’s victory over Satan as he evicts demons from their human homes. Humanity is locked in a struggle with these unseen beings that seek to manipulate human hearts and instil evil in them.

Evil as a philosophical problem is never really addressed in the Bible. The presence of evil in the world is just taken for granted and viewed as something unpleasant or repulsive. In the account of the creation of the universe at Genesis 1 there already exists the darkness and there are threatening waters, which are symbols of evil God must bring under control as a prelude to the creation of an ordered, perfect world. No attempt is made to explain the origin of evil, not even when the ‘subtil’ serpent enters the scene of the garden of Eden and encourages humans to transgress God’s prohibition against eating the forbidden fruit. In God’s eyes the world is “very good”, as can be seen in the refrain

repeated time and again in Genesis 1. What is more, evil is not seen as an intrinsic feature of the physical world, for creation is seen as good throughout. Although God subdues evil in the cosmos eventually, that does not mean that evil has ceased to exist altogether. There is plenty of evidence in Genesis that evil is present among humans: Cain's heinous crime against Abel and the construction of the tower of Babel are just two instances of humans' overstepping God's boundaries. But the freedom that human beings enjoy to direct their own hearts and souls for good or evil is left unexplored. There remains yet another complex theological problem: how is it possible to account for the existence of evil in a world created by a compassionate, just, omnipotent, and omniscient God. This is possibly *the one theological question*.

II

Israel's Genealogies and Past Ancestors

"Patrimony"

Ancestral Patriarchs: Noah & Abraham

Unlike the preceding short, jewel-like lyrics "An Augury", "Genesis Frozen" and "Essay on Adam", "Patrimony" and "Babylon" are two longer narrative poems of a very different nature. The biblical source of inspiration for both compositions is still the Book of Genesis, but now the emphasis is rather placed on the importance of ancestors in ancient Israel, where memory of the past is preserved in the form of genealogies that trace the persistence of the human race over time. By contrast, the preceding shorter lyrics were concerned with exploring the beginnings of the universe ("Genesis Frozen"), the near destruction and eventual preservation of the world following a universal deluge ("An Augury"), and the creation and fall of human beings ("Essay on Adam"). One of the astonishing characteristics of those poems is that they shed light on certain areas of the primeval biblical accounts that were originally left obscure or dealt with quite in passing. But it was precisely in those shadowy areas that Bringhurst's response to the Bible, a central book in the mythological framework of Western tradition to borrow the subtitle of a discerning essay by Northrop Frye and Jay Macpherson, found an occasion to produce such impressive lyrics, perfect artefacts carved in language perfectly embodying an intellectual precision rare nowadays among contemporary poets. Once again poetry, far from being a letting loose of emotion, is the result of a conscientious search after impersonality and objectivity. And Bringhurst's poems have the quality of little essays in miniature, though of course they are intensely lyrical and carefully thought objects.

"Patrimony" consists of two distinct parts or movements – the first one comprising the first two stanzas and the second the last three. The main characters in each section, Noah and Abraham respectively, have something fundamental in common: they are ancestors central to the ancient mythic history of Israel and central to the Book of Genesis as a whole, a book concerned with beginnings. Genesis 6-9 provides the *materia poetica* for the first part, the theme of which is the end of the Flood and Noah's familial relationships. The opening stanza of "Patrimony" is thus introductory in character and serves the purpose of providing readers with basic clues as to what they are to make of the rest of the poem. Upon closer scrutiny, the opening lines of the poem do ring a bell, as they direct the reader's attention back to "An Augury", where Noah sets forth a raven and a dove to see if the waters covering the earth have dried, and forward to "Ararat", where there is an explicit

allusion to ‘a bow in a black tree’. All three poems constitute scattered, but closely related, pieces of Bringhurst’s response to the biblical account of the Flood.

Bearing in mind that Noah’s narrative occupies chapters 6 to 9 of Genesis, and that the Flood episode is recounted in Genesis 7.6-8.22, Bringhurst’s poem begins *in medias res* in a way, and exactly at the point where the Flood narrative is about to end. As in the Gilgamesh Epic account, in the biblical narrative of the universal Flood a pious hero is warned by the deity to build an immense ark and to save the seeds of all living things in it to escape the coming deluge. For forty days and forty nights, rain poured from the “windows of heaven”, annihilating all trace of life upon the face of earth. Noah’s ark comes to rest eventually on Ararat, a sacrifice is offered to God, and a divine oath follows never to send a flood to destroy the earth (Genesis 9.8-10). In the conclusion to the Flood story, the rainbow (“*the bow shaved out of laminated / light*” in Bringhurst’s poem) is depicted as the visible token of the new covenant between God and all living creatures (Gen. 9.14-9.16). As in other ancient Near Eastern mythologies, Israel’s deity is conceived of as a warrior-god or storm god armed with a bow. That the bow is up in the sky for all humans to see (“*No man could / draw it or loose arrows with it*”) is a sign that God is not going to use it against them. In Bringhurst’s rendering of the bow theme, Noah’s reaction to its presence in the sky is strange though, as he feels that “*nothing could be done about it.*”

The second stanza of “Patrimony” is truly accurate, even as far as chronology is concerned. Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters was upon the earth (Gen. 7.6), and the universal deluge lasted forty days and forty nights (Gen. 7.12). According to Genesis 8.13, “it came to pass in the six hundredth and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from off the earth: and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and, behold, the face of the ground was dry”. While keeping the chronology accurate, Bringhurst’s version of the biblical episode is ironic in outlook. Noah has grown even older in just a short time span, and an additional year is to be added to his actual age for being “*shut up in a boat for a month / and a half with that menagerie*”, that is to say, a couple of all living creatures on earth, his wife, and his three children (Shem, Ham and Japheth) with their respective wives. Nothing is said in the original biblical account about the living together of all these creatures locked aboard the ark and isolated from the outer world for such a long period of time. Presumably desperation in the face of the non-stop pouring rain and the presence of water everywhere could have well been a reasonable reaction on the part of those sharing such an unusual sojourn on the ship. Once the universal deluge is over, it seems only natural that Noah “*planted his vines and waited and, when it was / possible, got patriarchally drunk.*” The humour in these words is explicit, particularly in the adjectival phrase “patriarchally drunk”, which brings together two apparently contradictory notions: on the one hand, the notion of a grave, long-lived patriarch like Noah unquestioningly obeying God’s commands regarding the construction of the ark to save all the seeds of existence, and, on the other, the irresponsibility that seems to be inherent in a 601-year-old ancestor getting drunk in an attempt at escapism, as though he wanted to forget, if only for a while, the demands of a pressing reality. The stress is on the more humane and vulnerable side to this venerable patriarch who found grace in God’s eyes among the men of his generation and became the main character of a story he did not ask to take a part in.

Chapter 9 of Genesis is basically concerned with God’s covenant with Noah and human beings as symbolized by the rainbow, as well as with the patriarch’s relationship with his children. According to Genesis 5.32 and 6.10, at the age of 500 years Noah begat his three sons (Shem Ham, and Japheth), who entered the ark with their wives as well

(Gen. 7.13). Ham, the father of Canaan (Gen. 9.18) is, in fact, the protagonist of the episode recounted in the closing lines of the second stanza of “Patrimony”, where the object of inquiry is the familial relationships between father and children. Bringhurst has revisited Genesis 9.20-9.27 in search of the *materia poetica* for this episode, but it is Genesis 9.20-9.25⁵⁶, which presents the story in an objective fashion, that seems to be the immediate source for the poet’s rendering of the biblical events. Ham saw his father Noah lying drunk and naked in his tent, and Noah later cursed Ham’s son Canaan, pronouncing him a slave to his brothers. By contrast, the other children, Shem and Japheth, had the decency to cover their father’s nakedness. It might be thought that Noah’s reaction toward Ham is unjust or exaggerated, but Ham’s precise offence has been interpreted as castration, sexual assault, and incest. Common sense tells us, though, that the simplest explanation seems best: in failing to cover his naked father, Ham was disrespectful. However, it is not Ham but his son Canaan whom Noah repeatedly cursed (Gen. 9.25-9.27), probably because the story served to legitimate Israel’s conquest of Canaan and the destruction of its inhabitants.⁵⁷ By a most curious alchemy and through an astonishing economy of strokes, the biblical episode becomes this in Bringhurst’s hands:

He came to in the tent with his fly open
 under Ham’s blanket and cursed Ham
 and cursed him again when his other two offspring
 came up with a highly unlikely story.

B, p. 54.

This might look like a too colloquial or disrespectful rendering of the biblical account, but the point is that the poet’s emphasis is placed on the more humane dimension to Noah and to the whole episode. Though a venerable patriarch, he is human and fallible after all. As he regains consciousness, he realizes that his fly is open and that Ham has offended him by seeing him in such an embarrassing situation. Angry at the fact that Ham has told his brothers “a highly unlikely story” (having to do with castration, sexual assault, or incest), Noah curses not this son, but his son’s son, Canaan, whom he pronounces a slave to the rest of his offspring’s descendants, who are left rather in the background of the story.

The second part of “Patrimony” is basically about Abraham, another important biblical patriarch. After the Noah cycle found in chapters 6-9, Chapter 10 of Genesis presents the table of nations and their spread in time and space: “These are the families of the sons of Noah, after their generations, in their nations: and by these were the nations divided in the earth after the flood.” (Genesis 10.32) As a matter of fact, the first movement in the second part of “Patrimony” is concerned with the all-important notion of genealogies in ancient Israel: “*Ten generations begot and begatted / and Abraham sold out to God.*” Genealogies preserve the life histories of those making up the chain of generations. Intended to preserve the continuity of a family in its progression through time, a genealogy is a sort of catalogue preserving the essential biographical facts in the lives of the successive members of a family’s lineage, including their birth, marriage, offspring, age achieved, and death. Originally, genealogies served the purpose of preserving and keeping alive the

⁵⁶ The biblical account reads: “And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard. And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without. And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father’s nakedness. And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.”

⁵⁷ See the entry on ‘Ham/Canaan, Cursing of’ in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 268.

generational succession of a family; later on, they came to express other more complex nuances of meaning related to kinship and to socio-political and religious relationships, and established connections within larger communities as if they were a living blueprint relentlessly evolving over time, perpetually in the making. Needless to say, genealogies are of the essence in oral cultures (they are transmitted orally and hence are intrinsically and inevitably mutable) and their origins can be traced back in time to nomadic tribes; in literate cultures they become obsolete and useless, for they are replaced with what purports to be an accurate record of historical facts.

Genealogies⁵⁸ play a crucial role in biblical writings, especially in Genesis, for they lend the events being recounted a strong coherence and a sense of continuity over time through the succession of human generations. In other words, these genealogies occur after the creation of humankind is complete and they knit the individual accounts of primeval events in Genesis 1-11 into a coherent narrative. There are basically two types of genealogy: (1) the linear form, in which a family lineage is presented in the form of a catalogue presenting family heads in a straight progression from the clan's founder down to the last or currently living representative (Genesis 5: the human lineage from Adam to Noah), and (2) the branching genealogy, which follows the diverging branches of a family exhibiting divisions among the communities descended from the sons of a single ancestor (Genesis 10: Noah's sons cover the entire known world with their offspring).

Closely connected to the notion of genealogy is that of ancestor. Genesis 12-50 constitutes a detailed account of the traditions about the ancestors or patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and the matriarchs (Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah) of Israel. For a proper understanding of the overall design of the account of Israel's ancient history, it is advisable to view Genesis 12-50 as part of a larger narrative extending from the creation of the world in Genesis 1 to the fall of Jerusalem in 586/586 BCE (2 Kings 24-25). As a coherent unity, this extended account serves the specific purpose of presenting the story of the Hebrews from their beginnings, with the call of Abraham, to their presence in Egypt following Joseph's rise to power. Now, there are at least four major blocks or cycles in Genesis 12-50: the Abraham cycle (12.7-25.11), the Isaac cycle (25.19-26.34), the Jacob cycle (27.1-35.29), and the Joseph story (37-48; 50). There is plenty of evidence that all these cycles were compiled from separate oral sources and were a long time in the making. Robert Bringhurst must have drawn most of the essential ideas for the second part of his "Patrimony" from the Abraham cycle (especially from chapter 16, as we shall see below) and the essentials of the more integrated Jacob narrative (chapter 27 of Genesis in particular) must have served as a source of inspiration for *Jacob Singing* (1977), another long dramatic monologue in the tradition of *Deuteronomy* (1974) and an essential poem in the overall design of Bringhurst's *oeuvre*.

Two movements are discernible in the poet's verse lines:

Ten generations begot and begatted
and Abraham sold out to God, and afterward
got his start in high circles by letting
his wife get laid by a rich Egyptian.
(He knew it was safe. She was barren.) And Abraham
slept with the maid and his wife kicked her out.

The desert was empty and the nights cold

⁵⁸ See the entry on 'genealogies' in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, pp. 243-245.

and the maid, Hagar, concluded God's earth
was as barren as Abraham's wife. There was no going
further. Hagar came back – for the sake
of the child, she said. And after a good deal
of grovelling and hollering she was let back into
a job of sorts, and worked, and gave birth,
and stayed clear of Abraham's bed, and said nothing.

B, 54-55.

Along with Noah, Abraham is the main character in Bringhurst's "Patrimony". As father of all believers, Abraham is viewed as a source of unity and harmony rather than dissent among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. He is the earliest biblical character who is delineated clearly enough to be viewed as a sort of historical creature. Abraham is seen as "father of all nations", "model of faith" and "guarantor of Israel's survival", and in the Book of Deuteronomy, he is associated with Isaac and Jacob (Deuteronomy 1.8; 6.10) and all three are considered as Israel's fathers or ancestors, as those men who were instrumental in somehow fulfilling God's covenant with Israel. Abraham's historicity as a flesh and blood man is the subject of critical dispute. Claims of historicity are based on certain key aspects. He may have been a caravan merchant or simply a pastoralist, as suggested by certain pieces of evidence, like the fact that his homeland is located on the Fertile Crescent and his itineraries as described in Genesis (southeast toward Chaldean Ur at Genesis 11.31, then west to Canaan and Egypt), which seem to correspond to actual Amorite migratory and commercial routes. Regardless of the historicity of Abraham, the theological message behind this narrative is crystal-clear: the triumph of God's purpose and promise in spite of all sorts of hindrances. After God has promised to Abraham that he will become a great nation (Gen. 12.2), he goes to Egypt, where God must intervene to rescue Sarah from the Pharaoh's harem (Gen. 12.15-12.20). In Bringhurst's rendering of the episode, Abraham manages to make a huge fortune "by letting/his wife get laid by a rich Egyptian". According to Genesis 12.16, the Pharaoh "entreated Abram well for her sake: and he had sheep, and oxen, and he asses, and menservants, and maidservants, and she asses, and camels", and Genesis 13.2 informs us that "Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold." Abraham consents to Sarah's lying with a stranger because "He knew it was safe. She was barren."

The core of the second part of "Patrimony" is about the love triangle formed by Abraham, Sarah, and the Egyptian maid Hagar. Chapter 16 of Genesis is the immediate source of the account. Because Sarah is sterile, Abraham lies with Sarah's maid to produce a son, called Ishmael. When Sarah finally produces a son it is in her old age; almost immediately, though, Abraham is ordered to offer the son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. Abraham's obedience is rewarded by the sparing of Isaac's life, and the first cycle ends with Rebekah being brought from Abraham's home of northeast Mesopotamia as a wife for Isaac.

Then there was Isaac, the joke. But things
got worse instead of better for Hagar.
Sarah tossed her out a second
time and she didn't come back. But it was
Ishmael who became the archer.

B, p. 55.

“Babylon”

Dreaming Nebuchadnezzar and Visionary Daniel

“Babylon” was first published in the prestigious literary magazine *Kayak* (Santa Cruz, California) 35 (June 1974): 63-65, along with the poem “The Identity Moving”. It was later included in Bringhurst’s MFA Thesis, *Carmina propria et opuscula translata* (1975), and reprinted in the groundbreaking poetry collection *Bergschrund* in 1975. “Babylon” is the companion poem of “Patrimony”; both explore aspects of the genealogies of ancient Israel, as well as the decisive formative influence ancestors had on the history of their people. In another sense, Bringhurst’s poem is an extended *sui generis* meditation on the Book of Daniel, which is one of the few books of the Bible that can be dated with precision. Historically speaking, the focus is on the diaspora period in which Jerusalem had been conquered by the Babylonians and many of its citizens had been taken captive away from home to the foreign kingdom. Thus, “Babylon” is not just about the kings of a real city that played a central role in ancient politics, but also about the vicissitudes lived by the Judeans that had been deported against their will, about the sustaining support God constantly represented for them, and about a man called Daniel, a shrewd youth and a visionary man capable of predicting future events. Before proceeding further into the examination of the structure and unfolding of ideas in the poem, it might be convenient and instructive to analyze the *materia poetica* out of which Bringhurst created a completely original poem or, in other words, the literary (mainly biblical) sources that served as the inspiration for the poem under scrutiny here. What Bringhurst manages to accomplish in the end is an impressive exercise in intellectual assimilation and literary condensation (*recombinatory poetics*) whereby a whole twelve-chapter biblical book, the Book of Daniel, is revisited, reinterpreted and refashioned into a single poem 38 lines long.

It might be wise to begin at the beginning. The first textual threshold the reader must cross before entering the poetic universe of the poem is the title itself. And the title usually provides the reader with a reliable point of reference for interpreting if only a tiny part of the potential meaning of the poem. In the biblical context, what is the literal and figurative meaning of ‘Babylon’? Has it got any historical consistency? Was it a real or a mythical city? Babylon was an important metropolis in ancient history. Scholars tell us that ‘Babylon’ is the rendering of Akkadian Babilum (Babilim), the city that for centuries served as capital of the “land of Babylon”. In the Bible, etymology links the name to the confusion of tongues (Genesis 11.9, Hebrew *bālal*, “[God] confused”), and so the city is called Babel.⁵⁹ The history of Babylon was marked by periods of splendour and by periods of servitude under the yoke of other contemporary empires. In the second millennium BCE, and under the adroit Hammurapi (*ca.* 1792-1750 BCE)⁶⁰, Babylon succeeded in restoring

⁵⁹ For further details, see the entry on ‘Babylon’ in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, pp. 71-72.

⁶⁰ Hammurapi is an important Babylonian figure. Sixth in a dynasty that settled in Babylon about 1894 BCE and continued until 1595 BCE, Hammurapi ruled *ca.* 1792-1750 BCE. His ancestors were seminomads from the Syrian steppe who poured into Babylonia from about 2000 BCE onward and overwhelmed the local rulers. Hammurapi continued the policy of his father, Sinmuballit, in strengthening the city’s position within a network of shifting alliances. He gained control of towns further down the Euphrates early in his reign, raising his kingdom’s prosperity by improving irrigation systems and building temples and fortifications. Having defeated the rival states of Eshunna and Assyria to the north, Hammurapi became master of Mesopotamia at the age of 33. He enjoyed his success for a few years, but at his death the conquered states reasserted themselves, and his son, Samsu-iluna, held only the region of Babylon. However, Babylonians remembered Hammurapi for more than a thousand years. He was the first to raise Babylon to great power, and he was also famous as a lawgiver. During his long reign, local governors referred awkward problems to him, and so a considerable body of royal decisions accumulated. Toward the end of his reign, Hammurapi promulgated his famous laws. They were written on clay tablets and engraved on stone *stelae*, one of which

the unity of Mesopotamia under its own hegemony and so it enjoyed a period of unparalleled splendour. By all the surrounding Mediterranean cultures Babylon was regarded as heir to the millennial traditions of the ancient Sumerian centres of cult and culture. In spite of this past splendour, in the early first millennium Babylon declined into the status of a vassal state to Assyria, the powerful neighbour to the north. Later, the weakening of the Assyrian empire cleared the path for the accession of the last and in some ways greatest Babylonian dynasty, that of the Chaldeans, sometimes referred to as the Tenth Babylonian Dynasty (625-539 BCE). With this restoration, Babylon ranked as one of the major cities, indeed, in Greek eyes, as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, by virtue of its famous 'hanging gardens', which the king had built as a present for his wife. Nebuchadrezzar II rebuilt the city most grandly during a long, fruitful reign (605-562 BCE) that lasted 44 years. He is remembered in biblical historiography as the conqueror of Jerusalem in 597 and 587/586 BCE (2 Kings 24-25). Though the Book of Daniel recounts stories about Nebuchadrezzar (especially chapter 4) as well as about Belshazzar (chapter 5), these stories should rather be referred to Nabonidus, who proved to be not only the last king of the dynasty (555-539 BCE), but also the last ruler of any independent city. The city surrendered to Cyrus the Persian in a bloodless takeover in 538 BCE and thereafter ceased to play an independent role in ancient politics.

In the Bible, Babylon plays a dual role, positively as the setting for a potentially creative diaspora, negatively as a metaphor for certain forms of degeneracy. The 'Babylonian exile' imposed by Nebuchadrezzar on the Judeans removed the centre of Jewish life to Babylon for fifty or sixty years, if not the seventy predicted by the prophet Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 29.10). The Bible also reflects a negative view of Babylon. Already in the primeval history, the tower of Babel (Genesis 11.1-11.9) uses the traditional ziggurat present in each city of Sumer as a metaphor for the excesses of human ambition that led to, and accounted for, the confusion of tongues and dispersion of peoples. In the Book of Daniel Babylon plays a crucial role, as two of the main characters are Daniel and Nebuchadrezzar. As pointed out above, the Book of Daniel has been dated with precision by biblical scholars as being the latest of all the books of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. This dating has been made possible by internal evidence found in chapters 10-12, in which a review of the political maelstrom of ancient Near Eastern politics swirling around the tiny Judean community accurately portrays history from the rise of the Persian Empire down to a time somewhat after the desecration of the Jerusalem Temple. The portrayal of the historical situation is expressed as prophecy about the future course of events, given by a seer called Daniel in Babylonian captivity; however, the prevailing scholarly opinion is that this is mostly prophecy after the fact.⁶¹

survives almost complete. There is no evidence that Hammurapi's laws ever came into force, perhaps because his son Samsu-iluna issued his own edict soon afterward. Nevertheless, scribes continued to copy them until at least the sixth century BCE. Thus, Hammurapi's laws are a series of regulations for various circumstances, not a comprehensive code. A strong emphasis is laid on property rights and the king's claim to decree justice to protect the weak from the oppression of the strong. It is evident from laws providing for members of society who lost the protection of father or husband. Comparing Hammurapi's laws with biblical laws shows striking similarities and strong contrasts. Babylonian law can prescribe physical penalties including execution in a variety of cases involving property (forms of theft), whereas biblical laws reserve such punishment for offences against the person, and then with careful restrictions, placing a special value on human life. Hammurapi did not pretend to give a complete code of laws, so there are no general apodictic commands like "You shall not kill." Hammurapi's laws remain the most extensive surviving statement of the principles for a just and orderly society, and of the king's role in it as shepherd of his people. See the entry on 'Hammurapi' in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, pp. 168-169.

⁶¹ One of the peculiarities of the Book of Daniel is its bilingual character. The artful arrangement of the diverse subject matter of the book into a coherent whole might suggest a single redaction, if not a single

In “Babylon”, Bringham shows indebtedness to biblical stories, particularly to the Book of Daniel. He handles his sources in Daniel 4 and 5 with intelligence and discretion, so that the allusions to the biblical original are masterfully threaded into the fabric of his own composition. The focus is on the story of Babylonian captivity, particularly on three important biblical figures: Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar, and Belshazzar. The poem consists of at least five movements for the mind, as we shall try to demonstrate in the following critical analysis. The poem becomes a prodigious palimpsest beneath which it is possible to identify the exact passages in the Book of Daniel that served as the source of inspiration for a poet who still believes that the Bible is too central a book to the Western canon as to be absolutely dispensable for the modern creator. The Western literary tradition is vast and ambitious, and so is the commitment of Bringham to producing a memorable contribution to great poetry. “Babylon” opens with two short stanzas that present the characters in the story recounted by the Book of Daniel:

Two equations:

Daniel: a shrewd second-level
politician, or, in the argot, a tamer
of lions. Nebuchadnezzar: a dreamer.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego
saw no evil, heard no evil, spoke no evil, burned.

B, p. 62.

Daniel was a pious and wise Jewish youth who was deported to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar (spelled Nebuchadnezzar in the Book of Daniel), together with his three young friends (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego), the royal household, and other prominent citizens. Daniel was a legendary figure, represented in this book as a youth of outstanding wisdom and piety who, in the second part of the Book of Daniel, matures into a seer capable of receiving visions of the future⁶². Upon attentively reading the Book of

author. But the problem is further complicated by the circumstance that the Book of Daniel is written in two languages, Hebrew and Aramaic. Scholars claim that there might have been at least two authors involved in the process of composition, or, alternatively, that one single author moved freely from one language to another with a naturalness and fluency which was not rare at a time when Aramaic was widely spoken by many people for daily interaction. The strongest arguments for multiple authorship are these. First, the literary style of chapters 1-6 differs radically from that of chapters 7-12. The former have all the flavour of heroic tales of the kind that would emanate from courtly or wisdom circles; the latter chapters belong to that late descendant of prophetic eschatology, apocalyptic literature. Second, the stories about Daniel in chapters 1-6 reflect a diaspora outlook. By their language and their knowledge of cultural details, they show considerable exposure to both Persian and Hellenistic influences. In their essentials, these stories are assumed to come from the third century BCE or even somewhat earlier. The apocalypses of Daniel 7-12, on the other hand, focus on Judah, Jerusalem, and the sanctuary. But composite authorship is not the only possible solution. For centuries, Aramaic, a linguistic cousin to Hebrew and possibly even the language of the ancestral period (see Genesis 31.47 and Deuteronomy 26.5), was the *lingua franca* of the Babylonian and Persian empires, and it continued in use throughout the Hellenistic period in Palestine. Jews knew it well and used it freely. Perhaps a single writer of Daniel freely moved from Hebrew to Aramaic for no reason other than to tell the stories of the Babylonian diaspora in the language that was in fact being used there at the time. On the other hand, one of the most frequently offered explanations of the bilingual character of Daniel is that the entire book was originally written in Aramaic, and that 1.1-2.4a and chapters 8-12 were later translated into Hebrew. To sum up, with the possible exception of minor glosses, the book reached its present canonical form approximately in the middle of 164 BCE, though the translation of 1.1-2.4a and chapters 8-12 into Hebrew may have taken place later. See the entry on ‘Daniel, the Book of’ in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* for further details.

⁶² Early in the Book of Daniel (1.17), the youth is presented in this light: “God gave them [Daniel and his three friends] knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.”

Daniel, we find out that Bringhurst's fundamental source of inspiration for his poem was the first part of the biblical book. The structure of the book is simple enough and straightforward, as it consists of two distinct parts. The former (chapters 1-6) comprises six tales from the Babylonian exile, whereas the latter (chapters 7-12) is about the apocalyptic visions and prayer of Daniel.⁶³ In some sense, the book records both the external and the internal history of Daniel, the former consisting of the stories of his virtuous deeds and wonders, and the latter his visionary experiences and revelations regarding the future of the world. Of course, the apocalyptic dreams and visions of the latter part of the book are not completely ignored by Bringhurst; they are somehow evoked at several points in his poem.

Bringhurst's poem begins *in medias res* as it were; certain knowledge of the biblical story of Daniel on the part of the reader is presupposed or taken for granted. To understand the meaning of the two equations formulated at the beginning of the poem, it is essential to read the Book of Daniel carefully, at least a couple of times. Daniel is characterized as being 'a shrewd second-level politician', which is a reference to the fact that he was made "ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief of the governors over all the wise men of Babylon" (Daniel, 2.49), after he had successfully interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream to the king's satisfaction. He is also characterized as 'a tamer of lions', which is again clearly a reference to chapter 6 of the Book of Daniel, in which the visionary man is locked in a cave full of lions. By virtue of Daniel's unwavering loyalty and solid faith, God sends an angel to tame the lions and save his life. On the other hand, Nebuchadnezzar is characterized as being 'a dreamer'. At least two distinct dreams dreamt by the king are recounted in the Book of Daniel. Chapter 2 tells the story of a strange dream envisioned while in bed by the king and the inability of all the wise men of his kingdom to guess and interpret the subject matter of his troubling vision. It is Daniel, the visionary man, who manages to see into the king's vision (Daniel 2.31-2.36) and to interpret it correctly thanks to the intercession of his God (Daniel 2.37-2.45).⁶⁴ In his dream the king beholds a colossal statue made of precious metals which finally comes down to dust blown by the wind and to nothingness. The ultimate message behind Daniel's interpretation is that all human kingdoms on earth (including Nebuchadnezzar's and his descendants) are temporary at best and that only the omnipotent God of Heaven will set up an everlasting kingdom that will never be destroyed and will break all other ephemeral kingdoms into pieces (Daniel 2.44). The second dream is recounted in chapter 4, which is central to the first part of the Book of Daniel. We will return to the second dream later in our discussion below.

⁶³ This is the structure of the Book of Daniel: A. First part (six tales from the Babylonian exile): chapter 1 – Daniel and his friends at the table of the king; chapter 2 – Daniel interprets the king's dream of the colossal statue; chapter 3 – three young men in the fiery furnace; chapter 4 – Nebuchadnezzar's madness; chapter 5 – the handwriting on the wall; chapter 6 – Daniel in the lion's den. B. Second part (apocalyptic visions and Daniel's prayer): chapter 7 – the vision of "the one like a son of man"; chapter 8 – the vision of the ram and the he-goat; chapter 9 – Daniel's prayer and the meaning of the seventy years of "the devastation of Jerusalem"; chapters 10-12 – the final vision and the promise of resurrection. See the entry on 'Daniel, the Book of' in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, pp. 149-152.

⁶⁴ Daniel 2.31-2.36 reads as follows: "Thou, O king, sawest, and behold a great image. This great image, whose brightness was excellent, stood before thee; and the form thereof was terrible. This image's head was of in gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass, his legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay. Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces. Then was the iron, the clay, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing-floors; and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them: and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth. This is the dream; and we will tell the interpretation thereof before the king."

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, Daniel's loyal friends, play a secondary role in the story in the book and in Bringhurst's poetic rendering of the biblical stories, although chapter 3 is completely devoted to their sacrifice and the miraculous intervention of their God to save them from the consuming flames of a fire. Daniel 3.17-3.27 tells the story of the sacrifice of the three friends and their unexpected salvation through God's intercession. King Nebuchadnezzar has built a colossal image of gold and all his subjects are ordered to fall down and worship the golden image that he has set up (Dan. 3.5). As the three young men refuse to kneel down before an idol and sin of idolatry, the king commands that they be bound with ropes and cast into a "burning fiery furnace" (Dan. 3.20). However, to Nebuchadnezzar's surprise, he sees "four men loose in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God" (Dan. 3.25). The king and his court witness how these three men "upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them" (Dan. 3.27) come out of the furnace completely unscathed. Following Pound's dictum that *Dichtung = condensare*, the whole story is evoked or condensed in just two lines in Bringhurst's poem: "*Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego / saw no evil, heard no evil, spoke no evil, burned.*" Unlike Daniel, the three young men had no visionary power, no prophetic capacity for seeing the future, but they were loyal servants of God, who saved their lives when they needed him most. The lyrical intensity of the moment is underlined in Bringhurst's poem through repetition and parallelism. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego simply burned in the fiery furnace and God did the rest to save their precious lives.

Let us now return to the second dream of Nebuchadnezzar, which is recounted in chapter 4 of the Book of Daniel. The second movement of "Babylon" explores the king's visions and Daniel's impressive capacity for interpreting such ethereal entities as dreams:

But Daniel discovered what Nebuchadnezzar
 never quite knew: that the gods have clay feet
 like trees, rooted in darkness, with ore
 in their ankles: the gods are affected by weather,
 groundwater, borers, pulp-mills, disease.
 The gods do not hang from blue air by their branches.

Daniel walked into the flame and the flame took
 Daniel's faces and Daniel's limbs
 and the fire walked out of the furnace wearing
 Daniel's soft Babylonian shoes
 and collapsed, leaving Daniel's tracks in the ashes

and Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar backed down.

B, p. 62.

It might be instructive, if only for the sake of comparison, to quote in full Daniel 4.10-4.17, which tells the story of the second strange dream – the direct source of Bringhurst's stanzas – and to see what knowledge might be gained from the juxtaposition of both texts:

I saw, and behold a tree in the midst of the earth, and the height thereof was great. The tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the earth: The leaves thereof were fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it was meat for all: the beasts of the field had shadow under it, and the fowls of the heaven dwelt in the boughs thereof, and all flesh was fed of it. I saw in the visions of my head upon my head, and, behold, a watcher and an holy one came down from heaven; He cried aloud, and said thus, Hew down the tree, and cut

off his branches, shake off his leaves, and scatter his fruit: let the beasts get away from under it, and the fowls from his branches: Nevertheless leave the stump of his roots in the earth, even with a band of iron and brass, in the tender grass of the field; and let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth: Let his heart be changed from man's, and let a beast's heart be given unto him; and let seven times pass over him. This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones: to the intent that the living may know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men.

Daniel interprets the king's dream as being premonitory of his imminent fall from power and madness. In Daniel 4.18-4.27 is the whole interpretation in full. The majestic tree he sees in his dream is the king himself, a strong king whose dominion reaches to the end of the earth (Dan. 4.22). The core of the interpretation is summarized in just a handful of resonant words in Daniel 4.25: "That they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and they shall make thee to eat grass as oxen, and they shall wet thee with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over thee, till thou know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will." One year later, "there fell a voice from heaven" (Dan. 4.31) and the prophecy was fulfilled: Nebuchadnezzar was "driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws." (Dan. 4.33) After a period of transitory madness, his understanding returned to him (Dan. 4.34), as he learnt the lesson that only God is the ultimate legislator of the world.

In Bringhurst's rendering of the biblical dream, the focus of the interpretation is not on the merely prophetic dimension inherent in the dream. The focus is on a truer apprehension of the nature of gods instead. Knowledge of the essence of reality begins with the fundamental gesture of paying attention to the surrounding world. Like Moses or Mohammed in "A Study for an Ecumenical Window", truly attentive observers of the universe, Daniel comes to the realization that the gods are inextricably linked to the mutability of the world. Daniel is a visionary man, not in the sense that he is capable of seeing the future, but rather in the sense that he is able to see into the essence of things. Nebuchadnezzar is a naïve king by comparison. He appears to come to the conclusion that "*gods have clay feet / like trees*" and that "*gods are affected by weather*", as if they were a telluric emanation from the earth itself, as well as a human creation after all. It is inevitable to feel that the two stanzas quoted above have a mysterious halo around them; upon a closer scrutiny of their words, the meaning remains fundamentally unclear. The incantatory rhythm produced by lexical repetition and parallelism evoke something of the awe-inspiring effect Daniel's interpretation of the king's dreams must have had for Nebuchadnezzar. The visionary man is able to touch the fire without being hurt; what is more, he enters the furnace and becomes the fire itself, but he does not consume himself amid the fiery flames. Nebuchadnezzar "backed down", was astonished to see the way Daniel saw into his dreams and interpreted them with such ease and confidence. It comes as no surprise then that the king is portrayed as a naïve enthusiastic dreamer, and Daniel as a lion-tamer, a shrewd politician who knew how to take advantage of his cunning and prophetic skills.

Belshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar's son and successor, is the protagonist of the third movement in Bringhurst's poem, which recounts the story of chapter 5 in the Book of Daniel, in which the king is admonished of the perils of profanation and of the passing of worldly glory and ambition. The language of this stanza is essentially colloquial, in contrast with the visionary and intensely lyrical language of the two previous stanzas:

Belshazzar, whoever he was, had neither
the dreams nor the cunning. Belshazzar simply
went mad one evening, watching a waiter
toting up his tips beside the candlestick, or some ass
scrawling his theory of proportion in the plaster.

B, p. 63.

In the opening lines, Belshazzar is said to have “*neither / the dreams*” of his father “*nor the cunning*” of Daniel; he is rather portrayed as being a simpleton. The rest of the stanza evokes Daniel 5.1-5.5: Belshazzar made a great feast and he “commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem” (Dan. 5.2) for everyone to drink from them. They drank wine and praised all the pagan gods “of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone” (Dan. 5.4). Exactly at that point in time “came forth fingers of a man’s hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaster of the wall of the king’s palace” (Dan. 5.5). Like Nebuchadnezzar before him, Belshazzar beseeched Daniel to interpret the meaning of the strange handwriting on the wall. Once again, the visionary man interpreted it as being an admonition on God’s part to humble his king’s heart in front of His omnipotence (Dan. 5.22), as a reminder of the vanity of worldly glory, and as a prophecy of his own fall from power and death. Daniel 5.26-5.28 interprets the writing as meaning that his kingdom is about to be “given to the Medes and Persians”. According to Daniel 5.30-31, Belshazzar was slain at night and Darius the Median took the kingdom. In Bringhurst’s rendering the king goes mad and misinterprets reality as he sees a waiter carrying his tips beside a candlestick or someone “*scrawling his theory of proportion in the plaster.*”

The fourth movement of “Babylon” is concerned with the fate or destiny of the biblical characters. In Daniel 4.33 we learn that Nebuchadnezzar was “driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles’ feathers, and his nails like birds’ claws.” In Bringhurst’s poem this passage becomes two terse verse lines: “Nebuchadnezzar’s hair turned to feathers / and he died, clawing the kiln-dried lions.” The lions are the ones Daniel spent a night with in the famous cave. Belshazzar “died watching the plaster”, or rather assassinated by his enemies, the Persians, in the middle of the night (Dan. 5.30). Daniel became a visionary, a seer, and a bard, as can be seen from the second part of the Book of Daniel (chapters 7-12), which are entirely devoted to his apocalyptic visions and prophecies about the future course of events in history. Daniel “*learned to dream in the end, groping for handholds / in the sunlight, fissures in the wind, watching / mountangoats climbing the cracked air.*” (B, p. 63) Daniel, the shrewd youth of chapters 1-6 has now turned into the dreamer Nebuchadnezzar was in chapters 1 and 4 of the Book of Daniel. Everywhere he turns to look he finds evidence that there is some kind of grand blueprint or design beneath reality, perhaps signs of God’s grandeur, even in the sunlight and in the impalpable fissures of the wind and the cracked air. But too much of this is fatal for him; he is in desperate need of handholds to help him going. In this respect, the reference to the mountain-goats is from chapter 8, which is about the vision of the ram and the he-goat.

The fifth and last movement of “Babylon” is a sort of *denouement*. Now a constellation of celebrated men from antiquity is summoned up to bring the poem to an accomplished completion. Alexander the Great, who had conquered Babylon in 330 BC also died “there” seven years later, in 323 BC, at the age of only 33 and after having built an impressive empire. He was probably dreaming of the glory of the great Nebuchadnezzar. But none of the characters mentioned in the poem survive; everything is

ephemeral, even the fame of such giants as Alexander or Nebuchadnezzar, such visionary men as Daniel and his three friends. *Ubi sunt?* All of them are gone with the wind, their achievements confined to History textbooks, to dusty library shelves, or to the forgotten annals of history. Not the feathers, not the footprints, not the fire (notice the alliteration), “*What remains is Belshazzar: not the plaster / but the eyes: the milk-white / eyes of Belshazzar.*” (B, p. 63) A minor character when compared to the glory and achievements of his father, the great Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar turns out to be the one who embodies the most potent poetic resonance in Bringham’s mind. The plaster on which he saw God’s writing prophesying his own fall from power and death is gone, but the eyes, shocked with fear while reading those lines, somehow remain alive. Thus Daniel 5.25-5.28:

And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God has numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.

III

Deuteronomy

“Deuteronomy”⁶⁵ is arguably one of the indisputable early masterpieces in Bringham’s literary output, an enduring long poem written as a response to his reading of the Bible at that time, and the first of his well-wrought dramatic monologues. It was first published as a limited-edition seven-page chapbook by the Sono Nis Press, Delta, British Columbia, in 1974 and, shortly afterwards, in *The University of Windsor Review* 10.2 (Spring/Summer 1975): 39-43, along with “Empedokles’ Recipes”. In 1975 it was republished in part III of *Bergschrund*, an early landmark collection in Bringham’s literary career, alongside other impressive shorter biblical pieces like “An Augury”, “Genesis Frozen”, “Essay on Adam”, “Patrimony” and “Babylon”. There were two more biblical pieces somewhat scattered in the same book, though they were not included under the same section, namely “A Study for an Ecumenical Window”, a meditative piece on the similarities holding between Moses and Mohammed (Bringham was reading the Koran at that time as well), and “Ararat”, the closing piece in the poetry collection, dealing with the biblical narrative of Noah and the Flood. Subsequently, “Deuteronomy” was republished once more in *The Beauty of the Weapons: Selected Poems 1972-82* (1982), under a section entitled “Deuteronomy (1974-1975)”, together with “An Augury” and “Essay on Adam”; in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), under a section also entitled “Deuteronomy”, together with “Jacob Singing”, “An Augury” and “Essay on Adam”; and, quite recently, in *Selected Poems* (2009), under a section also entitled “Deuteronomy” including all four poems once again.

Over a long period of time the poem has undergone revision and slight modifications with every republication. The editorial history of the poem is worth bearing in mind when we come to a stanza-by-stanza exegesis of the poem below, and so the textual variants are recorded in smaller type in square brackets at the end of those verse lines that have changed with the passing of time. Bringham’s method of composition and the fact that he revises his poems time and again is inextricably linked to his conception of his whole *oeuvre* as a sort of living organism. As a matter of fact, his whole literary output

⁶⁵ A.3 •• *Deuteronomy*. Vancouver: Sono Nis Press, 1974. Chapbook, 8 p. Paper, 14.5 × 23 cm. “This first edition is limited to 150 copies.” Contents: A poem (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.6, A.14, B.10, B.13, B.18, B.36, C.24; rev. in A.47, B.69, A.92).

seems to constitute a changing repertoire, alive not just typographically speaking as a perfect arrangement of words on the page, but also alive in the poet's voice in his public poetry readings, which are truly poetic performances. So Bringham's poem has inevitably changed over time: it has been revised with every re-publication, and it has been perfected and polished up in every new book or material incarnation. In his view, a poem is never finished for good; it is just a transitory stage in what looks like a process of perennial metamorphosis.

That the Bible was an important book in Bringham's early poetry seems to be an obvious and self-evident fact. There is an explicit concern with the Bible as a literary text, central to the Western canon and tradition, and as an inexhaustible source of inspiration not only for poems like *Deuteronomy* (1974) and the already mentioned biblical pieces⁶⁶ in *Bergschrund* (1975), but also for the subsequent dramatic monologue entitled *Jacob Singing* (1977), a long poem concerned with exploring another decisive figure among the ancestors of ancient Israel. However, while still cultivating the dramatic monologue in the tradition of Robert Browning, Bringham turns to something else with the publication of *The Stonecutter's Horses* (1979) – to Petrarch and fourteenth-century Italy, namely a central author and a central period in the Western tradition as well. Probably the pertinent questions to ask here are: Why was *the book of books* central to the poet's early poetry written in the 1970s? And what kind of inspiration did he find in the Bible? In a recent conversation with the author, Bringham elaborated on the significance of the Bible in relation to his early poetry in these terms:

I did not grow up in a religious household, so the Bible was always just a book. I never had to find my way out from under the great heavy Bible that so many people had dropped on them as children. But it's a very peculiar book, don't you think? I mean, all these layers of editing and all these many different voices that have become mostly separated from the name of the author, which the author braided together in this very peculiar way, stories told from different points of view... It's peculiar, and it seems more and more quaint now because so much of the religious infrastructure of Western civilization has sort of crumbled away. But when I was a young man, I just saw this as a part of the tradition that I should get acquainted with and, in some sense, I made myself responsible for it. I never took it as anything other than an anthology of curious texts. But, of course, the fact that it had been, and was still to some people, a sacred scripture meant that I would read it differently than I might read a novel by Ernest Hemingway, say. Well, I just found in the Bible what I could. There were large parts of the Bible in which I found very little and others which I found in some respects fascinating – the stories that you find in the Book of Genesis, for example.

The world has changed a great deal in my lifetime. Whereas people thirty years ago would routinely recognize a Biblical allusion if you made one, now you might as well have made a reference to some sort of obscure Sanskrit text because no one has an idea what you're talking about. This doesn't trouble me very much because the Bible in a sense has never been very important to me, but I understood it once upon a time to be important to my civilization and important to other people who lived in the same world that I did, and so I thought I should know something about it. Just as a consequence of sitting down to read it, I wrote some poems which were responses to what I had read – my way of trying to come to grips with this peculiar piece of the tradition. Would I do it again now? Maybe not. If I were a young writer now, I might think that the Bible is something that I could just ignore, forget about. I read the *Koran*, you know, at the same time of my life and I found much less there. Buddhism

⁶⁶ "An Augury", "Genesis Frozen", "Essay on Adam", "Patrimony" and "Babylon" (Part III), and "Study for an Ecumenical Window" (previously published in *Cadastre*, in 1973) and "Ararat" (Part V).

for me is not interesting as a religion but as a philosophical tradition, so it isn't actually the Buddhist scriptures that I have spent time reading, but the poems and meditations of thinkers in that tradition. But I didn't approach the Christian tradition in that way. I didn't sit down and read the Church Fathers or the dreams of Christian theologians. I'm almost completely ignorant of that literature. So it's an accident, in some sense, of the time and place where I was born.⁶⁷

There are possibly several reasons that may partly account for Bringham's fascination with the Bible. First, there was the question of tradition. He approached the Bible not as the sacred scripture it was for other people, but rather as a peculiar literary text central to the tradition into which he was trying to fit his own work. So there is a powerful sense in which the Bible was an inescapable text in Bringham's ambitious literary enterprise. Northrop Frye, an author to whom the poet has devoted much time and thought, wrote one of the most provocative books on the Bible and its bearings on Western literature, *The Great Code*. Secondly, what attracted the poet's attention to the Bible was that it still remained an evocative multilayered literary text, displaying a complex design and comprising a handful of peculiar stories about the Hebrews, precisely because it had been a long time in the making (in this sense it reminds us of Bringham's own method of composition and revision of his own poems). Literarily, from a purely formal point of view, it was a most curious book, uniting multiple strands, which had been a long time in the making and which was the result of a cooperative enterprise. The Bible as we know it nowadays is the product of a collective effort and a of complex process of revision and compilation in which numerous minds have been involved for over several centuries. Some theories suggest that the Bible was much of an oral enterprise at root, rather than an essentially literary monument fulfilling an initial blueprint or grand design. This oral dimension inherent in the Bible must have been truly appealing to Bringham, a poet most interested in orality and in the transmission process of oral literature, as well as in organic structures like those found in Native American stories. The biblical stories have much in common with these early manifestations of the oral literatures created on the American continent a great many centuries later.

Thirdly, the Bible is concerned with the origins of a people and with Israel's ancestors, with the notion that time is somewhat a fluid matter out of which the events in the history of humanity are made. Some of the stories about Israel's past history and ancestors told in the Bible were being composed at the same time as ancient Greece witnessed the emergence of philosophy in the hands of the Pre-Socratics, another source of inspiration for a 12-part sequence entitled *The Old in Their Knowing*, central to Bringham's poetry. And, what is more, the Bible offered the young poet an opportunity to listen to ancient voices from a different latitude and time, with a distinctive rhythm and music, with certain prosodic patterns, and with specific thematic concerns, all of which gave him a chance to polish up his own poetic language and to enlarge his own panorama of universal literature, which comprised disparate elements from a number of traditions set wide apart in space and time. In any case, these poems are the work of a poet of omnivorous curiosity, investigating the literary achievements of the past masters, in search of his own personal voice, which turns out to be already a distinctive and powerful one early in the beginnings of his literary career. So, stylistically, in these early biblical poems he seems to make use of such linguistic strategies as repetition, parallelism, tautology and paradox, which are strongly reminiscent of biblical language.

⁶⁷ From an unpublished interview conducted and taped on a digital voice recorder at the *Facultad de Filosofía y Letras* (Córdoba) on 7th April 2010.



The title of Bringhurst's poem is lifted from Deuteronomy, one of the five books comprising the Pentateuch (a word of Greek origin meaning precisely 'five-volumed book') in the Bible. It seems a tantalizing idea to claim that "Deuteronomy" is a perfect illustration of Pound's notion of *Dichtung* = *condensare*, or, to put it differently, poetry meant to condense diverse, disparate materials from an invaluable tradition into an original work of one's own making. In this particular case, for this long dramatic monologue the poet has drawn on several biblical materials, and more specifically on the first five books of the Bible comprised in the Pentateuch – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Bringhurst has lifted materials mostly from Exodus and Deuteronomy, and has shaped them into an original long poem which turns out to be a dramatic monologue spoken by Moses, a central character in the stories braided into an effective, organic whole in the Old Testament. For a proper understanding of Bringhurst's accomplishment in producing this enduring poem, it might be worthwhile the effort to provide some useful background information for a rigorous exegesis of the composition. For all these preliminary data regarding the biblical books which have served as an indisputable of inspiration for the poet and which will help us elucidate the meaning of each single detail of Moses' story in the poem, we are indebted to an invaluable reference book – *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Cougan, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.⁶⁸

Bringhurst acknowledges the fact that there were many parts from the Bible (probably from the New Testament) from which he could not draw much inspiration for his own poetry. However, he does mention the Book of Genesis as having been an inexhaustible source of ideas and materials for his early poems. The Pentateuch as a whole has proved to be one of those nourishing parts from the Bible for the poet's enterprise, as can be seen from the many poems that the author has written on episodes related in the opening five books of the Old Testament. Much of the overall impression of firm coherence of the Pentateuch stems from the fact that the last four books seem to be concerned with a central figure in Israel's history – that of Moses. However, despite this thematic unity, it is wrong to consider the whole sequence as primarily a biography of Moses' life and deeds, even if Exodus 2 deals with his birth, Deuteronomy 34 deals with his death, and a long stretch in between deals with the story of his life as spiritual guide of the Israelites. As a consistent literary entity, the Pentateuchal materials⁶⁹ constitute a narrative of Israel's ancestors.

⁶⁸ For the critical analysis of this particular complex poem, we have consulted innumerable entries from *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, more specifically the entries on *Pentateuch* (pp. 579-582), *Exodus* (pp. 209-212), *Book of Exodus* (pp. 212-216), *Passover* (pp. 571-573), *Moses* (pp. 528-531), *Plagues of Egypt* (pp. 595-596), *Red Sea* (644-645), *Manna* (p. 486), *Ten Commandments* (pp. 736-738), *Tabernacle* (pp. 729-730), *Law* (pp. 421-423), *Mount Horeb* (p. 290), *Abraham* (pp. 4-5), *Ancestors* (pp. 26-27), *Aaron* (p. 3), *Idolatry* (pp. 297-298), *Graven Image* (pp. 261-262), *Promised Land* (pp. 619-620), *Book of Deuteronomy* (pp. 164-168), *Deuteronomical History* (163-164), and *Mount Nebo* (p. 552). Of course, we have also read the primary sources, i.e. all five books comprised in the Pentateuch in *King James Bible* version, from which all the direct quotations in our dissertation have been lifted.

⁶⁹ As for the origins and date of composition of the five books in the Pentateuch, it remains an anonymous work to this date. It was the outcome of a long process of compilation of various documents from different periods in Israelite history. "The oldest written source of the Pentateuch was the document J (so-called from its author, the Jahwist or Yahwist, who used the name Yahweh for God) from the ninth century BCE. The E document (from the Elohist, who employed the Hebrew term *elohim* for God) came from the eighth century, and the J and E sources were combined by an editor in the mid-seventh century. The book of Deuteronomy, a separate source dating from 621 BCE, was added to the JE material in the mid-sixth century. The final major source, the Priestly work (P), was combined with the earlier sources about 400 BCE. The Pentateuch as

The Pentateuchal sequence recounts Israel's ancient history in the form of a long narrative encompassing a huge time-span running from the creation of the entire universe (the cosmogony in Genesis) to Moses' death on the other side of the River Jordan before the entry of the Israelites into the Promised Land (at the end of Deuteronomy). Law is of paramount importance throughout the whole sequence, but the Pentateuch is not intended to be read as a handful of law books, but rather as offering illuminating insights into the nature of Israel's God, the relationship of Israel to him, and the ethical values appropriate to a freed, healthy life in relationship to their Lord. More specifically, there are five essential themes or organizing ideas around which the total material of the Pentateuch had gradually gathered: the promise of the ancestors (the forebears' origins and divine election), the ancestors' descent into Egypt and their subsequent Exodus from Egypt, Moses' guidance in the wilderness, the giving of the law, the entry of the people into the Promised Land. The starting point for the unfolding of the Pentateuch is to be found in the divine promise to Abraham at Genesis 12.1-12.3.⁷⁰

On another level, the whole structure of the five-book sequence is shaped by a promise to one of Israel's ancestors (Abraham) that consists of three fundamental elements: 1/ the theme of posterity is plainly the theme of Genesis (Israel will become a great nation); 2/ the divine-human relationship comes most strongly to expression in Exodus and Leviticus (God's blessings upon the Israelites and their tacit covenant); and 3/ the gift of a Promised Land dominates Numbers and Deuteronomy (there is a land hyperbolically described at different points in the Pentateuch awaiting the chosen people of God). The fulfilment or partial non-fulfilment of this primeval promise to Abraham is the central theme of the Pentateuch. All these three elements of the original promise are present in Bringham's poetic rendering of Moses' story, but the emphasis is rather laid, on the one hand, on divine-human relationships as the poet recreates the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness through vivid images and intensely lyrical language (hence the Book of Exodus is probably the major source of inspiration for the poet's dramatic monologue), and, on the other hand, on the gift of a Promised Land which resists being found and is hovering like a mirage somewhere a step beyond over the horizon. But, of course, it all does make sense because of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis, which is somehow lingering in the background.

Whereas the narrative of Genesis 12-50 is concerned with Yahweh's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob of progeny and land, the narrative of the book of Exodus is concerned with various dimensions of the fulfilment of that promise. From a formal and literary point of view, the book of Exodus is mostly prose, expressed as straightforward narrative, as lists of laws in apodictic (universal) or casuistic (specific case) form, or as instructions related in one way or another to worship. However, there is one important section (15;1b-18.21) which takes the form of poetry, and there is one three-line poetic stanza at 32.18. The disparity in content is even greater than that found in form. Alongside narratives about the rise of a new dynasty in Egypt after Joseph's death are narratives of the

we know it thus came into existence no earlier than the end of the fifth century BCE." See *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Cougan, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 580. "Other researches on the process of literary composition as disclosed by the present shape of the Pentateuch have suggested that we should envisage individual authors creating large blocks of its material rather than editors interweaving a number of narrative strands, as the documentary theory supposed." (p. 581)

⁷⁰ "Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed."

Pharaoh's intransigence and of Israel's oppression under the Egyptians, as well as narratives of Moses' birth and growth to maturity, his flight to Midian, his first theophany on Mount Horeb, his return to Egypt to fulfil Yahweh's commission to set his people free, the narrative of the plagues meant as a punishment for the Egyptians, the event of Exodus and deliverance at the Red Sea, the subsequent wanderings in the wilderness to Sinai, Yahweh's rescue and provision, Israel's experience of Yahweh's advent (the revelation of the Ten Commandments and the gift of the covenant relationship), special instructions regarding worship, the rebellious golden calf episode, and God's subsequent punishment and mercy (the renewal of the covenant). All these quite different stories and sequences are set into a loose geographical and chronological framework. For roughly the first third of the Book of Exodus, the setting is Egypt (1.1-13.16). For the next five chapters, the setting is the wilderness en route to Sinai (13.17-18.27). And for just over the second half of the book, as also for Leviticus and nearly the first third of Numbers (through Numbers 10.11), the setting is the plain before Mount Sinai (19.1-40.38)



Upon first reading "Deuteronomy", we get to hear the distinct first-person poetic voice of Moses in Bringham's extended dramatic monologue. In giving voice to the thoughts and feelings of a mythical figure like Moses, a central one in the Bible, Bringham is following closely Robert Browning's tradition. The dramatic monologue is an invaluable means by which the poet can attain a sophisticated degree of Eliotian impersonality – poetry is not narcissistic self-expression or subjective emotion, but rather a mode of exploring realities other than the self. The result is simply astonishing. Even if the poet strives after impersonality, the poem displays an overwhelming and impressive personality: Moses' complex reality as a spiritual leader and intermediary between God and the Israelites. Reading the poem we feel that we are in the presence of something truly sublime, as Bringham manages to give voice to one of Israel's ancestors convincingly through a masterful use of poetic language. Contrary to all expectations, the language is not convoluted or rhetorical in any way, but simple, of crystal-clear clarity instead. At times it verges on the cadences of colloquial speech or conversational language – that used for everyday life communicative transactions. The syntax, the way the words have been arranged to convey Moses' message, has got something of a matter-of-fact quality, a passionate quiet, and a mental accuracy that seeks to convey with absolute precision what Moses goes through in his personal exodus or odyssey. It is no happy coincidence that the history of Western literature is, in fact, full of such odysseys and journeys somewhere. Homer's poem, a foundational text, is probably the first instance in a long, probably never-ending, sequence.

The indisputable protagonist of Bringham's version is thus Moses, who looks like a true a flesh-and-blood man endowed with charisma and a discerning mind. Throughout the eight stanzas of the poem (or 'movements for the mind') we learn of how he experienced his first encounter with God, he manages to take the Hebrews out of the Egyptian bondage (Exodus) after the ten plagues, spends forty years with them in the wilderness, provides them with drinking water and manna and the occasional quail, acts as an intermediary between the Law and the Israelites in giving them the Law, encourages his people to keep on walking despite the tiredness, arrives in the Promised Land and sees it far away in the distance, only to die just before the entry into Canaan. But let us turn to the beginning of the story. Who was Moses? Why did God choose him to be the spiritual guide of the Hebrews and to guide them across the wilderness into the Promised Land? What are the essential story lines in the grand design of his life?

Moses is the consummate human being and the appropriate founder of the theocratic state, the central figure in Israel's formative period. As pointed out above, much of the four books following Genesis in the Pentateuch seem to be conceived as being a biography of Moses.⁷¹ Exodus 2 reports the story of his birth and Deuteronomy 34 relates his death on the eve of the Hebrews' entry into the Promised Land. Between both capital events, materials from Exodus to Deuteronomy recount many episodes about his life and work as primary leader of the Israelites in their Exodus from Egypt and during their forty-year wanderings in the wilderness. He is presented throughout as mediator of the law between God and his chosen people. Exodus 6.18-6.20 explains his humble origins and how he was born as the younger of the two sons of a Levite couple, Amram and Jochebed, during the Hebrews' oppression in Egypt. He was hidden away to avoid slaughter at the Pharaoh's hands and placed in a basket amid the reeds of the Nile. Discovered by the Pharaoh's daughter quite by chance in the river, she had pity on him and Moses was raised as her own son. Moses was nursed by his own mother thanks to the intervention of his older sister, Miriam. When he became a young adult, he killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. As the news of his deed spread, he had to leave the country to save his life. He took refuge in Midian, where she married Zipporah, who gave him two sons.

Now, Bringham's poem starts somehow *in medias res*. Knowledge of all this background information is taken for granted. The first stanza of "Deuteronomy" opens in a straightforward, simple manner, somewhat reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's style. Textual variations with respect to the earlier versions in *Deuteronomy* (1974), *Bergschrund* (1975) and *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982) are shown in smaller type in square brackets:

The bush. Yes. It burned like they say it did. [instead of . + capital letter in *B & BW*]
Lit up like an oak in October – except
 that there is no October in Egypt. Voices
 came at me and told me to take off my shoes, [new comma here]
 and I did that. That desert is full of men's shoes.
 And the flame screamed, *I am what I am.* [new comma here]
I am whatever it is that is me,
and nothing can but something needs to be
done about it. If anyone asks ["If anyone/asks," in *B & BW*]
all you can say is, What is is what sent me. ["all you can say is, I sent me" in *B & BW*]

This first stanza deals with Moses' story as recounted in Exodus 3.1-4.17, which is the story of his first theophany. God reveals himself directly to Moses amid the utter solitude of the desert, a land where such encounters are not uncommon. While he was tending his father-in-law's flocks near Horeb, the sacred mountain of revelation also

⁷¹ As for the historicity of Moses, "any attempt to assess the historicity of the portrait of Moses presented in Exodus to Deuteronomy must take into account a number of characteristics of this literature. First, many of the stories are legendary in character and are built on folktale motifs found in various cultures. The theme of the threatened child who eventually becomes a great figure, for example, was employed from Mesopotamia to Rome and appears in stories about Heracles, Oedipus, Romulus and Remus, Cyrus, and Jesus. Second, Israel's theology located the giving of the Law and the formation of the national life outside the land it occupied and thus considered the wilderness period as its constitutional time (a formative period in the history of Israel). Third, the duplications in the texts and the frequent lack of cohesion in the narratives and of consistency in details indicate that the material is composite and multilayered. Fourth, the lack of external frames of reference makes it impossible to connect any of the events depicted about Moses with the history of other cultures. The Egyptian Pharaoh goes unnamed and no contemporary non-biblical sources mention Moses. Finally, Moses is depicted as the archetype of several offices – the good leader, the ideal judge and legal administrator, intercessor, cult founder, and prophet. In all of these he excelled and thus served as the standard by which others were judged." See *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 530.

known as Sinai, the Lord revealed himself in a burning bush. God commissioned him to return to Egypt and, with the help of Aaron, his brother, to lead the Hebrews out of the land of oppression. Moses' attitude is one of utter humility in the face of the overwhelming presence of Yahweh. He obeys God's injunction to take off his shoes, for he is treading sacred ground. This is no conventional encounter indeed, as Moses experiences his first encounter with the Lord (theophany) on Mount Horeb, but also his first encounter with a language which is essentially marked by utter paradox, ambiguity, and mystery. It is the language of gnomic poetry, but also the language we find already in Bringham's early broadside entitled *Pythagoras* (1974), in the Pre-Socratic poems in *Eight Objects* (1975) and *The Old in Their Knowing* (2005). It is also the same kind of pure language that we find in the short lyrics of *The Book of Silences* (2001), jewel-like compositions which are the true lyrical embodiment of the wisdom of the Zen Buddhist masters. It is the language of mystery intended to *touch* mystery, if only for a while. God is *the* mystery.

The sense that Yahweh is a mysterious, awe-inspiring creature permeates the Old Testament. Idolatry was strictly prohibited in ancient Israel, as God resisted being caught in any plastic form because of the abyss or chasm separating the creator from his creation. Similarly, the Israelites' God resisted being caught in words, hence the existence of the Tetragrammaton, i.e., the use of a circumlocution to name the deity. Here God is being conceptualized as a burning bush, as a set of disembodied voices, as a flame. As a matter of fact, this is a common practice in the Pentateuch. Yahweh is in the wind, the fiery cloud, the earthquake, or the fire, all manifestations of his presence in Exodus (19.18; 24.17) and Deuteronomy (4.12). To Moses' astonishment, the voices address him in absolutely tautological terms (in italics in the poem). If philosophy and poetry share the same titanic enterprise – i.e., the study and understanding of *what is* – then it is precisely at this point, at the very beginning of “Deuteronomy”, that we realize that there is a most subtle connection uniting Bringham's biblical pieces with his Pre-Socratic poems and his Buddhist lyric poems. What the poet did find truly appealing about the Old Testament was that it was full of episodes that recounted ancient Israel's sages or ancestors' encounters with the essence of things through the mystery which God's existence represented to them. They are shown coming to terms with *what is*, in much the same way that Pythagoras, Herakleitos or Parmenides, the three great Pre-Socratics, sought to grasp the essence of *what is* and of *what is not*, to look for answers to the same ultimate questions concerning humans' existence and the nature of reality.



After his first theophany, Moses returned to Egypt to fulfil God's injunctions with the help of Aaron, who is precisely a major figure in Israel's origins and the first of his high priests. Early in Exodus, he is said to be Moses' brother and a Levite (Exodus 4.14), and he begins to appear with features that implicitly suggest a tie with priesthood. His role as Moses' companion in Egypt and in the wilderness is heightened in Exodus (he is with Moses when Pharaoh asks for intercession with Israel's God at Exodus 8.25; 9.27-28; 10.16-17), but he is above all Israel's first high priest. Hence, his involvement in the episode of the golden calf (evoked in stanza five below) is quite problematic, as we shall try to demonstrate in due time. In any case, as suggested by the opening two lines of the second stanza, Aaron is with Moses in Egypt when they produced signs and nine plagues to persuade Pharaoh to allow the Hebrews to depart Egypt, either to go on a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer a sacrifice to God or to leave the land for good.

The second stanza is more agile in a way. It looks more like an enumeration and it conveys vividly the sense of motion and action preceding a central event in the ancient history of Israel – the Hebrews’ Exodus out of Egyptian bondage under Moses’ leadership and the wandering toward the Promised Land:

I went. But I brought my brother to do [“I went, but I brought...” in *B & BW*]
the talking, and I did the tricks – the Nile
full of fishguts and frogs, the air opaque
and tight as a scab, the white-hot hail,
and boils, and bugs, and when nothing had worked right, [new comma here]
we killed them and ran. We robbed them of every
goddamned thing we could get at and carry
and took off, and got through the marsh at low tide
with the wind right, and into the desert. The animals
died, of course, but we kept moving.

Aaron *does the talking* and Moses *does the tricks*, by which the leader refers to the ten plagues recounted in Exodus that God produced so as to force Pharaoh to set the Hebrews free to leave the country. These plagues were thus intended as signs of Yahweh’s presence in behalf of his chosen people. With an astonishing economy of strokes, Bringhurst manages to convey the rapid and cumulative severity of the plagues, which culminated in a climatic moment with the death of Egypt’s firstborn. All ten plagues except one are condensed in just four verse lines. In the Exodus narrative they form an orderly series of ten (the Nile water turns blood, frogs, gnats, flies, cattle murrain, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, death of the Egyptian firstborn), each related to its successor, but the poet has slightly altered the original arrangement and omitted the plague of cattle murrain at Exodus 9.1-9.7, which was possibly related to hoof-and-mouth anthrax, or some such disease, resulting from conditions created by the other former plagues. It struck Egypt’s farm animals, which were a principal source of food for the entire population. Curiously enough, there is much mythologizing and hyperbolic description going on in the plagues narrative. Except the slaughter of the firstborn in each Egyptian family, all the remaining plagues can be accounted for as being just ordinary events – natural phenomena or diseases common in ancient Egypt, occurring annually or at intervals between July and April. However, the Hebrews saw Yahweh’s hand behind them all, and interpreted them as signs of their God’s protective presence in the face of calamity.

The sequence of plagues in the poem opens with “the Nile / full of fishguts and frogs”, resonant and alliterative words which seem to bring together the first two plagues in the series. Exodus 7.14-7.24 relates how the Nile water turned to blood and became undrinkable, whereas Exodus 7.25-8.14 recounts how the frogs plague inundated all the Egyptian homes. The River Nile was an indisputable source of life for the ancient Egyptians; it ensured the harmonious functioning of their economy. The annual rise of the Nile brought life to their soil and made fruitful cultivation possible, but on rare occasions putrid waters carrying decaying algae from the vast swamplands of the Sudan got mixed up with the waters from Ethiopia’s Blue Nile into which volcanoes – active in those days – had spewed sulphuric lava and ash. This was quite uncommon, but once a century the waters of the life-giving river would turn red in colour because of the lava and ash in it, killing all forms of life (including fish, of course) and becoming undrinkable. On the other hand, the Nile would annually overflow, but then the waters subsided and left fertile soil behind them. But on this particular occasion a plague of frogs ensued as a result: heaps of dead frogs would be found covering all the land, even in people’s homes.

“The air opaque / and tight as a scab” is intended as a reference to the ninth plague: the darkness plague related in Exodus 10.21-10.23. Once more this darkness, in which the Hebrews saw Yahweh’s active hand in their behalf, was just another natural phenomenon. Thick darkness might have well been brought on by the desert wind, carrying with it dust and sand that would darken the sky. Part of the miracle was the fact that Egyptians were surrounded by darkness everywhere, whereas the Israelites did have light. In this skilled prose narrative the superiority of God’s power over that of pagan gods has found an eloquent expression. It is as if Yahweh, the Lord of the Hebrews, was clearly fighting Amon-Ra, the sun god worshipped by the Egyptians as their divine father and supreme god. Immediately afterwards comes the seventh plague of “the white-hot hail”, related at Exodus 9.18-9.35. Hail was a rare occurrence in Egypt, but when it did occur alongside thunderstorm, it ruined a whole season’s crops and destroyed the poor homes of the disease-ridden peasants living in simple mud-brick houses.

Two simple alliterative monosyllabic words, ‘boils’ and ‘bugs’, condense four plagues in a row. On the one hand, the sixth plague is that of boils that is to be found at Exodus 9.8-9.12.⁷² Again, boils are a natural disease that can be rationally accounted for, as ashes coming from the kiln were thrown into the air and caused boils breaking out in sores on humans and animals alike. On the other hand, ‘bugs’ evokes a constellation of three plagues (the third, fourth and eighth plagues in the Exodus narrative): the gnats, flies, and locusts plagues, respectively. Exodus 8.16-8.19 tells the story of swarms of gnats (whatever noisome insect this name represents) breeding and multiplying in the stagnant pools of water left by the subsiding waters of the overflowing Nile. The flies plague recounted at Exodus 8.20-8.32 appears to be a variant of the preceding plague. Once again, the miracle lay on the coming of myriads of flies upon the Egyptians, whereas the Hebrews were unaffected. The locusts plague is found at Exodus 10.3-10.20, where God brings the locusts by an east wind and takes them away by a west wind into the Red Sea upon Pharaoh’s confession of his sin (10.16). Locusts were truly a dreaded plague, as they devoured whatever was to be devoured once a storm was over.

The series of plagues culminates in the slaughter of the firstborn in every single Egyptian family, from Pharaoh’s down to those of slave girls, related at Exodus 11.1-11.8⁷³. Bringhurst conveys the urgency of the climax in these words: *“and when nothing had worked right / we killed them and ran.”* The preceding signs and plagues had failed to convince Pharaoh, who repeatedly gave and withdrew his permission for the Hebrews to leave Egypt. With the tenth plague, however, Pharaoh and his people urged them to leave. The announcement of the final plague is closely connected to what happened at the first

⁷² Exodus 9.8-9.12: “And the Lord said unto Moses and unto Aaron, Take to you handfuls of ashes of the furnace, and let Moses sprinkle it toward the heaven in the sight of Pharaoh. And it shall become small dust in all the land of Egypt, and shall be a boil breaking forth with blains upon man, and upon beast, throughout all the land of Egypt. And they took ashes of the furnace, and stood before Pharaoh; and Moses sprinkled it up toward heaven; and it became a boil breaking forth with blains upon man, and upon beast. And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils; for the boil was upon the magicians, and upon all the Egyptians. And the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he hearkened not unto them; as the Lord had spoken unto Moses.”

⁷³ Exodus 11.5-7: “And all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the firstborn of the maidservant that is behind the mill; and all the firstborn of beasts. And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there was none like it, nor shall be like it any more. But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast: that ye may know how that the Lord doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel.”

Passover⁷⁴ ceremony (Exodus 12.1-12.34): the daubing of the lamb's blood on the doorposts of the Hebrews was intended to protectively mark their houses, so that God would bypass their homes in the slaughter of the Egyptian firstborn and they would be spared from the most terrible plague of all.⁷⁵ After this dramatic slaughter, the Hebrews leave the land of oppression for good, quite in a hurry, for the Promised Land. Of course, they did not suspect what the future held in store for them: a forty-year wandering in the desert was awaiting them just round the corner.

This is the true beginning of the Exodus, a central event in Israel's history, or rather ancient Israel's national epic, retold throughout its history. As a matter of fact, the whole Bible seems to be permeated by constant direct or oblique allusions to the Exodus. So, there is a sense in which much of biblical narrative can be viewed as being shaped by alluding to the Exodus, either by anticipation or in retrospect. For instance, the division of the waters and the appearance of dry land at creation related at Genesis 1.6-10 somehow foreshadows the division of the Red Sea at Exodus 14.21. What is absolutely certain is that the Exodus meant the escape of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt under Moses' guidance, and that it encompassed a larger time-span, running from the definite farewell to Egypt to the conquest of the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, on the part of Joshua, including the wilderness wanderings in between both events. The promise of land made to Abraham, formulated originally in the Book of Genesis, remains unfulfilled in the Pentateuchal narrative, though. The conclusion of the story begun in Genesis is to found somewhere else: in the Book of Joshua, which is already the beginning of the Deuteronomic History⁷⁶. The full story of the Exodus, which is transcendental to the Hebrews as it is essential as a formative period in antiquity, is also found in summary form in a number of passages – Exodus 15; Deuteronomy 26.5-9; Joshua 24; Psalms 78; 80; 105; 114; cf. Ezekiel 20.6 – some of which are quite old.

The fact that the Pentateuch is a multilayered text exhibiting a complex and organic design is best seen in the Book of Exodus, which consists of several traditions, some of them truly ancient, such as the "Song of the Sea" (Exodus 15) or the bulk prose narrative, which braids together the Pentateuchal sources J, E, and P mentioned above, dated from the tenth to perhaps the late sixth century BCE. All these materials have undergone a continuous process of revision and updating. There are certainly two outstanding literary strategies at stake in this powerful narrative. On the one hand, there is a tendency to render what might have been an historical event in hyperbolic terms. Thus, embellishment, heightening, and exaggeration can be found in different places, for instance in the episode of the Hebrews' crossing of the Red Sea, which was the body of water crossed by the Israelites in their Exodus from Egypt. Moses and the people departed only to be pursued by Pharaoh, whose army was drowned in the returning waters of the Red Sea after the waters had parted for the Israelites to cross (Exodus 14.5-15.21). Bringhurst's rendering of the episode is simple enough: [we] "*got through the marsh at low tide / with the wind right, and into the desert.*" In the Bible the record of Israel's miraculous crossing is a complex one indeed. The simplest account is found at Exodus 14.24-14.25: a group of Hebrew slaves manage to escape from Egyptians guards, who give up their chase owing to their chariots being mired

⁷⁴ Passover is an important festivity for the Hebrews. Observed on the fourteenth day of the month of Nisan (March/April), this festival commemorates the Exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt.

⁷⁵ Exodus 12.12-12.13: "For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the LORD. And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt."

⁷⁶ A term used by biblical scholars for a hypothetical work composed in ancient times that consisted of the books of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings.

in the swampy land of the Nile delta. However, at Exodus 14.21-14.23⁷⁷ the whole episode is transformed into a miracle, as Yahweh is made to intervene at the sea. Through Moses' agency, he makes a path through the sea for the Hebrews to pass safely, with walls of water on their right and on their left. Once they are safe on the other side, the waters envelop the chasing Egyptian army.⁷⁸ A variant of this second version is found in chapter 15. Furthermore, on the other hand, there is an implicit tendency to mythologize. The escape of the Hebrews at the sea is recast as a historical enactment of an ancient cosmogonic myth of a battle between the storm god and the sea, where the adversaries of the deity are the personified Sea and Jordan River, who flee at God's approach at the head of Israel. The adversaries of Israel, however, are not cosmic but historical – the Egyptian Pharaoh and his army, and sea and river are not primeval forces but geographical realities.⁷⁹

Even if Bringham's second stanza renders the Red Sea crossing and the catastrophic defeat of Pharaoh and his army only summarily, it closes quite dramatically. The image of a whole people entering the desert, spiritually nourished only by Yahweh's promise of a gift – a wonderful land awaiting them in Canaan – is simply moving. There is a powerful sense in which, given the circumstances and having left slavery behind, hope seems to be more than enough to propel them forward in their journey into the desert in these words: "*The animals / died, of course, but we kept moving.*" This is not the beginning of exile, for the Hebrews had no land they could properly call home. It is rather the beginning of an unknown journey in the hope that it leads somewhere more brilliant where they can be free, till their own land, grow their own farm animals, and venerate their deity.



In the third stanza we are plunged straightaway into the Hebrews' desert wandering under Moses' guidance. The most humane side of Moses' is shown in intense, passionate language: his sense of unease and anxiety ("we took the unknown road"), his sense of loss amid space immensity ("[we] used a volcano for a compass"), and his feeling that his shoulders are not that broad to carry God's burden ("I had no plan") are all conveyed in transparent poetic language. Precisely because of its being devoid of rhetorical artifice, it is

⁷⁷ Exodus 14.21-23: "And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground: and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left. And the Egyptians pursued, and went in after them to the midst of the sea, even all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen." In what has been taken as the more ancient stratum in this passage, it is the Lord that drives the sea back by a strong sea wind all night and turns the sea into dry land. According to the other stratum, it is Moses' agency that is being highlighted in the whole miracle: waters go up forming walls on both sides of the crossing Hebrews and engulf the chasing Egyptian army.

⁷⁸ It has also been argued that Yahweh's miraculous intervention is further enhanced in the Septuagint, where the Hebrew phrase meaning "sea of reeds" (in Exodus 2.3-2.5 and elsewhere, *sif* means 'reed') is translated as "Red Sea". It seems more accurate, though, to translate the name of this mythical location as "Sea of Reeds", which seems to refer to a marshy area or a large body of water abundant in reeds in the eastern delta of the Nile. At any event, we are dealing here with mythical data (as in the case of the Hebrews' desert wanderings), and so the Red Sea/Sea of Reeds cannot be accurately identified. Different localizations of the event have been proposed though, such as Lake Sirbonis and the swampy region in the vicinity of the "Bitter Lakes". Likewise, the number of those escaping, originally a small group of men, becomes six hundred thousand men, as well as women and children (Exodus 12.37), an impossible population of several million. See *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 210.

⁷⁹ As for the historicity of the Exodus events, "it is impossible to determine with any certainty what may actually have occurred to Hebrews in Egypt, probably during the thirteen century BCE. Literary analysis of the narrative suggests that what may in fact have been several movements out of Egypt by Semitic peoples have been collapsed into one. But whatever happened, this event was also formative in the sense that ancient Israel saw its origins there." See *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 209.

even more capable of moving the reader. In its desperation, Moses invokes here the figure of one of Israel's ancestors, Abraham, who obeyed God's injunction to travel to Egypt – both Abraham and Israel (Jacob) went down to Egypt as aliens because of a famine (Genesis 12.10). But Moses' commission is harder by comparison, as he feels a sort of unbearable sense of responsibility towards his people. Their lives are in his hands, at least during the time it takes to fulfil their journey to the Promised Land.

Stanza three of "Deuteronomy" is primarily concerned with presenting a vivid depiction of the harshness endured by the Hebrews in their forty-year wanderings in the wilderness. Chronologically speaking, both stanza three and four concern the two months of the Hebrews' wandering after leaving Egypt, before they actually arrive in Sinai in the third month of their pilgrimage. There is not much to help them on their journey except Yahweh's unfailing presence and Moses' guidance and encouragement. Moses himself wanted to die somewhere else, in the mountains, "not in that delta". The marshy lands of the Nile delta they have left behind themselves, alongside bondage and oppression, but life is not easier now that that they are free. Even if the mountains take on a symbolic significance, as emblems of redemption, as the divine abode of Yahweh himself, Nature is depicted as being, if not hostile, at least as an indifferent milieu. No matter where they turn to look, all they find is rocks, mountains on the horizon, scarcity of water and food. And yet they somehow manage to survive through an ascetic diet consisting of dead water, bread made out of coriander and the occasional quail.

Abraham came up easy. We took
the unknown road and ate hoarfrost and used
a volcano for a compass. I had no plan.
We went toward the mountains. I wanted, always,
to die in the mountains, not in that delta.
And not in a boat, at night, in swollen water.
We travelled over dead rock and drank dead water,
and the hoarfrost wasn't exactly hoarfrost.
They claimed it tasted like coriander,
but no two men are agreed on the taste
of coriander. Anyway,
we ate it. And from time to time we caught quail. [i. instead of, as in **B** and **BW**]

During their long stay in the wilderness and on their journey to the Promised Land, Moses endured the people's recurrent murmuring and complaining. Early in the Exodus they suspected Moses and Aaron had brought them to the desert just to kill them with hunger and thirst. However, Moses was instrumental all the time in securing drinking water and in overseeing the receipt of quails and manna. Also, he directed their war with the Amalekites (Exodus 17.8-17.16) and, on his father-in-law advice, he established judges to hear and adjudicate the people's disputes (Exodus 18.19-18.22). The resonant words in this stanza are 'hoarfrost' and 'coriander', which are repeated several times and are strategically placed within the general design of the poem. Both are closely linked to 'manna', which was the miraculous food supplied by the Lord to the Israelites during the forty years of their wandering in the wilderness, from Egypt to Canaan. In response to people's suspicious minds and murmuring about Moses and Aaron, the Lord promised to rain down bread for them from heaven. Six days per week manna fell from heaven⁸⁰. Each morning,

⁸⁰ See Exodus 16.4-16.5: "Then said the Lord unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law, or no. And it shall come to pass, that on the sixth day they shall prepare that which they bring in; and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily."

when the morning dew had vanished, they would find a fine flaky substance covering the ground: “And when the dew that lay was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground.” (Exodus, 16.14) “And the house of Israel called the name thereof Manna: and it was like coriander seed, white; and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.” (Exodus 16.31) The people would grind it “in mills or beat it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil.” (Numbers 11.8)

Epistemological uncertainty is at stake here, and it is reflected in the very language deployed by the poet. We are dealing with hoarfrost that is not exactly hoarfrost, but some God-sent substance out of which the Hebrews can make their nourishing bread. The senses turn out to be deceiving: it is out of this hoarfrost which turns out to be coriander that they made their everyday bread. However, even coriander is said to have quite an indistinct taste (“no two men are agreed on the taste”). As there was nothing else to be eaten, coriander was welcome as a sort of delicatessen. The epistemological uncertainty is evocatively expressed also by the overwhelming presence of a natural world where there are scarce signs or marks by which to guide one’s way amid the wilderness – they use “a volcano for a compass”. In this respect, the sense of utter nakedness is conveyed by the ascetic simplicity of the diet, which is in accordance with the bareness of the elemental landscape surrounding their pilgrimage – one of mountains, hard rocks, vast expanses of desert, a sometimes merciless sun, air and light. The nakedness and simplicity of the diet and the natural landscape find their linguistic correlative in a poetic idiom which is strongly reminiscent of biblical language. Bringhurst thus makes use of simple syntactic sentence structures, parallelism and lexical repetition (mountains, hoarfrost, coriander, water), as well as alliteration (“*drank dead water*”), assonance (*boat-swollen*) and very subtle rhyme patterns (*taste-anyway-quail*). In the end, the sound of the whole stanza becomes incantatory, enveloping the reader’s mind and ear.



“And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night.” This is Exodus 13.21. In the forty-year wandering in the wilderness Yahweh’s presence becomes a sustaining force for the Hebrews to keep on walking despite the harsh and merciless conditions of the desert on their journey to the Promised Land. In fact, one of the central theological themes pervading the Book of Exodus in its entirety is the repeated assertion that the Lord is present in the ongoing daily life of Israel, his people of promise and covenant. Evidence of his unfailing presence was already implicit in the narrative of the plagues God sent the Egyptians as punishment to force them to let the Hebrews leave their country. Yahweh, who made promises to Israel’s ancestors (the gift of posterity, the gift of land, and the gift of the covenant), is still present and so those promises are still being kept. If Yahweh is present, there is no need for his people to worry, for they will be duly cared for. The Book of Exodus displays accounts of Israel’s guidance through a great and terrible wilderness, and stories of the provision of water and foodstuff in the form of manna and quails, which is the essential theme of stanza three in Bringhurst’s poem.

Similarly, stanza four dwells on the poor living conditions of the Hebrews in the wilderness. On some occasions hope seems to fail them, and more proofs of the sustaining presence and power of Yahweh are required. Either in the form of a cloud in daylight or a fire flame at night, Yahweh shows them the way across the desert, gives them food to eat

and water to drink, and reminds them, through the intermediary figure of Moses, of their primeval covenant, still in force. But humans are humans after all, vulnerable and prone to despair. The sense of utter exhaustion and tiredness is communicated through an eloquent verb like ‘plodded’. Under a merciless sun, the hills in the distance seem a mirage that ultimately explodes “*into labyrinths of slag.*” The image that conveys the almost abrasive heat of the desert sun is masterly drawn in just a few strokes, with an impressive poetic economy: the air is like a hot tongue licking the Hebrews’ bodies, “*twisting and flapping and gurgling*” (a carefully drawn sequence of onomatopoeic verbs). And this tongue is strongly reminiscent of the fire flame in the first stanza, which was the provisional incarnation of Yahweh:

Men and half-men and women, we marched [unhyphenated in B and BW]
 and plodded into those hills, and they exploded
 into labyrinths of slag. The air licked us
 like a hot tongue, twisting and flapping and gurgling
 through the smoke like men suffocating or drowning, saying, [new comma here]
An eye for an eye, and on certain occasions
two eyes for one eye. Either way, you model me
in thin air or unwritten words, not in wood,
not in metal. I am gone from the metal when the metal
hits the mould. You will not get me into any image [mould in earlier versions in B & BW]
that will not move when I move, and move [which in earlier versions in B & BW]
with my fluency. Moses! Come up!

In italics again are Yahweh’s words to the Hebrews. The source is possibly Deuteronomy 19.21 (“And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”), from the central part of a book concerned with presenting offenses and punishments in the form of a handbook for administration in civil or criminal cases where wrongs have been perpetrated and society must act against wrongdoers. We are back to the gnomic language found in the opening verse lines of the poem. They are words that speak of wisdom and of revenge (“*An eye for an eye, and on certain occasions / two eyes for one eye*”), but also of the mystery inherent in God’s essence. Yahweh’s presence is simply unutterable or ineffable, and so it resists being caught in human words (“*thin air or unwritten words*”). Certainly it refuses to be represented in any plastic form (“*not in wood, / not in metal*”), for, by virtue of the chasm between creator and creation, Yahweh cannot be adequately rendered in any physical form. Even if it looks stronger than wood, metal cannot apprehend God’s nature either (“*I am gone from the metal when the metal / hits the mould*”). As a matter of fact, idolatry was strictly prohibited among the Israelites, who embraced aniconism as a basic tenet.

An idol is a figure or image worshipped as the representation of a deity. In the religions of the ancient Near East idolatry was a widely-spread practice, and idols, a basic component of public and private piety, had a tremendous popular appeal at that time. It was felt that a closer sense of communion and communication between god and worshipper could be achieved through a visual representation of the deity. Archaeological excavations in the region have recovered, in fact, three-dimensional sacred images of metal, stone, wood, or clay, which were ubiquitously venerated in antiquity by the Israelites’ neighbouring religions. And, since almost all ancient gods, including Yahweh, resembled humans, most idols were anthropomorphic and displayed human features.⁸¹ However, they

⁸¹ Some idols took the form of animal representations, or combined both human and animal features. In this case, through a metaphorical procedure, the gods were attributed certain valuable features found in animals, such as ferocity (lion), virility (ram) or fecundity (frog).

became the frequent object of attacking and contempt in biblical literature; they were dismissed as the expression of pagan beliefs. Idols were condemned and strictly prohibited on the assumption that they entailed a sort of shifting of reverence from the real god to deceiving worldly things, which were perishable and the product of human hands, and so did not deserve to be worshipped.

This aniconic principle is a distinctive feature central to Israelite religion: the God of Israel could not be represented in physical form and would not tolerate the idols of any other gods. It is articulated in the one of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of anything...; you shall not bow down to them or serve them.”⁸² This commandment is effectively echoed in Bringham’s words: “*You will not get me into any image / which will not move when I move, and move / with my fluency.*” Biblical scholars do not know for sure at what point in history this prohibition first arose and why aniconism (the avoidance of divine images) should become such a fundamental cornerstone. To a certain extent, it seems to be closely linked to the notion of monotheism (the idea that there is only one true god), as well as to the early demand for exclusive worship of Yahweh alone in the official cult of Israel. Similarly, it has been argued that the Bible somehow misunderstands the very idea of idolatry in ascribing to worshippers the naïve belief that the image is the actual deity. In the religions of the ancient Israelites’ neighbours (Egyptians, Canaanites, Mesopotamians) the idol was taken to be inhabited by the deity’s spirit following its consecration and it just served the practical purpose of allowing worshippers to gain a glimpse of the divine in a material embodiment, so as to carry out ritual practices associated to the veneration of the gods.



“In the third month, when the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, the same day came they into the wilderness of Sinai.” This is Exodus 19.1. The Hebrews have been wandering in the desert for two months and now they arrive at Sinai. Stanza four closes with Yahweh’s injunction for Moses to go up the mountain. “And Moses went up unto God, and the Lord called unto him out of the mountain, saying, Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel.” (Exodus 19.3) Now, stanzas five and six, which are central to Bringham’s poem, are concerned with Moses’ encounters with Yahweh on the mountain to receive the Law he must give the Israelites. At Sinai (Exodus 19), Moses committed the people (19.3-19.8)⁸³ to observe the commandments of God (20.1-23.33), communicated to him during a forty-day stay on the mountain (24.18) and then addressed to the people (24.3) and subsequently written down by either Moses (24.4) or God (24.12). He received instructions for constructing the tabernacle and its accoutrements (25.1-31.17), where the Law was to be preserved:

I went, But I wore my shoes and took a waterskin. [instead of, in B & BW]
 I climbed all day, with the dust eating holes
 in my coat and choking me, and the rock cooking me. [missing comma after ‘coat’]
 What I found was a couple of flat stones
 marked up as if the mountain had written all over them.
 I was up there a week, working to cool them,
 hungry and sweating and unable to make sense of them,
 and I fell coming down and broke both of them.

⁸² See Exodus 20.4-20.5, 20.23-20.25 and Deuteronomy 4.15-4.18, 23, 28.

⁸³ See, in particular, Exodus 19.5-19.6: “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.”

Topping it all, I found everybody down there drooling
over Aaron's cheap figures, and Aaron chortling. [*figurines* in B & BW]

The description of Moses' climb up the mountain, hard and exhausting, is carried out in a vivid fashion in the opening three lines of the fifth stanza. As much as in Moses' first theophany in pre-exilic times (revisited in stanza one of Bringhurst's poem), shoes are again charged with metaphorical significance. On that particular occasion, the deity asked him to take off his shoes, of which there were plenty in the desert ("*That desert is full of men's shoes*"), as a sign of utter reverence and humility in the face of the mystery that Yahweh is. Also, he was treading upon sacred soil, so the necessity was that the soles of his feet should be closely in contact with the earth. *Breathing through one's feet* is a recurrent and potent image in Bringhurst's poetry and prose works indeed. It means paying attention to the world and remaining alert to the beauty of *what is*. On this particular ascent Moses is wearing his shoes and he has taken a waterskin with him. Once again he is surrounded by the simple elements found in the desert and his ascent is made the more difficult by an alien, hostile world in which the dust eats holes in his coat and chokes him, and a merciless sun cooks him on the hot rocks.

On the summit of Mount Sinai Moses finds the tablets of the Law given by God. At Exodus 31.18 we learn that Yahweh "gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon Mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God." In Bringhurst's rendering of the biblical episode, no mention is made of the sacred tablets containing the Ten Commandments, thought to have been handed down directly from God through Moses. He speaks of "flat stones" instead, not written by God's finger, but rather by the mountain itself, as if stones could speak words of wisdom of their own. Bringhurst's originality is most eloquent at this point in "Deuteronomy". Whereas the biblical text highlights Moses' indisputable excellence as a spiritual leader and as an obedient, humble intermediary between Yahweh and his people, the poet illuminates a part of the story that is left in the dark in the Bible. He emphasizes the fact that Moses is a man after all, which is to say vulnerable and constrained by both bodily limitations such as hunger, thirst and sweat, and by intellectual limitations such as ignorance and inability to rightly interpret God's message. To readers' puzzlement, they are presented with an image of a peculiar Moses who does not quite know what to make of what is written on the stones. Contrary to what the Bible says about Moses' stay on the mountain lasting forty days and forty nights⁸⁴, at the end of which he was commissioned to give the Hebrews the laws just promulgated by God, Bringhurst's version offers an altogether different view. In his version of the story, Moses spends a whole week trying to cool two simple flat stones, "*written all over by the mountain*", and trying to come terms with the laws on them. He appears not to be the person of extraordinary religious discernment that the Bible portrays. Afterwards, it is rather by accident that he breaks the stones as he falls down while descending from Mount Sinai. According to the Bible, however, the first tablets of the Law presented to Moses (Exodus 31.18) were smashed by him quite on purpose (Exodus 32.19) instead, when he returned to the camp only to discover that Aaron had supervised the construction of a golden calf (Exodus 32.1-32.35).

The role of Moses as the great law-giver in ancient Israel is central to the Book of Exodus. The Bible is, in fact, pervaded by a sense of the importance of the law. There are many legal passages in the biblical texts, and some of them have been identified as separate entities or units by modern scholars. These include the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20.2-

⁸⁴ See Exodus 18.24: "And Moses went into the midst of the cloud, and gat him up into the mount: and Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights."

20.17; Deuteronomy 5.6-5.21), the Book of Covenant (Exodus 20.22 [or 21.1]-23.19), the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26), and the Deuteronomic Laws (Deuteronomy 12-26). The Ten Commandments, also called the Decalogue (“the ten words”), which God gives Moses on Mount Sinai, are indeed essential in that they deal with the basic relations between people in an orderly society. They are expressed in the imperative and formulated as absolute pronouncements (apodictic or universal laws). As just pointed above, they appear in two places in the Bible (Exodus 20.2-20.17 and Deuteronomy 5.6-5.21) and are alluded to elsewhere in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. The Ten Commandments comprise a short list of religious and ethical demands laid by the Deity on the people of ancient Israel which are of continuing authority for the religious Jewish community and the Christian community. They prohibit the worship of gods other than Israel’s God, held to be the only true one; they rule out the making of images of the Deity in any plastic form, the misuse of the divine Name; they require observance of the Sabbath day and the honouring of one’s parents; they also prohibit murder, adultery, stealing, false testimony, and the coveting of the life and goods of others.⁸⁵ Unique in a way, this tenfold collection of short statements would possibly be easily remembered by reference to the ten fingers of both hands and was of great value as summations of simple demands of God by which one should be governed to enjoy an orderly life in community.

So Moses comes down Mount Sinai only to find out that Aaron and his people have erected a golden calf in the wilderness (Exodus 32.1-32.6) – *“Topping it all, I found everybody down there drooling / over Aaron’s cheap figurines, and Aaron chortling”* –, which is a flagrant violation of the covenant relationship. It involved disobedience to at least the first two of the Ten Commandments, which rule out the making of images of the Deity in any physical form. Israel’s sin of the golden calf is the expression of the futility of worshipping the products of human hands, perishable substitutes of Yahweh. As a result, Israel falls in disgrace and under the threat of the cancellation of God’s covenant. Israel repents then and Moses intervenes with God not to destroy the people.



So Israel is judged and forgiven by God’s immense mercy. Moses climbs Mount Sinai again and he witnesses now a unique revelation extending the earlier revelation of his unique name at the time of Moses’ call in pre-exilic times. Now Yahweh’s nature and attitude are shown unveiled to him at Exodus 34.5-34.7:

And the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and

⁸⁵ For a taxonomy of the Ten Commandments, see *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 737: “The Ten Commandments fall into four groups. The first three, the commandments demanding the worship of God alone, against image-making, and against the use of God’s name to do harm, are commandments stressing God’s exclusive claim of the lives of the people. [...] The next two commandments, calling for observing every seventh day as a day of rest and for honouring parents, are special institutions for the protection of basic realities in society – human need for rest from labour as much as for labour and the preservation of human dignity against any kind of exploitation. The next three commandments focus especially on the life of the individual or the family in the larger community. They insist on the sanctity of human life, the sanctity of marriage and of sexual life, and the necessity to maintain a community in which the extension of the self into one’s property is recognized and respected. The last two commandments are more social and public, calling for speaking the truth before the courts or the community’s elders and for living a life not distracted or corrupted by the lust for other persons’ goods or lives.”

that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.

This sequence provides a setting for two additional symbols of Yahweh's nearness – the tent of promised presence (Exodus 33.7-11) and the shining face of Moses (Exodus 34.29-35). In a sequence pervaded by intense dramatic tension Moses intervenes with God and prevents the destruction of his people, and immediately afterwards God (Exodus 34.1) or Moses (Exodus 34.27-34.28) again wrote the words of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34.17-34.26) during a second forty-day period (Exodus 34.28), which were again proclaimed to the people (Exodus 34.29-34.35). Moses then supervised the construction and erection of the tabernacle⁸⁶ (Exodus 35.1-40.38), received further laws and instructions, and consecrated the tabernacle and ordained Aaron and his sons as priests. Once again, Bringhurst's rendering of this sequence of biblical events is masterly executed in a few poetic strokes:

I went up again to get new stones, [this comma is new here]
and the voices took after me that time and threw me
up between the rocks and said I could see them.
They were right. I could see them. I was standing right behind them,
and I saw them. I saw the mask's insides,
and what I saw is what I have always seen.
I saw the fire, and it flowed and it was moving away [this comma is new here]
and not up into me. I saw *nothing*. [the italics in the word *nothing* and the comma are new]
and it was widening all the way around me.
I collected two flat stones, and I cut them [this comma is new here]
so they said what it seemed to me two stones
should say, and I brought them down without dropping them.

What is being highlighted here is the powerful sense of mystery permeating Yahweh's revelation to Moses. Whereas stanza five was primarily concerned with the harshness of Moses' climb up Mount Sinai amid a hostile setting, in stanza six the emphasis is rather on the actual revelation of God's presence to him in a visible form. The voices which were only heard in the first stanza are now visible to the eyes in the form of fire; they take on a material incarnation for the prophet to see Yahweh's nature with his own eyes. The first-person personal pronoun proliferates amazingly in a small compass of verse lines – it is repeated thirteen times in all. The mystery which Yahweh *is* is being almost touched now. The sense of awe and amazement Moses feels in the presence of the divine is conveyed through carefully meditated language, strongly reminiscent of biblical language in several respects. The language employed thus relies heavily on repetition, both lexical and syntactic, which produces the effect of incantatory rhythm. "I saw" is repeated time and again, as if Moses were trying to convince himself of the truth of what his eyes have seen on a moment with the texture of real transcendence. As a matter of fact, he gets to see "*the mask's insides*", for, having transcended the deceiving surface of things, he manages to grasp a core of irreducible meaning. Apprehending the mystery Yahweh embodies is no easy endeavour, though, and so the language proves also inadequate to truly transcribe his true

⁸⁶ The tabernacle is the portable sanctuary constructed by Moses at Sinai and primarily associated with the people's wilderness wandering. Conceived as a movable shrine, the tabernacle was constructed so that it could be assembled, dismantled, and reassembled as the people moved from one place to another. The account of the construction of the tabernacle is found in the Book of Exodus (in chapters 25-31 God provides instructions to Moses for its construction; chapters 35-40 report how they were carried out). Inside the holy part of the tabernacle were the tablets of the Law. The tabernacle was the place where God was present among his people, where he met with them and communicated with them. See *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, pp. 729-730.

nature into accurate terms, intelligible to mortals' understanding. Therefore much of the language is on the verge either of tautology (*"what I saw is what I have always seen"*) or on the verge of paradox (*"I saw nothing / and it was widening all the way around me"*). Moses sees the nothing that *is*.

The closing lines of stanza six recount how Moses is given the new tablets of the Law by God. According to Exodus, it remains unclear whether it is God (Exodus 34.1) or Moses (Exodus 34.27-34.28) who actually writes the Ten Commandments again on the stones. On this particular occasion, Moses does not have to make an effort to interpret what has been written on them. Quite on the contrary, *"they said what it seemed to me two stones / should say."* The message on the two stones is crystal-clear, transparent, natural in a way. Easily remembered by reference to the ten fingers of the hands, the commandments are simple ethical values stemming from common sense regarding essential rules everybody should comply with to make existence in community possible and enjoyable. The subject matter of this series of injunctions reflects ancient and fundamental concerns in any society, and so they constitute a short didactic compendium of ten basic religious and moral duties. In any case, they are not obscure to Moses any more; they speak the language stones speak. And with the highlighting of the naturalness of the stones' message, God's agency is left quite in the background. Stones are allowed a chance to speak a wisdom of their own. Though the notion of Nature as a book written by God's hand somehow lingers powerfully over these lines as well, the reader is under the impression that a more down-to-earth component of the biblical episode is being highlighted and brought to the foreground.



The harsh conditions of Moses' descent from Mount Sinai are conveyed through a jewel-like and hyperbolic image: *"the blisters must have doubled my size."* The blisters are probably those on the feet soles of Moses, who has trodden on hard, cold rock for a long time carrying God's stone tablets with the "ten words". God's law is a heavy burden for a man and the feet of a human being are vulnerable, especially if they have no shoes on to protect them. However, despite the tiredness after such a long stay of forty days and nights on the summit, Moses *"almost glowed in the dark"*, continues stanza seven. This is a subtle reference to the episode of the shining face of Moses recounted at Exodus 34.29-35. That Moses' face should glow the very moment he promulgates God's law to his people comes as no surprise. It is a transcendental moment in the formative historical period of ancient Israel; the Hebrews are being given the laws they must obey in the Promised Land, toward which they are heading. Thus, at Exodus 34.29-30 we read:

And it came to pass, when Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony in Moses' hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with him. And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him.

As we are dealing with mythical data, times does not seem to matter much, but it might be worth remembering that only three months pass by since the people of Israel leave Egypt. In the third month of their wandering they reach Mount Sinai, where they are given the Law by God's intermediary (Moses). Geographically speaking, the setting for the second half of the Book of Exodus is the plain before Mount Sinai (19.1-40.38). At that point begins a thirty-nine year wandering in the wilderness which will take the Hebrews to Canaan, the Promised Land. The narrative is continued in the remaining books of the

Pentateuch (Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), though it seems it is Deuteronomy that Bringham has lifted most of the material from as a source of inspiration for stanzas seven and eight in his poem. In fact, the poem takes its title from this particular book. There is much law in all three books. Whereas Leviticus and Numbers are primarily concerned with laws, with statutes and rules, which must govern Israelites' daily public and private life, the Book of Deuteronomy is formulated as an address by Moses to all Israel, permeated by a distinct hortatory tone in the recollection of the nation's past history, and aims at bringing as much life as possible under a sense of obligation and duty (private and social) toward God.

Law is thus at the core of the Book of Deuteronomy, which derived its title from the Greek translation of Deuteronomy 17.18, where the Hebrew word indicating "copy" has been understood as meaning "second law" (*deuteronomion*). The consistency of style and the continuity of the themes being dealt with suggest that it was the work of the so-called Deuteronomic School or the Deuteronomists – a community of scribes and legislators who composed the text over a long period of time (maybe a century). The book was thus subject to a constant process of revision, adaptation, and extension, and its sources could be trace back to an even older tradition, both oral and written. As for its structure, its main part consists of a second corpus of laws given to Israel through Moses in the plains of Moab in the eve of their entry into the Promised Land, supplementing those given at Horeb (Deuteronomy 29.1) and intended as the basis of the national life of Israel in Canaan. The central part of the book lies between 4.44 and 30.20, which is presented as a faithful transcription of the words of the covenant (made up of decrees, statutes and ordinances) between God and Israel.

So presenting law or Torah is the major concern of this book, which can be best described as "preaching law", articulated around three parts: the first part (Deut. 4.44-11.32) can be seen as a general introduction made up of Moses' exhortations in the form of long speeches directing Israel to obey the laws; secondly, the laws are found primarily in chapters 12-26; and, finally, the third part (Deut. 27.1-30.20) is an epilogue with admonitions, warnings, and curses against failing to obey God's laws. Many of the laws at the heart of the book are laws in the familiar juridical sense of the word and are presented as offences and punishments for them, but others are related to religious instructions and regulations for worship, or even to apodictic (universal) ethical admonitions (like the Ten Commandments found at 5.6-5.21). However, even if law is central to the book, there are three more threads around which all the materials have been braided: the three great unities of people, God, and sanctuary⁸⁷. This is a major distinctive feature of Deuteronomy in fact. First, Israel is one people and remains one in spite of the passing of time through all its subsequent generations, and so Moses leads his people as one people. Second, Israel must worship one God alone, the God who reveals himself to Moses on Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai), as the first of the Ten Commandments makes explicit. The third great unity refers to the sole place of worship where an altar at a location no further specified but to be interpreted as a reference to Jerusalem is to be set up and sacrifices offered.

⁸⁷ It has been suggested by biblical scholars that the ultimate design of Deuteronomy as well as the importance of the three great unities, central to the whole conception, can be partly accounted for when the impact of the historical background on the composition of the text is taken into account. The Book of Deuteronomy, when viewed comprehensively, was intended as a sort of last appeal to Israel to regain its sense of a God-given destiny, which Mesopotamian imperialism and internal apostasy were weakening perilously at that time. See *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 166.

Bringham's rendering of the Hebrews' forty-year pilgrimage in the wilderness does not focus on God-given laws though, but rather on the supernatural and superhuman effort Moses and Aaron had to make to keep their people alive despite adverse circumstances and failing hope. Much of the emphasis is also laid on the stamina (both physical and spiritual) it took Moses to accomplish God's instructions and Israel to head towards Canaan. The proofs of God's presence in behalf of Israel as manifested in the ten plagues that Egypt suffered before their Exodus are insignificant by comparison. "*I was pulling my stunts / more often then than in Egypt*", confesses Moses. After staying at Sinai for over a year, Moses and his people left Sinai. For the next 39 years, Moses leads the people in their journeys in the wilderness. During this period the people continue their murmuring and complaining, are fed with manna and quails, and are supplied with water. All he can do is encourage his people to keep on walking toward their destination – Canaan, the Promised Land. The language employed by the leader to convey the difficulty inherent in his endeavour to lead the people to safe land is straightforward, simple everyday speech. Words are the only weapons he has at his disposal to convince his people of the existence of a promised land far away in the distance, of the unfailing presence of Yahweh (showing them their way, giving them foodstuff and drinking water, protecting them from enemies), and of the fact that it might be well worthwhile the effort after all. The whole enterprise is being presented with the sense of inescapable necessity that characterizes fate or destiny written beforehand:

Even so, it seemed I was pulling my stunts
 more often then than in Egypt. I had to,
 to hold them. They had to be led to new land,
 and all of them full of crackpot proverbs and cockeyed
 ideas about directions.

The second part of stanza seven is primarily concerned with the notion of the Promised Land. Moses is doing his best to remind the Hebrews, who had all but given up hope for the future, of the divine promise of blessing and superabundance in the land that is awaiting them somewhere. With a moving sincerity, Moses tells us of the fate of his people during their pilgrimage. Many of the Hebrews died on their journey to Canaan, "*some of weakness*", Moses explains, but many others "*of being strong*"; the attempt was futile for them, as they did not even catch a glimpse of the Promised Land. Contrary to all expectations, "*out of knowing no different*" children seemed to be better equipped to survive the hardships of being exiles with no home of their own. Innocence is always a virtue; ignorance of better living conditions, a convenience for those who only know trouble and difficulty. However, Moses scrutinizes the whole situation from a critical standpoint – there is not much hope in the children's survival and the adults' death. He considers all those practical requirements for the people's survival once they get to Canaan. Children cannot till the land, do not know what a ploughshare is for or what purpose a river serves in relation to cultivation of the land. So there is a pragmatic mind at work beneath these verse lines, that of the skilled leader who Moses is:

Aaron and I
 outbellowed them day after day and in spite of it
 they died. Some of weakness, certainly, but so many of them
 died of being strong. The children stood up to it
 best, out of knowing no different – but with no
 idea what to do with a ploughshare, no
 idea what a river is. What could they do
 if they got there? What can they even know how to wish for?
 I promised them pasture, apple trees, cedar,

waterfalls, snow in the hills, sweetwater
wells instead of these arroyos, wild grapes... .

The first reference to the Promised Land found in the poem is quite vague. The poet makes use of the deictic “there” to refer to it. Its meaning is made clear by the closing three lines in the stanza (cataphora), which are a hyperbolic description of Canaan. Land was one of the things promised when God called Abraham (Genesis 12.1-12.2). The promised territory specified in Genesis 15.18 is the land of Canaan from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates River. Consider, in particular, Deuteronomy 11.24: “Every place whereon the soles of your feet shall tread shall be yours: from the wilderness and Lebanon, from the river, the river Euphrates, even unto the uttermost sea shall your coast be.” Seen in retrospect, and in the light of this quote, the river mentioned in Bringhurst poem turns out to be the Euphrates River.⁸⁸ The sharp contrast between the depiction of Canaan with which Moses presented his people and the wilderness (“*these arroyos, wild grapes*”) takes its most vivid expression in the final enumeration (another strategy probably inspired by biblical literature). Bringhurst’s has probably lifted much of the material from such passages as Deuteronomy 11.9 (“a land that floweth with milk and honey”) or Deuteronomy 11.11 (“the land, whither ye go to possess it, is a land of hills and valleys, and drinketh water of the rain of heaven”). Consider also Deuteronomy 11.14 (“I will give you the rain of your land in his due season”) and 11.15 (“I will send grass in thy fields for thy cattle”), which emphasize the superabundance of water and vegetation, thanks to the attentive provision of God. However, the poet turns the biblical description into an effective enumeration that emphasizes the generous fertility of the land (“*pasture, apple tress, cedar*”) and the abundance of water (“*waterfalls, snow in the hills, sweetwater*”), which sharply contrasts with the scarcity of water they have to cope with in the wilderness. The two geographical realms are then diametrically opposite in their characterization.



Chapter 31 of the Book of Deuteronomy opens with words spoken to Israel in the first person by Moses: “I am a hundred and twenty years old this day; I can no more go out and come in: also the Lord hath said unto me, Thou shalt not go over this Jordan.” (Deuteronomy 31.2) The leader, the visionary man, God’s servant, who has patiently guided Israel across the wilderness for forty years, is not allowed to tread upon the Promised Land. It looks like dramatic irony, but the point is that now it is high time he said farewell to his people, sound and safe at home at last. Hence, on the eve of his death, the first day of the eleventh month of the fortieth year after the Exodus (Deuteronomy 1.3), Moses delivers a series of farewell addresses to the people, expounding again the Law and its requirements for living in the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 1.6-4.40; 5.1-29.1; 29.2-30.20), offering personal adieu (Deuteronomy 32.1-32.6), a song (Deuteronomy 31.30-32.43), and blessings on the tribes (Deuteronomy 33.1-33.29). With Joshua properly commissioned as his successor, and having inscribed his song (Deuteronomy 31.16-31.29) and written and given directions of the reading and safekeeping of the book of the Law

⁸⁸ According to *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 619, “In the Book of Genesis the promise is renewed to Abraham’s descendants: Isaac (Genesis 26.3), Jacob (Genesis 28.4, 13; 35.11-35.12), Joseph (Genesis 48.4), and Jacob’s other sons (Genesis 50.24). In biblical narrative, the promise was also renewed in the time of Moses (Exodus 6.5-6.8). According to Leviticus 25.23, however, the land belonged to God; the Israelites were merely tenants. Deuteronomy represents the land as a gift (5.31; 9.6; 11.17; 6.10-6.11) and describes it in somewhat hyperbolic terms (8.7-8.9), but continuance on the land was conditional upon obedience to the law. Both Leviticus and Deuteronomy offer the threat of exile and scattering among the nations if the Israelites break the law (Leviticus 26.21, 32-33; Deuteronomy 28.63-28.64) as well as the hope of restoration to the land should they subsequently repent (Leviticus 26.42; Deuteronomy 30.1-30.16).”

(Deuteronomy 31.9-31.13; 24.29) at the command of God, Moses goes up Mount Nebo, views the Promised Land lingering far away on the horizon, and dies at the age of 120 years, seemingly full of life and vigour. He was buried by the Lord, “but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day” (Deuteronomy 34.6).

Bringhurst summarizes the whole of Moses’ address to his people on the eve of their entry into Canaan in an effective manner. Moses is well aware that the law is the song⁸⁹ he is somehow singing for Israel to understand what God demands from them before they set foot on the Promised Land. However, he is also aware that the song is just made out of words, words only, those out of which the law or Torah at the heart of the Book of Deuteronomy is made. In Bringhurst’s rendering of the biblical episode, the subversive message expressed in between the lines is quite palpable: language proves rather inadequate to convey even God’s message to Israel at such a decisive moment, particularly after such a long wandering in the desert. Even if Moses’ words are surrounded by a mysterious halo that makes them appealing to the children’s ears, they are vacuous in a way. Meaning is more important than language after all. Of this Bringhurst is absolutely convinced. In any case, the sense of utter exhaustion and tiredness experienced by Moses is conveyed at the very core of the closing stanza in Bringhurst’s poem:

Words. And whatever way I say them, words only.
 I no longer know why I say them, even though
 the children like hearing them. They come when I call them, [new comma here]
 and their eyes are bright, but the light in them is empty.
 It is too clear. It contains... the clarity only.
 But they come when I call to them. Once I used to sing them [to them B, not BW]
 a song about an eagle and a stone, and each time
 I sang it, somehow the song seemed changed, [this comma is new here]
 and the words drifted into the sunlight. I do not
 remember the song now, but I remember
 that I sang it, and the song was the law, and the law [this comma is new here]
 was the song. The law *is* a song, I am certain... [is in italics in B, not in BW]

Bergschrund is a poetry collection full of references to light, and “Deuteronomy” proves to be no exception at all. In the final stanza of the poem the light mentioned and evoked through words is that which Moses divines in the eyes of the children listening to one particular song of his: a song about an eagle and a stone, which is probably intended as an indirect reference to Deuteronomy 32.11: “As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings.” These words embody the powerful metaphor that God is taking care of his people all the time. God speaks through Moses in a language full of riddles and enigmatic metaphors. Hence, the language used by the poet, reminiscent of biblical language itself, is incantatory and relies heavily on paradox and tautology: the song is the law and the law is the song, and, even though Moses does not remember the exact content of the song (which is God’s law) because of old age and tiredness, he does remember that he sang it some time, a long time ago. At that time the children would stop and listen to him attentively, and the words seemed to change from one minute to the next as if the song had a life of its own. There seems to be a paradox at the core of this passage: language is somehow sacred according to the Hebrews’ conception of the *logos*, but in the poet’s re-telling of the biblical episode it

⁸⁹ See Deuteronomy 31.30: “And Moses spake in the ears of all the congregation of Israel the words of this song, until they were ended.” This marks the beginning of Moses’ song proper in Deuteronomy. Some passages are of a rare intensity and beauty. Consider, for instance, Deut. 32.2: “My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass.”

becomes somehow merely a tool – eel-slippery, inadequate, and ephemeral – to communicate one’s ideas and notions about reality. Once again, the words are just simple tools to tell stories capable of appealing to the imagination of the children. Out of knowing no different, their innocent minds enjoy the simple stories Moses tells them, and there is an inevitable sadness in the way the poet describes the children’s reaction as they listen to Moses’ song. They are said to have bright eyes, containing an empty clarity. Now clarity is usually associated to some sort of clairvoyance, but it remains unclear in this context whether such clarity is to be interpreted as a sign of the children’s understanding of Moses’ words or as the simple expression of their innocence.

The last four verse lines of “Deuteronomy” recount the episode of Moses’ death at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy. At Deuteronomy 32.48-32-50, God commands Moses to climb Mount Nebo and “behold the land of Canaan, which I give unto the children of Israel for possession: and die in the mount.” So from Mount Nebo, perhaps modern Jebel Neba just west of Heshbon, Moses views the Promised Land across the Jordan before he dies (Deuteronomy 32.49, 34.1). Bringhurst’s poem does not dwell on the reasons why God did not allow Moses to enter the land he viewed. It has been argued that Moses was deprived of such a privilege either because of his own failure to provide proper recognition of God or because of the sins of the people. Again the language is crystal-clear, simple, and direct, which makes the end of the poem even more intensely lyrical:

And I climbed to the head of this canyon. They said
I could look down at the new land
if I sat here, and I think it is so, but my eyes
are no longer strong, and I am tired now of looking.

The tone of Moses’ voice here is one of uncertainty as to what his mind and his eyes perceive. It is no coincidence that Bringhurst should not mention explicitly that it is God who commanded Moses to look at the Promised Land from the summit of a mountain (a sacred place in the Bible). A sense of impersonality is highlighted in choosing to use the words “they said...” instead. According to the Bible version of this episode, Moses was 120 years when he died, but “his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated” (Deut. 34.7). However, the poet has chosen to emphasize the more vulnerable side of Moses as a mortal man instead: “*my eyes / are no longer strong, and I am tired now of looking.*” He dies of being strong, like many of the people who died in the wilderness wandering. He longs to die now: perhaps he has seen too much and he has witnessed too many things now. *Possibly.*

PART III

Hachadura

A Meditation on the Metaphysics of Being & Nothing

I · INTRODUCTION

Robert Bringhurst has always wanted to write poems of real significance, and “Hachadura” is an early instance of such poetry. A milestone or landmark in the literary career of the self-conscious mature writer Bringhurst would become, this long meditative poem first appeared in the prestigious magazine *Poetry* (Chicago) 126.6 (September 1975): 311-317,

published by the Modern Poetry Association. It was then included in Bringhurst's MFA Thesis *Carmina propria et opuscula translata* (1975)⁹⁰, reprinted in *Bergschrund* the same year, later revised in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982) and reprinted in its definitive incarnation in *The Calling* (1995), and subsequently included with no significant textual variations in his two editions of *Selected Poems* (2009 Gaspereau Press & 2012 Counterpoint Press). In the poetry volume *Bergschrund*, articulated around five distinct parts, "Hachadura" constitutes the whole of Part IV, and yet there are subtle connections and threads uniting all its constitutive parts into a coherent or organic *Gestalt*. As a matter of fact, there is an overtly strong connection between Part II of *Bergschrund* (the Pre-Socratics section) and Part IV ("Hachadura") in their concern with philosophy – or rather with metaphysics and ontology to be more accurate. But, whereas in Part II Bringhurst poetically interprets, condenses (for, according to Pound, *Dichtung* = *condensare*) and gives voice to the elegant systems of thought of the sages of ancient Greece, in "Hachadura" it is the poetic self that undertakes the gigantic enterprise of building an *ontology of nothingness*.

What Bringhurst seeks in "Hachadura" is a mode of consciousness which Wallace Stevens himself calls in the introductory poem to "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942) "vivid transparence"⁹¹, a vision washed clean of all that has been said, a freeing from history. In this respect, "Hachadura" is a moving plain-dictioned search for an impossibly pure plainness of perception, a desire for unmediated vision, a seeing for the first time. This revolutionary freshness of perception, this desire for an original relation with the world, unmediated by tradition, is the revolutionary desire announced by Emerson in the opening sentences of "Nature" as early as 1836. So these words do ring a bell; we are inevitably reminded of those words uttered by the American Transcendentalist in his groundbreaking essay, in a striking and memorable passage that has not lost any of its pristine force even today, almost two centuries later: the self becomes a transparent eyeball and the eye, pure and unmediated, becomes a medium. In moments of transparency, Emerson says, "standing on the bare ground", his head "bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space", he becomes "part and parcel of God." These moments of vitality cannot happen in the modern metropolis, but somewhere else, in a place more fundamental, a bare environment where a first-hand experience of nothingness is still possible. What is simply astonishing in Bringhurst's long meditative poem is that the self does not become suffused with an Over-Soul (an all-pervading divine presence) at all, but is rather progressively erased, obliterated, in the face of the infinity and plurality of the "nothing" which "Hachadura" relentlessly seeks to define and explore to unknown extremes. It is a nothing *above* time, *beyond* time, or *out of* time. To start from nothing to achieve a fuller sense of plenitude, a more authentic knowledge of the intimate nature of things, is what Bringhurst is after in this twelve-section poem. Hence, the Pre-Socratics, Lucretius and Heidegger are an overwhelming presence in the background, an unstoppable subterranean flux nourishing Bringhurst's thinking and singing of the world, as well as his own intense and penetrating ideas about reality. In this context, the word "nothing" becomes a portentous word in the poem: *nothing* raises a number of conflicting significations that Bringhurst declines to translate into definitive meaning. In some respects, Bringhurst's long poem enacts an escape from all life-deadening structures of perception, and performs a cleansing of the senses for the reader who happens to listen

⁹⁰ Bringhurst's thesis is nowadays stored in the Rare Books and Special Collections at the Library of the University of British Columbia (Vancouver).

⁹¹ See lines 4-8 in the introductory poem to Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction": "In the uncertain light of single, certain truth, / Equal in living changingness to the light / In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest, / For a moment in the central of our being, / The vivid transparence that you bring is peace." See *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, London/Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984, p. 380.

attentively to what it has to teach in the form of unexpected revelation. And this experience belongs among those moments of precious and rare intensity, known in and for their uniqueness, devoid of all the culturally enforced repetitions of what has been thought and said. We readers are in a position in which we have to unlearn everything that culture and tradition has burdened our shoulders with. Once we accept nakedness, we are invited to cross the threshold of the poem and enjoy its sense of ease, its unique verbal texture and its incantatory musicality.

In his brilliant essay entitled “Poor Man’s Art: On the Poetry of Robert Bringhurst” (1991),⁹² Canadian poet Peter Sanger speaks of Bringhurst’s art as being a poor man’s art, and, in an earlier invaluable essay, literary critic Elsa Linguanti says that Bringhurst “si fa cosmologo”⁹³ with a special intensity in the climactic section X of the poem. In “Hachadura”, Bringhurst is accomplishing a literary feat in miniature comparable only to that of Parmenides and Empedokles: in his elemental confrontation with the world just *as it is*, he is shaping a complex image of nothingness in its manifold manifestations, and he is going straight into *the metaphysics of being*. Heidegger speaks of the uncovering or unconcealment of *being*, whereby *being (das Sein)* manifests itself clearly to humans’ eyes. In this early poem Bringhurst becomes the single artificer of nothingness. The world not as object of meditation but the world *as* meditation – this is what we are somehow confronted with in “Hachadura”. Nothingness becomes a presence without doctrine and beyond speech. But the astonishing thing is that Bringhurst becomes movingly and amazingly articulate in the face of nothingness, in the face of *the nothing that is*, to borrow Stevens’s closing words in his famous poem “The Snow Man”⁹⁴. Thus, “Hachadura” offers the reader a poetics of asceticism, a poor man’s art in Sanger’s words, made up of *fossils of words dug out of the air*, and also an instance of an ambitious literary project announced in a luminous shorter poem entitled “The Identity Moving” (*Bergschrund*, 1975):

I am plainspoken: I mean to sing
songs, and I mean to sing them so
that the words will be perfectly clear
and you will not hear them.

B, p. 23

Reading “Hachadura” we are in the presence of great poetry, pervaded by the texture of transcendence, or, in Pound’s words, in the presence both of *melopoeia* – the dance of the intellect to *the rhythm of the music of words* – and *logopoeia* – *the dance of the intellect among words*. It seeks the memorable quality and universal character of great poetry in its concern with fundamental issues – i.e., those essential questions pertaining to humankind in its entirety. But great poetry does not easily surrender to absolute scrutiny, it remains indecipherable to a certain extent; conclusive interpretive strategies prove inadequate in the face of a poem like this. This means that the poem is altogether self-sufficient, a self-contained entity, a self-explanatory artefact, needing no preface, elucidatory footnotes, or critical commentaries. Everything else (including this critical appraisal) turns out to be

⁹² Peter Sanger’s essay was published in the *Antigonish Review* (Antigonish, Nova Scotia) 85–86 (Spring/Summer 1991): 151-169.

⁹³ See Elsa Linguanti’s essay “Allo-Fanie: I Poeti Canadesi Della West Coast”, published in *Letterature d’America. Rivista trimestrale* 2.7 (Primavera 1981): 123-153. Linguanti explores the poetry of the Canadian West Coast from 1961 to 1981, focussing especially on the work of Earl Birney, George Bowering, and Bringhurst. See, in particular, page 149.

⁹⁴ Consider the closing lines of “The Snow Man”: “For the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, p. 10.

inevitably redundant in the end. However, Bringhurst gives us a long introduction, a foreword to the poem, in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), which gives us clues as to the place and the temporal conditions out of which the gnomic voice of this poem rises. Reading and interpreting “Hachadura” with this preliminary material in mind should ideally shed some light on an accurate understanding of this early masterpiece. Bearing these clues in mind might help us not to fall that easily into misinterpretation. In his foreword to the poem, Bringhurst translates the title as ‘hard axe’ and reveals that it was taken from the name of a village in El Salvador:

La Hachadura, “Hard Axe,” is the name of a village in Ahuachapán, El Salvador, to which this poem bears in my own mind certain tonal and temporal affiliations. The piece is offered, however, as music, not as cartography. For listening; not, like a map or a road sign, for reading. [...] La Hachadura, when I saw it last, was a simple church reeking of crucifixion, with some satellite huts and houses sheltering hungry people in a deforested, sunleached sun. A little ways distant was, and is, a military prison as infamous as any in the hemisphere.⁹⁵

Though the title and the foreword prefaced to the poem in its 1982 version create in readers’ minds certain expectations in relation to potential historical implications (an oppressive South American regime), it is not necessary to read much further into the poem for us to realize that we are witnessing an intellectual feat of titanic proportions. The line of thinking prompted by the prefaced material is almost immediately proved to be wrong, as the opening stanza deals with such elemental things as air, stone, sea and bone. In his foreword, Bringhurst does certainly point out that “This is not a poem *about* El Salvador, however much I ought to have written one.” The author addresses here the perennial question of the moral responsibilities the poet ought to assume in the face of the horror and the injustice of the world – “How can a man make music in the face of these preoccupations? A durable question. How, given the chance, can he do otherwise?” And yet “the ruined landscape of El Salvador as I knew it, years ago, before the present guerrilla war” is somehow lingering in the background, informing the poet’s *landscape of nothingness*, and, through an imaginative *tour de force*, that ruined landscape becomes all potential places on Earth.⁹⁶ We resemble one another much more than we might at first think; the same blood runs through the veins of humankind since the beginning of the human adventure on Earth – since that very moment when we began mindlessly to inflict pain on one another.

Thus, “Hachadura” is a generous gift for readers and a piece of music, not just because there is no narrative, no story unfolding throughout its twelve sections, no overt discursive progression or discernible logic inherent in its steady advancement toward nakedness in the self’s confrontation with the world, but also because Bringhurst manages to tessellate mouthfuls of resonant words that once uttered aloud cannot simply be blown away by the wind. In poetry there is sometimes a wisdom which is rare and precious. Sometimes we are fortunate enough to find wisdom and beauty hand in hand in the same

⁹⁵ Foreword to “Hachadura”, *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), p. 72.

⁹⁶ These are Bringhurst’s words in his foreword: “I thought, when I composed this piece, that the moral weather in El Salvador had nothing local about it: that it had gathered out of a heritage (exemplified by the European rape of the Americas), a condition (ignorance, hunger, despair) and a biology (soft flesh and sharp talons) which belongs acutely to us all. These several years later, the torture chambers are fuller, the tree cover is scarcer, the hungry are more numerous, and I see no reason to change my mind.” *Ibid.*, p. 72. *One single place becomes all places on Earth*: we witness the same analogical or metaphorical projection in *New World Suite no. 3* (2005), a complex polyphonic poem in which places far apart from one another come to be closely linked to one another by humanity’s obscure barbarism, voracious overexploitation of the available natural resources, and disrespect for Mother Earth.

poem – the wisdom in the truth found out about the ultimate nature of things, the beauty that the music of words breathe. In enumerating the themes that constitute the intimate network of “Hachadura”, Bringhurst’s words are crystal-clear:

One expects to find in a piece of absolute music the development of themes, not the progress of an argument – and the themes here must be obvious enough. They include, for instance, the theme that negation is basic: that we protrude into the nothingness, as Heidegger says – and, as Demokritos says, that it protrudes into us. They include also that story left us by the ancients, of a man too long away: a man who cannot go home any more than a circle can touch its center, and who is nonetheless determined to return. They include the theme of the sisterhood of life and non-life, even of non-life and divinity, and the theme of the death without and within us, the weaponry integral to us, which makes a true disarmament seem impossible. Death, our teeth and bones remind us, is departure and return.⁹⁷

In tracing the earliest critical responses to “Hachadura”, it is surprising to find out that critics reviewing the poem in the 1970s were not truly enthusiastic about this masterpiece, one of the central poems in Bringhurst’s literary oeuvre. Contrary to our expectations, “Hachadura” was not acclaimed as the masterpiece it indubitably is in the early critical responses by named and unnamed reviewers. An anonymous review of *Bergschrund* published in *Choice* in September 1976 is worth quoting in full for the light it sheds on the multiple layers or strands of tradition that come into the making of this poetry volume:

The title of Bringhurst’s latest volume of poetry, *Bergschrund*, indicates certain elements essential to its contents. First, it is a word unfamiliar to the common reader. A great many of the words Bringhurst uses share in this quality and are, in addition, sometimes awkward, as in the first line “chitin and calcareous accretions.” Second, it is a word from a special discipline, geology, which Bringhurst draws upon for many of his poetic analogies. Of the five parts of the volume, the first (utilizing geology as a mode) and the third (drawing on the Old Testament) are the most successful. Here the language and thought flow and intermingle. Ideas are original, as well. The second part (recreating ancient Greek philosophers) seems labored, and the fifth (a more random experimental group) is often cute or overly clever. *The fourth section, one long poem entitled “Hachadura,” left this reviewer unmoved.* Overall, then, Bringhurst seems a spotty but original poet struggling to find his best voice.⁹⁸ [Italics mine.]

In a review of several books (including Bringhurst’s *Bergschrund*) by Raymond J. Smith entitled “Poetry Chronicle”, the reviewer insists on the astonishing presence of edges in the poet’s book: “The title, a geological term denoting a large glacial crevasse that separates the stationary from the moving ice, points to the recurring geological imagery of the book and suggests the poet’s concern with fissures, edges, blades, especially in the long, richly lyrical, meditative poem “Hachadura”.”⁹⁹ In “The Holes in the Stone”, a review also of *Bergschrund*, William Meads does not give much thought or devote much space to the poem. All he has to say about the poem he summarizes in sparse though luminous words: ““Hachadura” presents the detailed anatomy of Nothing – not for its own sake, but as a means of dressing the edge.”¹⁰⁰ And in “Bringhurst’s Range: Essential Information”, Jane

⁹⁷ Foreword to “Hachadura”, *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), p. 72.

⁹⁸ Anonymous review of *Bergschrund*, published in *Choice* 13.7 (September 1976): 815.

⁹⁹ Review by Raymond J. Smith entitled “Poetry Chronicle”, published in *The Ontario Review. A North American Journal of the Arts* (Windsor, Ontario) 4 (Spring/Summer 1976): 104-110. See page 108.

¹⁰⁰ William Meads, “The Holes in the Stone”, in *Kayak* (Santa Cruz, California) 44 (February 1977): 60-65. See, in particular, page 64.

Munro also emphasizes the concept of “nothing”, which is central to a proper understanding of “Hachadura”: “Nothing, the grail of this age, is no simple negation in *Bergschrund*. Like other important concepts in Bringham’s metaphysics, the nothings in these poems are specified.”¹⁰¹ Thus, “Hachadura” tries hard at getting tantalizingly close to an irreducible core of meaning embedded in the word “nothingness”, which is univocal and polysemic at the same time – semantic univocity and plurality of meaning becoming undistinguishable at some point in the poem.

But for Bringham, drawing on musical analogies in his 1982 foreword to the poem, “Hachadura” is a “chaconne for a solo intelligence in twelve fragments”. In this sense, this long poem belongs somehow among Bringham’s early monologues (*Deuteronomy* 1974, *Jacob Singing* 1977 and *The Stonecutter’s Horses* 1979), and it also anticipates the coming of the sonata in three movements which *Tzubaalem’s Mountain* (1982) is, and the more complex experiments in polyphony accomplished in *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986), *Ursa Major* (2003 / 2009) and *New World Suite No. 3* (2005). “Hachadura” is a multilayered, complex text: it is a sacred text written in gnomic, at times prophetic, transparent language, meant to trigger a profound understanding of the world in readers’ minds; it is a meta-poem when placed side by side with Wallace Stevens’s “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”, which is a pervasive presence throughout the entire composition; and it is a philosophical poem concerned with the insights into reality by Empedokles, Lucretius, and Heidegger. Therefore, by the end of the poem we readers emerge out of “Hachadura” changed by what we have learnt about the nature of the world. What we have gained from this experience is the pleasure achieved in peace, the freshness of a unique and irreplaceable moment in time, or out of time.

It might be wise to stop a while and focus on the ultimate sources of “Hachadura”. Two brilliant essays have been written about Bringham’s poems: John Whatley’s essay entitled “Readings of Nothing: Robert Bringham’s *Hachadura*”¹⁰², published in *Canadian Literature* 122-23 (Autumn/Winter 1989): 108-122, and Peter Sanger’s “Poor Man’s Art: On the Poetry of Robert Bringham”, published in the *Antigonish Review* (Antigonish, Nova Scotia) 85–86 (Spring/Summer 1991): 151-169, which has already been mentioned above. Both still constitute the best critical appraisals of “Hachadura” to date; both contain luminous insights into the sources and meaning of this long, richly meditative poem. In our critical interpretation of Bringham’s poem, we will be constantly making references to both essays, while trying to fill in the interpretive gaps they left behind. Where Whatley’s and Sanger’s readings stop, we venture a full interpretation of “Hachadura” here. Whereas John Whatley explores the complex parallelisms between “Hachadura” and Wallace Stevens’s well-known poem “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” (which is a source of quotation and allusion throughout Bringham’s sequence), as well as the subtle way in which Bringham turns the word “nothing” into a vortex of complex meanings, Peter Sanger seems more concerned to analyze how Lucretius and Heidegger’s philosophical notions are somehow lingering in the background of the poem¹⁰³. To these three poet-philosophers, another name must be added – that of Empedokles –, the Presocratic philosopher explicitly mentioned in section VII of “Hachadura”.

¹⁰¹ Jane Munro’s “Bringham’s Range: Essential Information”, published in *CVII [Contemporary Verse Two]* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81): 38-41, includes a review of *Bergschrund*, *Jacob Singing* and *The Stonecutter’s Horses*, as well as a partial account of an interview with Robert Bringham. See page 39 for Munro’s comment on “nothing”.

¹⁰² Of Whatley’s essay, Sanger says that it is “one of the best, in fact, to have been published about a contemporary Canadian poet”. See “Poor Man’s Art: On the Poetry of Robert Bringham”, *Antigonish Review* (Antigonish, Nova Scotia) 85–86 (Spring/Summer 1991): 157.

¹⁰³ Peter Sanger says that “Whatley does not identify two writers additional to Stevens as forces in “Hachadura”. [...] They are Heidegger and Lucretius.” See “Poor Man’s Art: On the Poetry of Robert Bringham”, p. 158.

Now, all of them are connected to one another in curiously subtle ways: Empedokles wrote the poem *Peri phuseōs* (*On Nature*); Lucretius, who admired Empedokles and his hexametric poetry, wrote *De rerum natura*, which has the same title as Empedokles' (and Epicurus') work and dismisses Empedokles' ideas about the ultimate nature of reality; Heidegger admired ancient philosophy, especially that of the Presocratics; and Robert Bringhurst admired all three philosophers – Empedokles, Lucretius and Heidegger. There are but obvious reasons that account for his admiration for the old masters of the past. In his sequence devoted to the elegant and sharp philosophical systems of the Presocratics – the sequence born with the publication of the 1974 broadside entitled *Pythagoras*, later incorporated into the chapbook *Eight Objects* in 1975, expanded into “The Old in their Knowing” in *The Beauty of the Weapons* in 1982, and made into a separate book in *The Old in Their Knowing* in 2005 –, Bringhurst devotes two poems (“Empedokles: Seven Fragments” and “Empedokles' Recipes”) to the Greek philosopher that Matthew Arnold so masterfully portrays in “Empedokles on Etna”. On the other hand, in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), he speaks of *the great poem of Lucretius*, which he admires not just for its technical accomplishment but also for its intellectual prowess.¹⁰⁴ Heidegger's philosophy, one of the most important intellectual summits of the 20th century, is also central to Bringhurst's thinking. It was probably from Heidegger that he learnt to love the Presocratics' thinking (both their philosophy and their poetry, for they were poet-philosophers) and that he started to view reality from an altogether different stance – one that harmonized a beautifully inquisitive mind with sharp linguistic eloquence and emotional detachment. Needless to say, like Pound and Eliot, Wallace Stevens is a powerful influence on the early poems of Bringhurst, at a point in his literary career in which he was coming to terms with the literary heritage of Modernism and doing his best to find a poetic voice of his own.

At this point, we begin to see a latent paradox beneath Bringhurst's poem. On the one hand, there is the weight of tradition, the complex network of allusions to ancient philosophical thinking and, on the other, there is the irresistible drive toward a cleansing of the senses, toward a new mode of consciousness not marred by what has been said and thought in the past. No doubt “Hachadura” unites several strands of thinking from the masters of the past. The voices of poets and philosophers like Empedokles, Lucretius, Heidegger and Wallace Stevens are powerfully heard and interwoven in the verse lines of this long meditative poem, which is found in Part IV of *Bergschrund* and roughly in the middle of *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982). The teachings and lessons of the ancestors become indistinguishable from Bringhurst's own mode of thinking: by a most curious alchemy he appropriates or assimilates what these sages have to teach him and then he produces his own message in the memorable form of a poem which is truly a complex network of allusions, an original piece of music, and an appealing aesthetic challenge to the reader's intellect.

So Bringhurst's poetry is strongly allusive, like that of the Modernist masters that preceded him in time and set a model of excellence for his poetic achievement. Unravelling the network of complex allusions and references in his poems is by no means an easy task, but poses an epistemological challenge instead that is not without its pleasures and intellectual rewards. As John Whatley suggests in his essay, in Bringhurst's craft of rendering the past, “the Presocratic texts, the Old Testament, the writings of the Zen masters... mark out the arcanum from which he draws his imagery.”¹⁰⁵ Such ancient spirits

¹⁰⁴ Bringhurst, “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation, in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, p. 104.

¹⁰⁵ John Whatley's essay entitled “Readings of Nothing: Robert Bringhurst's *Hachadura*”, *Canadian Literature* 122-23 (Spring/Summer 1989): 108.

in the history of Western philosophy as those of Pythagoras, Parmenides or Empedokles, or such biblical figures as Noah, Moses or Jacob, or such Oriental sages as Dogen, Hakuin or the Buddhist philosopher-poet Saraha, are shown to have created sharply elegant systems of thought, or to have gained sharp insights into the essence of reality. It is only a matter of intellectual integrity and moral honesty that Bringhurst should rescue these tattered fragments of wisdom, these sharpened words from the past, from oblivion, and render them relevant in the modern world, for the spiritual benefit and enlightenment of his contemporary fellow human beings. After all, Robert Bringhurst is “an intellectual poet with a stubborn and erudite sense of history and a very conscious technique”¹⁰⁶, a poet dwelling on intellectual heights that are not easily accessible to everyone. And his ability to bring into this long poem such a wealth of references and allusions is indicative of his familiarity with the precious legacy central to the Western tradition.

II · CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

Sections I, II & III of “Hachadura”

It should come as no surprise to find a poem like “Hachadura”, heavily indebted to Wallace Stevens, early in Bringhurst’s literary career. Stevens’s work is somehow unique in that it explores the interaction of reality and what humans can make of reality in their minds. Though it sold fewer than a hundred copies, *Harmonium* (1923), his first book, received favourable critical notices; it was reissued in 1931 and in 1947. For the first time Stevens introduced the imagination-reality theme that occupied his creative lifetime, making his work so unified that he considered three decades later calling his collected poems “The Whole of Harmonium”. Stevens’s poetic output has a rare compactness to it that is strongly reminiscent of Bringhurst’s poetic enterprise.¹⁰⁷ Stevens displayed his most dazzling brilliance in his first book; he later tended to relinquish surface lustre for philosophical rigour. In *Harmonium* appeared such crucial poems as “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”, “Sunday Morning”, “Peter Quince at the Clavier”, “Sea Surface Full of Clouds”, “The Comedian as the Letter C”, and Stevens’s own favourites, “Domination of Black” and “The Emperor of Ice-Cream”. In the 1930s and early 1940s, the theme of the relation of the poet, or man of imagination, to society, was to reappear, although not to the exclusion of others, in Stevens’s *Ideas of Order* (1935), *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), and *Parts of a World* (1942). *Transport to Summer* (1947) incorporated two long sequences that had appeared earlier: “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction” and “Esthétique du Mal”, in which he argues that beauty is inextricably linked with evil. *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950) was followed by his *Collected Poems* (1954), which earned him the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. A volume of critical essays, *The Necessary Angel*, appeared in 1951. After Stevens’s death, Samuel French Morse edited *Opus Posthumous* (1957), including poems, plays, and prose omitted from the earlier collection.

As pointed out above, Wallace Stevens’s “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”, a long poem in twelve sections first published in *Harmonium* in 1923, constitutes a constant framework of reference for “Hachadura”. If we place both poems side by side, a complex

¹⁰⁶ John Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁰⁷ Bringhurst resembles the Modernist master also in this issue: his poetry is a titanic *work in progress*; his many poems are the expression of one big poem with subtle ramifications. Or to put it differently: his whole *oeuvre* is a huge tree, and his poems and essays are boughs and leaves leaning towards the sun of beauty and perfection.

network of allusions to Stevens's poem comes to light. Reading both poems in conjunction, the parallelisms and connections proliferate in an astonishing measure. As John Whatley points out, "Both poems have twelve sections and each of Bringhurst's stanzas or verse paragraphs extends or develops imagery found in *Le Monocle*. The allusions and borrowings are so numerous that *Le Monocle* must be one of the steady contexts for "Hachadura.""¹⁰⁸ In his 1982 foreword to *The Beauty of the Weapons*, the poet announces that

Many of the motives, though none of the themes, are filched from a very different and apparently joyful work by Wallace Stevens. The purpose of this theft, if it was not mere covetousness and venality, was, I suppose, to test the structural analogy to music – for the poem has, if I am not mistaken, no narrative, no program, any more than Bartók's First Piano Concerto or one of John Lewis's jazz fugues has a program. It is a chaconne for solo intelligence in twelve fragments.¹⁰⁹

In section VI of "Hachadura" we find an explicit address to Wallace Stevens, who turns out to be a pervasive presence throughout the whole poem indeed. In the first version of the poem published in *Poetry* (1975) and in *Bergschrund* the same year, the allusion was quite clear and straightforward, not so much in *The Beauty of the Weapons*, where it appears a bit hidden: "My Connecticut uncle stares into his manicured / thumbnail, thinking of his Riviera uncle's / smoked-glass monocle. A one-eyed sun goggle, / halfway useful in the lethal roselight." However, in verse section VI of the 1975 version, the title of Stevens's "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" is played with more openly: "Ton ongle, ton ongle, plutôt que ton monocle, Uncle / Wallace. Or a one-eyed sun-goggle, / halfway useful in the lethal roselight." Here, "the French pun clearly gives a set of hidden claws or nails (*ongle*) to Stevens."¹¹⁰ These are, by the way, the only significant textual differences between the 1975 version and subsequent versions of the text, as explained above.

Robert Bringhurst's ambitious poem begins with simple words that hide an undeniable profundity of thought. As a matter of fact, section I of "Hachadura" is structured around three distinct movements for the mind (in Bringhurst's words, the poem is *a chaconne for a solo intelligence in twelve fragments*, after all). The very first movement leaves no room for indifference on the reader's part, as it utters simple truths related to the self's confrontation with nothingness:

There is a nothing like the razor
edge of air, another

like the tongued pebbles, syllables
of sea-wind and sea-colour and

another and another like the salt
hide drying inward, eating

in through the underbelly of the bone,
the grain

¹⁰⁸ John Whatley, *ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

¹⁰⁹ Foreword to "Hachadura", *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), p. 73. In this Bringhurst reminds us of Eliot's famous words: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different." This is exactly what Bringhurst does with Stevens's poem in composing "Hachadura" – partly a creative response to the American poet's piece, partly a completely original composition that anticipates much of the author's mature work he was later to accomplish.

¹¹⁰ John Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 109.

of the sea-eaten iron, and the open
lattice of the wave.

In the first movement of section I of “Hachadura” Bringham is drawing *an anatomy of nothingness*. In his attempt to define the nothingness in the world, the poet masterfully arranges a series of elements drawn from Nature (air, pebbles, hide, iron and wave), out of which his own poetry is made. The self is confronted with reality as if for the first time. And the world is presented as it is, in a state of purity, unpolluted by human perception as it were. Hence the pervading tone is one of utter impersonality and objectivity, so that whereas the poetic voice and self are progressively erased, *das Sein* (to use a Heideggerian term) un-conceals itself, comes to light. Readers are plunged back into an elemental world where *die Natur spricht*, or so appear to suggest such constellations of words as *tongued pebbles* and *syllables of sea-wind and sea-colour*. The world is a world of meaning where everything speaks a language of its own; humankind in antiquity, living on closer and healthier terms with the natural world, must have probably understood those meaningful signs (*signatura rerum*) things are for sure. Given the myth-making habit of humankind in its earliest stages, it is not difficult to understand why human beings had a much more innocent perception of the world. There were gods and goddesses to be seen everywhere, hidden in the trees, in the rivers and in the mountains. Earth was home, after all, and life was sacred. These are but snapshots or glimpses of a pristine state of life – that of pre-literate, pre-industrial, prelapsarian societies – we gain throughout the first movement of the poem. The key word has already been uttered – *nothing*. Sections I, II and III of “Hachadura” elaborate on this nothingness to build a complex vortex of meanings.

In “Hachadura”, “to test the structural analogy to music”¹¹¹, Bringham resorts to Stevens’s “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”, so that the former becomes a palimpsest beneath which echoes from the latter can be heard from time to time. John Whatley is absolutely right when he points out that “a nexus [between both poems] seems to be the word “nothing”; Bringham has seen possibilities in this word that Stevens only suggests.”¹¹² In the opening lines of Bringham’s poem, there is a most curious modulation of the word, which looks like a response to the “no’s” and “nothings” in the first stanza of Stevens’s poems.¹¹³ When placed side by side with Bringham’s poem, Wallace Stevens’s “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” opens on a completely different note. Harold Bloom, one of the most lucid minds that have set about interpreting Stevens’s difficult poems, suggests that the “Mother of heaven” refers to the imagination¹¹⁴ and that the stanza “begins the painful interrogation of a trope in which the imagination is figured as a mistress who had once loved Stevens but who is now rejecting his advances. This ironic self-reflection is continued throughout *Le Monocle*, and underscores a fading potency of poetic imagination.”¹¹⁵ For Bloom, the stanza questions the power of poetry and also “one of the major romantic tropes: it questions the power of the “clashed edges” of poetic words to “kill,” to vanquish opponents or convince others, to create and destroy worlds, or to alter social forms.”¹¹⁶ From this reasoning, Whatley deduces that

¹¹¹ Foreword to “Hachadura”, *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), p. 73.

¹¹² John Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 110.

¹¹³ See Wallace Stevens’s “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”, I, 1-4: “Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds, / O sceptre of the sun, crown of the moon, / There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing, / Like the clashed edges of two words that kill.” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, p. 13.

¹¹⁴ H. Bloom, *The Poems of Our Climate*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 37.

¹¹⁵ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 110.

¹¹⁶ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 110.

... the focus of Bringhurst's first use of "nothing" becomes a little clearer. It is as if Stevens's mockery had been interpreted as saying: "I am worried that despite the beauty and power I once felt in it, poetry, in the end, could be ineffective, a nothing, a void, at least unequal to age and mortality..." and Bringhurst, or his persona, has quickly risen up to defend his art. The assertion for poetry is made by realigning, turning, remaking the meaning of Stevens's word "nothing" so that it gradually becomes active, absorbing all the force and edge of the dispersals, insinuations, and infinite numbers of nature.¹¹⁷

In Bringhurst's hands, in the wider context of a poetics of negation, the word "nothing" becomes a portentous word and it takes on an amazing richness of meaning, the layers of which cumulatively create a complex cluster of concepts as the poem unfolds. As Whatley brilliantly explains, "the repetitious use of simile [...] gradually makes a word having no physical referent, a "no-thing" into a substantive, something almost tangible or concrete" and Bringhurst's poetry comes to have "the force or energy of a weapon."¹¹⁸ In other words, the infinite and inexhaustible plurality of reality is reduced to just a single, all-encompassing word: "nothing". Bringhurst seems to be making the point that a poetics of nothingness and austerity is still possible, feasible, even today. This is a poetics of negation that finds in nothingness, in *the nothing that is*, a potential richness of meaning, or an irreducible source of meaning, and an objective *materia poetica* for Bringhurst's relevant utterances. Out of the poorness of nothingness, memorable poetry, full of wisdom, is born into the world. On the other hand, nothingness is also associated to nakedness, to simplicity, to unadorned truth, to fundamental issues, which is, in the end, what Bringhurst's poetry is all about. And the "nothing that is", that is to say the unmediated objective world of human and non-human life, invites to an unmediated freshness of perception, clean of all culturally accrued presuppositions, of all that has been said and thought in the past. Far in the background there is an attentive naked self responding to reality with a maximum of intensity; that self is poor but no less responsive and attentive to what is going on in the world. There is a clean, transparent world of spirit – firmly embedded in the utter materiality of things – that transcends purely human subjectivity. This is the ultimate message Bringhurst appears to communicate to readers.

According to Whatley, the self speaking in the opening lines of "Hachadura" has been almost erased by the end of the first stanza. It could not be otherwise in Bringhurst's poetics: he is not interested in subjectivity or self-expression, but rather in making an impersonal poetry characterized by an astonishing transparency (consider the poet's words in "The Identity Moving", quoted above) and an irresistible and inevitable pregnancy of thought. As a result, the poem is difficult to understand, and its ultimate meaning is impossible to pin down. There is not an obvious unfolding logic to "Hachadura", though if we care to listen attentively, a discernible pattern makes itself visible. No longer in a psychological present, Bringhurst takes readers back into an elemental world and time, or no-time. In the opening stanza of section I the first images "present themselves in so objective a way we can almost hear a bit of stone-age flint being broken or chipped or see something like an ancient spear or arrow in flight. Behind the answer to Stevens, we are allowed to glimpse, then, a something more primitive than sophisticated word play: the origin of a poetic *techné*, a very ancient use of irony and word craft."¹¹⁹ In other words, we are back in a time when a prelapsarian language still offers the possibility of conveying an

¹¹⁷ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

¹¹⁸ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 111.

¹¹⁹ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 111.

unmediated rendering of things, words are reliable tools for human knowledge, effective weapons in the hands of humans.

To Whatley, the key to the question is the “clashed edge” of a carefully placed line break: “*There is a nothing like the razor / edge of air.*” “The deliberateness of this enjambment signals technique”, for it is “a neat reworking of the idea that the poetic word has in Stevens’s phrasing, a “clashed edge”.”¹²⁰ At this point, Bringhurst’s poem turns metapoetic for a fraction of time, as it were. Of course, the notion of the weaponry of words finds strong resonances in the imagery about the craft of poetry found in Bringhurst’s shorter lyrics, such as “The Beauty of the Weapons”, “Song of the Summit” (“dressed edge of air”), “Stone-Lathe and Wing” (where a parallelism is drawn between poetic craft and the cutting of stone), “Pythagoras” (“the clarity of the clean talon”) and “Four Glyphs” (a short sequence rich in images of sharpened stone, light and sky). There is a common substratum to all these images, according to Whatley. He says that they point to “ancient philosophy and myth as “word weapons” poised against antagonistic forces like the “darkness that can be drunk” in “Pythagoras”, or the “death... by darkness” of “Three Deaths”.” What is at stake in the first lines of “Hachadura” is nothing more than “a mingling of images of primitive artefacts and symbolic connections with myth, Homer, the transcendent and critical consciousness of the early Greeks.”¹²¹ Somehow the whole of the history of humankind has been condensed in a handful of resonant lines, in an “an anthropologist’s sequence of *Homo Faber*: through a stone, bone and hide age, through an iron age and ending with a lattice of wave-like “clashed edges”.”¹²² Once upon a time human beings used to make things with their own hands, using the materials their environment had to give them, but then it was the mind that started to make things (or ideas) of its own with the aid of a much more subtle material called *words*, which are the basic stuff in which philosophy and science and poetry find their expression so as to be communicated to other human beings. It is only natural that the closing section of the poem (section XII) should mention in a row the sequence of the four ages of man: “*pitch-black, blood-colour, piss-colour, colourless.*”

In the second movement of section I of “Hachadura”, we are witnessing an important shift, which is linguistically marked by the connector ‘moreover’. The shift is from the myth-making attitude of ancient man (*mythos*) to the irruption of philosophical thinking and speculation into the world (*logos*). Or to put it differently: the irruption of the self and of the inquisitive rational mind as represented by Eurytos and his attempt at explaining the world in purely mathematical terms, given the Pythagoreans’ love of numbers and their belief in the omnipotence of mathematics as an explanatory or elucidatory tool:

There is the nothing, moreover,
at which Eurytos never
quite arrives, tallying
the dust with the four-finger
abacus
unsheathed from the flesh of his hand.

At this point, the right question to ask is, *who is this man?* In his glossary to *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), Bringhurst explains who Eurytos is: “A Presocratic mentioned in

¹²⁰ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 111.

¹²¹ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 112.

¹²² J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 112.

Theophrastos and Aristotle. He tried, it seems, more literally than anyone before or since, to picture the world in numerical terms.” Somewhere else, we learn that Eurytos (c. 450 BC), “a later Presocratic philosopher attached to the Pythagoreans through his master Philolaus [...], is thought to have applied geometrical theory in the form of patterns of coloured pebbles to the study of the human spirit.”¹²³ But what point is being made with this juxtaposition of Stevens and Eurytos (and Empedokles, Lucretius and Heidegger in the larger context of the whole poem) in the narrow space of just one verse section? “Eurytos was a member of the group of early Greek philosophers who began to question the prevailing Greek rituals and cosmology and who are thought to mark the transition of our culture from myth consciousness to the beginnings of rationalism.”¹²⁴ *Eureka!* Now the shift from *mythos* in the first movement of the section to the *logos* in the second movement is accomplished by the simple economy of what is in a name (‘Eurytos’) and what this philosopher represents.

With the appearance of Eurytos in “Hachadura”, the connection of this long poem with the poems in the Presocratics sequence begun with the publication of the broadside entitled “Pythagoras” (1974) (Bringhurst’s magnificent portrait of Pythagoras’ system) becomes crystal-clear. Eurytos stands for or symbolizes the rational explanation of reality, and the search after a different kind of wisdom, after order, “unstable or at any rate in motion”, for human beings have produced different explanations (elegant systems of thought) on the nature of things throughout the history of humankind, none of them being definitive or conclusive. The Pythagorean number theory reduces the manifold and multifaceted reality into a totality capable of rationally accounting for the implicit order in the cosmos (*the concretion of order inherent in one / of the innumerable / forms of such a number*). What Eurytos discovers in the world is *mathematical and moral infinity*¹²⁵ in the end, suggests Whatley. Still the focus is somehow on the world outside, not on subjectivity or self-expression. What Bringhurst rejects is precisely a poetry grounded in the pleasure of self-aggrandizement, narcissism and self-projection; Whatley speaks of *a self focused on an outside*¹²⁶. What Bringhurst advocates instead is a poetry of impersonality and of purely objective entities adrift the immense beauty of a world unpolluted by human subjectivity. Eurytos finds in mathematics the perfect language to convey the mystery inherent in the cosmos; Bringhurst nourishes on the insights and findings of the sages of the past to tackle reality from a stance characterized by emotional detachment and objectivity.

In the closing movement of section I, Bringhurst appears to have followed nothingness and the mind as far into the darkness as they led him. Whatley suggests that these lines show us that “We have moved from the imagery of edges and fissures to imagery of lines. [...] Most of the preceding images seem to have been turned from language based in an outward sensation to a language of inwardness, desire and living motive; each outward perception having its roughly opposite number simmering in a dark interior.”¹²⁷ It seems to us that we are presented with a vision of the darkness of *not-knowing* in these lines:

darkness under the sunrise,
darkness in the hollow of the hand;

inside the spine the darkness, the darkness

¹²³ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 112.

¹²⁴ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

¹²⁵ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 119.

¹²⁶ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 114.

¹²⁷ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 114.

simmering in the glands;

the crumpled blade of darkness which is
lodged in every fissure of the brain;
the membrane
of the darkness which is always

interposed
between two surfaces when they close.

In some respects, darkness is the equivalent of nothingness, but the whole movement seems to be structured around some elemental dichotomies: nothing-everything, darkness-light and unknowing-knowing. Whereas the mythical thinking of the first movement and the philosophical thinking of Eurytos of the second movement are two sides of the same coin – which is the inquisitive mind of human beings faced with the grandeur and mystery of the world –, the closing lines of section I represent the darkness from which myth and philosophy protect us. There is darkness in the world (outside the body), there is darkness inside the body (*in the hollow of the hand, inside the spine, in the glands, in every fissure of the brain*), and there is darkness in the world of objects (*between two surfaces when they close*). As for the exact interpretation of these closing lines, Peter Sanger emphasizes the fact that they somehow evoke Lucretius' conception of void:

... the relationship of Bringhurst's ... *darkness which is always / interposed / between two surfaces when they close* to the Lucretian conception of void. As Lucretius wrote: ... since there is void in things begotten, solid matter must exist about this void, and no thing can be proved by the reason to conceal in its body and have within it void, unless you choose to allow that that which holds it in is solid.¹²⁸

We are reminded of Blake's words in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "without contraries there is no progression." Light and darkness intertwine with one another and constitute the texture of the world. But Bringhurst's words point to something else beyond the Lucretian void and beyond themselves: they remind us of the possibility of poetic statement beyond the inner world of self. In this respect, he appears to be closely following Eliot's well-known words as he stated that "the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" in his ground-breaking essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919).

Section II of "Hachadura" opens with the image of a mysterious bird; we are confronted with the image of a strange bird flying through moonlight and sunlight:

The bird is the color of gunmetal
in sunlight, but it is midnight;
the bird the color of gunmetal
in sunlight is flying
under the moon.

¹²⁸ See Peter Sanger, "Poor Man's Art: On the Poetry of Robert Bringhurst", p. 162. Sanger claims that the source for his quote is Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, ed., annot., and trans. by H.A.J. Munro, 4th edition, George Bell and Sons: London, 1908, 3 vols., vol. III, p. 13.

“The bird is a bit enigmatic until we see that a similar image in the second verse of *Le Monocle* has also been turned inside out.”¹²⁹ As a matter of fact, the poetry of Wallace Stevens is pregnant with birds; consider, for instance, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”¹³⁰. But whereas Stevens’s bird is an archetypal figure and exquisite symbol for the lyric poet, a bird that “will sing in an inner, fabulous region of mind and if we hear his music we will hear it with a pure aesthetic pleasure within the imagination”, Bringhurst’s bird “looks quite alien in its more basic and lethal hue”.¹³¹ The bird is “the color of gunmetal”, not red, like Stevens’s:

Bringhurst’s symbolic colouring is drawn from perhaps the most impersonal and technological area one could imagine, the rifle or gun. These colours symbolize pure, lethal technique and are set directly against Stevens’s aesthetic pleasure in creating imaginary worlds. Rather than a symbol of beauty, we have another symbol of irony and a widening field of interplay between inside and outside: between romantic nightingales and real birds, birds standing for beauty and birds striving for survival, imaginary skies and real skies, poetic selves and the not-self.¹³²

According to Whatley, beyond the bird episode in the first stanza in section II of “Hachadura”, the relation between Bringhurst’s “Hachadura” and Stevens’s poem becomes ambiguous and the cross-references become bafflingly complex and ethereal through a gradually widening ironic interplay with Stevens’s “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”. In the second stanza *meridians* are mentioned with a metaphorical intention in mind. What are meridians for? They stand for order; they are imaginary lines that render the world manageable and comprehensible for human beings. In addition, the knotting of the meridians points to a reconciliation of opposites – a reconciliation of inside and outside, of inner self and outer world is being somehow enacted. At their knotting and intersection, the perceiving self and the world outside come into close contact, merge into one another into a provisional order. Interestingly enough, the meridians are *knotted into nothing*. Whereas in Stevens’s poem the self abhors the vacuum of nothingness, the self in Bringhurst’s poem wilfully surrenders to the empty nothing that is.

We begin to see what the point Bringhurst is trying to make is all about. The word “nothing” has no referent at all; trying to picture it demands that we resort to figures of speech, for “nothing” can only be approximated, never ultimately reached or presented in a straightforward, visible image. As Whatley points out in his essay, “By fixing his symbol for poetry to such an inexpressible key term [*nothing*], Bringhurst is opening his language. [...] Bringhurst’s “nothingness” provides an *outside* for his language that is as objective and cold as the “not-self” found in the scientific perspective.”¹³³ Stylistically, the language becomes enigmatic, gnomic, and the sense of the lines becomes hermetic, just bordering on sense. But if we pay attention, the connections make themselves visible. The word “meridian” is crucial in this particular context. For Bringhurst, “the word demarks a further step away from self-concern. [...] The meridian is [...] in a region where it begins to “fray,” where

¹²⁹ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 114. These are Stevens’s words in his poem: “A red bird flies across the golden floor. / It is a red bird that seeks out his choir / Among the choirs of wind and wet and wing.” (II, 1-3) *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, London/Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984, p. 13.

¹³⁰ Bringhurst’s words are evocatively reminiscent of these in section I of Stevens’s poem: “Among twenty snowy mountains / The only moving thing / Was the eye of the blackbird.” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, p. 92.

¹³¹ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 114 and p. 115.

¹³² J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 115.

¹³³ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 116.

words take on multiple meanings, or become figurative because what is being perceived cannot be stated in conventional speech.”¹³⁴ Consider these lines, for instance:

Listen: the sounds are the sounds of meridians
trilling, meridians drawn to produce
the illusion of plectrum, tuning pegs and a frame,
or perhaps to produce Elijah’s
audition: the hide
of the silence curing,
tanning,
tightening into the wind.

In the following stanza a prophet appears. The language turns also more prophetic or gnomic. The reference to Elijah is relevant here, as it sheds light on the quality of the language used by Bringhurst to evoke the mystery of meridians in stanza 2, which are literal and figurative at the same time. And who exactly was Elijah? Also spelled ‘Elias, or ‘Elia’, Elijah¹³⁵ is a Hebrew poet who ranks with Moses in saving the religion of Yahweh from being corrupted by the nature worship of Baal. Elijah’s name means “Yahweh is my God” and is spelled ‘Elias’ in some versions of the Bible. The story of his prophetic career in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reigns of King Ahab and Ahaziah is told in 1 Kings 17-19 and 2 Kings 1-2 in the Old Testament. Elijah’s deepest prophetic experience takes place on his pilgrimage to Mount Horeb (Sinai), where he learns that God is not in the storm, the earthquake, or the lightning. After receiving a divine visitation, this archaic figure learns that nature, far from being God’s embodiment, is not even an adequate symbol. God is not in the wind, earthquake or fire. And yet Elijah was able to listen to a small voice that told him God was alive and pervading the whole universe. Now we start to guess at the connections between Eurytos and Elijah and *the nothing that is*. Eurytos represents the philosophical stance towards the world; like Moses or Mohammed in “A Study for an Ecumenical Window”, Elijah is the embodiment of the visionary man, the prophet who sees into the grain of things and gains an enlightened vision of the world. As his perception of the world is that of a prophet, Bringhurst’s language at this point in the poem turns prophetic at times. Like Moses and Mohammed, Elijah represents a different stance before the awe-inspiring grandeur and beauty of the world, an attentive response to reality in its bare essentials.

Thus, Elijah represents one of the possible stances toward the exterior world outside the perceiving self: one capable of transcending appearance and the deluding surface of things. But his vision is not the only one. Counterpointing his mystic or enhanced vision of the world (*his isolate audition*, says Whatley), there is “an almost scientific description of a bird in flight.”¹³⁶ These are Bringhurst’s words:

Or the sounds are the sounds of the air opening
up over the beak and closing over the vane,
opening over the unmoving cargo slung
between the spine and the talon,
slung between the wingbone and the brain.

¹³⁴ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 116.

¹³⁵ See the entry on ‘Elijah’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 9, p. 5196. According to Whatley, “with the allusion to Elijah, the exterior which has been growing as the poem develops is now infinitely large, the self correspondingly small. This is the Elijah who was forced by his king and queen into the desert mountains for his open attacks on their illegal marriage.” *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹³⁶ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 118.

Being strongly reminiscent of such poems as “A Lesson in Botany” or “Anecdote of the Squid”, this almost zoological description reminds us “that millennia and the impersonal force of evolution were required to perfect a wing structure that could hold against space and gravity and against the “unmoving cargo” of the bird’s mass. The bird reminds us that what Elijah heard may have been only the lonely desert wind, the same sounds are made by a wing as it cuts alone through uncaring, godless space.”¹³⁷ In his love of precision, Bringhurst draws an accurate depiction of a bird in flight.

The first movement of “Hachadura” attains a climax in section III, which is something of a technical achievement, a miracle. It responds to Stevens’s opening lines in stanza III of “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”¹³⁸, where the poet is playing with the possibility of philosophic study as an alternative ground for the imagination in his quest after wisdom. Whatley sees Bringhurst’s section as “the culmination of the debate with Stevens over the origin and purpose of poetry” and as “something of a technical marvel”¹³⁹. Like Eliot and Pound before him, Bringhurst has no problem making straightforward statements, and when he does so it is with a high truth quotient, as happens to be the case in section III of “Hachadura”:

It is for nothing, yes,
this manicuring, barbering, this
shaving of the blade.

Nothing: that is that the edge should come
to nothing as continuously
and cleanly and completely as it can.

And the instruction
is given, therefore,
to the archer, sharpening

the blood and straightening
the vein: the same instruction
that is given to the harper:

Tap.
Strum the muscle.
Breathe.
And come to nothing.

Where Stevens’s stanza opens with a rhetorical question, Bringhurst’s opens with a vehement defence of poetry as a means to understand what is going on at all in the world. The tone is celebratory, one of exultation, for the *nothing* that the poet (or his persona) is talking about is a positive vortex of meaning, a creative force out of which a cleansed perception allows poetry to be born fresh into the world. *Nothing* is the ultimate goal the poet aims at. Substitute *poet* for *blade* and *poetry* for *edge*, and the meaning becomes clear. Bringhurst’s target is “the egoism of the poet who wants to “possess” or “repossess” a corrupt form of the imagination rather than recognise a clean “nothingness” as the ultimate

¹³⁷ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 118.

¹³⁸ Consider “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”, III, 1-3: “Is it for nothing, then, that old Chinese / Sat tittivating by their mountain pools / Or in the Yangtse studied out their beards?” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, p. 14.

¹³⁹ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 119.

source of his poetry.”¹⁴⁰ Thus, “Hachadura” moves from the initial images of weapons (section I) through darkness and a sinister, because all too real, bird (section II) to “an attempt to relocate the source of poetic imagery not in the self, but in the perception of an infinity outside the self”¹⁴¹ in section III – a perception of the world not tinged or contaminated by human subjectivity, opening an exterior that is the basic ground out of which poetry may spring fresh into the world.

Therefore, the same piece of advice is given to the archer and to the harper. The archer stands for the whole realm of weaponry, which is a vast pool from which Bringhurst draws similes and analogies for poetry, and the harper stands for music in a broad sense of the term. If poetry is a cold efficient weapon (let us recall the *weaponry integral to humans* Bringhurst mentions in the foreword to the 1982 version of the poem), fatal and effective, with the precision of a sharp knife (as in the author’s impressive essay on Haida poetry, *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*, 1999), and if it is also music (“Hachadura” is intended as a piece of music, after all, for listening, not for reading), a well-wrought composition of sharpened words and transparent musicality, then Bringhurst’s words begin to make sense. It is somehow possible to sharpen words in poetry to apprehend an ultimate core of meaning in reality. Similarly, it is possible for the archer to sharpen his blood and straighten his veins, and for the harper to strum the muscle. All three – poet, archer and harper – may well come to *nothing* in the end. Or, to put it differently, for Bringhurst, “the poet should sing in the harsh register of alienation. With “nothingness” as the ultimate ground for poetry no other motive (especially a corrupt or self-serving motive) is possible.”¹⁴² This is a sort of welcome dissolution or annihilation of the self in the face of the overwhelming presence of reality. In the background there are powerful echoes of the Modernists’ concern with poetry as breathing and music; echoes of the Modernists’ aim to achieve a salutary impersonality as announced by Eliot’s words on *the continual extinction of personality, an escape from personality* and the self in search after something grander and more universal, which is the world at large out there. These concerns inform Bringhurst’s words in section III, which resists ultimate interpretations and yet evokes a multitude of complex meanings crowding the mind all of a sudden. “Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood”, said Eliot, and this applies to much, if not all, of Bringhurst’s poetry – one marked by an impulse to remain memorable, which is of paramount importance in poetry. Thus, “Hachadura” represents the kind of poetry that, once read, refuses to leave the mind: the incantatory rhythm of its twelve-part pattern, the linguistic plainness and musical transparency of the words tessellated into its making, and the difficulty of the philosophical ideas being intertwined into the poem to suffuse a new life into the concept of *nothing*, all make this poem memorable and unforgettable, even if sense sometimes verges on obscurity and words do not manage to take us any further into a realm where they are no longer steadfast points of reference.

What we get to see in “Hachadura” is a *gradual enclosure of the self by the not-self*¹⁴³. This is self-evident in section III, which ultimately represents a climatic moment in the unfolding of the poem. Curiously enough, after section III the word “nothing” does not appear significantly again; it is in section VI that the word comes up again, though in a completely different context. Whatley claims that “grasping his sense of a “not-self” or

¹⁴⁰ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 119. Somewhere else, Whatley explains that, for Bringhurst, “poetic language must, as its fundamental gesture, reach out to try and present or picture “nothingness” even though this exterior will, by definition, remain absent. The poem must do this or he will fall into pride, and his poetry will become a mere projection of himself.” *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹⁴¹ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 117.

¹⁴² J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 118.

¹⁴³ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 119.

exterior for language is a good start in understanding Bringham's poetry as a whole."¹⁴⁴ As a matter of fact, Bringham's early volumes of poetry are all pervaded by an overwhelming sense of this "not-self" which constitutes the ultimate source of all poetry and wisdom. The dream of an unmediated vision through transparent poetic language – that seems to be Bringham's goal in this poem, and in much of his poetry. A vision not marred by subjectivity, a vision which does not refer to something beyond itself that would fulfil it. The fact that the poet nourishes himself on tradition, on the insights into reality of such biblical figures as Moses in *Deuteronomy* (1974) or Jacob in *Jacob Singing* (1977), on the teachings of the Presocratics in *The Old in Their Knowing* (2005) and the Oriental sages in *The Book of Silences* (2001), is indicative of the search after an atemporal, ahistorical wisdom and truth that is not marred by the vicissitudes of History. As Peter Sanger suggests,

... when Bringham invokes [...] by citation, translation and paraphrases the work of thinkers and poets such as Herakleitos, Empedokles, Lucretius, Holderlin [*sic*], Rilke and Char, he is praising equitable encompassing of poverty and truth in their work. Heidegger, a presence throughout Bringham's poems, designates the kind of encompassing which their language attempts with the term *logos*. [...] Heidegger's is a pre-Christian or post-Christian *logos* which [...] designates a kind of language separate from "discourse" and "speaking". It is a language which is based upon a *primal gathering principle*, which collects the *conflict of the opposites*, while maintaining *the full sharpness of their tension*.¹⁴⁵



Sections IV, V & VI of "Hachadura"

As Peter Sanger claims in his essay on Bringham's poetry, Heidegger and Lucretius constitute two further sources of inspiration for "Hachadura". We should add a third philosopher, Empedokles, who is explicitly mentioned in the seventh section of the poem. If we care to listen to Bringham's words attentively and if we care to read in between the lines, philosophical notions from these ancestors become a steady context of reference for this beautiful palimpsest. Sections I, II and III of the poem constitute a unity of their own within the twelve-part sequence in that they are constellated round the word *nothing*, which they seek to explore and define in detail. *Nothing* becomes a productive starting point for a poetic enterprise, Bringham's, which aims at recording the world from a detached stance, from a perspective marked by impersonality, objectivity and linguistic transparency. The whole enterprise is not meant just as an escape from narcissism and self-expression, but also as a truly epistemological opportunity to grasp the ultimate nature of things. What Whatley says about the remaining sections can be best summarized in his own words:

The essential pattern of "Hachadura" should now be clear; each of the remaining stanzas places Stevens's self-concerned, almost rococo, melancholy in relation to this "nothingness". By answering each of *Le Monocle's* questions with a look at this indifferent, impersonal exterior, the poetic self is brought to its true size and importance.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁴⁵ Peter Sanger, *ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁴⁶ J. Whatley, *ibid.*, p. 120.

“Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” remains a powerful framework and steady context for the interpretation of the remaining sections in “Hachadura”, but the more subtle and diffuse the references to Stevens’s poem become, the stronger the force and momentum Heidegger and Lucretius and Empedokles appear to gather. Thus, when placed side by side with stanza IV of “Le Monocle”¹⁴⁷, section IV of the poem makes the pattern of cross-references and allusion to Stevens crystal-clear: the only connection with Stevens’s poem is just one single word – *apple*. The sense of impersonality is enhanced by a depiction of a world that does not seem to care about a perceiving poetic self, and also by a style which is consistently focused on the *not-self*. Elsa Linguanti speaks of the impersonality of “Hachadura” in the following terms: “La poesia è priva di un io lirico e tuttavia cerca l’occasionale contatto con il lettore negli impratichi (“consider the magnetism of the bone”, “measure from the surface”) che appaiono a tratti, ma sembrano provenire da una voce profetica e fuori campo.”¹⁴⁸ Consider Bringham’s section, which is a jewel-like short lyric in its linguistic concision, brevity and pregnancy of ideas:

Consider the magnetism of bone,
the blood-magnetic
fleshfield eddying in
and out of the marrow
under the blood-flux in the vein.

The apple is the palpable
aura and hysteresis
of the seed, the tissue is
a proof of the polarity and necessary
coldness of the bone.

Quoting what Peter Sanger points out about Lucretius as one more nourishing source beneath “Hachadura” might help us better understand the section just quoted:

Besides Heidegger, the second revising, converting source of positive energy in “Hachadura” is [...] Lucretius’ poem, *De Rerum Natura*. From Lucretius (who was, like Bringham and Heidegger, a close reader of Herakleitos and Empedokles), Bringham has taken two principles. The first is that matter exists in a ceaseless process of transformation. The second is that matter exists in an intimate, active relationship with void. The effect of these principles further defines “Hachadura’s” recuperation of *nothing* and confutes Stevens’ replacement (to use a Heideggerian diagnosis) of *physics* (being) by *eidōs* (appearance).¹⁴⁹

Bringham’s section places the human body and the apple on one and the same continuum, one that stretches from the blood and bones of human beings (an inside) to the world of plants and vegetation (an outside). The sequence is on a scale from microscopic and elemental components in the human body (bone, flesh, blood) to the larger macrocosm or the universe as a whole as epitomized by just one single fruit. The apple is no random choice, of course. In the Christian tradition of our Western culture the apple is reminiscent of the tree of knowledge planted in the very centre of Eden, of which Adam and Eve, the first couple of human beings on Earth, ate, thus contravening Yahweh’s injunction not to. The rest of the story is too well-known. The ultimate cause of humankind’s fall can be

¹⁴⁷ Stevens, “Le Monocle”, IV, 5-8: “An apple serves as well as any skull / To be the book in which to read a round, / And is as excellent, in that it is composed / Of what, like skulls, comes rotting back to ground.” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, p. 14.

¹⁴⁸ Elsa Linguanti, *ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁴⁹ Peter Sanger, *ibid.*, p. 160.

traced back to that particular moment in time. But Lucretius was not a Christian author; quite on the contrary, he was strongly criticized by the fathers of the Church for centuries on account of his atheism. The implicit lesson seems to be that all creatures on Earth, living and non-living alike, are made of the same stuff, which in Lucretian terms can be reduced to atoms and the void.

As pointed out above, Bringhurst admires Lucretius, a philosopher with whose *De rerum natura*, Sanger suggests, the author's poems share some common ground. Lucretius represents the prototypical poet-philosopher of antiquity who Bringhurst finds so fascinating in his concern with poetry, science and philosophy at the same time. Like Parmenides and Empedokles before him, Lucretius lived in an era when Eliot's *dissociation of sensibility* had not yet taken place: they all were capable of approaching reality in a holistic manner, they were coming to terms with the universe as a complex *Gestalt* made of subtle connections and correlations. This partly accounts for the fact that they wrote philosophical poems, or lyric philosophy – theirs was a thinking and a singing of the world that harmonized both ideas and music, *melopoeia* and *logopoeia*, in Pound's terms. This also accounts for Lucretius' *magnum opus*, a six-book philosophical poem (otherwise labelled 'a didactic epic') on Epicurus' system of thought basically concerned with Epicurean physics. It was the first philosophical poem ever written in Latin, an intellectual feat which posed certain linguistic challenges, to say the least, at a time when Latin had no philosophic vocabulary.

At this point, it might be wise to go back in time and see what Lucretius had to teach us two millennia ago. Who was the man? And what was his intellectual achievement? A Latin poet and philosopher, Titus Lucretius Carus lived and died in the 1st century BCE. Speculation has it that he wrote his only extant work around the mid-century. Not much is known about his life, except from what little information can be lifted from his own work and from a letter by Cicero, written in 54 BCE, in which, addressing his brother, he speaks of the 'flashes of genius' and 'craftsmanship' of Lucretius' poem. He is universally known for his single, long hexameter poem *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), which survives virtually intact¹⁵⁰ and is the fullest extant statement of the physical theory of the Greek philosopher Epicurus – though it also alludes to his ethical and logical doctrines. The title of Lucretius' work is a translation of that of the chief work of Epicurus, *Peri physeōs* (*On Nature*), and also the title of the didactic epic of the pre-Socratic sage Empedokles, a pluralist philosopher of nature of whom Lucretius spoke with a degree of admiration comparable only to that with which he praised his master Epicurus.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ *De rerum natura* survived in two 9th-century manuscripts, known as O and Q, which were rediscovered by Poggio Bracciolini in 1417 and became the basis of the Renaissance editions. In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, where Bringhurst speaks of 'the great poem of Lucretius' (p. 109), the poet imagines the intellectual pleasure Bracciolini must have experienced upon encountering the valuable manuscripts. A similar kind of pleasure did Bringhurst experience upon finding in a library the first page of *Raven Travelling*, the poem of epic proportions composed by the great Haida poet Skaay and dictated to John Swanton in the late 19th century. Of course, Skaay also belongs among Parmenides, Empedokles, Lucretius and other poet-philosophers of Western and Oriental antiquity.

¹⁵¹ Of his much admired Epicurus, Lucretius says at 3.3-3.13 in his *De rerum natura*: "te sequor, o Graiae gentis decus, inque tuis nunc / ficta pedum pono pressis vestigia signis, / non ita certandi cupidus quam propter amores / quod te imitari aveo; quid enim contendat hirundo / cycnis, aut quid nam tremulis facere artubus haedi / consimile in cursu possint et fortis equi vis? / tu, pater, es rerum inventor, tu patria nobis / suppeditas praecepta, tuisque ex, inclute, chartis, / floriferis ut apes in saltibus omnia libant, / omnia nos itidem depascimur aurea dicta, / aurea, perpetua semper dignissima vita." See *On the Nature of Things*, translated by William Ellery Leonard: "O thee I follow, glory of the Greeks, / And set my footsteps squarely planted now / Even in the impress and the marks of thine – / Less like one eager to dispute the palm, / More as one craving out of very love / That I may copy thee! – for how should swallow / Contend with

The philosophical Epicurean system is presented in six books arranged in highly symmetrical patterns, beginning each with a highly polished proem or introduction. The poem's structure¹⁵² is as follows. Books I and II deal with the main principles of the atomic universe (atoms and void), refute the rival theories of the pre-Socratic cosmic philosophers Herakleitos (for whom fire was the ultimate essence of things), Empedokles (whose finite pluralism reduced reality to combinations of fire, air, water and earth), and Anaxagoras (who posited the notion of *infinite pluralism* as the ultimate basis of reality), and covertly attacks the Stoics. Book III demonstrates the atomic structure and mortality of the soul and ends with a triumphant sermon banishing the fear of death. Book IV describes the phenomena of the soul – the mechanics of sense perception, thought, and certain bodily functions – and condemns sexual passion. Book V describes the creation and working of this world and the celestial bodies and the evolution of life and human society (including the emergence of human language). Book VI explains remarkable cosmic phenomena of the earth and sky, in particular thunder and lightning. The poem ends with a description of the plague at Athens, a sombre picture of death contrasting with that of spring and birth in the invocation to Venus, with which it opened. And so the circle is now complete. As can be inferred from this brief outline of the argument of the six books, the sequence is one of ascending scale: the first pair of books deal with the microscopic world of atoms, the second with human beings, and the third with the cosmos as a whole.¹⁵³

swans or what compare could be / In a race between young kids with tumbling legs / And the strong might of the horse? Our father thou, / And finder-out of truth, and thou to us / Suppliest a father's precepts; and from out / Those scriven leaves of thine, renowned soul / (Like bees that sip of all in flowery wolds), / We feed upon thy golden sayings all – / Golden, and ever worthiest endless life.”

¹⁵² For a more detailed account of the argument in outline see the entry on ‘Lucretius’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 17, pp. 10198-10199: “(1) No thing is either created out of or reducible to nothing. The universe has an infinite extent of empty space (or void) and an infinite number of irreducible particles of matter (or atoms) – though their kinds are finite. Atoms differ only in shape, size, and weight and are impenetrably hard, changeless, everlasting, the limit of physical division. They are made up of inseparable minimal parts, or units. Larger atoms have more such parts, but even the larger are minute. All atoms would have moved everlastingly downward in infinite space and never have collided to form atomic systems had they not swerved at times to a minimal degree. To these indeterminate swerves is due the creation of an infinite plurality of worlds; they also interrupt the causal chain and so make room for free will. All things are ultimately systems of moving atoms, separated by greater or smaller intervals of void, which cohere more or less according to their shapes. All systems are divisible and therefore perishable (except the gods), and all change is explainable in terms of the addition, subtraction, or rearrangement of changeless atoms. (2) The soul is made of exceedingly fine atoms and has two connected parts: the *anima* distributed throughout the body, which is the cause of sensation, and the *animus* in the breast, the central consciousness. The soul is born and grows with the body, and at death it is dissipated like “smoke”. (3) Though the gods exist, they neither made nor manipulate the world. As systems of exceedingly fine atoms, they live remote, unconcerned with human affairs, examples to men of the ideal life of perfect happiness (absence of mental fear, emotional turmoil, and bodily pain). (4) Men know by sense perception and argue by reason according to certain rules. Though the senses are infallible, reason can make false inferences. Objects can be seen because they discharge from their surface representative films, which strike the eye just as smells strike the nose. Separate atoms are in principle imperceptible, having no dischargeable parts. The senses perceive the properties and accidents of bodies; reason infers the atoms and the void, which exists to explain the perceived movement of bodies. (5) Men naturally seek pleasure and avoid pain. Their aim should be so to conduct their lives that they get, on balance, the maximum of pleasure and the minimum of pain. They will succeed in this only if they are able, through philosophy, to overcome the fear of death and of the gods.”

¹⁵³ It has been suggested that there are further symmetries in the way the argument has been arranged into the six books. Thus, within each pair of books, the first explains general aspects of a particular entity (atoms and the void in Book I, the human soul in Book III, and the cosmos in Book V), whereas the second goes on to examine individual phenomena associated to them. In addition, the theme of mortality appears to provide one more symmetry; it is dealt with in odd-numbered books, and, though Book I deals with the indestructibility of atoms and the void, Books III and V emphasize the perishable nature of the soul and the universe. Furthermore, the whole poem can be seen as consisting of two balanced halves – the first half dealing with life, as announced in the proem to Book I by the hymn to Venus as the force inspiring life, love

Translating the abstract prose in which Epicurus' physics had found expression into Latin hexameters at a time when the language of Rome had no specific philosophic vocabulary was a true challenge. And yet the poetic style, the language and the spirit of *De rerum natura* are truly remarkable. Lucretius applied common words to a technical use, and whenever there were no Latin words available to convey what he intended to express, he did not hesitate to invent new *ad hoc* words. His influence on his younger contemporary Virgil was immense, especially pervasive in his *Georgics*, which is a didactic poem heavily indebted to Lucretius'. In the celebrated lines 2.490-2, Virgil writes: "*felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas / atque metus omnis et inexorabile fatum / subiecit pedibus strepitumque Acherontis auari.*" That is to say: "Happy he who was able to know the causes of things, and who trampled beneath his feet all fears, inexorable fate, and the roar of devouring hell."

Let us turn back to Bringhurst's poem. The intellectual feat he is accomplishing lies in condensing some of the most fundamental ideas of Lucretius' philosophical system into a handful of luminous words. Sanger recommends that we read the second stanza of section IV in conjunction with Lucretius' words:

The stanza reworks and replies to the dissolving indifference of Stevens' line, *An apple serves as well as any skull*. But Bringhurst's stanza acquires a further defining resonance if sounded with these words of Lucretius in mind: *If things came from nothing, any kind might be born of anything, nothing would require seed . . . Nor would the same fruits keep constant to trees, but would change; any tree might bear any fruit . . . in particular things resides a distinct power*. Or consider Lucretius' statement . . . *nature dissolves every thing back into its first bodies and does not annihilate things*, in relationship to the eleventh part of "Hachadura".¹⁵⁴

If we read Bringhurst's stanza bearing these statements in mind, we realize that words such as *seed*, *magnetism* and *flux* are reminiscent of Book I of Lucretius, where he sets out the fundamental principles of Epicurean atomism. Nothing comes into being out of nothing or perishes into nothing, for there are indestructible elements (atoms and the void) out of which everything in the universe is made. These *primordia rerum* or seeds combine in astonishingly complex ways to produce all existing things. However, if Stevens annihilated all differences between a skull and an apple (an apple might well serve the purpose Yorick's skull served for Hamlet), Bringhurst/Lucretius reminds us of the distinct qualities of every single thing in the world. Though all entities consist of minute, indivisible portions (atoms), things are not absolutely indistinguishable. The latent or underlying analogy beneath Bringhurst's lines is obvious though: the seed is to the apple what the bone is to the tissue, and so the seed and the bone are the irreducible core of the apple and the body, respectively. But there is one more analogy to it: the flesh surrounding the bones inside the body resembles the flesh surrounding the seed of the apple, *the palpable aura and hysteresis of the seed*.

Though subtly connected to sections X and XI as shall see below, section V of "Hachadura" responds to the fifth stanza of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle". However, at this point the network of references and allusions becomes extremely subtle. These are Stevens's words: "In the high west there burns a furious star. It is for fiery boys that star was set / And for sweet-smelling virgins close to them. / The measure of the intensity of

and birth; and the second half closing on a gloomy note with the disquieting description of the Athenian plague during the Peloponnesian War.

¹⁵⁴ Peter Sanger, *ibidem*, p. 161. The source of Sanger's quote from Lucretius' work is *De Rerum Natura*, ed., annotated, and translated by H.A.J. Munro, 4th edition, George Bell and Sons: London, 1908, 3 vols., vol. III, pp. 4-5 and p. 6, respectively.

love / Is measure, also, of the verve of earth.” The connection with Bringham’s poem is articulated around two expressions – the *high West* in the first part of the section and *measure* in the second part. As Bringham himself suggests in his 1982 foreword to the poem, Stevens’s poem now becomes just a text against which to test the musical experiment he intended to carry out in this 12-part poem. The *high West* becomes an indeterminate place and the word *measure* acquires powerful resonances in the poet’s hands:

In the high West there is everything
it is that the high West consists of,
mountains,
named animals and unnamed birds,

mountain water, mountain trees
and mosses, and the marrow of the air
inside its luminous blue bone.
And the light that lies just under darkness...

The opening lines of this section are a sort of *atlas of the difficult world*, to borrow the words from the title of Adrienne Rich’s well-known poetry collection. This is a detached catalogue of the world, marked by an incantatory rhythm that renders these verse lines truly memorable on account of the use of assonance, alliteration and lexical repetition. The world consists of mountains, animals, water, trees, mosses, air and light – the enumeration is simple enough, but also ambitiously comprehensive. What the high West truly represents, we are not sure of. We guess it stands for the world in its entirety, but it is impossible to be conclusive at all on this particular issue. Peter Sanger advises that we read these lines of Bringham in conjunction with two passages lifted from Heidegger’s *Einführung in die Metaphysik* which are particularly germane in spirit and phrasing to the excerpt just quoted above:

Poetry, like the thinking of the philosopher, has always so much world space to spare that in it each thing – a tree, a mountain, a house, the cry of a bird – loses all indifference and commonplaceness.

But the appearance in which sun and earth stand, e.g. the early morning landscape, the sea in the evening, the night, is an appearing. This appearance is not nothing. Nor is it untrue. Nor is it a mere appearance of conditions in nature which are really otherwise.¹⁵⁵

If we read Heidegger’s words in these two quotations in juxtaposition with the fifth part of “Hachadura”, the philosopher’s words shed some light on the poet’s words. Whereas in the preceding section (section IV), Bringham set out a Lucretian phenomenological continuum in which the bone stood on one end and the apple on the other, and so they remained similar in that their ultimate stuff was one and the same thing (indivisible atoms combined in creative ways) and yet clearly distinct as idiosyncratic entities, here and now he celebrates the uniqueness of every single entity in the world. Heidegger speaks of things *losing all indifference and commonplaceness* in poetry and philosophy, which means that both the poet and the philosopher (or the poet-philosopher) are capable of grasping the intimate nature of things in such a way that they perceive the subtle threads uniting them beneath

¹⁵⁵ Peter Sanger, *ibid.*, p. 159. The source for Sanger’s quotes is Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (translated from the German by R. Mannheim), Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1959: p. 124 and p. 26, respectively.

surface appearance, while not forgetting the distinctiveness and irreplaceability of every single entity in the cosmos. Curiously enough, Heidegger's catalogue embraces both non-human (mountains, trees, the cry of a bird) and human elements (a house), and he presents nature as capable of speech (he says *the cry of a bird*, not just *bird*). On the contrary, Bringham's poem has room only for a self-sufficient natural universe where human subjectivity has not yet intruded into a world that does not need it, just because he aims at presenting a world of *not-self* where humans are no longer the sense-giving or ultimate centre. In the second passage by Heidegger, the philosopher hints at one central notion in his philosophical thinking: the *un-concealment of reality*, the *unveiling of being* to human perception – for in a way all his philosophical utterances were meant to disclose ways of being.¹⁵⁶

Like Bringham, Heidegger is a difficult author; his writing is hard to understand. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1972) is counted among the main exponents of existentialism. His groundbreaking work in ontology and metaphysics determined the course of much 20th-century philosophy on the European continent and exerted an enormous influence in virtually every other humanistic discipline, including literary criticism, hermeneutics, psychology, and theology. His influence on Bringham is pervasive in a way, basically because of his concern with one of the most fundamental questions – the nature of *being*. Let us consider, for instance, just the title of one of the most important essays in Bringham's literary output: "Everywhere Being Is Dancing, Knowing Is Known", which is, by the way, the title of his recent compilation of essays. Bringham's interest in philosophy dates from early in his life; he studied philosophy at university, and he has tirelessly pursued its study up to the present. Philosophy, science and poetry are just but different ways of responding to the mystery that reality is, to the beauty and complexity of the world, to the essence of being – this remains a central notion to Bringham's thought. We cannot help thinking of Heidegger being concerned with the same fundamental question. Heidegger's interest in philosophy can be traced back to 1907, when he embarked on an intensive study of *Von der mannigfachen Bedeutung des Seienden nach Aristoteles* (1862; *On the Manifold Meaning of Being according to Aristotle*) by the 19th-century German philosopher Franz Brentano. Brentano's work in ontology helped to inspire Heidegger's lifelong conviction that there is a single, basic sense of the verb "to be" that lies behind all its varied usages. From Brentano Heidegger also developed his enthusiasm for the ancient Greeks – especially the pre-Socratics, who are undoubtedly a source of inspiration for Bringham's poetic enterprise. In addition to these philosophers, Heidegger's work is obviously influenced by Plato, Aristotle, the Gnostic philosophers of the 2nd century CE, and several 19th- and early 20th-century thinkers, including the early figures of existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche; Wilhelm Dilthey, who was noted for directing the attention of philosophers to the human and historical sciences; and Edmund Husserl, the founder of the phenomenological movement in philosophy.

¹⁵⁶ In 1927 Heidegger astonished the German philosophical world with *Being and Time* (1927), which, despite its complexity and its intriguingly difficult style, was immediately felt to be of prime importance and acclaimed as a masterpiece of philosophical thinking. His declared purpose in *Being and Time* is to show what it means for a person to be – or, more accurately, how it is for a person to be. This task leads to a more fundamental question: what does it mean to ask, *what is the meaning of being?* These questions lie behind the obviousness of everyday life and, therefore, are usually overlooked, because they are too near to everyday life to be grasped. One might say that Heidegger's entire prophetic mission amounts to making each person ask this question with maximum involvement. Humankind has undergone a serious crisis, which, according to Heidegger, stems from the deep "fall" (*Verfall*) of Western thought since the time of Plato, a condition brought about by the one-sided development of technological thinking and the neglect of other kinds, resulting in alienation (*Entfremdung*) – or, as expressed in terms more central to Heidegger's thought, in a "highly inauthentic way of being". Although fallenness, or inauthenticity, is an inescapable feature of human existence, it is an existential, and an essential, potentiality (*Möglichkeit*).

Turning back to Bringhurst's poem, we are surprised to find a reference to Artemis, the virgin Greek hunting goddess who lived in the woods, in section V of "Hachadura". Hers is the first occurrence of a human-like entity in the poem, even if in section I we find a reference to Eurytos (the Greek philosopher), in section II there is an allusion to Elijah (the biblical prophet), in section III the reference is to the archer and the harper (both of them anonymous, generic figures), and in section V a Greek goddess intrudes into the world of *not-self*. All these references to human presences share some common ground: all of them are symbolic in that these names point to something beyond themselves – in the face of the grandeur and mystery of the cosmos, Eurytus symbolizes the philosophical stance; Elijah embodies the visionary stance; the anonymous archer and harper suggest the precision and musicality of a poetry concerned with the not-self; and Artemis is a synthesis of the weaponry images, the unloving impersonality of deities that live far apart from humans' vulnerable constitution. That Bringhurst has got powers of manipulating language to reveal unspeakable truths seems to be out of the question when we come to read lines like these:

Artemis

grazing the ice
that is sea-rose under the sunset, and sea-green
and sea-deep under the snow's froth. Under
the still white water the sudden
fissure in the wave.

Measure from the surface,
measure from the light's edge
to the surface of the darkness, measure
from the light's edge to the sound.

Artemis represents the irruption of sacredness into a world where the *not-self* prevails over the *self*. Though, if we are to believe Lucretius' account of the nature of gods and goddesses, they are made up of atoms of a very special nature which make them immortal, unaffected by human beings' perishability, which means that, at this point in the poem, we readers still remain somehow in the realm of *not-self*. In a world that has long forgotten what it means to be dwelt and trodden by such ethereal beings as the Olympic deities (to whom Bringhurst devoted a long poem entitled "The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods" in *Cadastr* in 1973) enters all of a sudden the goddess of hunting and chastity, of wild animals and vegetation. Bringhurst depicts a natural world of mountains, trees and animals that constitute the right setting for the sylvan goddess' activities. But the choice is far from random for several reasons, basically because the twin-sister of Apollo embodies the fatal efficiency of weaponry Bringhurst has been alluding to throughout previous sections. The maiden huntress goddess, the sylvan deity dwelling in the woods, was uncaring and unforgiving, and her wrath was proverbial. For instance, poor Actaeon, son of Aristaeus, was metamorphosed into a stag and eventually torn to pieces by her pack of fifty hounds just because he happened to surprise the goddess completely naked as she was bathing in a stream in the woods. We begin to see that the reference to this goddess makes sense as soon as we remember that she was also a consummate archeress living in the mountains, in the woods – which recalls the allusion to the anonymous archer in section III. As a matter of fact this section is subtly connected to preceding ones. Thus, resonant words like *sea-rose*, *sea-green* and *sea-deep* take us back to the *sea-wind* and *sea-colour syllables* in section I, which is indicative of an overall careful design on the part of the poet. And it is no happy coincidence that there should be one more

reference here to the *wave*, which finds such powerful echoes in the opening lines of “Hachadura”. The *fissure in the wave* marks a turning point in this section, for the closing lines represent a search after order which is strongly reminiscent of the words *suppose a certain concretion of order* we find in section I. Light, darkness and sound appear to be the only reliable points of reference in the measuring that is being done.

Section VI opens with an overt address to Wallace Stevens (“*Ton ongle, ton ongle, plutôt que ton monocle*, Uncle / Wallace” in the version published in *Poetry* and in *Bergschrund*), whose “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” provides a steady context of reference for “Hachadura”, particularly for sections I to VI and VIII. Bringhurst’s words play on Stevens’s poem’s title. What is curious about this word-play is that the poet emphasizes *ton ongle* (your nail) over *ton monocle* (your one-eyed goggle). We are not sure what the intended meaning of the pun might be, but it arguably suggests that one must resort to the use of nails and touch rather than to a glasses-mediated perception of the world for a faithful apprehension of reality. After the opening vocative comes a three-part imperative that directs the reader’s attention to light, air and the others. The mixture of *not-self* and *self* is most eloquent here, as we shall try to demonstrate below.

Light is a theme central to *Bergschrund* as a whole, a book also pervaded by imagery of sharp edges, claws, talons, crevasses, and nails. In the opening lines of the section, light is presented as being lethal, which is much in accord with the imagery of the fatal efficiency of weaponry that pervades much of the poem too. Light intrudes into the perceiving self quite violently (“*the light drills/up the nerve backward*”) and manages to reach a place somewhere beneath the retina, where it alters “*the eye’s aim*”. We may wonder what the eye’s aim is; possibly it has to do with grasping the landscape surrounding the self, collecting visual sensory data for the mind to impose order upon the seeming chaotic flux of reality. *I am an eye* might be a god motto for Romanticism, which accorded the eye such pre-eminence over other sensory organs. The “*lethal roselight*” has nothing to do with Homer’s rose-fingered Aurora, which is indicative once again of Bringhurst’s rejection of romanticized interpretations of natural elements. In much the same way he rejected the Stevensian red bird in section II and favoured a bird the colour of gunmetal instead, now it is time to turn a benevolent view of light upside down: light exerts violence on the eye, it is lethal, it proves fatal for the eye’s retina. Hence the “*one-eyed sun-goggle*” mentioned in the second line proves inadequate and useless in the face of such an aggressive light. It might well be a symbol for Stevens’s belief in the imagination, which comes to distort a harsh perception of reality. If you do look reality in the eye, with no sun-goggle at all, the harsh light might well be unbearable in such an unmediated perception of things just as they are. Then it is “*the colored cores of the air*” that invade the ear and somehow what is at stake here is that the *not-self* takes over: not only does it prevail in much of the poem, it also manages to invade the *self*. This could be interpreted as meaning that *self* and *not-self* have reached a point at which they harmoniously coalesce or merge into one another. But the coalescence seems to be far from harmonious: the *not-self* is irresistible, unassailable or victorious in this elemental confrontation, and the *self*, which is vulnerable, has not option left but to surrender. What we gain in the end is a glimpse of a surrounding indifference out of which poetry comes. But the “nothingness” Bringhurst seeks to explore is not quite the exterior explored by science, but rather a constellation of bare, elemental things in the world such as light, air, stone and water, out of which memorable, great poetry is born. Because it is impersonal, it is also universal, capable of transcending the spatial and temporal constraints that confine the relevance of self-expressive and subjective poetry to a tiny fraction of time.

However, the climatic moment in section VI comes right at the end, in the closing lines where an allusion is made to *the others at this intersection*:

Notice in addition the others at this intersection:
this one who is talking, this one who is standing
in the shoes of the man who is wearing them and sitting,
this one with, undeniably, a knife in his hand,
this one, this one saying nothing...

If we interpret *the others* as being a reference to the sages of the past, to the ancestors whose voices Bringhurst has threaded into the making of “Hachadura” (Stevens, Eurytos, Elijah, Empedokles, Lucretius, Heidegger), then *this one* (repeated up to five times) might well be an allusion to the poet himself. Speaking in the harsh voice of alienation, the poet refers to himself as *other* in the third person. *Je suis un autre*, used to say the French Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud. It is the poet (or his poetic persona) who is ultimately doing the talking in the poem; who is, as it were, divided into several distinct selves (“*this one who is standing / in the shoes of the man who is wearing them and sitting*”); who is holding “*a knife in his hand*” so as to strip reality of all inessentials and reduce it into nothingness; who is celebrating the potential inherent in *nothing* to bring about or produce memorable poetry with a valuable message to deliver to other human beings. *This intersection* is then a metapoetic reference to “Hachadura” itself; it represents the verbal space or *luogo d’incontro* where voices, past and present, meet to create a single tapestry of resonant words.



Sections VII, VIII & IX of “Hachadura”

Section VII is an enigmatic poem within the twelve-part sequence in “Hachadura”. All of a sudden the ancient pre-Socratic philosopher Empedokles enters the poem, but his entrance comes as no surprise, for it was already anticipated in section IV, where Lucretius’ notions about the world as expressed in his *De rerum natura* were invoked to shed light on Bringhurst’s anatomy of nothingness. And section VII anticipates also section IX below, with which it is subtly connected. Lucretius admired Empedokles, who also wrote a poetic treatise on the nature of things entitled *Peri physeōs*; Bringhurst admired the *claritas* of mind of both men, and so “Hachadura” is pervaded by echoes of the voices of these sages who lived in antiquity and have a relevant message to deliver to humankind to this day. Possibly the poem is a homage to these poet-philosophers capable of such an intimate perception of reality. In its brevity and structure, this section, which opens the second half of “Hachadura”, is reminiscent of such jewel-like lyrics as “Poem about Crystal”, “A Quadratic Equation” or “Scholium”. Once again the poet manages to tessellate a handful of words to produce music for the mind. The best of Bringhurst’s poetry aims at pervading the senses and the mind of the reader; like lichen adhered to the bark of a tree, it adheres to the mind quite vehemently, where it keeps on resonating for a long time. This is memorable poetry that refuses to leave the mind.

That Empedokles is an important ancestor for Bringhurst is indubitably out of the question. Like Lucretius, he was a poet-philosopher, capable of thinking and singing at the same time. He lived a long time ago, almost 2,500 years ago, in the cradle of ancient Greek philosophy, but the elegant system of thought he set out in his now largely lost work

remains poetically appealing to modern sensibilities. Empedokles¹⁵⁷ was born in Acragas (in Sicily) c. 490 BCE, and he died in the Peloponnese (in Greece) in 430. He was a polymath – not just a philosopher and a poet, but also a statesman, a religious teacher, and a physiologist. A divine halo surrounded him in his lifetime and, according to legend, he brought about his own death by flinging himself into the volcanic crater atop Mount Etna to convince followers that he was not a mere mortal. After all, he was apparently a firm believer in the transmigration of souls. In 1867 Matthew Arnold immortalized Empedokles’s legendary death in his long dramatic poem “Empedocles on Etna”, where the self-styled god takes his life in quite an unorthodox fashion to convince his contemporary followers of his divinity. In fact, he was reputedly hailed by Aristotle as the inventor of rhetoric, and Galen considered him the founder of Italian medicine. As pointed out above, in Roman times Lucretius admired his hexametric poetry, certainly a source of inspiration for his own *De rerum natura*. Of the various writings attributed to him, the only surviving work is 400 lines from his poem *Peri physeōs* (“On Nature”) and fewer than 100 verses from his poem *Katharmoi* (“Purifications”).

Though strongly influenced by Parmenides, who emphasized the ultimate unity of all things, Empedokles assumed instead that all matter was composed of four essential ingredients – fire, air, water and earth – and that nothing either comes into being or is destroyed, but that things are merely transformed, depending on the ratio of basic substances, to one another. Following Herakleitos’ ideas, Empedokles believed that two basic forces – Love and Strife – interact with one another to bring together or to separate these four elemental substances out of which everything is made. Whereas Strife makes each of these elements withdraw from the others, Love makes them coalesce or mingle together. The real world in its present state has managed to find a precious balance in which neither force dominates. But in the beginning, Love reigned and all four elements were mixed together; then, during the formation of the cosmos, Strife played its part to separate air, fire, earth and water from one another. Afterwards, the four substances were again rearranged in partial combinations in certain places, so that springs and volcanoes, for instance, manifest the presence of both water and fire in the Earth.

Now, if we read Bringhurst’s words in section VII against this brief exposition of Empedokles’ philosophical ideas, we begin to understand what at first looked like an indecipherable mystery:

Empedokles says the talon
is the crystallization
of the tendon, the nail is the wintered nerve.
Or the antler is the arrowhead
of the arrow threading the axeheads of the spine.

Bearing in mind that the whole of reality is in a state of perpetual metamorphosis for Empedokles, the three basic equations presented in the opening stanza become crystal-clear. The talon is “*the crystallization of the tendon*”, the nail is “*the wintered nerve*”, and the antler is but the visible manifestation of “*the arrow threading the axeheads of the spine*”. The first element in all three equations (*talon, nail, antler*) appears to belong to the world of animals; the second element (*tendon, nerve, spine*) evokes somehow a world genuinely human. What is being emphasized, however, is the perennial metamorphosis of one thing into another. Metamorphosis is the only thing that remains intact in a world which is in a state of endless

¹⁵⁷ For basic information on the Presocratic philosopher, see the entry on ‘Empedokles’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 9, p. 5241.

flux. Beneath these words there might be also echoes of Empedokles' belief in the transmigration of souls. Humans may well have been animals in a previous life, or vice versa. What is more, the reference to the "*nail as the wintered nerve*" takes us back to *ton ongle* ('your nail') in the preceding section (section VI). The cross-references to Stevens's poem have become more subtle than ever before in the preceding sections of "Hachadura".

Whereas the first stanza focuses on the relationship of body parts, the second stanza seeks correspondences beyond the inside of the body, in the realm of *not-self*:

The Aristotelian then
wonders whether leather stands
in similar relation
to the muscle, and if sunlight might
be said to shed the darkness back of the stone.

The shift has been from microscopic observation inside the body outwards, towards the cosmos as a whole. Is leather a projection of the muscle it warms and protects? Is the shadow of a stone peeled off from the stone itself on account of the agency of sunlight? These are the questions posed by the Aristotelian, who believes only in a four-fold model of ultimate causes for all entities in the world, in what is objectively perceivable, scientifically and rationally measurable. Unlike Empedokles before him, Aristotle represents a different stance towards the ultimate nature of things. His is an inquisitive detached look into the essence of the world – deprived of poetry and mythical dimensions. *Mythos* has been left far behind – with the pre-Socratics and the biblical prophets – and *logos* is now dominant. Aristotle only believes in what his eyes can see and his hands can touch, in what reason alone can ascertain.

"*The mules the angels ride come slowly down / the blazing passes.*" So begins section VIII of "Hachadura". The juxtaposition of these peculiar mules with Empedokles' lyric/philosophical account of the universe is startling, to say the least. The words as such have been literally lifted from the opening lines of the seventh stanza in Stevens's poem.¹⁵⁸ If we pay close attention to the way the whole section has been structured, a discernible pattern makes itself visible. The opening movement of the section depicts the landscape that the mules coming from somewhere up in the sky are crossing. Counterpointing the divine nature and uncanny splendour of these mules that angels ride, "*the progeny of sea-mares and celestial asses*", is a landscape of desolation, of "*relict ice, lichen-spattered boulders and stunted timber.*" To counteract the romanticizing effect of Stevens's imagination, Bringhurst highlights the harsher sense of hostility and indifference of the natural world. The remaining movements in the section rescue and poetically expand the closing words in the first verse line (*slowly* and *down*). Slowly and noiselessly do the mules go downwards,

Down
through the gentian and the peppergrass, down
through the understory dark

between these trees, down through the recurved waves
and into unlightable water. The mules
the angels ride go to summer pasture
somewhere on the sea-floor or still deeper.

¹⁵⁸ See Wallace Stevens's "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle", VII, 1-2: "The mules that angels ride come slowly down / The blazing passes, from beyond the sun." *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, p. 15.

The strongly parallelistic prepositional phrases beginning with *down through* create an incantatory rhythm that emphasizes the downward movement of the divine mules into an unknown region on the sea-floor. Here the connection with the preceding section is obvious: whereas in section VII Empedokles' ideas about the ultimate nature of the world gave the poet a chance to explore a movement outward, up into the sunlight in the sky, here the mules the angels ride allow him to explore a movement inward, down into the dark regions of the waters undersea. The shadow shed by the stone in the sunlight (section VII) finds now a verbal echo in *the unlightable water* and darkness of the sea-floor (section VIII). And the closing lines of the section take readers back to the opening lines with its explicit repetition, so that the perfect circle drawn in the small space of such a short poem is now complete. The final note is one of indeterminacy, openness, ambiguity. The words *still deeper* point beyond themselves, possibly to the journey outward in section VII from the body cells to the light and air in the sky, which is elegantly reversed in section VIII – now the journey has been from somewhere beyond the sun down to earth, to the water in the sea, and somewhere beyond into an indeterminate darkness. Of the four elemental substances in Empedokles' account of the universe, only fire appears to be missing, but not completely, since the *blazing passes* the mules come slowly down might well be reminiscent of fire.

With section IX we are back into the enigma initially posed by the Empedokles section. Once again, in its concision and in its use of scientific lexicon this short lyric is reminiscent of such poems as “A Lesson in Botany” or “Anecdote of the Squid”, which was a scientific meditation on the squid and a meta-poem on the act of composing poetry at the same time. When placed side by side with other poems in *Bergschrund*, this section reminds us that this is a book pervaded by geological imagery – crevasses, summits, mountains, glaciers, and so this short poem comes as no surprise in the end. The first impression is one of semantic opacity and impenetrability, for Bringhurst's poems resist easy, straightforward interpretation:

Chitin and calcareous accretions
no longer clothe me. Meat
has eaten the fossil;
the body is no longer able
to moult the bone.

The first stanza encapsulates a synthesis of the history of human evolution into just five short verse lines. A history of evolution in miniature – this could prove a plausible explanation, or at least an initial hypothesis, to enter the poem in search of a sensible interpretation. The beginning has fascinating telluric connotations: a living creature speaking in the first person is being born of the earth, as if for the first time. What is peculiar about this birth is that it is a birth into nakedness: all accretions are left behind, the meat takes over the fossil, and the bones are no longer moulted. *Moult* is an interesting verb: it is used of birds and certain animals to refer to the fact that they lose their hair or feathers before new hair or feathers grow. This makes sense, but when we read the first stanza in conjunction with the second one, we realize this line of thinking is wrong. Section IX of “Hachadura” is the companion poem of “Anecdote of the Squid” to a certain extent. This poem is another variation on the squid:

Or as the field-notes
show for August:
the squid has swallowed the quill; the animal
has successfully attempted

to incarcerate the cage.

These verse lines explore the anatomical morphology of the squid, which has got a quill as part of its anatomy. This is why the poet says *the squid has swallowed the quill*, and in so doing it has incarcerated the cage, i.e. it has left no room for the customary cage in which birds are kept and deprived of their freedom. Seen in retrospect, the reference to the *fossil* in the first stanza is now easily understandable: it refers to the fact that cephalopods (squids among them) are some of the earliest life forms of the Cambrian period of which there are surviving fossils. And the reference to the bone has also to do with the anatomical structure of the squid, which has a peculiar kind of cartilage skeleton. Last but not least, the squid in this section is subtly connected to the two preceding sections in “Hachadura”: section VIII ended with mules looking for pasture in the unlightable water on the sea-floor, which is the place where different species of squids usually dwell; and section VII encapsulated Empedokles’ philosophical view of the world, according to which the world was in a state of permanent flux and all things and beings were constantly being renewed into some new non-living or living creature, whether human or non-human. The combination of the four elemental ingredients (fire, air, water and earth) might well bring about the birth of the mules angels ride or the birth of the squid, which has undergone an unstoppable metamorphosis since the Cambrian period.



Sections X, XI & XII of “Hachadura”

Like sections I, II and III, sections X, XI and XII of “Hachadura” are closely connected to one another in their thematic unity. But, as we shall try to demonstrate below, they are also subtly connected to all the preceding sections, if only because suggestive verbal echoes propel us backwards and forwards in a patient and attentive reading of the complete poem. Section X in particular is probably another technical accomplishment comparable to that of section III, not just because of Bringhurst’s masterly use of all the poetic possibilities of the English language, but also because he manages to relate a cosmogony in a well-wrought verbal space where echoes from all other sections coalesce into a *Gestalt*. The poet is concerned here with a return back to origins, to the beginning of everything in the cosmos. What he finds out in the end is that everything is related to everything else, that Empedokles’, Lucretius’ and Heidegger’s insights into reality are still valid and enlightening for us. In this respect, section X represents the true climax of “Hachadura” in its comprehensiveness, in its mythical connotations, and in its concern with fundamental questions. Elsa Linguanti puts it most eloquently and brilliantly as she points out that Bringhurst “se fa comologo e generosamente include tutta la catena dell’essere”¹⁵⁹ in section X.

Reading this masterpiece we realize that we are in the presence of a virtuoso of the English language. The section is structured around three movements for the mind which progressively populate the universe in its entirety with all sorts of entities, living and non-living alike. Thus, the first solo for the mind presents a picture of light mating with itself and with water to bring about the existence of the whole cosmos:

The bud of light before the sunrise

¹⁵⁹ See Elsa Linguanti’s essay “Allo-Fanie: I Poeti Canadesi Della West Coast”, published in *Litterature d’America. Rivista trimestrale* 2.7 (Primavera 1981): 149.

mated with the dusk,
bore rock and jagged water,
mated with the water, bore
the tidal bore, the overfall, the spindrift and the mist.

In the beginning was not the word (the biblical *logos*), but rather a bud of light, which turns out to be the primordial element in this peculiar cosmogony. The bud of light evokes the first sun rays of the morning, before sunrise or daybreak. Curiously enough, it mates with a different kind of light, with that of the dusk or twilight, which represents the departure of the last rays of sunlight and announces the arrival of the impending darkness of night. Somehow dawn and dusk are brought together into a perfect circle to give birth to earth and water (“*rock and jagged water*”). Then light mates with water, thus bearing a wide range of water-related phenomena, such as “*the tidal bore, the overfall, the spindrift and the mist.*” And this is the end of the first solo for the mind. Readers are presented with an elemental draft of the world, consisting of light, water and earth. The first verse paragraph is reminiscent of Empedokles’ ideas about Love and Strife being primordial forces that bring together or separate essential ingredients or substances (air, water, fire, earth) to create everything that exists in the universe. The fourth element (fire) is missing here, though.

Consider that Elsa Linguanti mentions the fact that Bringhurst embraces *la catena dell’essere* throughout section X, which is possibly the best way to encapsulate the linguistic strategy at stake here. The whole *chain of being* finds a stylistic equivalent in the chain-like verbal structure which summarizes the story of the creation of the world. This is best exemplified by the second movement of the tenth section, where it is starlight that seeds earth and water to produce something else – slime. Then slime eats into stone and darkness (the darkness of *nothingness*, of the void preceding life and light) to produce the teeming forms of life that dwell on the Earth, all of them evoked through a chain of metonymies (*pars pro toto*) that point to the constituent parts of the body (human and non-human): “*nail and nervecord*” (reminiscent of the verse line “*the nail is the wintered nerve*” in section VII) and *bone marrow* (reminiscent of the line “*consider the magnetism of the bone*” in section IV). Bone emerges out of the darkness and darkness emerges out of the bone, which inevitably reminds us that life and death belong together, that in the beginning the end is already being anticipated. Rhetorically, the repetition of key words such as *slime*, *bone* and *darknesses* serves as a reminder that life and death are one and the same thing – two sides of the same coin. Bringhurst’s hypnotically suggestive lines render the rhythm inherent in these lines absolutely incantatory as a result:

The starlight seeded earth and mist and water,
germinating slime.
Slime ate into the rocksalt and the darkness,
the seacrust and the metamorphic stone, breeding
nail and nervecord, bone marrow, molar and

bones taking root in the darknesses
and darknesses
flowering out of the bone.

Unlike the Christian cosmogony found in the biblical account in the Book of Genesis, revisited by Bringhurst in a number of poems in part III in *Bergschrund* (“Genesis Frozen”, “An Augury” or “Essay on Adam”, to quote but a handful of poems), this is a pagan cosmogony of mythic proportions – one that relies solely on natural processes, on the interaction of chemical elements or basic ingredients out of which the whole world is made. Hesiod’s account of the beginning of the cosmos in his *Theogony* represents also a

clear antithesis of what Bringhurst is trying to accomplish here: the gods, who transcend man and exist wholly apart from the world of human vulnerability and desire in the Greek cosmogony, are placed side by side with human beings, ghosts, animals and plants in this account of the origins of the cosmos:

Gods and men and goddesses
and ghosts are grown out of this,

brothers of the bark and heartwood and the thorn,
brothers of the gull and the staghorn coral,
brothers of the streptococcus,
the spirochete, the tiger, the albatross, the sea-spider,
cousins of lime and nitrogen and rain.

There is a basic stuff out of which every single thing in reality is made of in the final analysis. That basic stuff is a constellation of light, water, earth and darkness, which crystallizes into bone, marrow and nervecord. Notice that the poet says that gods, humans and ghosts are *grown out of this*, not *born of this*, which is indicative of a spontaneous process of self-generation. The sense of brotherhood in the living mesh of things (human and non-human) is masterfully stressed in the closing lines of section X, where gods, humans and ghosts are said to be brothers of plants, land and sea animals, microscopic creatures, and chemical elements. Section X is thus ambitious in that it embraces the whole of the universe, from the primordial light that imbued everything else with life through the early microscopic life forms to human beings and spiritual creatures like gods, made of the Aristotelian fifth element (*ether*) and ghosts. By reducing the world to essentials only, Bringhurst has found a genuine ground out of which to make lasting, universal poetry, capable of appealing to humankind in its entirety. At the beginning of “Hachadura” he bids himself to think of nothingness so as to be able to find what will suffice. Only thus can he attain a point like section X, where he has come to embrace the whole universe in a pagan cosmogony of mythic echoes which takes the form of a safe, autonomous verbal icon. The shift is noticeable enough and makes itself discernible in the end: the *self* has first emptied itself into nothingness, into *not-self*, so as to be able to generously encompass the universe. what remains truly fascinating about “Hachadura”, and section X in particular, is the alliance between a sort of detached observation (naturalism) and a visionary faculty. Bringhurst labours successfully to make both the visible and the invisible a little easier to see. By the end of the tenth section we begin to realize that the world is a complex phenomenon where threads are intertwined to form a coherent *Gestalt* of subtle connections and correspondences.

The eleventh section of “Hachadura” can be read as a natural continuation of the preceding section. As a matter of fact, the overall picture of the poem suggests the origins of life in prehistoric times. In the dawn of life on Earth there were simple microscopic creatures in the primitive waters of seas and oceans that eventually evolved into more complex life forms that dwelt on land. The imagery drawn from geology that pervades the poem enhances the fact that this is intended as a detached, objective account of the origins of life on Earth: *alluvium*, *silt*, *magmatic fire*, *slag* (the waste material that remains after metal has been removed from rock), *crag*s... What is so fascinating about this geological terminology is that it suggests that the world is a book wide open for everyone who is willing to pay attention. The book of nature can be easily read if we learn how to interpret the signs of a complex alphabet which is not made of letters, but of different kinds of stones and geological phenomena instead. Thus, *alluvium* is a geological term that refers to the sand and earth left by rivers or floods, but in this particular context it is meant to

signify something else beyond itself: in human beings' blood there are indices or signs that betray the common source of everything that exists in the world. We need only to have a look at feldspars, ores, silt and magmatic fire to be able to interpret the message (*the spoor*) written or embedded in our blood, i.e., the common origin of every single thing, living and non-living, in the world. Furthermore, we are back with Empedokles' elegant system of thought again, which reduces the whole of reality to combinations of the four basic elements (air, fire, water and earth). What we manage to read in the end is nothing more than

the thumbprint on the air, the soul's print
beached on the foreshore under the slag,
the spine-tracks and excavations
of sea-urchins
climbing the high crags.

On the air and on the sand of this primordial ocean out of which life was grown, there are prints that betray the existence of a common essence, of indestructible ties among all living and non-living things in the world. We all are made of the same stuff after all; the same blood is running through the veins of all creatures on Earth.

Section XII of "Hachadura" is also the natural progression of the two preceding poems in that it presents a concise summary of the history of mankind. The linguistic marker that unites this section to poems X and XII is *therefore*. According to Bringhurst, the four ages of man are *pitch-black, blood-colour, piss-colour, colourless*. The colours appear to manifest an intrinsic symbolism: whereas the origins of humanity are black because of the halo of mystery surrounding all beginnings, a stage in history the colour of blood evokes a period of cultural splendour that probably coincides with the period of the mythical apprehension of reality (*mythos*) in antiquity that still believes in the existence of gods and goddesses. Ages the colour of piss and colourless probably signify a shift toward *logos* – i.e., the scientific inquiry into the nature of things, purely rational accounts of reality – and toward utter cultural and moral decay. This is what is probably meant with the allusion to "*the season / of concrete and tungsten alloy and plastic.*" However, the closing lines seem to hint at the circularity of the history of humankind¹⁶⁰. After the modernity of such substances as plastic of the tungsten used for making steel and filaments of light bulbs, comes a moment when we turn back in time to the beginning, as evoked by these lines: "*hooves and feathers hooves and feathers / shudder past the tusks / and navigate back between the horns.*"

Peter Sanger lifts a quotation from Santayana that "summarizes some of the premises upon which it ["Hachadura"] and other poems by Bringhurst are based". Santayana's words perfectly encapsulate the vocation of much of Bringhurst's poetry:

¹⁶⁰ Peter Sanger advises us to read the concluding poem in "Hachadura" bearing in mind the realism of Lucretius' great lines: "Death does not extinguish things in such a way as to destroy the bodies of matter, but only breaks up the union amongst them, and then joins anew the different elements with others; and thus it comes to pass that all things change their shapes and alter their colours and receive sensations and in a moment yield them up; so that from all this you may know it matters much with what others and in what position the same first-beginnings of things are held in union and what motions they do mutually impart and receive." Peter Sanger, *ibidem*, pp. 162-163. The source of Lucretius' words is *De Rerum Natura* (ed., annot., and trans. by H.A.J. Munro) 4th edition, George Bell and Sons: London, 1908, 3 vols., vol. III, p. 52. Lucretius' words suggest that the whole world is in a state of permanent flux or metamorphosis, and that there is no such thing as absolute extinction, but rather a perpetual transformation of all things into something else on account of the different ways in which atoms combine to produce new realities.

The soul of nature, in the elements of it, is then, according to Lucretius, actually immortal; only the human individuality, the chance composition of those elements, is transitory; so that, if a man could care for what happens to other men, for what befell him when young or what may overtake him when old, he might perfectly well care, on the same imaginative principle, for what may go on in the world for ever. The finitude and injustice of his personal life would be broken down; the illusion of selfishness would be dissipated; and he might say to himself, I have imagination, and nothing that is real is alien to me.¹⁶¹

Nihil alienum a me puto, used to say the Roman playwright Terentius. And the same applies to Bringhurst. A patient reading of “Hachadura” yields little in personal revelation but deep insight into the poet’s distinctive lyric voice and poetic mission, into his first finding of himself as a poet. This is Bringhurst at 29, master of simplification through intensity that approximates clairvoyance. Throughout his 12-part poem he makes a powerfully implicit attack upon poetry as self-expression, as a medium of romanticizing self-aggrandizement. But, of course, this does not mean that Bringhurst does not care about humankind. He in effect does care. He is after something grander than narcissism or self-complacent solipsism: he is looking for some final revelation in “Hachadura” that will bring him into the company of those who sought out the unknown and the invisible, the ultimate *ratio* beneath multifarious reality. Stevens’s “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” may have been the starting point for his experiment in music for the mind, but his powerful chaconne for a solo intelligence in twelve fragments tessellates the findings of such poets, philosophers and visionaries as Elijah, Empedokles, Eurytos, Lucretius, Heidegger in their attempt to find an illuminating intuition capable of accounting for the ultimate sense of life and the ultimate nature of things. The same impulse can be felt in much of Bringhurst’s subsequent works, for his work has astonishing completeness, a sense of ripeness unique in contemporary Canadian poetry. Sanger himself points out that

some of the opinions Bringhurst has expressed in prose are far more intricately and accurately expressed in his poetry – where, in effect, they really cease to be “opinions” and become that *listening* to *logos* which Bringhurst has proposed for himself as a poet.¹⁶²

PART IV

Scholium, Fish, Equations, Phoenix & Ararat

I · INTRODUCTION

One of the striking features of the last section in *Bergschrund* is precisely its heterogeneous nature. Part V of the collection consists of twelve poems of varying lengths exploring very different thematic concerns, even though the distinctive poetic voice beneath them is one and the same. If we have a look at the titles themselves – “Phoenix”, “Sleep Does Not Have Chinese Eyes”, “The Fish Who Lived to Tell about It”, “City of Mirage”, “Scholium”, “A Quadratic Equation”, “Study for an Ecumenical Window”, “A Lesson in Botany”, “Some Ciphers”, “Anecdote of the Squid”, “Notes to the Reader”, and

¹⁶¹ Peter Sanger, *ibidem*, p. 162. The source of George Santayana’s quote is *Three Philosophical Poets*, Doubleday Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc.: New York, 1953, p. 56.

¹⁶² Peter Sanger, *ibidem*, pp. 162-163.

“Ararat”¹⁶³ –, some sort of light illuminates the subtle connections between them and partly accounts for their having been subsumed under the same section. What all of them seem to have in common is the fact that they represent a dispassionate attempt at elucidating a tiny part of the world. What they offer are luminescent snapshots of the visible and invisible universe. The very instant the insights gained into the essence of the world are brought together to form a sort of organic *Gestalt*, the discernible pattern in the carpet springs to life. Some of the titles are true enigmas in themselves; others have a narrative impulse beneath them that somehow seeks to capture the essentials of the theme being dealt with in a particular piece.

In any case, the tone pervading the whole section is one of emotional detachment, utter impersonality, and scientific objectivity. In this respect, the epigraph to the whole section is quite illuminating: “He wanted to say his prayer, but could remember nothing but the multiplication table.” It comes as a true surprise to learn that it is a quote lifted from Hans Christian Andersen’s popular folktale entitled *The Snow Queen*, which we tend to associate with fairy-tale magic and naïve happiness in a realm not of this world. The basic dichotomy at the core of the quote is simply relevant to the poems in the sequence of Part V of *Bergschrund*: on the one hand, prayer stands for religion, for the belief in an ultimate supernatural divine entity in charge of taking care of everything that happens on Earth; on the other, the multiplication table symbolizes the cool objectivity inherent in the scientific pursuit of truth. The astonishing juxtaposition of both religion and science might well shed light on the poems in the fifth section of Bringhurst’s collection. However, the sense that we are in the face of a wide range of poetic interests and themes is palpable and obvious the moment we read the poems attentively.

While “Phoenix” explores the mystery of a creature not of this world – the mythological bird that consumed itself to ashes and came miraculously to life again –, a

¹⁶³ This is the editorial history of the poems in part V of the collection: 1. “Phoenix” was first published in *Stuffed Crocodile* (London, Ontario) 2.3 (September 1974):46-50, with four more poems (“Stone-Lathe and Wing”, “The Meadow”, “Some Ciphers” and “Genesis Frozen”) and it was included in Bringhurst’s MFA Thesis *Carmina propria et opuscula translate* (1975). Later, it was also published in *Littack* (Epping, Essex) 3.2 (March 1975): 151. 2. “Sleep Does Not Have Chinese Eyes” was first published in *3¢ Pulp* (Vancouver) 11.13 (September 1974): [1], along with “The Fish Who Lived to Tell about It”. It is also included in Bringhurst’s MFA Thesis. 3. “The Fish Who Lived to Tell about It” was first published in *3¢ Pulp* (Vancouver) 11.13 (September 1974): [1], along with “Sleep Does Not Have Chinese Eyes”. 4. “City of Mirage”, based closely on Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb’s Arabic, was first published in *Quarry* (Bloomington, Indiana) 2 (Fall 1972): 33-38, under the title “Two Poems” (“You Went Away” and “City of Mirage”), both translations from Arabic, along with “The Beauty of the Weapons”. It was later reprinted in *Contemporary Literature in Translation* 19 (Summer /Fall 1974): 4, 18, 24, in a sequence of four translations which comprised “City of Mirage” and “The Cry of the Mallard”, both by Badr Shākir el-Sayyab; “Waiting for Them”, by Mahmoud Darweesh; and “Elegy”, by Tumadir el-Khansa. All four translations were later incorporated in Bringhurst’s MFA Thesis as well. 5. “Scholium” was published for the first time in *Bergschrund*. 6. “A Quadratic Equation” was first published in *West Coast Poetry Review* (Reno, Nevada) 3.3 (Spring 1974): 50-52, along with “Essay on Adam” and “Four Fragments” (translated from the Greek of Aeschylus). It was also incorporated in Bringhurst’s MFA Thesis in 1975. 7. “Study for an Ecumenical Window” was first published in book-form in *Cadastre* (1973) and later reprinted in *Stoney Lonesome* 4 (1974): 16-17. See the chapter devoted to *Cadastre* for a critical analysis of this poem. 8. “A Lesson in Botany” was first published in *The Berkeley Samisdat Review* (San Jose, California) 2.4 (Winter 1974): 34. It was later published in book-form in *Bergschrund* (1975), and reprinted in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982) and *The Calling* (1995). 9. “Some Ciphers” was first published in *Stuffed Crocodile* (London, Ontario) 2.3 (September 1974): 46-50, along with four more poems: “Stone-Lathe and Wing”, “The Meadow”, “Phoenix”, and “Genesis Frozen”. It was then included in *Bergschrund* (1975) and in Bringhurst’s MFA Thesis, revised in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), and further revised in *The Calling* (1995). 10. “Anecdote of the Squid” was first published in *Bergschrund* (1975). 11. “Notes to the Reader” was first published in *Bergschrund* (1975). 12. “Ararat” was first published in *Bergschrund* (1975) and then it was also published in *The North Carolina Review* (Raleigh, NC), Winter 1976: 58.

poem like “A Lesson in Botany” brings under scientific scrutiny a gigantic flower found in the real world, in Malaysia to be more precise, and “Some Ciphers” constitutes an original meditation on the beauty of mathematical language and the detached effectiveness of equations. On the other hand, “Sleep Does Not Have Chinese Eyes” and “The Fish Who Lived to Tell about It” are two very *sui generis* poems: the former is a most original meditation on the way light and darkness are inextricably linked to one another in sleep, and the latter is an allegory or a parable that avails itself of fish to illustrate the somewhat inexplicable incongruities or inconsistencies of human behaviour. “City of Mirage” is exceptional in this context because it is a translation from the Arabic of Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, a contemporary Iraqi poet. Along with the lengthy pieces there are also jewel lyric poems, brief and concise, like “Scholium”, a short meditation on Dante’s well-known Ugolino, a character found in Inferno in his masterwork (the *Divina Commedia*), and “A Quadratic Equation”, an exercise in linguistic and mental acrobatics. “Study for an Ecumenical Window” and “Ararat” are biblical pieces written in the style of those in the third section of *Bergschrund*: the one essays a juxtaposition of Moses and Mohammed as visionary men of two distinct religions which are reduced in the end to a handful of fundamental insights into the nature of the world; the other is a poetic rendering of the biblical story of the universal Flood and Noah’s ark. And last but not least, “Anecdote of the Squid” and “Notes to the Reader” are twin poems in that they offer a view of the author’s poetics: if the former makes use of the image of the squid as an apt metaphor for the poet’s role in creating poetry, the latter addresses readers directly in an ironic tone to give them essential pieces of advice regarding the way they should approach the reading of poetry.

II · CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE POEMS

“Phoenix”

A Bird Perpetually in the Making, Or Life (Emerging) out of the Blue

The opening poem in the fifth section of *Bergschrund* takes us back to the world of ancient mythologies of early times, back to the cradle of humanity when a sense of the inexhaustible richness of the world could still be breathed through the skin pores. The phoenix belongs among such fantastic creatures as the unicorn or the sphinx – products of a creative human impulse that seeks to render the world intelligible through an array of imaginative and intellectual tools over time. It is, in fact, an imaginary bird which, according to ancient myths, burns itself to ashes every five hundred years and is then born again, brand new, as if it had not crossed the threshold of death and total annihilation. The phoenix is found across a number of ancient mythologies, which may in part account for the fact that it is no common bird, and no common myth either. In Egyptian mythology it stood for the sun, which dies at night when it sets and is reborn every morning, and primitive Christianity employed it as a symbol of immortality and resurrection. As if to suggest the circularity of a never-ending process of death and resurrection, the language of the poem deploys repetition, enumeration, and alliteration to produce an incantatory rhythm and a mesmerizing effect from beginning to end:

Beak, wing, the scent of ashes;
a burned herb and the blood-fountain out of it
branching and stemming, tendrilling up

the bone.

The poem opens with a metonymic sequence that provides the basic ingredients out of which the phoenix is made. Life is constant motion, and this imaginary bird seems to be the perfect embodiment of what it means to be somehow in the making for eons of time. The *-ing* forms convey a sense of perpetual metamorphosis by which the separate constituents enumerated at the beginning of the poem cohere into a *Gestalt*, namely a forged bird that springs to life, endowed with a beak, two wings, circulating blood and bones. Life springs out of inert ashes, and this is the mystery at the core of the story about this fabulous bird: the fact that life defeats death triumphantly in the end. According to the myth, this happens every five hundred years, at a point when life and death seem to become indistinguishable for a while. However, after such a long interval of time, the phoenix is reduced to a handful of ashes only to be reborn again in the form of an identical, impeccable, brand-new bird. Humans are not accustomed to conceiving of such long time-spans, as our lifetime is vulnerable and reduced to a short while, owing to a number of unexpected contingencies and accidents. It is precisely this vertigo of time that the core of the poem evokes in these lines:

Enough numbers to numb long enough
for the flame to stare through the eye and the eye
through the ashes. But the distance vanishes.

Interval vanishes, sequence vanishes.
Not years, miles or experience.

B, p. 83.

Fire burns the bird to ashes, or the bird consumes itself into nothingness, and the mystery of life and death is embodied in the act of self-regeneration being enacted in these verse lines. The flame consumes the eye, but then the eye is born out of the dead ashes. Once again metonymy is being used here, probably to convey a sense of awe at the renewal of life that the reader is experiencing and witnessing when reading this poem. Thus, the flame stands for the fire consuming the bird, and the eye stands for the phoenix in its entirety. Life and non-life and life again succeed one another, and it seems no longer possible to be able to put the finger exactly upon one moment in time when they are completely distinguishable from one another. The desire to apprehend what the return from the land of the dead back into life looks like is left unsatisfied in the end:

One wishes
to measure exactly only this difference:

the fledgling, still smelling of the fire,
and the forged bird, his nerve cords relentlessly
incinerating toward it.

B, p. 83.

Because the phoenix seems to be immersed in a state of perpetual metamorphosis, the human mind cannot apprehend the division separating life from death. This impression of commingling into an amorphous matter is conveyed acoustically through the alliteration of /l/ around *fledgling*, *still* and *smelling*. The fledgling, the little bird just born into the world, still smells of the fire which killed it and brought it back to life again. And the forged, mature bird is already anticipating its own imminent self-annihilation amid the flames of a life-giving fire. But the thing is no one ever asked the phoenix if it wanted to lead an eternal life like this. Its fate is then inescapable. The fact that the phoenix lives forever makes it a

tantalizing mythological creature which knows not of the devastating effects of time, *edax rerum*. In this respect, the phoenix remains a potent symbol of the way in which life and death are inextricably linked to one another and constitute the essential moments in a lifetime. What makes human life precious is that it is short-lived and unique. There is not much left. Between ἔπος and θάνατος lies just the irreplaceable story of the lifetime of a human being that sometimes misses the opportunity to be phoenix-like.



Attempts at Crystal-Clear Definitions

“Scholium” & “A Quadratic Equation”

“Scholium”

Ugolino, or Dante Revisited

“Scholium” and “A Quadratic Equation” are two magnificent instances of short jewel-like lyrics – they are brief and memorable, and, once encountered, they keep lingering in one’s mind as an unasked-for gift, for which one is permanently grateful. This they have in common, but they differ in a resonant fashion. Whereas “Scholium” pivots around a magic word, ‘Ugolino’, which transports the reader back to medieval Italy, and demands that the reader find out about the identity of this enigmatic character to be able to understand the resonances in between the lines properly, “A Quadratic Equation” is self-sufficient, a self-contained artefact which is closed on the outside like a perfect circle in its ruminative meditation on the nature of thought and language, indistinguishable and yet kept distinct and separate at the same time, precisely because of the author’s impulse to define concepts in clear terms.

“Scholium” is a short sculpted lyric indeed, and also a treatise in miniature, in three little movements, on one of Dante’s most fascinating characters, Ugolino, a dweller of the *Inferno*. The supreme literary work of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance is Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (finished some time before 1321). Dante’s poem draws upon science, philosophy, and history, as well as theology, but it is supremely indebted to the Bible. Dante works leading figures from the Bible into his vast tapestry. Dante’s grandest moments come when he has the damned (e.g. Ugolino) tell their tragic stories with a greatness of soul not lessened by the fact that they stand under God’s eternal condemnation. When you throw a little stone into a lake, it ends up producing ripples, concentric circles on the surface water which vanish far away in the distance you do not see. Ugolino is the stone here, and the poem is the lake in which the powerful resonances it radiates find a mesmerizing echo. The title itself suggests the very idea of interpretation or exegesis: a *scholium*, a word of Greek and Latin origin, is an explanatory note intended to clarify the meaning of a text. The text under scrutiny in this case is Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, a grandiose gesture of the secular human imagination and one of the literary landmarks or masterworks in the history of world literature.

It is commonly acknowledged that Dante’s work is not only a great work of medieval literature, but also a profound Christian vision of man’s temporal existence *in haec valle lacrimarum* and eternal destiny in a Christian afterlife or afterworld. As such, it is an inexhaustible literary work and an imaginatively complex monument of linguistic artifice. Its architectural design, with its concentric circles like the vanishing ripples on the surface

of a lake, is the product of a visionary mind, a talented genius, and a man of erudition. Therefore, it can be approached and interpreted from many different directions; the manifold layers of which it is made are irreducible to an ultimate core of meaning. On its autobiographical level, it draws on the poet's own experience of exile from his native city of Florence. However, on its most comprehensive level and as a product of a medieval mind and imagination, it may be read as an allegory, taking the form of a three-stage journey through hell, purgatory, and paradise. Dante was a learned man, so it comes as no surprise that the poem should amaze readers from all times and places by its impressive wealth of learning, its penetrating and comprehensive analysis of contemporary problems, and its inventiveness of language and imagery. Life and experience (the private self), literature and a heavy baggage of readings (the private universe of a man of letters), society and personal misery (the public self), all impinge on the final shape of Dante's poem.

The history of Western literature is full of instances of journeys undertaken by characters in search of some form of truth or revelation, some kind of introspection or insight into the final gist of everything. In this respect, the plot of *The Divine Comedy* is simple enough in that it recounts a journey undertaken with a fanciful destination: Christian Paradise. The protagonist, a man generally assumed to be Dante himself, is miraculously enabled to undertake an ultramundane journey, which leads him to visit the souls in Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. On this peculiar journey he has two guides: Virgil, whom Dante considers to be one of the acknowledged literary masters of the past, leads him through the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, and Beatrice, the beloved of the Italian author, introduces him to *Paradiso*. There are in fact three movements in this strange symphony of the human imagination, as *The Divine Comedy* consists of one hundred cantos, which are grouped together into three sections, or canticles, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Technically there are 33 cantos in each canticle and one additional canto, contained in the *Inferno*, which serves as an introduction to the entire poem. For the most part the cantos range from about 136 to about 151 lines. The poem's rhyme scheme is the *terza rima* (*aba, bcb, cdc*, etc.). Thus the divine number of three is present in every part of the work.

Dante's *Inferno* differs from its great classical predecessors in both position and purpose. In Homer's *Odyssey* (Book XII) and Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book VI) the visit to the land of the dead occurs in the middle of the poem because in these centrally placed books the essential values of life are revealed. However, Dante does differently: while adopting the literary convention of his ancestors, he begins his journey with the visit to the land of the dead, basically because his poem's spiritual pattern is not classical or pagan, but Christian. In this sense, Dante's journey to Hell represents the spiritual act of dying to the world, and hence it coincides with the season of Christ's own death. The *Inferno* represents a false start during which Dante, the character, must be disabused of harmful values that somehow prevent him from rising above his fallen world. Dante's meetings with the damned (Ugolino among them) in the *Inferno* are among the most memorable moments of the poem and impose themselves upon the reader's imagination with tremendous force. This is Bringhurst's poem, or scholium on Dante's poem. The juxtaposition of both is simply amazing, as *The Divine Comedy* is a poem of epic scope and proportions, while, quite on the contrary, Bringhurst's poem looks like an extant fragment from a time long vanished, a handful of luminous tatters from another time and place that remind modern readers that humans are in essence still the same despite the passing of time:

SCHOLIUM

The ethereal song distends in the thinned
air. Listen more
closely. It is only

the sound of Ugolino eating his hands.

B, p. 88.

The poem offers different entrances to its inside chamber, but we have made up our mind to enter the poem through the word *Ugolino*, an enigmatic and fascinating man who lived in Italy in the thirteenth century. Knowing exactly who this man who attracted Dante's attention was might help us to understand Bringham's poem much better. Ugolino della Gherardesca (ca. 1220-1289), Count of Donoratico, was an Italian nobleman, politician and naval commander. Throughout his life he was frequently accused of political treason and treacherous conspiracy at a time when Italy was a swarm of independent city-states, passionately quarrelling with one another over commercial issues and power supremacy. In fact, thirteen-century Italy was beset by the strife of two opposing parties – the Ghibellines, who sided with the Emperor and his rule of Italy, and the Ghelphs, who sided with the Pope and supported the idea of self-governing city-states. Ugolino was born in Pisa into the Gherardesca, a noble family of ancient lineage who became the leaders of the Ghibellines in Pisa. He lived a passionate life of conspiracy, plotting and political intrigue, which inevitably led him to trouble and to spend his last days in captivity in a tower near the Arno River. In a series of violent riots which broke out in Pisa in 1288 owing to a dramatic increase in prices and food scarcity, Ugolino killed a nephew of Ruggieri degli Ubaldini, the Archbishop of Pisa, who ended up taking revenge upon Ugolino, his children and grandchildren. On orders of the Archbishop, all of them were detained in the Muda Tower in March 1289 and the keys were thrown into the Arno River. The prisoners were left to die of starvation, but Ugolino was immortalized in the *Inferno* of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where he is presented as a figure of passionate tragic stature.

In Dante's poem, Ugolino and Ruggieri are presented as dwellers in the ice of the second ring (Antenora) of the lowest circle of the *Inferno*, which is the traitors' hell, reserved for betrayers of kin, country, guests, and benefactors – for those who have refused to embrace human love and must be therefore far removed from the light and warmth of the God's sun. Ice is then the perfect metaphor for this kind of inhumane betrayal. Ugolino's punishment involves his being entrapped in ice up to his neck in the same hole with his betrayer, Archbishop Ruggieri, who was the one who left him to starve to death. Ugolino is constantly gnawing at Ruggieri's skull¹⁶⁴ and so he is granted the right to inflict a ghastly eternal punishment on the Archbishop for his crime against him and his family. This has been normally interpreted as signifying that Ugolino's strong hatred for his enemy compels him to gnaw at what is simply an empty skull with no substance inside for eternity. But it is in Canto XXXIII that we are presented with the dramatic fate of Ugolino and his children in captivity in the Muda Tower. The prisoners died slowly of starvation, and Dante explains that, before dying, the children begged his father to eat their bodies¹⁶⁵. Ugolino's climatic words in verse lines 70-73

... And I,
Already going blind, groped over my brood
Calling to them, though I had watched them die,

¹⁶⁴ See *Inferno*, Canto XXXII, lines 124-128, for Dante's description of Ugolino in Hell: "I saw two shades frozen in a single hole / packed so close, one head hooded the other one; / the way the starving devour their bread, the soul / above had clenched the other with his teeth / where the brain meets the nape." See Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, translated and edited by Robert Pinsky, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996.

¹⁶⁵ See *Inferno*, Canto XXXII, lines 56-59: "'Father our pain', they said, / 'Will lessen if you eat us you are the one / Who clothed us with this wretched flesh: we plead / For you to be the one who strips it away.'" (Pinsky's translation).

For two long days. And then the hunger had more
Power than even sorrow over me.

have been interpreted either as a statement on the fact that hunger proved ultimately stronger than grief and so Ugolino, mad with hunger, ended up devouring his children's corpses, or as meaning that starvation killed him eventually after he had failed to die of grief. The first one of these interpretations has proved to be more resonant in the literary and artistic variations on Ugolino's fate in the Tower. Thus, he is often depicted gnawing at his own fingers (eating his own flesh), for instance in Auguste Rodin's sculpture *The Gates of Hell* or in Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's *Ugolino and His Sons*. However, Ugolino might have been eating his fingers just in grief for his children and grandchildren's death of starvation in front of him. And yet, though certain interpretations of Dante's Canto XXXIII emphasize the implicit cannibalism invoked in lines 70-73, recent forensic investigations demonstrate that the remains of Ugolino and his children do not show signs of the alleged cannibalism. Perhaps they did not die ultimately of starvation, though there are evident signs of malnourishment in their bodies.

Now the meaning of "Scholium" is crystal-clear. The poem consists of three simple, declarative sentences. The first sentence invokes a song, which is ethereal and might have well been heard in Hell by Dante and his guide, Virgil. The second sentence opens with an imperative that directs the listener's attention (Virgil's or Dante's or the reader's) to this almost inaudible song. In the end the song turns out to be no song at all, but just the sound of Ugolino eating his hands in despair, out of grief, rather than out of maddening hunger. The poem closes with this most atrocious image: a man gnawing at his own fingers in consternation. The scholium has now clarified the meaning of the ethereal song, that produced by Ugolino's grief in the face of the ineffable horror of one's own children's death. The whole episode has the dramatic pathos found only in some of the best classical plays of Greek antiquity – Antigone giving a proper burial to her brother's corpse, Oedipus killing his father and marrying his mother unaware that he has committed an atrocious crime of parricide and incest, Medea killing her own offspring as an act of revenge upon their father.



“A Quadratic Equation”

The Essence of Mind and Speech

In “A Quadratic Equation” the poet's impulse to define things and draw their perfect outline is most evident. Four concepts are being defined through resonant words in a small compass of five verse lines, of which three are human (voice, thought, and speech) and one is non-human (birdsong). For the title of the composition Bringham has drawn on the language of scientific discourse, on a mathematical *quadratic equation*, to present an elemental chain of four relentless, impersonal truths. In another poem analysed below, “Some Ciphers”, the beauty and elegance of mathematical language is also explored in depth. The tone is impersonal, objective, rational, and detached throughout, as suits scientific attempts at accurate definitions. The title may well be interpreted as a witty word game or pun: what readers find in the poems is not really the kind of quadratic equation they find in mathematics, but rather a sequence of four equations. The declarative mode of speech found in other short lyrics by the poet is also overtly palpable in this poem, where the verb to be has been replaced by semi-colons which serve the purpose of equating the two halves in each definition. In the province of concepts and ideas there seems to be no room for

verbs, which denote action, but only for nouns, denoting essences, unchanging or permanent entities in the world. The presence of twelve nouns in such a small composition is indicative of such a proliferation of ideas:

A QUADRATIC EQUATION

Voice: the breath's tooth.
Thought: the brain's bone.
Birdsong: an extension
of the beak. Speech:
the antler of the mind.

B, p. 89.

The inner skeleton or the architectural design of “A Quadratic Equation” relies heavily on several simple mechanisms: first, parallelism, that is the same syntactic pattern is being repeated in verse lines 1 and 2 (noun + noun-Saxon Genitive + noun) and 3 to 5 (noun + complex noun phrase consisting of article + noun + preposition + article + noun); second, the use of alliteration and assonance, which means that, even if there is no rhyme scheme, certain sounds are being repeated to produce some kind of musicality, particularly through alliteration around the phoneme /b/ (in such key words as *breath*, *brain*, *bone*, *birdsong*, *beak*) and through assonance, or the use of certain matching vowel sounds in consecutive words (for instance, in *beak-speech*); and, third, the use of enjambment, which is the carrying of sense from one line to another, especially in lines 3 to 5. All three strategies lend the poem a compact nature and make it a memorable piece of linguistic and musical craftsmanship, another enduring poem with an irresistible meditative halo about it.

A short and intense meditation on the nature of language and thought in only five lines – this is what “A Quadratic Equation” constitutes. Language is one of the most distinctive features of human beings as a species, along with another distinctive mark: humans are endowed with an amazing capacity that allows them to *think* the world, which compels them to try to understand it. Humans think and speak, they can communicate with one another through a diverse array of mechanisms, the most characteristic and effective of which might be natural languages – art and love are other such mechanisms of transcendental value. But the whole world *speaks*, one might argue. The mesh of living things is a subtle network of meanings; communication, conveying meanings to other creatures in the world, seems to be the inescapable fate that humans and non-humans have in common. Animals communicate with one another in their own languages, which are not obviously made of words but are, nonetheless, meaningful to them and serve their purpose of communicating with one another effectively. Even plants have something to tell humans about the mystery of existence and the world: the sunflower seeks the sunlight, trees are not inert, insensitive creatures, but their branches keep on growing upwards toward the sky in search of light and air, and their roots keep on growing downward in search of nutrients, minerals, and water.

However, the mystery at the centre of “A Quadratic Equation” is the nature of man. Bringhurst is a *humanist* in a broader sense after all, and being a humanist entails being concerned with everything that has to do with human beings in one form or another. *Nihil humanum alienum puto*. It is reminiscent of “Strophe from Sophocles”, an early poem included in *Cadastre* (1973) in which the poet comes to terms with the ancient Greek playwright's vision of humanity. What is fascinating about this sequence of four equations is that the impulse behind them is toward sheer physicality: the shift is from an abstract

concept toward a physical entity. Making a concept understandable to other people might well imply turning it into something palpable, something that can be seen or touched. A metaphor equates A and B; it looks beyond surface appearance, which might be misleading or even opaque, and uncovers inscrutable similarities, deep analogies, or unexpected links or ties. Thus, the first concept under scrutiny is voice, human voice, which is conceptualized as being *the breath's tooth*. Air is the basic stuff out of which voice is made, not any simple kind of air, but rather air emanating from inside the body. Air loves air and strives to get back to its natural element. Breath goes a long way from the lungs up the larynx to the mouth, where it finds a resonance chamber made up of teeth, the tongue and the roof of the mouth – all of them important constituents of the speech apparatus. Teeth are at the very border separating the inside of the body from the outside world; it is at that point that voice becomes vehemently physical, a puff of air semantically charged with meaning that may reach somebody's ear, where the whole process is mimicked in reverse. The addressee will have to process what he/she has heard or listened to and turn the sound of the voice into thought. Thought is precisely the second concept under scrutiny here. It is *the brain's bone*. It is in the head that thought operations occur at the speed of sound, brain cells drawing connections with one another to render the raw data provided by the senses intelligible. But from a purely physiological perspective, the outer shell of the brain is just bone that makes up the cranium. In a nutshell, the opening two verse lines dwell on the indissoluble dichotomy of language and thought, which are inextricably linked to one another. The second part of "A Quadratic Equation" juxtaposes animal and human communication, so as to shed light on some ultimate truth.

So for a while humans are abandoned, but not altogether left behind, and the focus is on birdsong, which is defined as being *an extension of the beak*. In much the same way that voice is linked to the teeth that make it audible to a potential audience, the origin of birdsong is purely physical. Human voice comes out from the lungs through the teeth, and so birdsong comes from somewhere inside the bird through the beak. The analogy is subtly evoked in the background. What is at stake here is an organic view of communication, for the ultimate message seems to be that humans speak in a natural, spontaneous way, in much the same way that birds sing or flowers bloom. It is an essential part of human nature to want to communicate *through* language – it is instinctive, it is part and parcel of our species, it is the core of an ancestral legacy or heritage we carry with us wherever we go. Speaking a mother tongue implies no effort as language acquisition unfolds naturally, through imitation and simple exposure to our fellow human beings' speech. The same happens to birds, which know how to fly and what use to make of their wings. The natural disposition toward speaking and singing and flying is already firmly ingrained inside. All of them (speaking, singing, flying, blooming) might be just indicative of the irrepressible or manifold exuberance of existence itself.

The poem closes with a revelatory equation whereby speech is presented as being *the antler of the mind*. Speech serves the purpose of exteriorizing the mind and making it physically palpable. Language is made of basic structural elements, namely words, and words are physical – audible when spoken and visible when written. Hence language is a way of rendering the mind and what goes on inside it (thinking, thought and ideas) palpable in a way. However, there is something else to the word *antler* here, since it evokes the idea that speech allows the mind to keep in touch with the raw physicality of the world, and in so doing it helps humans understand what is going on at all in the world. Speech as the antler of the mind is a form of coming to terms with reality, it is a tool, a way of coming to terms with what lies outside the enclosed, solipsistic circle of the self. Needless to say, language is a beautiful two-edged weapon that separates and unites human beings at the

same time. Above all, it might bring humans closer to other humans, precisely because it makes communication of ideas and memories and emotions possible. In any case, the ultimate truth the poem strives to convey to the reader is that while it might be useful to keep concepts distinct, it does not make much sense to keep things apart as they are at the root united through subtle means into a complex net of relationships. What *tooth*, *bone*, *beak* and *antler* have in common is that all of them are in essence the same – hard matter resembling different manifestations of bone. Voice, thought, birdsong and speech are but diverse names for the same thing: the impulse towards communication, the desire to open oneself to the outside and to commingle with what lies outside.



“Sleep Does Not Have Chinese Eyes”

On Sight, Sleep & Being

The lyric poem “Sleep Does Not Have Chinese Eyes” has got an enigmatic title, to begin with. After a close reading of it in full, the reader might as well remain unclear as to what the ultimate meaning of this short poem might be, but certainly not indifferent to its beauty and incantatory rhythm. Once encountered and attentively listened to, it resonates powerfully in the echo-chamber of one’s mind, and it keeps singing on its own for a long time afterwards. It might be a poem about sight, or sleep, or simply about the state of being purely alive and alert to the multifarious flux inherent in the world. In any case, the meaning of the poem seems to build cumulatively, one step at a time, on the basis of a language that is essentially gnomic – that is to say, a language intended to touch *the* mystery of the world – and that relies heavily on synaesthesia, i.e., the unexpected juxtaposition or mixing up of different sense impressions in pursuit of a conscious poetic purpose. Synaesthesia is not a chaotic hocus-pocus though; it is more like a *perceptual symphony*. Somehow it is a poetic rendering of the raw data emanating from the world, perceived by the different sense organs and furthered processed by the mind, and it represents an effort on the part of the sensory system of human beings to set all these sense impressions in order and to make them cohere into a *Gestalt* of sorts.

Let us suppose that this is a poem about wakefulness and about the perception of the world, sprawling exuberantly out there – outside the human mind. It is no coincidence that the words “*the corners of my eyes*” should be repeated with a number of variations throughout the whole composition. Around the word ‘corners’ are thus constellated radiant words full of evocative meaning. This does not mean that the meaning is vague or vaporous at all, as the poem is akin almost to a syllogism in that the progression or unfolding of ideas follows a relentless logic in a way. At least three movements or parts are identifiable at first sight. The piece opens like this:

And if I could not taste the cold
in the corners of my eyes
I would not know that I have
not been sleeping. Sight, deep under
sleep, lacks absolutely this
pale taste of almond.

B, p. 84.

If this poem were a narrative, a story, it could be said to begin *in medias res*, as it seems to take some previous framework of mind and information for granted. The lyric opens with a conditional clause and a string of three negations which cancel each other. Now, when the semantics of these opening lines is closely scrutinized, we realize that it is impossible to taste the almond cold in the corners of one's eyes and then to conclude that one has not been sleeping at all. The emphasis seems to be placed on the act of perception itself that eyes make possible; sight is probably the most *poetic* of all the senses after all. *I am an eye-ball*, old Ralph Waldo Emerson seemed to sing in *Nature* as early as 1836. Possibly the emphasis is on solipsism instead: on the fact that the eye cannot see itself, so maybe the only thing left for it to do so as to ascertain its existence is to let its owner taste it. The corners of the eyes are said to have a pale taste of almond, which is not a random choice, as the form of the eye resembles that of an almond.

At the very centre of the poem, right in the middle, is light, which is a pervasive theme in *Bergschrund*. It rhymes with 'sight' and makes it possible. The language used at the core of the poem is gnomic and it relies on alliteration, lexical repetition, assonance, and enjambment – linguistic strategies which render the second part of the poem genuinely incantatory to the ear and the mind. The statements in this second movement of the poem seem paradoxical at first sight:

The corners
of unsleeping eyes are white
because the light, when it gathers,
uncolours, because colours
gather into darkness, which is
also colourless and cold
but darkness does not own these
corners which it occupies, these
corners I cannot see into.

B, p. 84.

Back in an elemental world, the world is reduced to a set of opposites: sleep and wakefulness, colour and non-colour, light and darkness. Light was not the sole concern of Pound in his *The Pisan Cantos*; the prolific German author Goethe wrote several scientific essays, including *Optik* (1791-1792) and *Farbenlehre* (1810), a treatise on colours. This eight verse lines and a half constitute a short meditation on the nature of light and darkness, and on colour and its perception on the part of the human eye. While the poem entitled "For Robert Grosseteste" was a poetic rendering of another thinker's thoughts about light, physically conceived of as particles and waves, "Sleep Does Not Have Chinese Eyes" posits an original theory about light and darkness that does not leave the perceiving subject out. Light has a favourite place in the corners of the eyes of those who remain wakeful, because they want to or because they suffer from insomnia. *Esse est percipi*, said Berkeley. If a bird sang in the woods and there were no one to listen, could it be positively affirmed that the bird's song exists? What is the sound of one sound clapping? If all humans were asleep at the same time, the world might as well stop existing, so the fact that there are open eyes somehow ensures that the world will keep on existing. The ultimate sense of *what is* is that its beauty is to be perceived by humans: maybe this is too much of a categorical assertion, or an overtly human-oriented statement that ignores the autonomy of the existence of the non-human world. But the point is that light finds a place in the corners of unsleeping eyes and that colour ceases to exist there as light gathers into non-

colour and turns white. Exactly the same happens with darkness, into which colours seem to coalesce, but it does not own the corners of the eyes it occupies.

The eye sees everything around it, but never itself. And the final revelation or epiphany comes in the closing lines: the mind knows that there is a sort of darkness even darker inside the eyes:

Therefore, looking at these colours,
I look also for the cold
and for the taste of the pale
metal of the almond in my
eyes, and know the darkness there is
deeper, I have not been sleeping.

B, p. 84.

The circle is full and complete now, as the self realizes that “these colours” of the world outside seem to have a correlative in the cold almond taste in the eyes. Looking at the colours of *what is* is tantamount to exploring the almond taste in the corners of unsleeping eyes, so that the fusion of *the world seen* and *the seeing eye* is now complete. The ending of the poem has got an ominous halo about it though, as there is something gloomy about these eyes that incessantly scan the world outside but are incapable of seeing themselves. In any case, darkness has got negative connotations in our Western framework of mind, where it stands for irrational forces, instinct, and even evil. That the darkness inside one’s eyes is even ‘deeper’ may be interpreted in at least two possible ways: (1) eyes are not really transparent pools of water or the windows of the soul, wide open onto the radiance of the world, as they seem to conceal something darker beyond themselves, and (2) darkness is not something truly negative, but rather the complementary opposite of light, and the fact that eyes betray the existence of some kind of darkness deeper than that in the physical world is only indicative of the complexity inherent in the design human beings’ body and mind. There is more to it than the eye can see, even if from time to time it can turn to itself and realize that it has not been sleeping.



“The Fish Who Lived to Tell About It”

Allegorical Thinking, or a Fable on Human Behaviour

“The Fish Who Lived to Tell About It” is a peculiar poem in section V of *Bergschrund*, where lyrical poems of a different meditative nature are included. To begin with, it is a narrative poem, which means that it tells a story with a recognizable plot – with a beginning, a middle and an end – in which definite characters find themselves immersed/involved in certain vicissitudes. That the characters should be fish does come as a surprise at first, but this is not an uncommon practice in the history of Western literature, where the tradition of having animals at the centre of a story goes back in time to Aesopus’ fables. So the whole poem might well be interpreted as a piece of allegorical thinking, as a fable on human behaviour that closes with an enlightening moral. Hence the whole composition is an instance of didactic literature, which had strong resonances in the Middle Ages. 2,000 years ago Latin poet Horace encouraged a view of poetry meant to *docere et*

delectare, to teach and to entertain people; Bringham's poem accomplishes both purposes in a well-wrought narrative as we hope to demonstrate below.

In the same way that other lyrics such as "A Quadratic Equation", "Poem About Crystal", or "Scholium" seek to define diverse concepts with astonishing accuracy, "The Fish Who Lived to Tell About It" displays a similar accuracy in the narration of a story which is meant probably to shed light on human behaviour. The language used to recount the story is simple, straightforward, and transparent in a way, and the action is propelled forward toward a resolution through verbs in the past tense, characteristic of the narrative mode. And yet the spatio-temporal axes constituting the framework of the story are absolutely indeterminate, which has been surely done on purpose. Once upon a time, somewhere in the world, in an ocean, or in a river, or in a lake, there was a solitary fish leading a miserable life. "*Once there was one fish only. It hadn't any / memories. Presently it died.*" (B, p. 85) Like plants, animals have got a lot to teach humans about what it means to live in a difficult world, in the absence or in the company of other fellow human beings or other fish, if one happens to be born a fish after all. According to Aristotle, humans are *political animals*, which means that we are bound to live with others in some form of organized society. It is part of our nature. Survival of the species would be endangered if one tried to live alone. This is exactly the fish's lot. It could have no memories, for it lived in utter solitude, and the construction of memory, like the construction of self-identity, is the result of active interaction with other fellow beings – it is a collective enterprise.

It takes two to tango, to make love and to make war. When two fish or humans meet there is room not just for love, but also for war. This is the road taken by the fish, which achieve an impressive command over the art of fighting one another and, as a result, probably end up killing each other: "*Then there were two fish. They fought. They got / really very good at it.*" (B, p. 85) Reading the poem we might think that the poet embraces a very pessimistic view of human nature, but the fact remains that humans have options and that they are endowed with free will and the capacity to choose different paths from minute to minute. Robert Frost expressed it masterly in memorable lines: "*Two roads diverged in a wood / And I took the less travelled by. / And that has made all the difference.*" Needless to say, even if Frost's verse lines are pervaded by a strong feeling of nostalgia and melancholy, they hint at humans' compulsion to lead an authentic life, if only because there is only one chance given us. The wood is a metaphor for life, and the roads are the different paths one decides to take in one's lifetime. Nostalgia stems from a realization that the roads not taken might have led somewhere more brilliant and authentic than the roads eventually taken. That is inevitable, part of the *chiaroscuro* and tragedy inherent in human life.

What happens when three fish decide to live together? They are enough to create a community of sorts. However, the prospect is not encouraging either. The uncompromising advance of short, simple, declarative sentences with no linking words in between uniting them hints at the relentless fate that awaits the fish. No motives are offered for the course of action taken by the fish; they simply seem to obey blindly their selfish instinct, which is not one of survival but of gratuitous destruction: "*Elswhere three fish. Three fish were / enough. They could circle in the water; / they ate each other.*" (B, p. 85) Three proves to be a disastrous multitude. There was a chance for creativity, as the fish could circle following one another and have fun. However, eventually they do not have any idea what to do except eating one another. At this point, one has to make an effort to repress a sad smile as we recognize humans' ways in the fish' behaviour. It comes as no surprise that four fish should turn out to be inevitably fatal:

Four fish. First they had a brawl, then

they had two simultaneous fights, then a full-scale¹⁶⁶
circus. One of them got out early,
leaving three. The meek do indeed, from time to time,
inherit the territory (wishing well in this case)
for a little while. Then they start to dream. They are
meek; they have seen fighting.

B, p. 85.

Only one of the four fish manages to survive in the end, the meek one. The lesson to be learnt from the poem comes in the form of a didactic moral: the meek inherit the territory, even if only for a short period of time, for it is violence that seems to count after all. However, there is not much hope that the meek will opt to live in peace for long, as they have seen and tasted violence and destruction. Whenever fish (humans) start dreaming, the risk remains that the instinct to destroy might come back again. There are subtle biblical echoes in the conclusion to the poem. Jesus affirmed that the meek would inherit the earth, in Matthew 5.5 and the same notion is recorded in Psalms 37.11.



“A Lesson in Botany”

Blumen blühen, Or *Rafflesia arnoldii* – The Largest Natural Flower in the World

The poet as territorial recorder we found in *The Shipwright's Log* (1972) reappears again in poems like “A Lesson in Botany”, “Some Ciphers”, or “Anecdote of the Squid” (see “Anecdote of the Jar” by Wallace Stevens), which represent serious attempts on the part of Bringham to define natural objects with as much intellectual precision and accuracy as he is capable of. Here poetry approaches the status of science in that it records all the relevant details of the object under scrutiny in a dispassionate, objective and impersonal manner. Thus, “A Lesson in Botany” is an extended, detailed definition of a specific type of flower, and it is born out of the poet’s impulse to clarify the ultimate nature of things in the world, which is also found in the miniature definitions in “Poem About Crystal”, “Scholium” or “A Quadratic Equation”. The four stanzas constituting the poem display a linear, logical structure in which all the parts of the flower by the scientific name *Rafflesia arnoldii* are being described minutely, in detail, in a manner reminiscent of Crusoe’s factual realism and his detailed observation and recording of what he sees on the island where he has been shipwrecked. The sense of absolute rigour, objectivity, detachment and impersonality characteristic of natural sciences is enhanced by the use of the specific terminology in producing a scientific description of the flower. Recording all the details faithfully and patiently also demands that the poet make use of a declarative mode characterized by simple sentences which are factual statements in themselves.

On one level, Bringham’s poem could be interpreted as being a poetic rendering of the scientific description of the flower in question that we might come across if we look it

¹⁶⁶ “The Fish Who Lived to Tell About It” was republished in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982) with slight punctuation variations in the third stanza: “Elsewhere three fish. Three fish were / enough: they could circle in the water. / They ate each other”. Notably, in the fourth stanza ‘a full-scale/circus’ becomes ‘a one-ring/circus’ in these later reprints. ‘Hadn’t’ in the first line becomes ‘didn’t have’.

up in any rigorous encyclopaedia¹⁶⁷. Consider this excerpt from the entry on the flower lifted from *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

Rafflesiaceae, plant family in the Malpighiales order, notable for being strictly parasitic upon the roots or stems of other plants and for the remarkable growth forms exhibited as adaptations to this mode of nutrition. The vegetative organs of most are so reduced and modified that the plant body exists only as a network of threadlike cellular strands of the host plant. There are no green photosynthetic tissues, leaves, roots, or stems in the generally accepted sense, although vestiges of leaves exist in some species as scales.

The flowers are well developed, however, and range in size from minute to extremely large. The monster flower (*Rafflesia arnoldii*), with the largest known flower, is parasitic upon the roots of *Tetrastigma* species, large vines of the grape family (Vitaceae) found in the forested mountains of Malaysia. Its fully developed flower appears above ground as a thick, fleshy, five-lobed structure weighing up to 11 kg (24 pounds) and measuring almost one metre (about one yard) across. It remains open five to seven days, emitting a fetid odour that attracts carrion-feeding flies, which are believed to be the pollinating agents. The flower's colour is reddish or purplish brown, sometimes in a mottled pattern, with the sex organs in a central cup. The fruit is a berry containing sticky seeds thought to be disseminated by fruit-eating rodents.¹⁶⁸

This entry provides the poet with all the essentials he needs to know to prepare this *sui generis* lesson in botany. There are possibly millions of different flower species in the world, but Bringham has chosen no common flower, but an exotic, anomalous one called *Rafflesia arnoldii* instead. The revelation of the flower's name is procrastinated till the end and it is only in the last stanza that we learn the basic facts about the story of its name. In any case, the arrangement of the information into the different stanzas has been carefully planned beforehand. The first stanza deals with the natural habitat where *Rafflesia arnoldii* grows, namely the Malaysian forested mountains, where it is parasitic upon the roots or stems of the 'mammoth grape', i.e. the *Tetrastigma* species, a large vine species growing specifically in Malaysia. There it thrives and manages to achieve an impressive weight of 24 pounds (11 kilos) and a size of almost one metre in diameter. The whole plant is nothing but a gigantic flower, "*A triumph! Leafless, asepalous, / rootless and stemless: pure flower.*" (B, p. 93) Next, the second stanza explains such points as the parasitism of the flower upon the *Tetrastigma* vine, as well as its vital cycle, the colour of its five petals and the structure of its organs. Ironically enough, the flower spends a long time in the making (nine months) before it achieves full maturity, just to stay open for one short-lived week. *Rafflesia arnoldii* is of an intense red colour, aimed at attracting insects and other little animals that might ensure its survival amid a hostile environment. Of course, flowers are the sexual organs of plants, so they normally display appealing colours and give off irresistible scents to attract bees and other pollinating agents. However, this peculiar flower gives off a most unattractive smell. And yet, in spite of its disgusting scent, it manages to survive and to attract carrion-eating flies that help in the pollination process and rodents that disseminate its seeds. The irony is most eloquent in the third stanza:

Consider, furthermore, its smell,
which is precisely that of
twenty-four fully opened

¹⁶⁷ According to Raymond J. Smith, "Elsewhere, in "A Lesson in Botany", Bringham could have gone to the encyclopaedia for his description of "the largest natural flower of the world". See "Poetry Chronicle", in *The Ontario Review. A North American Journal of the Arts* (Windsor, Ontario) 4 (Spring/Summer 1976), p. 108.

¹⁶⁸ See the entry on 'Rafflesiaceae', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Global Edition, 2009, vol. 23, p. 13892.

pounds of rotting meat; the method
of its pollination: carrion-
eating flies and of its seed-
dissemination: fruit rats.

B, p. 94.

Lastly, the closing stanza explores the story of the flower's name. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (1781-1826)¹⁶⁹ was a British Indian administrator and founder of the port city of Singapore in 1819. He played a decisive role in the creation of Britain's Far Eastern empire at a time when the British Empire was about to achieve its heyday, owning almost a quarter of the total Earth's surface. Although Raffles' formal education was quite inadequate owing to family circumstances which forced him to leave school at the early age of only 14, he had a keen interest in a wide range of disciplines, and so he studied sciences and several languages on his own and conceived an interest in natural history that would earn him a distinguished reputation as a botanist. He was conscientious, hard-working and judicious, invaluable virtues which helped him achieve an increasing authority in the affairs of the British East Indian administration. In Penang, where he spent a period of his lifetime, he had a unique opportunity to shape his career by an intense exploration into the language, history, and culture of the Malayan peoples scattered over the islands of the archipelago. Later, at the age of only 30, he was charged with the responsibility of governing a vast empire comprising Java and an archipelago inhabited by several millions inhabitants. However, his attempts at reforms aimed at improving the living conditions of the native population proved costly and disastrous for the development of his promising career. Eventually he fell out of favour with the directing board of the East India Company and went back to Britain. Later he would intervene once more at a crucial moment, when on the morning of January 29, 1819 he landed on the shore of a sparsely populated island off the southern tip of Malaya, planted the Union Jack on it to claim Singapore as British territory and established by treaty a port there, so as to safeguard the commercial interests of his Empire in the Far East and prevent the Dutch monopoly in that geographical area:

Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles,
the man to plant the Union
Jack on Singapore, has given it
its name: it is *Rafflesia*
arnoldi. This, of course,
is history. *Rafflesia*
arnoldi by any other
name would be *Rafflesia*
arnoldi as we know it and
the largest natural flower of the world.

B, p. 94.

The last stanza¹⁷⁰ is ironic in essence. It does not just give the flower's name but also dwells on the far from clear relationship holding between words and the things they

¹⁶⁹ The basic information on Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles for this short biographical note essential for a proper understanding of the last stanza of the "A Lesson in Botany" has been lifted from *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Global Edition, 2009, vol. 23, pp. 13891-13892.

¹⁷⁰ "A Lesson in Botany" was later republished in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982) and *The Calling* (1995) with minor variations, especially in the closing stanza: 1/ "the man who planted the Union" instead of the original "the man to plant the Union" and 2/ "the largest flower in the natural world" instead of the original "the largest natural flower of the world".

name. *Rafflesia arnoldii* would still be the largest flower in the natural world even if it were called differently, for there is no essential connection between its name and its being. Quite on the contrary, the relationship between a word and its referent is purely arbitrary, as Saussure would put it in his *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, and the fact that this flower came to be known by this name is just the result of historical accident, or rather of a chain of accidents. It was a happy coincidence that Raffles should conceive an interest in the native flowers in Malaysia and that, in spite of the pressure of other bureaucratic responsibilities, he had a chance to devote part of his time, attention and energy to the study of exotic plants like the one which came to be named after him. It was an ironic coincidence that this flower, which turned out to be one of the largest flowers known to exist in the world, was a disgusting parasitic creature, in much the same way that the British Empire was parasitic on the indigenous population of the Malaysian archipelago, and that Raffles was instrumental in setting up this parasitic Empire abroad.



“Some Ciphers”

The Ultimate Elegance of Mathematical Language

“Some Ciphers” is an important poem in the living mesh of Bringhurst’s total *oeuvre*. It is no chance that it should be first published in book form in *Bergschrund* (1975), reprinted in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), and then republished with considerable textual variations in *The Calling* (1995), and in *Selected Poems* (2009). The perfectly poetic inclusion of science in such poems as “Some Ciphers” or “A Lesson in Botany” is indicative of Bringhurst’s omnivorous appetite for human knowledge: in his attempt at comprehending the multifarious world, he embraces the findings of science and philosophy alike. On one level, it is a strange composition, consisting of a chain of mathematical equations and resembling “A Quadratic Equation”, which was linguistic in essence and presented a string of astonishing equations about human language and the mind. On another level, though, the message this terse composition is conveying is one that remains utterly fundamental to the poet’s conception of the way poetry and science are inextricably related to each other in their attempt at illuminating the universe. Poetry and science, like philosophy, are but different ways of responding to the beauty of the world and to the mystery inherent in reality. In an interview, the author elaborated on this idea:

When I was very young, I was mostly interested in the sciences, and physics in particular. And many people think that physics and poetry have nothing to do with each other, but to me they are in essence the same thing. I mean that what it comes down to in both cases is a real astonishment at and keen interest in the fact that the world exists, an awareness of what an amazing and inexhaustible thing it is. I’m fascinated by the meanings of things, and the relations of things, and the interrelations of things. Poetry is a way of responding to it all.¹⁷¹

There seems to be no room for indifference or apathy in the face of the grandeur of *what is* in Bringhurst’s view of how the mind responds to the world. So upon closer inspection, “Some Ciphers” represents not just an exploration of the elegance of mathematical language, which it tries to emulate within the boundaries of a poem through the

¹⁷¹ From an interview with the author conducted at the *Facultad de Filosofía y Letras* of Córdoba (Spain), on 7 April 2010, by Leonor M. Martínez Serrano.

conjunction of words and ciphers instead of ciphers alone, but also a terse statement about the essential unity of poetry and science as gestures of the human mind in their search of knowledge and harmony. In this context, science becomes largely an aesthetic enterprise, concerned with exploring the world with some sort of elegance, an economy of means and objectivity. These are virtues which should not be alien to poetry itself, and perhaps Bringham's poem is the embodiment of one of those precious moments in which poetry and science unite to shed light on *what is* and on *what isn't*.

Reading this poem, we realize that the insights gained into the essence of reality through mathematical equations are not to be dismissed that easily. There are at least five identifiable parts in this composition, roughly corresponding to each stanza. What all of them seem to have in common is a concern with what could be called *a number cosmogony*. Cosmogonies are usually associated with mythical accounts of the origins of the world, which are an anthropological universal – all cultures from all times and historical epochs have inevitably produced their own explanation of the way the universe came into existence. In Bringham's *sui generis* cosmogony, each stanza explores a fundamental concept related to existence. This is obvious in the opening two stanzas, which display a parallel structure, which is palpable not only in their use of conditional clauses, but also in the marked parallelisms uniting the thoughts in both of them:

If I say
 $1 + e^{\pi i} = 0$,
 I have recorded a rather
 elaborate but arguably beautiful way
 of reducing unity to zero.
 If, however, I say
 $1 + 1 = 2$, or 1
 $+ 1 = 1$, I have made a concrete
 assertion having to do
 with construction or fusion.

B, p. 95.

While the first stanza explores a mathematical equation that reduces “unity to zero”, or, in other words, existence into non-existence, the second one looks for the mathematical equivalent of “construction or fusion”. The message implicit in both stanzas is that numbers are *demiurgus-like* entities capable of annihilating existence and of bringing life into being. On the one hand, $1 + e^{\pi i} = 0$ expresses the reduction of unity (being) to zero (non-existence), or of life to death. Destruction is easy and straightforward, as demonstrated by this mathematical equation; creation demands more attention and certain doses of creativity and effort, as the next two formulae seem to express. Though at first sight the mathematical equations $1 + 1 = 2$ and $1 + 1 = 1$ (notice the enjambment in this particular verse line in the poem) might embody different kinds of truth about the world, they are presented as being two alternative paths leading to the same destination – unity. *One plus one* are two separate entities from a logical, rational and mathematical point of view, and yet at the same time *one plus one* fuse into an unbreakable and undistinguishable unity. The same basic concept applies to a number of circumstances in everyday life: two pieces of rope are knotted to form one single rope; a river flows into the ocean and its water becomes one with that found in the ocean; or two persons meet, fall in love, and they somehow become one single person (*ed erant due in uno*, Dante said in his *Divina Commedia*). It is the beauty and the economy of mathematical language that is being highlighted and brought to the fore throughout, basically because it manages to convey in just a few strokes what a natural language would possibly convey through many words.

Like tradition, the following stanzas leave nothing *en route*. Stanza number three explores two more equations: $1 + 1 \rightarrow 0$ and $1 + x = 0$ (where x equals $e^{\pi i}$), which are two alternative, more complex, ways of reducing unity to zero. One of the astonishing virtues of mathematics as a form of rationally accounting for the mystery of the world is precisely its analytic capacity to bare reality down to its very essentials. This virtue of mathematical language Bringhurst bears in mind, so that the search of an elemental simplicity goes on in the last three stanzas. Perhaps these stanzas constitute the irreducible core of “Some Ciphers” and, therefore, they have been indefatigably revised time and again in subsequent versions or incarnations of this poem:

Consider, further, $1 = 0$.
 This, in mathematical terms, may be called
 cancellation. It differs from $0 = 1$,
 which may, in mathematical terms, be called
 the creation *ex nihil* of number, or terror¹⁷².
 Consider, therefore, 0 not equal¹⁷³
 to 0 , or $0 = x$, where x
 is not equal to 0 . Climb left through the zero
 and watch, looking back at
 the blood in its jacket,
 the breath in its jacket,
 the vacuum¹⁷⁴
 opening its arms.

B, p. 95.

$1 = 0$ and $0 = 1$ are two distinct mathematical statements. The fact that the same ciphers are being used in a reversed order does not mean that they mean exactly the same. Thus, the poet is prompt to say that $1 = 0$ is called ‘cancellation’, whereas $0 = 1$ reminds us of the creation of number out of the blue (*ex nihil*). The mathematician is thus depicted as a sort of tantalizing Frankenstein who, instead of assembling parts from different corpses into a coherent body, creates numbers out of airy nothing to account for the mechanisms at work beneath the surface appearance of reality. Indispensable though they may be, numbers are just a mental construction of human beings, after all: a beautiful way of simplifying reality and setting order upon the changing flux of reality, and a means of freezing the world somehow, if only for a while. However, creating an entity from what did not exist before is a form of terror. The version of this poem published in *The Calling* and *Selected Poems* is much more explicit in fact: $0 = 1$ is, “*in non-mathematical terms, the invention / of terror.*”

In the two closing stanzas the emphasis is precisely placed on what lies beyond the creation of number *ex nihil*. Beyond the zero which becomes a unity of sorts lies only the abyss, the vacuum, or the absence. The poem closes on a rather ominous note, as it is suggested that it took non-existence ‘blood’ and ‘breath’ to accomplish its titanic task. For the vacuum or the absence to become a tangible presence it has been necessary to fulfil a cosmogony in which numbers sprang out to the world out of the nothing that is. Despite their explanatory force and despite their being the basic skeleton of science, numbers cannot simply replace the freshness and fleeting essence of the world; they are an amazing

¹⁷² The original “the creation *ex nihil* of number, or terror” in the version in *Bergsbrund* is expanded into “the creation *ex nihil* of number, or, / in non-mathematical terms, the invention / of terror” in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), page 36; in *The Calling* (1995), pages 33-34; and in *Selected Poems* (2009), p. 22.

¹⁷³ “ 0 not equal” is changed into “ $0 \neq$ ” in *The Calling* version.

¹⁷⁴ The original “the vacuum” in the version in *Bergsbrund* is changed into “the absence” in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), in *The Calling* (1995) and *Selected Poems* (2009).

product of the human mind, but they remain somewhat arbitrary, unnecessary, unmotivated, a pale shadow of things. And yet, in the way he conceives of the mission of poetry and science in the world, Bringhurst embraces a sort of organic view of the world in which *everything is connected to everything else*. It is in the face of the sublime grandeur in the cosmos that we humans have embarked on the titanic enterprise of knowing what is going on at all in the world. Poetry, philosophy and science are just simple kinds of reaction to reality, different facets of the human imagination in its attempt to apprehend the nature or the essence of things. In many of his essays the author has explored the connections between poetry, philosophy and science in this respect. As he points out in the interview from which we quoted above,

Well, it seems to me that they all [poetry, science and philosophy] begin with the same..., in the same place, they begin as one thing. They are like branches of a tree that are grown out of the same, single trunk. If you get very specialized, you get far out on one particular limb and you leave the other ones behind. A research scientist who is working at a laboratory with subatomic particles or hydrocarbon chains or some other thing that they are doing in a very specific task for which the only adequate language is mathematical language, you might think that this leaves poetry behind, but if you talk to mathematicians about this, you'll discover that they don't think that at all. They are very alert to the beauty of the equations that they write and they know that it is possible to write the same sequence of mathematical ideas in a way that is more beautiful or in a way that is not so beautiful, and they look for the beautiful ways, in the implicit assumption that beauty and truth are somehow related, they are not exactly the same thing.¹⁷⁵



“Anecdote of the Squid”

Of Squids and the Essence of Poetry – Another Treatise on Poetics in Miniature

As in “A Lesson in Botany”, where the poet could have gone directly to the encyclopedia for his description of the largest flower in the natural world, Bringhurst could have turned again to a dictionary or an encyclopedia for his poem entitled “Anecdote of the Squid”, which turns out to be a poem not just about the cephalopod found in oceanic and coastal waters, but also a meditative, if witty, treatise on the nature of poetry and the poet’s role in creating linguistic artifacts.¹⁷⁶ In this way, the poem consists of two clearly distinguishable

¹⁷⁵ From an interview with the author conducted at the *Facultad de Filosofía y Letras* of Córdoba (Spain), on the 7th April 2010, by Leonor M. Martínez Serrano.

¹⁷⁶ Gary Geddes, in a review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, published in *Journal of Canadian Poetry* (Nepean, Ontario) n.s. 3 (1988): 15-18, analyzes this poem in some detail: “His best work seemed to me to have a sureness of craft and an intellectual sophistication worthy of attention. One of his very fine poems, “Anecdote of the Squid,” [...] is witty and cleverly constructed, presenting the ink-bearing squid as a portrait of the artist who, in the company of enemies, makes artifacts which are mistaken for the squid itself, who, meanwhile, “grows / transparent and withdraws / leaving behind him his / coagulating shadows.” The squid, like Bringhurst, belongs to the older tradition of objectivity in art, which we recall in Flaubert’s statement that the novelist should be “everywhere felt, but nowhere seen” and in Yeats comment that, in art, “all that is personal soon rots.” Bringhurst places himself squarely in this tradition: “Music that is too human is useless. That which is too exclusively human is not human enough. Our deepest passions push us away outside ourselves.” This is not a popular view to hold in Canada, where confession, domestic reportage, and other personal fictions are the order of the day. [...] The poet is, by nature and by choice, an outsider, an inhabitant of the edges of society, a scholar and polyglot who prefers the company of widgeons and herons to that of humans, an American by birth who eschews the values of his society and lives in permanent exile, like his mentor Ezra Pound.” See p. 15.

parts of five stanzas each: one evocative sequence of five stanzas describing different aspects of the squid's anatomy is followed by an original meditation in which the squid becomes an evocative metaphor for the poet's role. On one level, like the above mentioned "A Lesson in Botany", this poem turns out to be a sort of lesson in anatomy; but, unlike its companion poem, it goes a step further in explicitly elaborating on the poet's idea of what poetry is and is not, and on his notion of what it can accomplish in the world. For this purpose he has chosen not an exotic flower, the largest in the world, which thrives in the forested mountains in the Malaysian archipelago, but a common sea animal which still remains a mystery to biologists. In fact, not much is known of the life history of these numerous 10-armed cephalopods (order Teuthoidea) found in both coastal and oceanic waters, ranging in size from about 1.5 centimetres to more than 20 metres, including the tentacles. And yet, exploring the nature of the squid enables the poet to explore his own conception of the poet's role.

In the first part of the poem, the opening lines of each stanza are marked by anaphora, i.e., the repetition of the noun phrase 'the squid'. The close repetition of 'the squid' sets up a tight, mesmerizing chain of echoes throughout the whole composition, which visually resembles the longish body of the squid itself. The animal is described in a sequence of witty metaphors which constitute a sort of tentative approach to an accurate definition of the animal under scrutiny here. When juxtaposed or tessellated, the string of images forms a *Gestalt* – the picture in full of the squid. A scientific description informs us that squids have elongate tubular bodies (mostly strengthened by a feathery-shaped, internal shell composed of a horny material) and short compact heads, which allows them to be swift swimmers or part of the drifting sea life. Their eyes, almost as complex as human eyes, are set into the sides of their head. Science proceeds through declarative, impersonal sentences in which an accurate recording of the animal is being carried out. However, in Bringhurst's poem we find a poetic rendering of the picture of the squid, which is successively described as being "a carnivorous pocket / containing a pen" (stanza 1), as "a raised finger or / an opposed thumb" (stanza 2), and as "a short-beaked / bird who has eaten / his one wing" (stanza 3). Stanzas 4 and 5 dwell on what the squid does and does not do: even if it looks like a wineskin, "it does not entertain" (stanza 4) and even if its tentacles may suggest that it has a natural ability for painting, it does not draw (stanza 5). Science tells us that two of the ten arms of the squid have developed into long slender tentacles with expanded ends and four rows of suckers with toothed, horny rings:

The squid, with his eight
arms and his two
brushes and his sepia,
does not draw.

B, p. 98.

The second part of the poem is a sort of treatise on poetics in miniature. The intention is similar to that of "The Identity Moving", included in the first part of *Bergschrund* as an explicit reflection on the nature of poetry. As Iain Higgins suggests when quoting a couple of lines from "Anecdote of the Squid" apropos the notion of the unspecialized, multifunctional body, which the poet analyzes in his essay "Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation",

For Bringhurst, the true poet's communicative activity – taking 'investigative' soundings in 'attempts at echolocation' – hardly differs from that of bats, birds, or dolphins, except insofar as the poet also takes literary dictation from naturally

occurring voices, giving oral utterances written form for publication. [...] Bringhurst's radically earthly poet resembles a wayfaring cephalopod: head and foot remain in vital contact with each other and with their native element, as the organism 'transcribe[s] / [its] silence' into the elemental space in which it moves, making 'artifacts' when it leaves behind its 'coagulating shadows'.¹⁷⁷

Such 'attempts at echolocation' suggest that the poet's mind and senses remain alert to what is going on around him, and that the whole body is a sort of conduit through which impressions are directly impressed on the mind, the heart and the soul. Poetry, however, has nothing quintessentially to do with narcissistic self-expression or raw subjectivity:

The squid knows too that the use
of pen and ink is neither recording
impressions nor signing his name
to forms and petitions.

B, p. 98.

What the poet manages to accomplish is to pay close attention to the ineffable beauty of the world and to the mystery that the very world exists out there for us human beings to celebrate in its inexhaustible richness and vividness. It is his serious calling to transcribe it into well-wrought artefacts made out of words so as to enlighten other humans, for only the squid (the poet) seems to be capable of listening attentively to what lessons the sound of silence has to teach him. The image of the squid as a sensitive territorial recorder, floating somewhere between the ocean bottom and the surface waves of the sea, perceiving the unspeakable mystery about him, is already a gift to the reader. After all, squids are creatures of light: the luminescent squids bear numerous light organs, which may be for recognition and for attracting prey. On another level, they shed light on their surrounding world:

But the squid may be said,
for instance, to transcribe
his silence into the space
between seafloor and wave,

or to invoke an unspoken
word, whose muscular
non-pronunciation the squid
alone is known to have mastered.

B, pp. 98-99.

The ink the squid takes with him serves him as a tool for producing his own artefacts (i.e., poems), which are not to be confused with a representation of reality (mimesis), with self-expression or with reality itself. They are just pure artefacts, even if

These are mistakable for
portraiture, or
for self-portraiture, or,
to the eyes of the squid-eating whale,

¹⁷⁷ See entry on Robert Bringhurst by Iain Higgins in *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*, ed. W. H. New, pp. 152-153.

for the squid, who grows¹⁷⁸
transparent and withdraws,
leaving behind him his
coagulating shadows.

B, pp. 98-99.

In words strongly reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's on the impersonality of great poetry, the poet advocates a view of poetry which has nothing to do with subjective insights or narcissism. Like the squid, leaving behind him nothing but "*coagulating shadows*", the poet refines himself out of existence when creating a poem. There is not much of him left in his work. What he leaves behind him is poems, artefacts, for other humans' consumption. Similarly, we might think that the same applies to squids. They are numerous in the sea and serve as food for many animals, including the sperm whale, bony fishes, and man.

Bringhurst's rejection of elaboration and syntactic complexity is self-evident in this poem, which consists of short declarative sentences in the present tense. Our present-day preference for directness means fewer adjectives or adverbs, fewer subordinate or qualifying clauses that might lengthen the sentence. Of course, this is indicative of a generalized mistrust of verbal play and of the favour that plain speech enjoys in contemporary poetry. Today's poetry has taken on the directness and the simplicity of speech. The poetic line has become shorter, committed as it is to communication or to delivering authentic meaning. There is no rhyme either, and, without rhyme, there is suddenly far more chance for natural and unforced speech. In fact, the short lyric is a perfect vehicle for meditations of this sort, or the ones we find in other even shorter Bringhurst poems like "Scholium" and "A Quadratic Equation". It is out of the question that one of the signatory traits of the sculpted lyric is that it comes out of deep sources of language and thought, ingrained in the human mind. In "Anecdote of the Squid", unlike Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar", where a manufactured object is placed amid a natural landscape, the reader is presented with a series of small, intense image- and sound-snapshots. Even if there is no rhyme, the music builds from verse line to verse line often producing a hypnotic rhythm. The form is designed so that the poetic voice is clearly heard. And it is a recognizably human voice, which conveys a sense of the immediacy of thought and perception which it takes to produce a poem like this – memorable, beautiful, enduring.



"Notes to the Reader"

Poetics Revisited

In "Notes to the Reader" a poetic voice which we presume to be Bringhurst's addresses the reader for the first time. This address takes the form of off-hand, quick notes, jotted down on a piece of paper, as if the poet were in a rush. Whereas in "Anecdote of the Squid" the poet used the cephalopod as a potent image to convey a sense of how the poet goes about creating linguistic artefacts and how poetry somehow manages to touch the

¹⁷⁸ "Anecdote of the Squid" was later republished with minor variations in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), *The Calling* (1995) and *Selected Poems* (2009), where a/ "his one wing" (stanza 3) becomes "his single wing", b/ "Cadurcien" (stanza 4) becomes "Cadurcian", and c/ the opening line in stanza 11 reads "for the squid, who in the meanwhile grows".

mystery inherent in the world, now it is high time that he addressed directly the issue of the ultimate nature of poems. This new poetics is presented in three parts. What is common to all of them is that all three are formulated in the imperative, that they are pervaded by a subtle irony, and that they constitute several attempts to decipher the essence of what at first sight might look indecipherable. Following Wallace Stevens's example in his celebrated "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird", Bringhurst is essaying here three ways of looking at the nature of a poem as a man-made object which, in the end, turns out to be much more than a witty combination of words, full of music and evocative of transcendent meaning. As though it were a piece of music, the poem displays an *in crescendo* structure. Thus, the arrangement of the poem into three distinct parts obeys a logic that becomes obvious by the end of the composition, or just the very moment the reader stops to contemplate the *Gestalt* of the poem as an organic whole in his/her mind. In Bringhurst's poetics a poem is first conceptualized as being an object, purely physical, and so liable to being handled, touched, and put to a number of practical uses. Then, the reader is encouraged to absorb it and turn it into a part of the fabric of his/her own body and mind. Lastly, there is an astonishing and unexpected moment of revelation, when the reader witnesses the total fusion of poetry and the world into an indistinguishable whole – no longer is the division between poetry and non-poetry discernible.

"*Have a Good Time*" – this is the first command addressed to the reader, probably not to the common reader of poetry, but rather to the reader of Bringhurst's own poems¹⁷⁹. As a matter of fact, the poem begins with a deictic (*This is a poem*) which appears to refer to the author's poem itself. The central notion at the heart of this part is that the poem is conceived of as an object, a thing in the world, and so it can be used for a number of purposes. A string of imperatives follows in which the reader is encouraged to observe the incessant metamorphosis of the poem as object: "*Take it. Pack it up / the mountain. / You will meet a man / who says it is an ice-axe. Give it to him.*" Maybe part of the grandeur of poetry lies precisely in the fact that there is no universal agreement on the ultimate nature or meaning of poems. Conceived as an object, the poem is first interpreted as being an ice-axe by a mountaineer and then as a harpoon by a sea man. There are not simply right or wrong interpretations; it all depends on the actual context and vital circumstances surrounding a first encounter with an author's poems. Poems are not made primarily to be subject to exegesis, critical analysis, or rational scrutiny; they seem to be intended to accomplish something else in the world and in the reader's mind. Poems sing and all they demand from attentive and respectful readers is that they should listen to whatever they have to unveil about the world and themselves. Horace used to say that literature served a practical purpose in the world, and he encoded that intuition of his in the memorable words *docere et delectare*. In Bringhurst's first meditation on poetry, entitled "Have a Good Time", the emphasis is rather placed on the second half of the Horatian motto: poetry is made to provide readers with fun and entertainment. The knowledge that may be derived from reading poetry is only a by-product, though an essential one indeed. However, there is a sadness pervading the closing line of the first part of the poem. As in "The Fish Who Lived to Tell about It", humans end up inevitably quarrelling over the ultimate nature of poems – whereas the one argues it is an ice-axe, the other argues that is a harpoon instead. It is no coincidence that both should be sharpened objects.

¹⁷⁹ I remember Bringhurst telling me years ago that if I was going to spend a long time working on his poems, at least I should enjoy reading them above all. The pleasure of reading is of the essence; criticism is only secondary in importance when compared to the aesthetic experience of reading a poet's work rich in insights into the nature of life and reality for the first time. The encounter with new poems and the discovery of a new outlook upon the world are simply exhilarating experiences.

“*Get Laid*” – this is the second command for the reader to follow. If a poem is an object, then it follows that it can be perceived through all sense organs – it can be seen, smelled, touched, tasted, and listened to. The first stanza explores this possibility and very subtly presents the view that poetry is thinking and singing at the same time:

Watch it: it thinks but, no, you cannot quite watch it
thinking. Listen to it singing: no, you can't quite
hear it singing. Smell it: linseed and lampblack: no,
no you can't quite smell it, touch it, taste it.

B, p. 100.

Though the hypothesis that a poem can be perceived through the sensory system is explored and immediately cancelled, the view that a poem thinks and sings on its own is put forward in eloquent terms. Poems are made of thinking and singing, that is to say, of ideas and music. If the bodily senses do not ensure that a poem be absorbed and experienced as a simple physical experience, then the next thing for the reader to do is to “*take it / intravenously and see if it does not have / some effect.*” In its raw physicality, the poem can be absorbed and incorporated into the living fabric of the human body. Then the poet makes use of a witty simile to suggest that a poem can be handled as if it were a thermometer, and so it can be put under one’s tongue, or pocketed or stuck somewhere. The striking thing about this second part of Bringhurst’s meditation is that a poem is not just an object, an autonomous entity of clear-cut outlines, standing out against an undistinguishable mass of things, but something that can be absorbed through the mind and incorporated into the changing reservoir of experiences of the individual subject. At that point the poem becomes something else: a creature with a life of its own, a naughty being that enjoys the pleasures of the world. And a poem is a voice and is the emanation of human breath from the lungs in the body as well. Poetry is breath charged with meaningful meaning:

You may feel it thinking, singing, feel it
humming to itself, yodelling down these treeless
canyons, up these lattices of sound and shadow

following its echo. Follow. Echo it or
swallow it. It is just a voice; you are a whale.

B, p. 101.

“*Stand back / or up and back*” – this is the last order addressed to the reader. The third part of “Notes to the Reader” is instrumental in operating a Whitmanesque total fusion of Nature, the human body, and language. The whole world is a gigantic stage where the reconciliation of opposites is being enacted time and again, as suggested by Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Bringhurst accomplishes the fusion with just a couple of linguistic strokes and an impressive poetic economy. First comes the acknowledgment that “*Inanimate / and animate embrace each other,*” and then the fusion is further elaborated upon in a striking enumeration that brings the elements in the natural world (treebark, water, rock), the human body (nervicord, chromosome, bone), and human language (words) into an organic whole. All three (the world at large, the body, and the mind): “*cling to each other, lean against / each other: treebark, words, water, / rock, nervicord, chromosome and bone.*” (B, p. 101) The ultimate lesson about the nature of poetry comes to the fore as the poem comes to its end. Poems cannot be separated from the body and the mind from which they emanate in the form of meaningful breath and ideas set to music. And they cannot be severed either from the physical world which makes their birth possible, for they celebrate the very universe in

which they are born. There is poetry in the world, and there is poetry in the souls of human beings. One has to be only alert to the beauty so as to let the poems bloom and flourish. Human poems, i.e., poems made by human with the aid of natural languages, are just a tiny part of the larger poetry of the world. In the end, poetry and the world turn out to be absolutely indistinguishable.



“City of Mirage”

In memoriam Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb

Translation is a form of communication across languages. And from a different perspective, it is also a form of intertextuality, a way for literatures and natural languages spoken by human beings to communicate with one another despite temporal and geographical divisions and barriers. Both notions, translation and intertextuality, are inextricably linked to the idea of tradition. It is probably universally true that, as the history of literature unfolds in time and space, no matter which human language it finds a material incarnation in, tradition becomes an ever more powerful instrument in the poet’s hands, enabling him to enter into a dialogue with the past and to produce an enduring work endowed with multilayered meaning for a literate audience of true connoisseurs. This is particularly true of Arabic literature, the vehicle of expression of which is the Arabic language. One of the most striking features of the Arabic language is that there is a contrast between a more or less uniform and universal literary language and vastly diverse colloquial dialects spoken in what is generally known as the Arab world. The coexistence of a colloquial dialect and the literary language constitutes, in fact, one of the most prominent features of the Arabic language. Classical Arabic literature has a strongly conservative character and literary Arabic is conceived of as an essentially unchanging sacred tongue, the language in which the Koran, the sacred text or scripture, is written.

Robert Bringhurst’s poetry is dynamically involved in a permanent dialogue with the poetry of different traditions. An ever-increasing corpus of texts constitutes tradition and becomes an immense reservoir authors may draw upon in search of nourishment and inspiration. “City of Mirage” is just an instance of what it means to have a look at another completely different tradition and find a jewel of a poem. The cadences of the vernacular can be heard in its four constituent stanzas, even if this is but a translation, a masterful one we presume, from the original Arabic text. At this point, we must acknowledge our ignorance of the Arabic language, which will render this critical analysis only partial and incomplete. An exhaustive study of the poem under scrutiny would require that both pieces (the original Arabic poem and the English translation) were set side by side and rigorously analyzed. But we are not after this kind of philological precision in this context. What we aim to illuminate is the fact that translation is a form of nourishment for Bringhurst since his early poetry books.

The poem by Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, “City of Mirage”, dated 2 November 1961, Basra, was originally published in his poetry collection *House of Slaves* (1963), almost one year prior to his untimely death. The extended lyric is an evocative love poem dedicated to the beloved, Wafīqa, someone real, the cousin whom al-Sayyāb loved as a young man and throughout all his life. With the passing of time Wafīqa becomes something grander than herself in his poetry: she comes to be associated with Jaykūr, the little village where he was born, a potent symbol for emotional security and stability, childhood innocence, and a state of careless bliss. But at this point it might be wise to understand where this poet came

from, vitally and literarily, and to see what he was capable of doing with the Arabic language. Iraqi poet Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb¹⁸⁰ (1926-1964) is one of the leaders of the free verse movement in the Arab world. Deeply influenced by Western authors writing in English and French, in the 1940s he set out to revolutionize traditional poetry and break loose from the formal constraints of classical Arabic poetry. In the fifties and sixties he produced a handful of poetry books, written mostly in free verse, which have become enduring works not only in the history of Arabic poetry, but also in the larger context of world literature. His bold experiments somehow changed the course of modern Arabic poetry. There is now no way of knowing whether he would have produced more lasting works, had he not died at such an early age of a degenerative disease of the nervous system. He died in poverty after an intense life devoted to the art of poetry, both politically committed and intimate poetry exploring personal dilemmas, fusing through myth and symbolism the particular and the universal in human experience. Altogether he produced seven poetry collections and translations from the poetry of Louis Aragon, Nazim Hikmet, and Edith Sitwell, who, along with T. S. Eliot, had a particularly lasting influence on him. His precious literary legacy has now become a constituent part of the fabric of modern Arabic culture.

Al-Sayyāb was born in Jaykūr, a little town south of Basra. He was the eldest son of a date grower and shepherd, and he lost his mother in 1932, at the age of six, while she was giving birth to her fourth child. He was then raised by his paternal grandparents in Jaykūr, which remained the place where he found solace during his periodic stays away from the city of Baghdad, and also a potent image of childhood innocence and emotional stability in his poetry, as pointed out above. He was educated as a child in a school in the neighbouring village of Bab Soliman and the Mahmoudia School in Abul-Khasib, another small town that often figures in his poems. In 1938 he moved to Basra, where he settled with his maternal grandparents to attend secondary school. Afterwards, he attended university, initially with the intention of specializing in Arabic Language and Literature, for which he seemed to have innate aptitudes, and eventually studying English Language and Literature. In 1941 he started writing poetry regularly, though much of his early work, written in traditional metres, was collected and published only posthumously. In Baghdad he developed his literary inclinations by the interaction with other fellow students with literary interests. This was a decisive impulse to his artistic growth. He graduated from the Higher Teachers' Training College in Baghdad in 1948. Shortly afterwards, for a short period of time (1948-1949), he worked as an English teacher, but he was banned from teaching for a ten-year period for being a member of the Iraqi Communist party. He worked subsequently as a civil servant and as a free-lance journalist. Continually he suffered political harassment, and, as a result, he was arrested and dismissed from several jobs several times in his lifetime.

Early in his literary career, his poetry collections betray the influence of Baudelaire, the English Romantic poets (Wordsworth in particular), and such Arab Romantic poets of the 1940s as 'Alī Mahmūd Tāhā and Ilyās Abū Shabaka. His two first books, *Azḥār dhābila*

¹⁸⁰ Basic information regarding the life and work of the Iraqi poet has been drawn from a number of different sources, particularly (1) the entry on 'al-Sayyāb, Badr Shākir' in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, edited by Julie Scout Meisami and Paul Starkey, London & New York: Routledge, 1998 (reprinted 1999), vol. 2, pp. 696-697; (2) the entry on 'free verse' (*shi'r hurri*) in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, vol. 1, pp. 236-237; (3) the book-length essay entitled *Modern Arabic Literature* (2006), by Paul Starkey, Georgetown University Press; (4) Youseff Rakha's essay "Badr Shakir al-Sayyab", published in Cairo by *Al-Abram. Weekly On-line*, Issue no. 682, 18-24 March 2004, at <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/682/bo6.htm>>, consulted on 20th April 2010; and (5) Fadhil Sultani's essay "Badr Shakir al-Sayyab: One Heritage for Humankind", published by *Banipal Magazine*, no. 9, Summer 1999, at <<http://www.banipal.co.uk>>, consulted on 20th April 2010.

(*Wilting Flowers*, 1947) and *Asātīr (Myths)*, 1950), feature sensuous poems concerned with exploring love themes, women and nature. Both were further revised and re-published under the title *Flowers and Myths* in 1960 and both combined the traditional *qasīda* and free verse compositions. The poems stemming from his political affiliation and social commitment were originally published in local newspapers and collected posthumously. In the development of modern Arabic poetry al-Sayyāb is best known for his experimentation with poetic form. Al-Sayyāb experimented with what came to be known as *shi‘r hurr* (free verse)¹⁸¹. In the 1940s the free verse movement in modern Arabic poetry tried to liberate itself from the fixed patterns of the single rhyme and the symmetry of classical poetry. The basic unit of verse was the single foot (*tafīla*) and al-Sayyāb experimented precisely with new rhythms based on the single foot as the metrical unit, using as many feet per line as the thought required instead of the fixed six or eight feet per line of traditional verse. Rhyme was optional now and quite often even irregular in the hands of the new experimenters. Hence al-Sayyāb used irregular line lengths and irregular rhyme schemes. Influenced mainly by T. S. Eliot and Russian poets, the poets of the free verse movement abandoned the division of the verse into two hemistiches, employing enjambment and a combination of technical, mythological and symbolic devices to communicate a new poetic vision.

The 1950s were a prolific decade in al-Sayyāb’s life, as he wrote his best poetry, most of it in free verse. His was the first Modernist attempt in Arabic poetry to develop complex modes to explore a wide spectrum of themes ranging from the socio-political issues, personal experience and emotion, to metaphysics and human nature. In this context, a poem is a closely interwoven *Gestalt*, an artefact carefully designed to convey an accurate sense of reality. 1960 was an *annus mirabilis*: it witnessed the publication of what is unquestionably acknowledged as his major literary achievement, *Unshūdat al-matar (Rain Song)*, which collected the poems written between 1952 and 1960, among them the long poems *The Grave Digger* (1952), *The Blind Prostitute* (1954) and *Weapons and Children* (1955). Though still politically committed, he now made effective use of literary allusions and symbols, creating images of intense beauty to convey the Arab hope for a better life, free from repression and exploitation. Under the powerful influence of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) and Edith Sitwell, he incorporated myths of fertility as well as myths of death and resurrection from different sources (Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, and Christian) as a structuring device in his poetry to convey a sense of the renewal of Arab society and culture. He produced then poems that communicated a sense of the personal and the universal in a way reminiscent of High Modernism literature in English. He somehow embraced the Eliotian concept of the co-existence of all time planes here and now, as well as the notion that tradition is an inexhaustible reservoir of texts and a powerful source of inspiration for a never-ending secular enterprise (the act of creating poetry) that finds perpetual nourishment in the achievements of the past. From Eliot, al-Sayyāb derived a distinct vocabulary and vivid imagery, at times almost Imagist in precision and intensity, as well as a genius for transcendent themes. It was a new poetic language to convey a sense of modern Arab life and its predicament.

The last years of al-Sayyāb’s life were marked by physical and psychological decay. In the 1960s he was still very productive and wrote poems in spite of his degenerative illness. With his activism waning, his poetry acquired something of a contemplative tone. For the most part his poems now dwelt existentially on the human condition as seen from the idiosyncratic personal predicament he was going through, wavering between hope or stoic resignation in the face of death, and celebration of childhood reminiscence, past

¹⁸¹ See the entries on ‘free verse’ (*shi‘r hurr*) and ‘prosody’ in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, vol. 1, pp. 236-237, and vol. 2, pp. 619-622, respectively.

moments of bliss, love and happiness. Hence, the poems in *Drowning Temple* (1962) and *Manzil al-aqnān* (1963, *House of Slaves*) are more confessional and intimate in style. Despite being treated in different cities to no avail, his illness eventually took him to Kuwait, where he suffered from paralysis and intense depression for six months before his death at the age of only 38. His last poetry collection, *Shanāshil ibnat al-Jalbī* (1964, *Al-Chalabi's Daughter's Shanashi*), an expression of pure *Angst* and sense of existential emptiness, was published on 24th December 1964, exactly on the day he was buried. His complete *Dīwān* was published in two volumes in Beirut, 1971-74.

Al-Sayyāb's poetry had a formative and lasting impact on the poetry of other renowned Arab authors like Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and Syrian poet Adonis, who has described his poetry as being a turning point in the history of Arabic poetry, as a meeting point where two worlds converge and diverge at the same time – the ancient world of traditional Arabic literature, conservative by nature, and the future world of Arabic literature. He is credited with being the most conservative of the free verse poets, displaying an astonishing familiarity with the difficult aspects of the classical tongue as well as a profound command of the metrical rules governing Arabic verse. In fact, al-Sayyāb remained closer to the spirit of the classical legacy in spite of making use of free verse, symbolism, and myths in the tradition of T. S. Eliot, probably one of the most influential Modernist writers in English literature. What is striking in this case is that the author of such a landmark text as *The Waste Land* (1922) should have had such a decisive impact on an Arab poet twenty years after the publication of what is considered the central monument of High Modernism in English. The fact remains that he is held responsible for a true revolution in modern Arabic poetry and that he tried to find a new, simple poetic language to express a new social and political reality as well as complex issues (his personal tragedy, the social tragedy of Iraq, and the human condition). In his creative enterprise he revived the mythology of ancient Iraq and somehow fused it with other mythologies, in particular Greek, and used myth as a most potent device to articulate important meaning in thoughtful images. The message he was sending to the world and to the young Arab poets that would listen to his findings, Adonis among them, was that there seems to be only one common heritage for humankind in its entirety, and that it is the poet's duty to somehow enrich it, even if with a modest contribution.

“City of Mirage”, dated 2 November 1961, Basra, is a moving love poem, an autobiographical meditation on al-Sayyāb's love for Wafīqa. Jaykūr was not just his birthplace, but the home of his first love, one of his many cousins. In his poetry there is an infinite string of references to this little village, which becomes a sort of Eliotian objective correlative for innocence, the first flutters of consciousness, and personal identity. Jaykūr was the setting of his childhood and of many of his poems, and the place where he first fell in love with a woman. Even if it was a doomed love from the beginning, and he returned to Jaykūr one day only to find Wafīqa already married, both the birthplace and the woman came to be closely associated with one another in his mind as powerful symbols of security, as a place of warmth and protection, which were of essence for someone who had been an orphan since the age of six. Opening with a first-person poetic voice, the extended lyric consists of four stanzas that display a sort of circular structure that bring the beginning and the end to exactly the same point: the beloved's absence when he needs her most, by his side, at a time, 1961, when the poet was already sensing the devastating effects of an illness of the nervous system that proved to be fatal.

The poem is then a nostalgic meditation on the nature of love, which is basically made out of the absence and the presence of the loved person. The speaking voice (which

we presume is al-Sayyāb's voice) sets out on a long journey toward Asia, probably toward Jaykūr once more, to the place where the beloved is. The journey is not a physical journey through time and space, but rather a psychological one, one taken through the sole effort of the extended wings of the mind and the imagination. As a result, in the first stanza the speaking *I* dwells on what in a prototypical love poem would constitute physical obstacles to the lovers' union. In al-Sayyāb's poem distance is no problem at all: time does not "curl over", 'mountains' are just 'small mounds', and 'waterways' are no more than 'tributary ditches'. He thus flouts all the conventional motifs of a love poem, if only for a while:

I crossed from Europe into Asia
and the day did not curl over
and instead the mountains and the waterways seemed
to be small mounds and tributary ditches
that children can jump.
Between sunrise and sunset
north and south embrace each other,
fertile fields sleep in the bleak plains,
and you who share my bed are as far away as stars
and it seems that there is sleep between us.

B, p. 86.

Harmony in the physical world is depicted through an astonishing economy of poetic strokes as being the province of opposites that can be easily reconciled. All the elements in the natural world, including the cycle of the earth around the sun, cardinal points, fertile fields and bleak plains, betray a most subtle harmony in the way they embrace each other. By contrast, the true nature of the beloved's ubiquitous presence comes to the fore just as the stanza comes to its end. Even if she seems to be in two places at the same time – in the lover's bed, by his side, and "*far away as stars*" –, no reconciliation seems to be possible between her absence and her presence. The second stanza is precisely concerned with exploring the pain the beloved's absence brings about in the lover's soul:

My hands harvest you, wringing out a dumb cadaver
like a soaked shirt, as if I were
hugging my own blood on a stolen stone
in someplace robbed by the breeze and the mist
and the midday heat, where evening consists
of nothing but silence and stars, and morning
is useless for anything but waiting.

B, p.86.

This stanza is a most vivid depiction of the beloved's absence. Hands are crucial in a love relationship, for they ascertain the physical presence of the *other* through elemental touch. What is left of the beloved when the lover tries to embrace her is just 'a dumb cadaver', for, in fact, he is not embracing her physically, but rather he is hugging an image of her that he diligently treasures in his mind. Following the decisive 'as if' is a cogent and lucid meditation on what it means to be deprived of the beloved's presence. Not only is the lover embracing his "*own blood on a stolen stone*", but the emotional setting is also a desolate landscape where breeze, mist and intolerable heat reign. Time is of no use in the beloved's absence: evening in this hostile landscape of the mind is "*nothing but silence and stars*", and morning serves no practical purpose other than waiting, probably for the beloved's return. The repeated alliteration (*hands-harvest, stolen-stone, mist-midday, silence-stars*) pervades

this second stanza with an evocative musicality and helps convey a sense of unreality as well, which is further extended into the next stanza.

Whereas the first stanza dwelt on the space separating the lovers, the third one focuses on time instead. The literary motif or *topos* at stake here is that whereby time is conceptualized as being *edax rerum*. Emotionally destitute, al-Sayyāb cries for help and addresses his beloved, Wafīqa, for the first time. “Blood and fire” have settled in between them, which are probably intended as symbols for havoc and destruction, or for the separate paths they have taken in their lives. Let us not forget that on one of the occasions al-Sayyāb goes back home, he finds her married. The point is that years have inevitably elapsed now and time seems to have succeeded in separating the lovers even much more strongly than space. Though the lover has built “bridges over them”, and made an effort not to forget her, she is now truly far away from him. The bridges he has built to bring her closer to him have turned into an inaccessible enclosure, and somewhere beyond the protective walls of such a symbolical enclosure is Wafīqa, who seems to belong among the dead now. Several pieces of evidence in the poem itself seem to back up this hypothesis: she dwells “*in deep seas*” he cannot even touch, hard though he may try, and she is “*darling / of the darkness and the worm.*” Back in a primordial element like water, Wafīqa is inaccessible, and yet the poet feels she is still close at hand, “nearest” to him, though she is the companion of the worm in the realm of darkness.

For a long time the poet has been journeying toward Wafīqa. For ten years al-Sayyāb has been revisiting Jaykūr, in search of spiritual solace and comfort. His birthplace was also the place where his beloved breathed. In spite of the insurmountable difficulties of time and space, no single day has Wafīqa not shared the poet’s bed, which is to say that he has not forgotten her despite the relentless passing of time. And then, all of a sudden, Wafīqa becomes Jaykūr, the woman and the city seem to fuse into one single entity – they become one and the same thing. What they have in common is their mirage-like quality: they are evanescent like a vision in the desert; their consistency is fluid like desert sand or water; and they are somehow unreal, like the cities enumerated in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, which had a lasting impact on al-Sayyāb’s mind:

Ten years I came toward you,
you who share my bed, sleeping
beside me behind that enclosure, sleeping
in the bed of her being,
and there has been no ending to the journey
toward you, city of mirage, stinking, blind
ending of her life.
I crossed from Europe into Asia
and the day did not curl over
and you who share my bed, a distant city
of shut doors behind which I
stopped and stood waiting.

B, p. 87.

But once again al-Sayyāb flouts the reader’s horizon of expectations. The journey has no ending proper; it has been going on and on for a long time, and will presumably go on much longer. At last the poet arrives in this distant city, but he does not cross the shut doors which keep him outside. He just stops and makes up his mind to wait patiently, probably for his own death, which will reunite him with the beloved. The circle is now perfect and complete: he has come all the way from Europe to Asia to be by his beloved’s

side. Paradoxically enough, she was close by his side from the very beginning, lying next to him on his bed, sharing every single minute of his life, pervading his heart and soul all the time. This most moving eulogy of love has been carried out in a most impersonal Eliotian way, but Bringham's homage to al-Sayyāb was a deserving cause: "City of Mirage" is a homage written *in memoriam* of the Iraqi poet who lived a life of intensity and adversity alike, who knew the pain and pleasure of human love, and who expressed it all masterfully in a poetic language of intense and precise images which our poet must have truly admired to have made his mind to translate it into English. Unfortunately, we are not in a position to make sure whether the translation itself has improved upon the Arabic original text, for we lack the knowledge of the literary language in which it was first conceived.



"Ararat"

The Universal Flood, Noah's Ark & the Rainbow

"Ararat" is a peculiar piece in part V of *Bergschrund*; together with "A Study for an Ecumenical Window", it rather belongs among the biblical pieces in part III. In this poem there is air and there is light – which is a recurrent image throughout the whole book – but there are also fissures, edges, sharpened outlines in an elemental landscape that speaks of a primeval time that still has bearings upon the present. Time being a fluid matter, the filaments of the past have surreptitiously survived into the present and their presence can still be felt in a mountain landscape akin to that in "Song of the Summit" – which is possibly its companion poem in its impulse to record the nakedness of Nature sublime. "Ararat", however, is about something else: upon closer inspection it turns out to be a poetic rendering of a biblical episode related in Genesis, which is the story of the Flood and Noah's Ark¹⁸². The title of the poem gives ample evidence about the theme explored in this composition. In the Bible Ararat is best known as the region ("the mountains of Ararat", not "Mount Ararat", Genesis, 8.4) in which Noah's ark came to rest after the Flood. In spite of later Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions that sought to identify the mountain on which Noah landed, all attempts to do so have ended in failure. What is certain is that studies in comparative mythology have demonstrated that the Flood myth is universal and can be found across cultures in a number of traditions. Like all myths, the universal Flood proves no exception in its being concerned with timeless things and common human preoccupations.

The legend of a hero who survives an inundation to repopulate the earth once again is one found in many cultures around the globe. Natural catastrophes have always existed and people have been concerned to record such traumatic events in different places around the world. Most closely related to the biblical account are the stories from ancient Mesopotamia, a land comprised between two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, which were a permanent natural menace because of their overflowing. Prototypically a hero, a man of impeccable virtue, is warned by the gods and taught how to build a large ark to protect his family and all living creatures from an impending universal deluge. Thus, in the Sumerian flood story, the pious king Ziusudra survives two to three attempts, including a flood, to destroy humanity. After his ordeal, he offers a sacrifice to the gods, repopulates the earth, is granted immortality and sent to live in paradisiacal Dilmun. The eleventh tablet

¹⁸² See *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Cougan, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, more specifically the entries on "Ararat" (p. 46), "Flood" (pp. 231-231), and "Noah" (pp. 557-558).

of the Gilgamesh Epic relates the story of Gilgamesh's ancestor Utnapishtim, who survived the flood to gain immortality through a capricious act of the god Ea/Enki. Many of the images and details of the story parallel the biblical account. Something similar happens in ancient Greece, where Deucalion builds an ark for the same purpose, and in India, where Manu becomes the father of all humanity when, guided by a fish he had previously saved, he builds an ark where the seed of all living creatures is preserved from universal annihilation.

Bringham's poem consists of two movements for the mind. Consider the first one. With an impressive economy, and in just a few strokes, a landscape inundated by water everywhere, in all directions, is outlined with astonishing precision. The windows of heaven were open", says Genesis, 7.11, and "the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights" (Gen., 7.12) and "the waters prevailed upon the earth an hundred and fifty days" (Gen., 7.24):

The deepening scour of the keel across this
granular water. Nothing more. The fissure
through the estuary five thousand feet over the headwater.
These
are the real mouths of rivers. The teeth,
not the slough and the rattles.

B, p. 102.

But the poem begins *in medias res*, or rather almost exactly at the point where the story ends. After a prolonged period of unceasing rain, God causes it to cease, "and the ark rested in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, upon the mountains of Ararat" (Gen., 8.4). But who was Noah? And why did God determine to destroy the earth in its entirety with all the living creatures on it? Noah is the indisputable hero of the biblical Flood narrative (recounted in full in Genesis 6.9-9.17) and the first vintner (Genesis 9.18-9.28), but the complete story of his lifetime is related in chapters 6 to 9 of the Book of Genesis. While chapter 5 closes by tracing the origins of Noah's genealogy back in time – he is the son of Lamech, a long-lived ancestor –, chapter 10 opens with a recording of Noah's descendants – he begat three children, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, who bred more children on their turn. After Adam and Eve's fall from Eden, the Flood narrative relates a new chapter in the history of humanity, which is created anew and given another chance. After observing the corruption of all creation¹⁸³, God determined to cleanse and purify the earth through a flood (Genesis 6.1-7). Noah, however, is the pious hero who found favour with God (Genesis 6.8-9: "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord" as he was "a just man and perfect in his generations"). God warned him to build a great ship and gave him precise instructions as to the exact dimensions and the materials out of which the ark should be built. Then he told him to load it with his family and selected animals so as to escape the coming deluge: "And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort shalt thou bring into the ark, to keep them alive with thee; they shall be male and female." (Gen., 6.19) He, together with his family and the seed of all living creatures, entered the ark and survived the deluge. In the opening lines of the poem, the resonant words "*deepening scour of*

¹⁸³ Consider these three illuminating passages from Genesis: a/ "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Gen., 6.5), 2/ "And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them." (Gen., 6.7), and 3/ "And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die." (Gen., 6.17).

the keel across this / granular water” seem to suggest the moment when, once all others have perished, the ship grounds on the mountains of Ararat (in Armenia). Afterwards, Noah offers a sacrifice to please God, and a divine oath follows never to send another flood. The earth was then repopulated and life began anew. That is the story – a straightforward, simple and fascinating narrative.

The second movement of the poem opens with the occurrence of a tantalizing *we* which remains ambiguous throughout. However, there is a plausible interpretation whereby this first-person personal pronoun is spoken by Noah and so it refers to Noah and his family and the living creatures aboard the ark, waiting for the earth to dry after the deluge. But *we* is universal, and democratic in a way, and it could be meant to encompass humanity in its entirety:

We have been here
before, eating raw air, but have always
forgotten,

all day eating the air the light
impales,
stalking the singular animal.

I no longer remember whether a fish
or a bird. Nor whether its song or its silence
is what we were listening for.

B, pp. 102-103.

Noah’s ark is resting on Ararat after the universal deluge and there is nothing to be seen on the horizon but vast expanses of water in every direction. Above their heads is the sky, below them is an immense ocean, and between both blue territories is air traversed by light – the raw, purified air following the rain. All the creatures aboard the ark are *‘stalking the singular animal’*, but, in an elemental world of air, light and water, Noah does not exactly remember whether it is the return of a water creature (a fish) or of an air creature (a bird) that they are waiting for. Time passes by and they are anxious to know whether the rain has abated on the face of the earth. Genesis, 8.7-8.12 recounts the episode in which Noah decides to set forth first a raven and then a dove to see if the earth has already dried or not:

And he sent forth a raven, which went forth to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth. Also he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground. But the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned unto him into the ark, for the waters were on the face of the whole earth: then he put forth his hand, and took her, and pulled her in unto him into the ark. And he stayed yet other seven days; and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark; and the dove came in to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf plucked off: so Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth. And he stayed yet other seven days; and sent forth the dove; which returned not again unto him any more.

At that point in the biblical narrative we are told that Noah builds an altar and offers a sacrifice to God, who promises never again to “curse the ground any more for man’s sake” (Gen., 8.21). It looks like a propitiatory sacrifice intended to appease the Lord’s anger at humans, similar in essence to the ones found in the narratives of ancient Mesopotamia, India and Greece. But what truly remains ambiguous and fascinating about this part of the poem, which is centrally placed in the composition and constitutes its core, is the tiny adverb ‘before’. What does it entail to acknowledge that *‘we have been here / before,*

eating raw air, but have always / forgotten? One possible interpretation is that Noah and his family have lost track of time; it has been a long time since they came aboard the ark and they have been isolated for many days and nights, being tossed to and fro by the waters. But, on another level, the adverb *before* is connected to the personal pronoun *we*, and the juxtaposition of both of them seems to evoke the notion that time is fluid. *We* (the poetic persona and the contemporary readers of the poem) have much in common and have trodden the same earth and breathed the same air, and we remain in essence the same despite changes in outward appearance throughout the history of humanity.

On the other hand, there is something else that the lyric voice embodied by the speaking *I* remembers: ‘*a bow in a black tree*’ and ‘*a snowbound ploughshare*’. The bow¹⁸⁴ is probably intended as a reference to God’s covenant with Noah and the new generation that is about to repopulate the earth. The most familiar passage in which the rainbow occurs is the conclusion to the Flood story in Genesis 9.12-9.16, where it becomes a symbol of the covenant between God and Noah and all living creatures. Thus, God promises not to send a flood again (“the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh”, Gen., 9.15) and the rainbow becomes a vivid, visible symbol of His covenant with the brand-new humans: “And God said, This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for token of a covenant between me and the earth.” (Gen., 9.12-9.13) On the other hand, the snowbound ploughshare suggests a man-made object that belongs to a time prior to the Flood; because of the impending danger of the coming deluge everything had to be abandoned immediately. In this respect, the bow is literally a bow, a hunting tool, as hunting animals and growing the land were probably the common ways to get food and ensure survival.

The closing lines of the poem bring the circle to perfection. In an economy of strokes similar to that of the opening lines, the poet manages to convey a sense of a pristine world following the Flood. There is nothing left from the world and existence known before the deluge; Nature has been cleansed and purified for human beings to start anew and follow God’s command to multiply and fill the earth again. A new Eden of sorts is inaugurated in which there are no indices of a universal catastrophe and the seed of all living creatures preserved in Noah’s ark can now be fruitful and repopulate the earth. The powerful deictic (*here*) insists on the immediacy and physicality of a new world where the elemental things out of which it is made are still the same: the same blue air living creatures breathe, the light cast upon the earth (the furrow being a symbol of fertility and agricultural renewal), and the sky casting a menacing white shadow despite God’s covenant with men to ensure the survival of all living things on the face of the earth:

Here is no spoor and no flotsam
timber. Simply the blue sliding into
the furrow on the tilting light, and the violet
sky always casting the same white shadow.

¹⁸⁴ The Hebrew word used for ‘bow’ in the Bible and elsewhere is *qeset*, which is also the ordinary word for the weapon called the bow. It has been suggested that there is a mythological background beneath the use of the rainbow in the Flood narrative. “Like other ancient Near Eastern deities, the God of Israel was frequently depicted as a warrior-god, especially in his role as god of the storm; lightning bolts are his arrows, which he shoots from his bow. [...] The rainbow after the Flood is then a sign that the deity of the storm will never again use his most powerful weapon for total destruction. He has put it in the clouds as if for storage; the bow’s visible presence in the clouds is a guarantee that it is not being used.” See the entry on ‘rainbow’ in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 642.

Jacob Singing

Jacob Singing of Stolen Self-identity & Mountains

Jacob Singing saw the light of day in 1977 in a beautifully designed limited-edition chapbook by Kanchenjunga Press. And once again, as is common practice with Robert Bringhurst, both content and format are carefully wrought to harmoniously complement each other. Being the eighth in a series of exquisitely conceived chapbooks by Kanchenjunga, “The first edition consists of fifty copies signed and numbered I through L on Murray’s handmade English paper and one hundred copies signed and numbered 1 through 100 on Grandee Pyrenees White text, printed by Paul Peter Dächer at Vancouver, British Columbia, from type set by George Payerle.” This long poem is one of the most impressive compositions in the entire Bringhurst poetic corpus and it has gone through countless revisions from one textual incarnation to the next.¹ Dedicated to Roo Borson and Joseph Keller, the occasion for the writing of this piece was the impending birth of the poet’s daughter, Piper. A Latin inscription in the first edition of *Jacob Singing* announces the new tidings thus: “*Celebrat editio poetae filiae Piper Laramie nationem.*” And an untitled note preceding the poem in a later incarnation informs us of the genesis of the poem in further detail:

Robert Bringhurst published his first book of poems, *The Shipwright’s Log*, in 1972, and his thirteenth, *Conversations with a Toad*, in 1987. He was an MFA student at UBC (never once attending a class) in 1973-5 and a visiting instructor of Creative Writing during 1975-7.

*I was hired on one day’s notice to take over Pat Lowther’s teaching duties at UBC when she was murdered in 1975, and I stayed for two years. Towards the end of that period, I wrote Jacob Singing. Its chief provocation was the impending birth, in a wrecked marriage, of my daughter Piper, but the dedication is to two of my students who taught me most during that time.*²

Like *Deuteronomy* (1974) before it and *The Stonecutter’s Horses* (1979) after it, this long dramatic monologue concerns another old man preparing to die. Following in the steps of

¹ This is the complex editorial history of *Jacob Singing*. (1) First published as A.7 •• *Jacob Singing*. Kanchenjunga Chapbook No. 8. San Francisco and Vancouver: Kanchenjunga Press, 1977. 12 p. Paper, 20.5 × 30.5 cm. “This first edition consists of fifty copies signed and numbered I through L ... and one hundred copies signed and numbered 1 through 100.” ISBN 0-913600-52-0. Contents: A poem (rpt. in C.31, and rev. in A.14, B.9, B.33; further rev. in A.47, B.74; further rev. in A.92). Afterwards, it was reprinted from A.7 in C.31 “Jacob Singing.” *Queen’s Quarterly: A Canadian Review* (Kingston, Ontario) 84.3 (Autumn 1977): 441-444. (2) A.14 •• *The Beauty of the Weapons: Selected Poems 1972–1982*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982. 160 p. Paper, 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 0-7710-1660-3. *Jacob Singing*: Untitled headnote; [•] Jacob Singing (rev. from A.7). Also reprinted in (a) B.9 *News and Weather: Seven Canadian Poets*, edited by August Kleinzahler. Ilderton, Ontario: Brick Books, 1982: pp 10-16. Contributions: “Death by Water” (rpt. from A.8); “Ararat” (rpt. from A.6); “Song of the Summit” (rpt. from A.6); [•] “Jacob Singing” (rev. from A.7); and in (b) B.33 *Words We Call Home: Celebrating Creative Writing at UBC*, edited by Linda Svendsen. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990: pp. 26-29. Contribution: “Jacob Singing” (rpt. from A.14), with a short prologue discussing the genesis of the poem. (3) Further revised in A.47 •• *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970–1995*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995. 256 p. Paper. 14 × 22 cm. ISBN 0-7710-1651-4. The poem is included under the section entitled “Deuteronomy”: [•] “Jacob Singing” (rev. from A.14), “An Augury” (rpt. from A.14), [•] “Essay on Adam” (rev. from A.14), [•] “Deuteronomy” (rev. from A.14). It was also reprinted as B.74 In *New Life in Dark Seas: Brick Books 25*, edited by Stan Dragland. London, Ontario: Brick Books, 2000: pp. 25-28. Contribution: “Jacob Singing” (rpt. from A.47). (4) Further revised in A.92 •• *Selected Poems*. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press. 2009. 272 p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-068-6.

² See B.33 *Words We Call Home: Celebrating Creative Writing at UBC*, edited by Linda Svendsen. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990, p. 26.

old Moses, who broods on the vicissitudes of his long lifetime and impending death in *Deuteronomy*, and of the Italian poet-scholar Francesco Petrarca, who dictated his last will and testament to his secretary in *The Stonecutter's Horses*, the biblical Jacob thinks deeply of his own identity and of the story of his life in the face of his impending death. So *Jacob Singing* is another biblical piece belonging among such shorter compositions as “An Augury”, “Essay on Adam”, “Genesis Frozen”, “Ararat”, “Patrimony” or “Babylon”, which explore mostly incidents recounted in the Pentateuch. Jacob’s singing is inspired by biblical sources already announced by Bringhurst himself in the first edition of the poem in 1977: “CITANTUR LIBRI GENESIS CAPUT XLVIII ET DEUTERONOMII CAPUT XXX.” Thus, chapter 48 from the Book of Genesis and chapter 30 from the Book of Deuteronomy provide the immediate source of inspiration for what Iain Higgins has called the author’s *recombinatory poetics*: “Two powerful long poems – “Jacob Singing” and “The Stonecutter’s Horses” – articulate Bringhurst’s recombinatory poetics (that is, his way of making new poems out of salvaged or borrowed materials)”.³ What Higgins means by *recombinatory poetics* is actually a label for Bringhurst’s love of tradition, the seriousness of his calling, and his concern to explore the best that has been thought and said by our ancestors. The Bible is one of those valuable repositories where stories, anecdotes and values worthy of attention are collected to form one of the literary cornerstones of the Western canon. Hence, it is as a literary work of art, and not as a religious book of dogma, that the Bible caught Bringhurst’s attention in the first decade of his literary career. By *recombinatory poetics*, Higgins also means the poet’s astonishing ability to absorb and metamorphose a wide array of literary and philosophical sources into something completely new, that is to say into poems truly his own, spoken by a voice which is recognizably Bringhurst’s voice. This is what he does not just in the three dramatic monologues of the 1970s, but also in the 12-part sequence “The Old in Their Knowing”, devoted to the thinking of the Pre-Socratic poet-philosophers, and in “The Book of Silences” sequence, concerned with the ideas of the ancient Buddhist monk-thinkers.

At the heart of *Jacob Singing* is the biblical figure of Jacob or Israel. As Marilyn Bowering points out in an early review of Bringhurst’s poem, “The Biblical Jacob with his brother’s stolen identity and his wrestling with the angel, is an archetype of the divided self. This is a beautiful poem, which asserts that in antagonism is song and life.”⁴ But why should have Bringhurst chosen this man as the controlling consciousness and singing voice of this moving dramatic monologue? It might be wise to start from the very beginning, namely by analyzing the essential vicissitudes of Jacob’s story as recounted in the Bible. As pointed out above, the biblical sources upon which *Jacob Singing* is based are the Books of Genesis (chapter 48) and Deuteronomy (chapter 30). The Book of Genesis is an important book from which Bringhurst has found the inspiration he needed for most of his biblical poems. It is a book concerned with origins and with the old patriarchs of Israel. In this respect, chapters 12-50 are particularly relevant, for they contain the history of the ancestors and they preserve their memory. The narratives of the ancestors extend from Abraham and Sarah to the sojourn of Jacob’s family in Egypt. These stories are mostly family stories, concerned with exploring the basic relationships within the small human community a family is: the relationship of parents and children (chaps. 12-25: Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar; Ishmael and Isaac), of siblings (chaps. 25-36: Jacob and Esau), and of both (chaps. 37-50: Joseph, his father Jacob and his brothers). “In these stories the family is the paradigm of community from which all others arise. Human existence is experienced

³ See Iain Higgins’ entry on “Bringhurst, Robert” in W.H. New (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002: 152-54. See, in particular, page 153.

⁴ See Marilyn Bowering’s review of several books, including *Jacob Singing*, entitled “Long Poems from the Little Presses”, in *Quill & Quire* 44.9 (July 1978): 42.

through the succession of generations. One's own identity is preserved in the tales of the ancestors, and only by telling those tales is a link with them established."⁵ To sum up, then, chapters 12-25 contain the Abraham cycle; chapters 26-36 contain the Jacob-Esau cycle; and chapters 37-50 contain the Joseph story. From now on, we shall focus on the story of Jacob and his brother Esau.

The heart of the Jacob-Esau cycle⁶ (chapters 26-36 of Genesis) is the conflict between the brothers Jacob and Esau. Jacob⁷ is the son of Isaac and Rebekah, and the younger brother of Esau (Gen. 25.24-28). Jacob is presented as a pastoralist, whereas Esau is a hunter:⁸ "Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a plain man, dwelling in tents" (Gen. 25.27). Whereas Isaac loved Esau most, Rebekah loved Jacob instead. At any rate, in the Bible Jacob is presented as the revered ancestor of the people of Israel, and, in fact, he is given the name 'Israel' by God after he wrestles with Him at Penuel (Gen. 32.28 and Gen. 35.10).⁹ But Jacob is also presented as being a trickster, as the one who deceives his brother Esau into parting with his birthright as the firstborn (Gen. 25.29-34)¹⁰ and as the one who deceives his father into giving him the blessing of the firstborn that should have been bestowed upon Esau (Gen. 27). That is precisely the heart of the conflict between both brothers. However, the accounts of Jacob's acts in Genesis seem to record them without censure, and so does Bringhurst's poem. Upon closer scrutiny, *Jacob Singing* could be said to consist of five parts or five movements for the reader's soul, as we shall see below. Now, the first movement of Jacob's song of prophecy begins like this, with gnomic and resonant words spoken by an old man musing on his own self and on the difficult beauty of life:

What I am I have stolen.
I have climbed the mountain with nothing in my hand
except the mountain. I have spoken to the god
with nothing in my hand except my other hand.
One against the other, the smith against the wizard,
I have watched them. I have watched them

⁵ See entry on 'Genesis, the Book of', in the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 247.

⁶ Entry on 'Genesis, the Book of', *ibid.*, p. 248. At the centre of the Jacob-Esau cycle "is Jacob's indenture to Laban (chapters 29-31) and the birth of Jacob's sons (chapters 29.31-30.24: the quarrel between Leah and Rachel). These too are tales of conflict. Genealogies form the introduction and conclusion, and the theme of flight and return (chapters 29-33) provides a larger narrative framework. The conflicts concern territory, food supply, and social standing. The conflicts in the Jacob-Esau cycle take place in a familial setting and must be resolved there, since they all endanger the survival of the group; consequently, the narratives tend toward a peaceful resolution of conflict, as in the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau in chapter 33."

⁷ See the entry on 'Jacob' by John Barton in the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 338.

⁸ See the entry on 'Esau' by Hector Ignacio Avalos in the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 192: "Most scholars view the stories of Jacob and Esau not only as folktales about fraternal relationships and reversals of fortune but also as Israelite depictions of the ambivalent and sometimes treacherous relationship between Edomites (sons of Esau) and Israelites (sons of Jacob) over territorial claims and other ethnopolitical issues."

⁹ Genesis 32.28: "And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed." Genesis 35.10: "And God said unto him, Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and he called his name Israel."

¹⁰ Genesis 25.29-25.34 relates how Esau foolishly sold his birthright to Jacob for the price of a meal: "And Jacob sod pottage: and Esau came from the field, and he was faint: And Esau said to Jacob, Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red pottage; for I am faint: therefore was his name called Edom. And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright. And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me? And Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he swore unto him: and he sold his birthright unto Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentiles; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way: thus Esau despised his birthright."

wrestle one another to the ground.
I have watched my body carry my head around
like a lamp, looking for light among the broken stones.

Spoken in the first person, Bringham's dramatic monologue opens with an overt meditation on Jacob's stolen identity. Indeed, the words "*What I am I have stolen*" are repeated up to four times in the first four stanzas of the poem. This reflection on a divided self is measured against the sheer magnitude of mountains, which are central to this and to many other Bringham poems. Amid what looks like a hostile environment, Jacob has spent a whole lifetime climbing mountains and struggling to make a living of his cattle. Up on those same mountains, he has experienced supernatural encounters with the divinity of his ancestors – the God of Moses and Abraham and Isaac –, he has wrestled with God himself, who gave him the name of 'Israel' ("*What I am I have stolen. Even my name.*", reads one of the verse lines of the second stanza), and has tried to find light amid darkness, "*among the broken stones.*" He owns nothing, not even his name, not even "*the ingrained web / in the outstretched palm of this body, / limping on oracle-finger and thumb, / dragging a great weight...*". Like Petrarch in *The Stonecutter's Horses*, old Jacob is happy to get rid of *the sagging carcass* of his own body, which is now a heavy burden. Aware of his own impending death, he is calmly ready to give up whatever he has now to his God. So here is the voice of an old man preparing to die, singing of his own identity and of the vicissitudes of his own life. As Jane Munro points out in his lucid analysis of Bringham's dramatic monologues,

Bringham's concern with the inheritance and wisdom of a migrant people informs *Jacob Singing*. Once again, as in *Deuteronomy* and in *The Stonecutter's Horses*, we meet an old man preparing to die. Jacob, of course, is Israel, he who wrestled with the angel and won a blessing which he passes on to his grandchildren. But the singer of this song is Jacob, an individual, rather than Israel, the people. Jacob has not found his life particularly ready to yield him its bounty, nor has he found himself equipped with all that he might have used to his benefit, but he has desired to take the best he can get and to make the best use of it that he can.¹¹

At the heart of the third stanza, Jacob is presented as the trickster who deceives his father Isaac into giving him the blessing that belongs to his brother as firstborn. Chapter 27 of the Book of Genesis is the starting point for Bringham's remarkable exercise in poetic condensation (*Dichtung = condensare*, in Pound's well-known dictum). Esau's ruddy and hairy appearance, as well as his preference for hunting and the outdoor life, distinguished him from his brother. Isaac intended to give his blessings to his elder son, but acting on the advice of Rebekah, Jacob tricked his father into making him the principal heir by disguising himself as his older brother and obtaining his father's blessing.¹² In Bringham's hands a

¹¹ Jane Munro's review of *Bergschrund*, *Jacob Singing*, and *The Stonecutter's Horses* (with a partial account of an interview) entitled "Bringham's Range: Essential Information", in *CVII [Contemporary Verse Two]* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81): 41.

¹² See Genesis 27.21-27.29: "And Isaac said unto Jacob, Come near, I pray thee, that I may feel thee, my son, whether thou be my very son Esau or not. And Jacob went near unto Isaac his father; and he felt him, and said, The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau. And he discerned him not, because his hands were hairy, as his brother Esau's hands: so he blessed him. And he said, Art thou my very son Esau? And he said, I am. And he said, Bring it near to me, and I will eat of my son's venison, that my soul may bless thee. And he brought it near to him, and he did eat: and he brought him wine, and he drank. And his father Isaac said unto him, Come near now, and kiss me, my son. And he came near, and kissed him: and he smelled the smell of his raiment, and blessed him, and said, See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the LORD hath blessed: Therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine: Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee: be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother's sons bow down to thee: cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be he that

whole chapter from Genesis becomes a six-line stanza of astonishing beauty and perfection in which Jacob's persona acknowledges the fact that he owns nothing, not even his hands. The only thing he can truly call his own is his voice, the voice with which he is now singing the song of his life and stolen identity. Bringhurst's words manage to convey some of the sense of sadness at the heart of a split or divided self, if only because the imagery deployed by the poet and the acoustic sonic texture of these lines are used to a most eloquent effect:

My brother, I would touch you, but these
are your hands. Yours, yours though I call them
my own. My brother, I would hold your shoulders,
but only the voice is mine. My brother,
the head is a hand that does not open
and the face is full of claws.

The end of the first movement of *Jacob Singing* dwells on the mountains whose presence has punctuated Jacob's life on earth. Acknowledging that he does not own mountains either, he sings: "*These mountains which were never mine / year after year have remade me.*" Whatever form of wisdom he might have attained in his life, it is the mountains that have shaped his character and fashioned his own body as it were. The mountains with the sky above them and such elemental things as stones, water and light have taught him all there is to know of this world. Tirelessly climbing the mountains where he tended his flocks, Jacob has learnt to look at the book of Nature with open eyes and he has learnt to listen to the singing of *what is* with open ears. Such is his communion with this elemental world of air, stone and light, that the sun, the moon and the wind are all part of the inner geographies of his own body and his own self. He has become *one with the world*, or so seem to suggest these memorable verse lines rich in alliteration, woven with simple and elegant words that reverberate in the echo-chamber of one's mind long after one has finished reading them aloud:

I have seen the rocks between the withered water
and the quaking light. I have climbed the mountain
with nothing in my hand except the handholds
as I came upon them, leaving my hands behind.

I have eaten the sun, it is my muscle,
eaten the moon, it is my bone.
I have listened to the wind, whipped
in the heart's cup, slap and whistle in the vein.

The second movement of *Jacob Singing* is a sort of short interlude. For a while, Jacob's persona reminisces his father's words in simple, parallelistic verse lines: "*the wood will crawl into the apple, / the root will crawl into the petal, / the limb will crawl into the sepal / and hide.*" The image presented in these enigmatic lines is truly uncanny. Isaac is giving voice in oracular language to some notion of fear implicit in the verbs 'crawl' and 'hide'. Though at first these words might give the impression of fertility and abundance, upon closer scrutiny they turn to convey a sense of gloomy prospect for the future, as the lines that follow make clear: "*But the fruit has eaten the tree, has eaten the flower. / The body, which is flower and fruit together, / has swallowed its mother, root and stem.*" It is unnatural for the fruit to eat the tree and the flower that gave birth to it. It is equally unnatural for the body (i.e., the fruit) to swallow its mother (i.e., its root and stem). But these words make perfect sense as soon as they are

blesseth thee." In spite of Jacob's actions, Esau eventually shunned revenge, was reconciled with his younger brother, and settled in Seir (Gen. 33).

interpreted as being Jacob's veiled reference to his own deceiving acts towards his father Isaac and his older brother Esau. If he is the fruit, his father is the tree and root of his own self. He has eaten the root and stem of his brother's self by deceiving him into renouncing his right as firstborn and by disguising himself as Esau to make Isaac give him his blessings. Deceit is possibly the key concept beneath this interlude: by breaking the sacred bonds uniting a family, Jacob has become a divided self that owns nothing at all, even if he claims that "*The lungs are leaves and mine are golden.*"

The third movement of *Jacob Singing* resumes the telling of the story of Jacob's life in a very subtle way. The oracular tone of his voice is emphasized by the repetition of "*I have seen...*" as the opening words of many of the verse lines at the geographical heart of Bringhurst's dramatic monologue. What Jacob has seen is expressed in the form of an exhaustive catalogue of disparate elements including (1) "*the crow carry the moon / against the mountain*", (2) "*the sky crawl under a stone*", (3) his "*daughter / carried on the land's shoulder*", (4) "*the wind / change color above her*", (5) "*the light drop / like a wagon-sprag in the crisp stubble*", (6) "*the moon's wheels / bounce through the frozen ruts / and chirp against the pebbles*", (7) "*the metal angels / clatter up and down*", and (8) "*the flushes ewes / churn in the pen and picked rams boil / against the hazel*". This seemingly chaotic enumeration of everything this man has seen are words, episodes or chapters in Jacob's life. Items (1) and (2) are gloomy images, surrealistic snapshots of a scary world. Items (3) and (4) are a reference to Jacob's daughter (Dinah) being kidnapped and defiled by the son of a neighbouring city's ruler's as told by chapter 34 of Genesis.¹³ Her brethren took revenge and killed all the men living in the city. Items (5) and (6) are poetic remembrances of close observations of the natural world on the part of a man who has "*lain in silence, my [his] mouth to the ground.*" Item (7) is based on Jacob's well-known dream (Gen. 28.11-28.22) where he envisions a ladder leading up to Heaven with angels going up and down on it. Like his father Isaac, Jacob seeks a wife in Mesopotamia (Gen. 28.1-28.5). On the way to the land of his uncle Laban, Jacob encamps at Bethel and there in a dream sees divine messengers ascending and descending on a staircase between earth and heaven and erects a pillar to commemorate the incident:

And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the LORD stood above it, and said, I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of. And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven...¹⁴

¹³ Genesis 34.1-2: "And Dinah the daughter of Leah, which she bare unto Jacob, went out to see the daughters of the land. And when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the country, saw her, he took her, and lay with her, and defiled her." Jacob's sons avenged her sister's kidnap and defilement by killing all the males of Hamor's city and depriving them of all possessions (Gen. 34.25-34.31).

¹⁴ Genesis 28.11-28.17.

Finally, item (8) is based on Jacob's sojourn in the land of his mother's brother, Laban, where he sought a wife. Jacob fathered up to 12 children by four different mothers – Leah and Rachel, Laban's daughters, and their two handmaids. They would become the twelve tribes of Israel, as the genealogies closing the Jacob-Esau cycle make clear (Genesis, chapters 36 & 37). Jacob the trickster who deceived his father to give him his blessings is now himself tricked by his uncle Laban into working fourteen years to obtain the wife he desires, Rachel. For this purpose, Jacob contracts to work for seven years, but at the end of that time he is given Leah, the elder sister, as a wife instead (Gen. 29.15-29.30). Jacob has his revenge on Laban by swindling him out of large flocks and herds (Gen. 30.25-31.21)¹⁵ and then he flees from Laban's house to return to the land of Canaan but is finally reconciled with his uncle (Gen. 31.36-54). After the mysterious incident at Peniel where Jacob wrestles with God himself, there follows a reconciliation also with Esau (Gen. 33.1-16).¹⁶ Here is Bringhurst's stanza on Jacob taking revenge on Laban, whom he robbed of the best specimens of his flocks:

I have seen the flushed ewes
churn in the pen and picked rams boil
against the hazel. I have seen them
strip the poplar, scrub the buckeye bare.
I have seen the mixed flocks
flow through the scented hills like braided oil.
I who never moved as they do.
I have climbed the mountain
one foot up and one hoof down.

The fourth movement of *Jacob Singing* opens with a memorable, gnomic verse line: "*The breath is a bone the flesh comes loose around.*" According to this eloquent metaphor, breath is equated with a bone with no flesh attached to it. This is a most curious definition of *breath*, which is certainly another notion central to Bringhurst's poetics. Body, speech and mind are indeed a potent equation in his poems, which are more the product of oral composition than of writing. That poems are oral products means that they are literally a secretion coming directly from one's own breath. By equating the breath with a bone, the poet is possibly emphasizing the very tangible nature of air coming out of the body. Breathing is after all one of those basic links that bring the human body and the world at large together; feet and hands are also elemental links uniting the body and the world as well. The verse lines that follow this bold metaphor are enigmatic words that are possibly intended as a reference to Jacob's wrestling with God himself in Genesis 32.24-32.27,¹⁷ after which episode God gives Jacob the name of Israel:

¹⁵ For instance, Genesis 30.42-43 reads thus: "But when the cattle were feeble, he put them not in: so the feebler were Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's. And the man increased exceedingly, and had much cattle, and maidservants, and menservants, and camels, and asses." Fittingly, Jacob sings "*What I am I have stolen,*" for he has made a fortune through deceptive and morally dubious means.

¹⁶ See the entry on 'Jacob' in the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, p. 338: "The remaining stories of Jacob focus on the deeds of his children, the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob appears as an old man in the story of Joseph (Gen 37; 39-50), where the theme of trickery recurs in the deceit by which he is robbed of his favorite son by Joseph's jealous brothers (Gen. 42.36). Eventually Jacob goes down to Egypt with his sons and dies there (Gen. 49.33), but his embalmed body (Gen. 50.2-3) is taken for burial to the land of Canaan by Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 50.7-13). The blessing of Jacob (Gen. 49.2-27) is widely held to contain some of the oldest poetry in the Bible."

¹⁷ Genesis 32.24-32.29: "And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou

Flower and fruit together.
But this other, this other
who is always in the body,
lungs in the belly, head
between the thighs.
O his arms go
backward, and his legs go
side to side.

And at the heart of this fourth movement of Jacob's monologue is a twofold blessing that has been extensively revised by Bringham in the successive textual incarnations of *Jacob Singing*: one is bestowed by Jacob on his son Joseph and the other is bestowed on his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh. But who exactly is Joseph? Joseph¹⁸ is the son of Jacob and Rachel. Laban's younger daughter was barren and yet God listened to her, opened her womb and, as a result, she conceived a son whom she called Joseph (Gen. 30.22-30.24). The Joseph cycle is found in chapters 37-50 of the Book of Genesis, in which he is portrayed as a patriarch through whom the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are transmitted to later Israel. He is indeed the favourite son of all twelve sons of Jacob by four different women. Joseph's story begins with the young, self-centered man announcing to his father and brothers his double dreams of their obeisance to him. This is a source of anger and envy to his brothers. Joseph later goes to visit his brothers who are caring for their father's flock. They decide to kill him, but at the intercession of Reuben and Judah, his life is spared. He is then sold to Egyptian traders who take him to his land, where he soon prospers under Potiphar, the captain of the guard. In the meantime, his brothers have told Jacob that his son is dead, showing him as evidence his blood-stained coat, a gift the father has given his favourite son. Eventually, Joseph's family travels to Egypt and the son is reconciled with his brothers and his father. The final chapters of the Joseph cycle are Jacob's blessing of his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh (chapter 48), his testament (chapter 49), his death, and Joseph's final days (chapter 50). In this respect, chapter 48 is the textual source upon which Bringham's stanzas on Jacob's blessings on his grandsons are based.

So first come Jacob's blessings for his son Joseph. Maybe it is no coincidence that the blessing bestowed on Joseph should consist of twelve different elements that include three bodily parts (eye, ear and tongue), six professions (sailor, labourer, soldier, lawyer, judge, rancher), two animals (roebuck and wolf) and a "man with gay eyes". There were twelve tribes of Israel after all. When all twelve elements are tessellated together into this stanza, the sense of gloom conveyed by the words evokes a scenario of danger and deception. All the sentences are in the future tense, predicting or auguring a landscape of routine, resignation and desolation, even if some of the predictions are certainly positive ("the rancher will prosper", the roebuck will produce music as it wrestles the air, and a man with a happy countenance will enjoy chocolate). However, the shining teeth of the wolf walking out of Joseph's own hand, the uncanny smile of the lawyer and the snake-like motions of the judge suggest the opposite – an uncanny future for Joseph and his brethren. These are Bringham's enigmatic words:

My son, you have asked for a blessing. I give you

power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there."

¹⁸ See the entry on 'Joseph (son of Jacob)' by Richard J. Clifford in the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, pp. 382-383.

this blessing. I tell you,¹⁹

the eye will flow out of the socket like water,
the ear will gore like a horn
and the tongue like another,
the sailor will stay in his house near the harbor,
the laborer, blinkered and fed²⁰, will stay at his labor,
the soldier will soldier,
the lawyer will smile like milk and swill liquor,²¹
the judge will glide like a snake keeping pace with the horses,
the man with gay eyes will like chocolate,
the roebuck will wrestle the air and you will hear music,
the rancher will prosper,
the wolf will walk out of your hand and his teeth will be shining.

And secondly comes the blessing bestowed on Jacob's grandsons, particularly on his younger grandson Ephraim. One of the two quotations with which Bringhurst prefaces *Jacob Singing* is lifted from chapter 48 (48.13-14 and 48.18-19) of the Book of Genesis and constitutes the textual source of this accomplished part of *Jacob Singing*:

And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right hand, and brought them near unto him. And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it upon Ephraim's head, who was the younger, and his left hand upon Manasseh's head, guiding his hands willingly.... And Joseph said unto his father, Not so, my father: for this is the firstborn; put thy right hand upon his head. And his father refused, and said, I know it, my son, I know it: he also....

This is the passage upon which Bringhurst's second blessing is based. In the full text of the original we learn that Joseph is displeased (Gen. 48.17) to see how Jacob is about to place his hand on the younger grandson (Ephraim) instead of on the firstborn (Manasseh). This is exactly what happened when Jacob, disguised as his brother, deceived his father into thinking that he was Esau and made him bestow upon him the blessings that fittingly belonged to the firstborn. The only difference is that here there is no deceit involved; Jacob knows that the future holds moments of glory and splendour for Ephraim, and so he is the one who deserves his blessing. Gen 48.19 (interrupted in Bringhurst's quotation) goes on as follows: "... he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great: but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations." In Bringhurst's poem, the emphasis is precisely laid on the glory awaiting Ephraim, a visionary and a man of action, capable of stealing whatever there is to be stolen, like Jacob, his grandfather:

But this one, my grandson, the young one,
this one will steal²²
the sun and the moon, the eye and the tooth
of the mountain, This one will ride with his dogs [., this one in 1977 version]
through the galleries of vision, This one will move [., this one in 1977 version]
among the rain-worn shapes of men
with faces in his hands and the fingers writhing.

¹⁹ These two verse-lines are added for the first time in *The Beauty of the Weapons* version of the poem.

²⁰ "Given no choice" instead of "blinkered and fed" in the first edition of the poem.

²¹ This verse line was the fourth verse line in the first edition of the poem.

²² This verse-line reads "this one will steal the eye and the tooth" in the 1977 first edition and in *The Beauty of the Weapons* version of the poem.

This one will slide his spade through the sea
and come away carrying wheat and linen.

This one, the young one, how tall,
shaking hands and trading armor
with his dark-eyed brother.²³

The fourth movement of *Jacob Singing* closes with a warning or a piece of advice addressed to Joseph. He is speaking from first-hand experience: he has dreamed of angels clattering up and down a ladder connecting Heaven and Earth, and he has wrestled with God himself. Jacob warns him to “do more / than listen to the angel; you must wrestle him,” he tells him. But before wrestling him, he should make sure that the angel is right there. There will be pieces of evidence telling him of the presence of the angel: “The muscle in the air, the taut light / binged in the milky gristle / and the swollen dark, the smell / like the smell of a cornered animal.” The palpable presence of muscle floating mid-air, the smell of an animal sensing impending danger, and the chiaroscuro of alternating light and darkness. Now, light is of the utmost importance in Bringham’s poetry. And if there is light, there must also be darkness. *Bergschrund*, Bringham’s groundbreaking book of poems published in 1975, is a palpable proof of this. There is light in “Song of the Summit”, “Ararat”, “Genesis Frozen”, “Study for an Ecumenical Window”, “Poem About Crystal”, “Stone-Lathe and Wing”, “For Robert Grosseteste”, “Herakleitos”, “Pythagoras”, and “Hachadura”. These are only instances. Light was also of the essence in *The Pisan Cantos* of Ezra Pound, the acknowledged master in whose steps Bringham might be closely following here.

The fifth and closing movement of *Jacob Singing* shows the poetic persona of Jacob speaking once more in the first person about himself:

I have oiled these stones to sharpen the wind.
I have come or I have gone, I have forgotten.
I hold what I hold
in this chiasma of the hands.

I have set my ear against the stone
and heard it twirling.
I have set my teeth against the stone
and someone said he heard it singing.²⁴

Though chapter 49 of Genesis offers Jacob’s last blessings on his twelve children before “yielding up the ghost” (Gen. 49.33), these are probably his last words before dying in Bringham’s account of the last moment of his life. Now the old man is making a balance of what his life has been like. He is shown hesitating, doubting whether he has come or gone. The only thing he seems to have accomplished is sharpening wind with the stones he has walked upon in those mountains that have been witness to his unceasing struggle in life. He holds little in his hands, and yet he has managed to sing a song of enduring value and importance. His song sings of those moments when he would lie still with his mouth on the ground, listening to what the stones told him in their twirling. Penetrating beyond the surface of things, he learnt that the world is truly alive. Even stones, which look

²³ In *The Beauty of the Weapons* version of the poem, this verse is similar to the 1977 original text and it reads as follows: “This one, the young one, will steal / the sun and the moon, / the eye and the tooth of the mountain. / This one, the young one, how tall, / shaking hands and trading armor / with his dark-eyed brother.”

²⁴ “They heard” instead of “he heard” in the first edition of the poem in 1977.

inanimate or inert, are endlessly moving, speaking a language of their own. And what is more, he has made the stones sing. It was upon a stone that he lay his head when he dreamed of angels ascending and descending on the heavenly ladder; it was a pillar of stone that he erected exactly in that place to commemorate the apparition of God there to remind him that he would protect him and his seed. Stones are not silent; they have their own speech, and Jacob seems to have mastered their language somehow. Because he has learnt to listen to *what is*, he is now able to bring his own song to perfection. Now the circle is complete: Jacob is about to depart from this world, and his autobiographical meditation is about to end at the same time. Even 34 years after its birth (after Bringham's daughter's birth and my own birth), *Jacob Singing* still speaks to us with the utmost moving relevance. It remains a masterpiece indeed.

The Stonecutter's Horses

Petrarch's Last Will and Testament

Though dead a long time ago, on 19 July 1374, one day short of his 70th birthday, Francesco Petrarca (or Petrarch) has had no more ardent suitor in the English language than Robert Bringhurst in the late twentieth century. The intensity of an authentic life lived to a maximum, the reputation of one of the first men of letters in Europe, and the philosophy of life of a scholar who despised money and the mundane power associated to it and who searched silence and quiet for his study in the rural surroundings of Vaucluse instead, must surely have meant much to Bringhurst in 1979. In a broader perspective, this intellectual concern with Petrarch is a single episode in the long history of Bringhurst's infatuation with the most lucid minds of tradition and with the insights of great men into the ultimate nature of reality. A fundamental poem in Bringhurst's entire poetic corpus, *The Stonecutter's Horses*¹ was originally published in *The Malabat Review* in 1979 and then as a beautifully designed chapbook in a limited edition of only 350 copies the same year. It was subsequently revised in later written incarnations as a central piece in the poet's living repertory contained in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), where it was considerably revised with respect to the original text, in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), where it was further revised, and it was finally reprinted from *The Calling* in *Selected Poems* (2009).

¹ The textual history of this complex poem may be summarized as follows: (1) C.32 [Four poems]. *The Malabat Review: An International Quarterly of Life and Letters* (Victoria, British Columbia) 45 (January 1978): 126-134. Contents: • "The Heart is Oil"; "Death by Water"; • "Spell for White Sandals"; • "The Stonecutter's Horses". Shortly afterwards, it was reprinted in B.6 *The Pushcart Prize, IV: Best of the Small Presses*, edited by Bill Henderson. 1979-80 edition. New York: Pushcart Book Press, 1979: pp. 495-499. Contribution: "The Stonecutter's Horses" (rpt. from C.32). (2) A.9 • *The Stonecutter's Horses*. Vancouver: Standard Editions [Pulp Press and William Hoffer], 1979. Chapbook, 12 p. Paper, 19.5 × 28 cm. "This first edition of THE STONECUTTER'S HORSES has been printed in an edition of 350 copies, of which 10, lettered A to J, are signed by the author and specially bound; 40, numbered 11 to 50, are signed by the author and 300 are numbered 51 to 350." Contents: A poem (rpt. from C.32). (3) A.14 • *The Beauty of the Weapons: Selected Poems 1972-1982*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982. 160 p. Paper, 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 0-7710-1660-3. "The Stonecutter's Horses" was revised in this poetry collection and also published in (i) B.18 *The New Canadian Poets, 1970-1985*, edited by Dennis Lee. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985: pp. 26-39. Contributions: "These Poems, She Said"; "Deuteronomy"; "Demokritos"; "Leda and the Swan"; "The Stonecutter's Horses" (all rpt. from A.14); "Saraha" (rpt. from A.23); (ii) B.27 *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Two*, edited by Gary Geddes. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988: pp. 490-505. Contributions: "The Beauty of the Weapons", "The Sun and Moon", "Poem about Crystal", "Anecdote of the Squid", "Xenophanes", "The Stonecutter's Horses", "The Song of Ptahhotep" (all rpt. from A.14), "For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985" (rpt. from A.32); (iii) B.31 *Canadian Travellers in Italy*, edited by Barry Callaghan. Toronto: Exile Editions, 1989: pp. 15-20. Contribution: "The Stone Cutter's [sic] Horses" (rpt. from A.14). (4) A.47 • *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995. 256 p. Paper. 14 × 22 cm. ISBN 0-7710-1651-4. "The Stonecutter's Horses" was further revised in this book and also reprinted in (i) B.78a *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Three*, edited by Gary Geddes. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001: pp. 388-400. Contributions: "The Beauty of the Weapons"; "Anecdote of the Squid"; "The Stonecutter's Horses"; "These Poems, She Said"; "Poem without Voices"; "For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985" (rpt. from A.47); (ii) B.81a *A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, edited by Donna Bennett & Russell Brown. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002: pp. 954-975. Contributions: "Essay on Adam"; "The Stonecutter's Horses"; "Leda and the Swan"; "These Poems, She Said"; "The Reader"; "Conversations with a Toad"; "Bone Flute Breathing" (all rpt. from A.47). (5) A.92 • *Selected Poems*. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press. 2009. 272 p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-068-6. "The Stonecutter's Horses" was reprinted from A.47. From A.92 it was reprinted in B.113 *Elements of Literature: Fiction, Poetry, Drama*, 4th Canadian edition, ed. by David Staines et al. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2010: pp. 693-700. Contribution: "Essay on Adam"; "The Stonecutter's Horses"; "Leda and the Swan" (all rpt. from A.92).

The place of *The Stonecutter's Horses* in Bringham's literary corpus is crystal-clear from the very outset: it belongs among the early biblical dramatic monologues *Deuteronomy* (1974) and *Jacob Singing* (1977), concerned with two old men preparing to die. It is also subtly connected to *Hachadura* (1975), a monologue for a solo intelligence of a very different kind that embodies a meditation on the ontology of nothingness. Now, *The Stonecutter's Horses* is an original literary recreation of Petrarch's last will and testament, which has been preserved in a Latin text entitled "Testamentum" that the Italian man of letters produced in April 1370, four years prior to his own death. This is Bringham's most immediate starting point for his dramatic monologue, but there might be other sources of inspiration lingering in the background, in the echo-chamber of the poet's mind, such as "Posteritati" (an autobiographical letter addressed to posterity included in a collection entitled *Seniles*), *Epistulae familiares* (another collection of letters) and *De vita solitaria* (a meditation on solitary, simple life). But why should Bringham have chosen to compose a poem on Petrarch?, one may ask. In a review of *Bergschrund*, *Jacob Singing* and *The Stonecutter's Horses* entitled "Bringham's Range: Essential Information", Jane Munro suggests that *Bergschrund* is not the only work by Bringham worth reading. *The Shipwright's Log* (1972) and *Cadastr* (1973), the two poetry volumes preceding it, and the dramatic monologues entitled *Jacob Singing* (1977) and *The Stonecutter's Horses* (1979) are also works of remarkable quality that tell us much about his brilliant poetic development. This essay also includes a partial reprint of an interview, in which the poet himself explains why he chose to write about Petrarch "preparing to die six hundred years ago in Italy":

Well, we are all preparing to die. We're all dying and we ought to try to make our lives sufficient to that fact... Petrarch was a very interesting man. He was a lover of mountains, a gentleman, and a scholar – the first great modern poet, a good Catholic, and the father of an illegitimate daughter of whom he was very fond, and whose illegitimacy caused him considerable pain. He was suspicious of the politics and politicians of his time and yet he moved usefully among them and did useful work as a diplomat, a sort of bureaucrat, if you wish. He was able, through caginess and through his assiduous devotion to his work, to get money and devote the time to his writing that lesser men, lesser poets, could never somehow find. Petrarch has, I think, a lot to say to us. He is not so far away; those six hundred years are nothing.

... Petrarch was familiar with the circumstance of having no capital. And we are perhaps in that fix ourselves... Our Euro-American culture, artistic culture, even commercial culture, is without center... America, North and South, is without center. It is, on a larger scale, I think, very much like Italy in the early Renaissance, late Middle Ages – the feudal texture of small-time potentates... The only advantage Petrarch had is that the scale was smaller... Petrarch could talk to any educated man of his time and place without transition problems. We can't do that...

We live in a larger world; it is my ambition to live in a larger world, one which is really round, one which remembers that China and Japan are equally importance [*sic*] sources of tradition... with Europe and the Middle East, one which remembers that the Buddhist tradition is at least as intelligent and fruitful as the Christian tradition, one which remembers that the way the New World where I live came to be is that the Europeans were looking for the Orient and they came here believing that they had found it, or would find it. They stumbled, instead, onto this whole new wealth...

America is an important mythical fact to me because it represents the opportunity for the world to sew itself into a world again,... to stitch itself into a unity for the first time.²

In paying homage to this remarkable scholar and man of letters in the form of a dramatic monologue, Bringhurst is following closely in the steps of Ezra Pound, who also had a keen interest in Italian culture. Bringhurst's fascination with three gigantic figures of the Western canon as embodied by Dante, Petrarca and Boccaccio is palpable in his poetry: Dante is indirectly invoked in "Scholium", an early short lyric on Ugolino, one of the characters dwelling in the Inferno of the *Divine Comedy*; the controlling consciousness at the centre of *The Stonecutter's Horses* is that of Petrarch dictating his will, but Boccaccio, one of his closest friends, is also mentioned in the poem as one of the heirs to what few possessions his friend has. What Bringhurst manages to condense in his masterwork in miniature is nothing less than Petrarch's spirit and thinking in a voice that still talks to us in the twenty-first century.³ Hence, it is no overstatement to claim that the humanist's life and work provided the *materia poetica* (the content), and Robert Browning and the Modernists' notion of impersonality provided the right literary treatment (the form) in the genre of the dramatic monologue for Bringhurst's homage to this man of genius endowed with astonishing clarity of mind. On the use of the dramatic monologue and on the importance of the weight of tradition for Bringhurst, Jane Munro says:

Bringhurst's use of personae reflects his reading of Browning and Pound; I would guess that the title of *The Stonecutter's Horses* makes reference to two of the early *Cantos*. Petrarch, like Sextus Propertius, like Jacob, is a man preparing to die; it is a time for taking account of what is left to give. Personae offer Bringhurst the chance to take account of the traditions he has been given. As may be expected, he is unimpressed by the "banana republics" in North American poetry "like the Black Mountaineers and the Poundians and the Eliotians and the New Critics and the Middle Critics and the Middle-Aged Critics, all the little clubs." He says:

A tradition is something that grows like a tree; a banana republic is founded by a founder of things, dynasties he hopes, repressive regimes as it usually turns out. But life goes on underneath that patina of order, much as it always has and may always continue to do. I do not find any movement in American or Canadian poetry that I would particularly like to inherit from. But, insofar as there are American traditions, I mean American in the larger sense, the hemispheric sense,... we should all try to partake of them, to be nourished by them, claim whatever inheritance we can. Nothing was founded anew in this place. The New England transcendental movement in literature, which has precious little to do with poetry,... is something which means more and more to me as time passes. I was very unimpressed with Emerson when I was younger. Melville was the only American writer, or early American writer, whose work I had great affection for, and he is still the writer for whose work I have the most affection, of all United States writers, but Emerson means more and more to me as time passes, makes more and more sense to me, seems deeper and deeper. [...] The fact is that a real literary culture is made out of a very few, very good, writers. And there are a few in Canada, and a few in the United States, and a few in Mexico,

² Jane Munro, "Bringhurst's Range: Essential Information", *CVII [Contemporary Verse Two]* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81): 39-40.

³ See Steven Smith's "Blood and Butterfly Bones", a review of *The Beauty of the Weapons*, published in *Books in Canada* (Toronto) 12.7 (August/September 1983): 25-27. He claims the following: "Bringhurst's broad intelligence is realized sometimes by using traditional poetic devices, like parables, or dramatic monologue. In "The Stonecutter's Horses," Francesco Petrarca, an Italian living around 1370, dictates his will. Within the monologue are attitudes that reverberate in the reader's present, toward death, lawyers, property, and money. [...] It is ironic to hear these classic structures and devices delivering content relevant to the modern sensibility. We are reminded of the constancy of human values, conflicts, and foibles, in so-called civilized societies, throughout man's existence." See p. 27.

and a few in South America, and that's what we have, we had, and that's what we need: a few.⁴

Before embarking on a detailed critical analysis of *The Stonecutter's Horses*, it might be wise to go into Petrarch's life and work in some depth. At least, some elementary information on the life and work of this humanist as well as on the historical context where he lived might shed light on our understanding of this complex dramatic monologue. So who was Petrarch? Francesco Petrarca⁵ was born on 20 July 1304 in Arezzo, Tuscany (Italy) and he died on 19 July 1374 in Arquà, near Padua (Carrara). Petrarch was an eminent Italian scholar, poet, and humanist best remembered for his *Canzoniere*, a collection of 366 love poems addressed to Laura, the idealized object of an unrequited love, which contributed decisively to the Renaissance flowering of lyric poetry and of the sonnet as a fundamental genre across Europe in subsequent centuries. The greatest scholar of his time, Petrarch set the very foundations of Italian Humanism, which looked to ancient Greece and Rome in search of inspiration for an anthropocentric view of the world that set human beings and human dignity at the very centre of the universe. Man became the measure of all things – that was the fundamental tenet upon which Humanism rested. He was convinced that God had given humans their intellectual and creative potential to be used to their fullest, and he firmly believed in the immense moral and practical value of the study of ancient history and literature. It was possible to take part in mundane activity in the realm of worldly affairs and yet find time for a contemplative life of study and solitude. His inquiring mind and love of classical authors led him to travel, visiting the illustrious men of learning of his time and searching monastic libraries for tattered manuscripts of Graeco-Roman works. Having a deep interest in all literature that provided an insight into the human spirit, he tirelessly and enthusiastically disseminated ancient culture.

Petrarch was the son of Ser Petraco, a lawyer who had left Florence in 1302 and had moved to Arezzo, where the son was born in 1304.⁶ He spent his early childhood in the village of Ancisa, near Florence, until the family eventually moved to Avignon (1312),⁷ in the Provence region of southern France, the home of the exiled papal court, at which an Italian lawyer might hope to find employment. At his father's insistence, Petrarch and his brother Gherardo were to study law also. Thus, Petrarch's first studies were at Carpentras (France) and then he was sent to study law at Montpellier (1316-1320). From there he returned to Italy with his younger brother Gherardo to continue these studies at Bologna

⁴ Jane Munro, "Brighthelm's Range: Essential Information", *CVII [Contemporary Verse Two]* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81): 40-41.

⁵ See the entry on 'Francesco Petrarca' by John Humphreys Whitfield in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 22, pp. 13045-13047. See also Petrarch's "Posteritati" ("Letter to Posterity"), an autobiographical letter included in *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*, ed. and trans. by James Harvey Robinson, New York: G.P. Putnam, 1898, pp. 59-76.

⁶ As Petrarch himself puts it in "Posteritati", "My parents were honourable folk, Florentine in their origin, of medium fortune, or, I may as well admit it, in a condition verging upon poverty. They had been expelled from their native city, and consequently I was born in exile, at Arezzo, in the year 1304 of this latter age which begins with Christ's birth, July the twentieth, on a Monday, at dawn. I have always possessed an extreme contempt for wealth; not that riches are not desirable in themselves, but because I hate the anxiety and care which are invariably associated with them. I certainly do not long to be able to give gorgeous banquets. I have, on the contrary, led a happier existence with plain living and ordinary fare..." *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*, pp. 60-61.

⁷ Petrarch himself says: "My life up to the present has, either through fate or my own choice, fallen into the following divisions. A part only of my first year was spent at Arezzo, where I first saw the light. The six following years were, owing to the recall of my mother from exile, spent upon my father's estate at Ancisa, about fourteen miles above Florence. I passed my eighth year at Pisa, the ninth and following years in Farther Gaul, at Avignon, on the left bank of the Rhone, where the Roman Pontiff holds and has long held the Church of Christ in shameful exile." *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*, p. 65.

(1320-1323), the centre of juridical learning.⁸ He despised the untruthfulness of law and so those seven years were a waste of time for the young Petrarch, who was primarily interested in writing and in Latin literature, developing what he described as “an unquenchable thirst for literature” in one of his letters. From the Montpellier and Bologna period date Petrarch’s earliest surviving poems, which were heavily revised later, as was the common practice with the author, who, like Bringham, had the habit of revising his works, often extensively. Meanwhile, his knowledge and love of the classical authors increasing, he made his acquaintance with the new vernacular poetry that was being written. After his father’s death, in 1326, Petrarch was free to abandon his law studies and pursue his own interests: reading works of his interest and writing his own poems. He and his brother returned to Avignon, where Petrarch took minor ecclesiastical orders and entered the household of the influential cardinal Giovanni Colonna.

Petrarch enjoyed life in Avignon, where he made a name for his scholarship and the elegance of his culture. But during his early youth, Petrarch not only embraced a love of classical literature, but also a deep religious faith, a love of virtue and a painful awareness of the transitory nature of all human affairs. On 6 April 1327 a decisive event happened in Petrarch’s life: that day marked the beginning of his chaste love for a woman called Laura. He first saw her in the Church of St. Claire at Avignon on a Good Friday and loved her ardently until his death. Petrarch was 23 years old at that point in his life and his lasting passion would become the source of inspiration of his Italian poems or *Rime*, a work in progress in the vulgar tongue which Petrarch revised throughout his entire life despite the fact that he dismissed these 366 poems (most of them being sonnets) as being mere trifles. Laura was a lovely and fair-haired woman and she had a modest and dignified bearing, but the problem was that she was already married to another man. This unrequited love caused the ardent lover and Christian believer violent inner conflicts, but also unspeakable joys, endless agony, unendurable desires, and vibrant ecstasies, to the point that Laura becomes an unreachable goddess surrounded by a halo of linguistic indeterminacy. In his “Posteritati” (“Letter to Posterity”), Petrarch refers to his beloved in cold words that contrast sharply with the passionate language of his *Rime*: “I struggled in my younger days with a keen but constant and pure attachment, and would have struggled with it longer had not the sinking flame been extinguished by death – premature and bitter, but salutary. I should be glad to be able to say that I had always been entirely free from irregular desires, but I should lie if I did so.”⁹ The grief the poet experienced after her death in 1348 was as difficult to live with as was his former despair when she was still alive.

Afterwards, the period 1330-1340 was characterized by intense study in the field of classical Latin. Petrarch continued to reside at Avignon in the service of the cardinal Colonna, with whom he stayed until 1337. These were also years of ambition and of travel: Petrarch travelled through France, Flanders, Brabant, and the Rhineland, where he visited

⁸ Petrarch says: “I then set out for Montpellier to study law, and spent four years there, then three at Bologna. I heard the whole body of the civil law, and would, as many thought, have distinguished myself later, had I but continued my studies. I gave up the subject altogether, however, so soon as it was no longer necessary to consult the wishes of my parents. My reason was that, although the dignity of the law, which is doubtless very great, and especially the numerous references it contains to Roman antiquity, did not fail to delight me, I felt it to be habitually degraded by those who practise it. It went against me painfully to acquire an art which I would not [*sic*] practise dishonestly, and could hardly hope to exercise otherwise.” *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*, pp. 66-67.

⁹ *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*, ed. and trans. by James Harvey Robinson, New York: G.P. Putnam, 1898, pp. 61-62. See, more specifically, the *Familiar Letters*, where “To Posterity” is included. These are the original Latin words: “Amore acerrimo sed unico et honesto in adolescentia laboravi, et diutius laborassem nisi iam tepescentem ignem mors acerba sed utilis extinxisset. Libidinum me prorsus expertem dicere posse optarem quidem, sed si dicam mentiar.”

men of learning and searched monastic libraries for “lost” classical manuscripts (in Liège he discovered copies of two speeches by Cicero, *Pro Archia*). During his travels, he collected crumbling Latin manuscripts and fostered the recovery of knowledge from writers of ancient Greece and Rome. He was outraged by the neglect and misuse of ancient manuscripts, and he did all he could do to rescue them from oblivion. And in Paris he was given a copy of St. Augustine’s *Confessions* by a friend and spiritual confidant, the Augustinian monk Dionigi of Sansepolcro, and he was to use this more and more as the breviary of his spiritual life. It seemed to Petrarch there was an unbreakable sense of continuity between classical culture and the Christian message. In the classical world of antiquity he found values and illumination of great moral weight and he produced a synthesis of the achievements of antiquity and Christianity. When he first visited Rome in 1337, he was overwhelmed by the sense of grandeur of its past among its ruins. After returning to Avignon, he was shocked to see how the papacy was absorbed in secular and corrupt matters, and so the scholar sought refuge in the solitude of Vaucluse, which was to become a much-loved place of retreat for study and meditation. There he would enjoy the quiet of rural surroundings. By the time he discovered Vaucluse,¹⁰ Petrarch had also written a considerable amount of the poems included in the *Epistolae metricae* (66 “letters” in Latin hexameter verses) and some of the vernacular *Rime* inspired by his love for Laura. At Vaucluse he began to work on *Africa* (an epic poem on the subject of the Second Punic War) and on *De viris illustribus* (a series of biographies of famous men of all times beginning with Adam, thus emphasizing the continuity among ideals of the classical world and Christianity).

The years 1340-1346 are marked by a profound literary and moral evolution in Petrarch’s life. His reputation as a scholar was spreading in Europe as that of a great erudite and man of learning, and, as a result, in September 1340 he was offered invitations from Paris and Rome to be crowned as laureate poet. On 8 April 1341 he was crowned publicly on the Capitoline Hill, afterwards placing his laurel wreath on the tomb of the Apostle in St. Peter’s Basilica, a gesture that linked the world of classical antiquity with Christianity again. After leaving Rome, he went to Parma and then back to Avignon in 1343. But at this time of splendour in intellectual and secular achievements, Petrarch experienced some kind of moral crisis, which found expression in the *Secretum meum* (1342-1343), an autobiographical meditation which consists of three dialogues between the poet and Saint Augustine in the presence of Truth where the humanist embraces the hope that amid worldly preoccupations, affairs and error it is still possible to find a path leading to God, to conform his life to his religious faith. He came to the realization that his immense love of Laura was a love for the creature and not for the divine Creator, and so he opened his mind to authoritative voices other than those of classical antiquity. At this point, *De viris illustribus* was expanded to include heroes of sacred and secular history, and Petrarch composed *De vita solitaria* (1346), where he celebrates solitary life and the consolations to be found in Nature, study and prayer.

The years 1346-1353 were also decisive years in Petrarch’s life, inasmuch as they mark a break with his past. He lost Cardinal Colonna’s friendship in 1346 as he became

¹⁰ In his “Posteritati”, Petrarch says: “On my return, since I experienced a deep-seated and innate repugnance to town life, especially in that disgusting city of Avignon which I heartily abhorred, I sought some means of escape. I fortunately discovered, about fifteen miles from Avignon, a delightful valley, narrow and secluded, called Vaucluse, where the Sorgue, the prince of streams, takes its rise. Captivated by the charms of the place, I transferred thither myself and my books. Were I to describe what I did there during many years, it would prove a long story. Indeed, almost every bit of writing which I have put forth was either accomplished or begun, or at least conceived, there, and my undertakings have been so numerous that they still continue to vex and weary me.” *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*, p. 69.

enthusiastic for the efforts of Cola di Rienzo to revive the Roman Republic, which divided him more sharply from the Avignon court. The 1348 plague (Black Death) brought about the death of many friends of his, including Laura, who died on 6 April, exactly on the anniversary of his first seeing her. In 1350 Petrarch travelled to Rome on pilgrimage, and that year marked the beginning of his renunciation of sensual pleasures. Meanwhile, Petrarch was busy all the time, engaged in diplomatic missions, study, and an intense literary activity. In 1345 he had made a great discovery of Cicero's letters to Atticus, Brutus and Quintus in Verona, not previously known to exist. This discovery allowed him to better understand the great orator and the man he got to admire so deeply. These letters were a source of inspiration for his own letters. Petrarch was a prolific letter-writer indeed, and so he wrote epistles to ancient authors he admired and made up his mind to collect his scattered correspondence with friends. At the end of 1345 he returned to the peace of Vacluse, where he spent two years revising *De vita solitaria* and composing *De otio religioso*, on the theme of solitude in a monastic context. Between November 1347 and his pilgrimage to Rome in 1350 he spent some time in Verona, Parma and Padua, trying to advance his ecclesiastical career. In May 1351 he left Rome again for Vacluse.

In the peace of Vacluse he worked on a new plan for his *Rime*, which were arranged in two parts, the *Rime in vita di Laura* and the *Rime in morte di Laura*, which illustrate the story of the lover's own spiritual growth. The subject matter of the *Canzoniere*, as the *Rime* came to be known, is not just Petrarch's love for Laura. The poems are arranged according to a chronological criterion, depicting the poet's falling in love, the celebration of the beloved's beauty and perfection, and the final invocation to the Virgin, with the poet renouncing worldly pleasures and announcing his trust in God only. The 366 lyrics are stitched together into a wonderful tapestry endowed with a precious organic sense of unity that conveys to posterity a passionate and well-wrought expression of love and grief, of ecstasy and sorrow, of sublime spirituality in the face of beauty. Petrarch's legacy was the beginning of modern poetry in Europe so to speak, as he provided the form and the language of the new lyric in Europe. But Petrarch was an indefatigable writer: he continued work on his *Epistulae metricae* (begun in 1350) and began work on a poem entitled *Trionfi*, a more generalized version of the story of the human soul in its progress from earthly passion towards fulfilment in God. At the same time, he advocated the spiritual worth of classical writers in a new conception of education, which rejected the prevailing Aristotelianism and promoted the new studies to be called *litterae humanae*, "humane letters".

The last years of his life (1353-1374) were marked by an intense revision of his writings. His dislike of the new Pope, Innocent VI, and the death of his closest friends prompted him to leave the Avignon court for good. He moved to Milan, where he completed his first edition of the *Rime*, continued work on his *Epistulae Familiares*, kept working on his *Trionfi*, and set in order many of his earlier writings for most of the next eight years. In 1361 he sought to escape the plague and left for Padua, and in 1362 he left Padua as a fugitive from the Black Death for Venice, where he was given a house. His daughter Francesca and her family settled with him there, giving him great pleasure. Though Petrarch never married, he fathered two children by a woman unknown to posterity: a son, Giovanni, born in 1337, and a daughter, Francesca, born in 1343. He would later legitimize them. The son died of the plague in 1361, whereas Francesca married Francescuolo da Brossano, who was later named executor of Petrarch's will. In 1362 Francesca, Brossano and their daughter Eletta joined Petrarch in Venice, trying to flee the plague then ravaging Europe. A grandchild, Francesco, was born in 1366, but died shortly afterwards, before his second birthday. Although Petrarch continued to travel in those

years as poet-diplomat, his family lived with him from 1362 to 1367 in Venice. During those years, Petrarch worked peacefully on the definitive versions of his various works and was visited by his friends, including Boccaccio, who gave him a Latin translation of Homer's poems. About 1368 he and his daughter's family moved back to Padua and Arquà, where he wrote *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia*, a defense of his humanism. In 1370 he was called back to Rome by Urban V, but a stroke surprised him at Ferrara, eager as he was to see the establishment of a new Roman papacy. However, Petrarch kept on revising his works and composing some minor texts. Thus, he added new sections to his *Posteritati*, an autobiographical letter to posterity that was to have formed the conclusion to his *Seniles*, and he also composed the final sections of the *Trionfi*. Petrarch died on 19 July 1374 in Arquà and was found by his beloved daughter with his head resting on a manuscript of Virgil, working on yet another project. He was buried in the parish church and, six years later, his remains were transferred to a sarcophagus built in Arquà by Brossano. The literary legacy¹¹ Petrarch has left us is immense, and we cannot but be grateful to him.

There are striking parallelisms between Petrarch and Bringham as flesh-and-blood human beings engaged in a life-long enterprise of study of the best that has been thought and said by our ancestors, as humanists convinced that tradition is essential nourishment for the mind and the soul of humankind. Both of them share an enthusiastic love of tradition as well as the sense of belonging to something grander than individual achievement. To put it differently, the hallmark of their thought is a deep consciousness of the past as the nutriment of the present. Their love of Graeco-Roman antiquity and of classical authors (Homer, among them) is palpable in their respective works. For instance, the pre-Socratic poet-philosophers, Pindar, Sophocles and Ovid are present in Bringham's poetry – in his 12-part sequence of *The Old in Their Knowing* recreating the thinking and singing of the earliest sages of Western philosophy; in “For the Sprinter Asopikhos / & for Others: A Version of Pindar's Olympian 14”,¹² an original rendering of one of the Olympian odes by the ancient Greek poet; in his translation of a chorus from the

¹¹ The chronology of Petrarch's works is complicated by the fact that he tended to revise his works time and again throughout his life, sometimes quite extensively. Apart from his Italian poetry, notably the *Canzoniere* or *Rime* (originally titled *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, begun sometime between 1336 and 1338, and finished in 1373), dedicated to his beloved Laura, and *I Trionfi* (inspired by his love for Laura and begun in 1352), he was an enthusiastic Latin scholar and produced a number of works in this language: *De viris illustribus* (a series of 24 moral biographies on figures from antiquity from Romulus to Trojan, begun in 1338), *Rerum memorandarum libri* (an incomplete treatise on the cardinal virtues begun in 1342), *Secretum meum* (three intensely personal and imaginary dialogues with St. Augustine in the presence of Truth for personal meditation, 1342-1343), *Psalmi poenitentiales* (seven prayers and confessions, 1343), *Italia Mia* (1344), *De vita solitaria* (a treatise in two books and a praise of contemplative life, 1346), *Bucolicum carmen* (a collection of 12 pastoral poems, 1346), *De otio religioso* (a meditation on solitary life in the monastic context, 1347), *De remediis utriusque fortunae* (a sort of self-help book on good and bad fortune, 1354-1360), *Itinerarium* (Petrarch's guide to the holy Land), *Epistolae metricae* (66 “letters” in Latin hexameter verses), the unfinished epic *Africa*, and a series of invectives against opponents, such as *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* (a defense of his humanism, 1367). Petrarch was also a prolific letter-writer. He collected his letters into two major books: *Epistolae familiares* (a compilation of 350 letters written between 1325 and 1366 and sorted into 24 books; the first edition dates back to 1359 and consists of 20 books) and *Seniles* (a collection of letters compiled from 1362 onwards). He kept out of the *Familiares* a special set of 19 letters called *Liber sine nomine* which contained criticism of the Avignon papacy and so avoided mentioning explicitly the names of the recipients. Some of his letters were addressed to his long-dead friends, including Cicero and Virgil, but also to influential men of his time and to his dear friend Boccaccio. And his famous letter entitled “Posteritati” (“Letter to Posterity”), an autobiographical meditation and a synopsis of his philosophy in life, was completed in 1371 or 1372 and was intended to be the last letter of his *Seniles*. As a scholar, Petrarch did much to revive the work of Marcus Tullius Cicero.

¹² Translation from Greek, originally made for the Olympic Literary Festival, Calgary, Alberta, in 1988. Published in B.10 *Under Strange Sail: Translations & Improvisations from Many Hands*. Mission, British Columbia: Barbarian Press, 2007: s.n. [One sheet in a set of 16, loose in a folder].

Sophoclean tragedy of *Antigone* in “Of the Snaring of Birds”, and of certain passages on the myth of Callisto from Book II of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in *Ursa Major*, respectively. Unlike Bringhurst, Petrarch knew no classical Greek and never managed to master even a rudimentary knowledge of the language, and yet he was immensely interested in Greek and Latin literature, particularly in Cicero and Virgil, and he addressed some of his letters to these eminent men who lived in what he deemed a glorious past of unsurpassed achievement.

But they have much more in common, for instance their fascination with culture, their unquenchable thirst for knowledge, and their love of manuscripts and books. Whereas Petrarch found Cicero’s letters (*Ad Atticum* and others) and visited important libraries in search of tattered manuscripts from the past, Bringhurst found the lost first page of *Raven Travelling* (the great masterpiece by the Haida oral poet Skaay) and has tirelessly explored the transcriptions of the monumental works of the oral literatures of North America preserved in different libraries across Canada and the USA.¹³ And, what is more, Bringhurst shares with Petrarch his sense of intellectual integrity, his despising of money and of the absurd enterprises humans embark on; his sincere love of study, humility and solitude; and his concern with humanity: *nothing can be considered more appropriate of man than to know man*. Both are well-educated and travelled men, cosmopolitan citizens dwelling in a vast world, and wandering poets, intellectuals and scholars (for a true man has no home and no address, as the Rinzai master claimed so long ago) seeking to understand reality in its manifold expressions. Their love of quiet surroundings and mountains¹⁴ is self-evident in their writings and in their love of outdoor activities in close contact with the natural world. Even if the mountains and woods of British Columbia have nothing to do with Petrarch’s Vaucluse, the parallelisms between both men are striking though in their love of the sheer beauty of mountains:

Like Petrarch, Robert Bringhurst is a great lover of mountains. And mountains are large, they have magnitude. That magnitude brings you out of yourself and offers a way to unlearn the affectations of the self, which is part of the clarity the mind finds at the summit.

... I am disinterested in the bulk of modern writing – prose or verse – because it consists largely of personal confessions or personal whines or problems of the self or affectations of the self, and while those problems are all very real, I’m sure, they are not finally interesting enough to make literature out of them. The world is much more

¹³ In the groundbreaking essay entitled “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation” (included in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, 1986), Bringhurst explains the thrill he experienced as he found unpublished transcripts of Haida myths and he compares that moment in his life to an interesting episode of a Renaissance humanist finding a lost copy of Lucretius’ *De rerum natura* in a library some centuries ago. He writes: “In the summer of 1984, I found in a Philadelphia library unpublished transcripts, in Haida, of performances by the great Haida mythteller Walter McGregor of the Qaiahlannas, recorded in 1901 in the Queen Charlotte Islands. And I felt then an excitement such as I think Gian Francesco Poggio Bracciolini felt in 1417, when, poking through manuscripts at a monastery in Italy, he uncovered the lost text of Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*.” Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁴ In B.52, *Contemporary Authors*, new revision series, vol. 44, edited by Susan M. Trosky. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994: p. 47, there is an untitled statement by Bringhurst beginning with these eloquent words on mountains: “I walk in the mountains, come back to my desk and am whole, and can speak in a whole voice, though often it seems to be somebody else’s. But equally often now I walk in the ruins of history....” Mountains figure prominently in Bringhurst’s poetry from the very outset of his literary career: they represent the sublime grandeur of *what is*, or the sheer magnitude of a world larger than narcissistic human beings who seem to care only about themselves. There are mountains in such fundamental poems as “Ararat” or “Song of the Summit”, but also in *Deuteronomy* (1974), in *Tzubahalem’s Mountain* (1982), in *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986), and in the Oriental sequence of *The Book of Silences* (1986/2001), which reminds us that the Buddhist monk-scholars were usually named after the mountains where they lived.

interesting than most of us. We become interesting insofar as we come out of ourselves and belong to the largeness of life and death and the world.¹⁵

On 26 April 1336, Petrarch and his brother and two servants climbed to the top of Mont Ventoux, a feat he undertook just for recreation, for the sake of contemplating the views from the summit of the mountain. Petrarch describes this central episode of his life in a letter addressed to his friend Diogini di Borgo San Sepolcro included in his *Epistulae familiares*. The letter betrays a sense of aesthetic gratification in the grandeur of the scenery, as well a sense of spiritual elation. On reaching the summit, dazed by the view of the Alps, the mountains around Lyon, the Rhone and the Bay of Marseille, Petrarch took from his pocket the *Confessions* by his mentor Saint Augustine and stumbled upon a simple truth: his ascent of Mont Ventoux was an allegory of aspiration towards a better life. His eyes were drawn to these words: “And men go about to wonder at the heights of the mountains, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolution of the stars, but themselves they consider not.” As a result, Petrarch turned his attention away from the outer world to the inner world of the soul, which meant a true rediscovery of the inner world:

I closed the book, angry with myself that I should still be admiring earthly things who might long ago have learned from even the pagan philosophers that nothing is wonderful but the soul, which, when great itself, finds nothing great outside itself. Then, in truth, I was satisfied that I had seen enough of the mountain; I turned my inward eye upon myself... [...] How many times, think you, did I turn back that day, to glance at the summit of the mountain which seemed scarcely a cubit high compared with the range of human contemplation...¹⁶

The Stonecutter's Horses is a beautifully complex dramatic monologue in which Petrarch is preparing to die. He dictates his last will and testament to a notary, in which he gives precise instructions as to what to do about his modest property and possessions. The so-called *Testamentum*, the Latin text of Petrarch's will dated 4 April 1370, is the immediate source of inspiration for Bringhurst's mastery recreation. The sense of dramatic immediacy and poignancy of having Petrarch speak in the first person directly to the modern reader in a voice that talks to us with the utmost relevance is simply astonishing. By using a dramatic persona in the best tradition of Robert Browning's well-known dramatic monologues and Pound's poem on Sextus Propertius, Bringhurst gives us a first-hand insight into the psyche of a unique human being meditating on impending death. Petrarch's will leaves a number of legacies to his brother Gherardo, his servants and his friends (including his dear friend Boccaccio), though the bulk of his estate is to go to his son-in-law, Brossano, who is to give half of it to his daughter. The will does not mention his property in Arquà nor his library of notable books and manuscripts, which was seized by the lords of Padua and scattered all over Europe. In Bringhurst's hands, the original Latin text becomes the starting point for a poignant psychological portrait of one of the first European scholars, the father of Humanism and a stubborn advocate of classical literature, the man who was desperately in love with Laura and devoted a whole lifetime to revising his *Canzoniere*, a fundamental cornerstone in the history of European poetry. What is most moving about

¹⁵ Jane Munro, “Bringhurst's Range: Essential Information”, *CVII [Contemporary Verse Two]* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81): 41. Bringhurst's dislike of purely subjective poetry, or poetry as narcissistic self-expression, is crystal-clear in the words just quoted. He is interested in an impersonal kind of poetry, concerned with the essence of reality, with the objective celebration of the world, which is far more interesting than the private lives and preoccupations of individuals.

¹⁶ Petrarch, *Epistulae familiares* 4.1, translated by Morris Bishop. See Morris Bishop, “Petrarch”, in J. H. Plumb (ed.) *Renaissance Profiles*, New York: Harper & Bow, 1961, pp. 1-17.

Bringhurst's poem is that Francesca, Petrarch's illegitimate daughter, is never explicitly mentioned and yet she is a pervasive presence beneath this poem and in his father's mind.

As is common practice with Bringhurst, his poem is preceded by an untitled headnote in which he provides readers with elemental background information that might help them better understand the dramatic monologue that follows. Thus, in the 1982 textual incarnation of the poem as published in *The Beauty of the Weapons*, Bringhurst explains who Petrarch was and the basic details concerning his last will and testament:

This is in some measure the story of Francesco Petrarca, who was a gentleman, and a scholar, and a brilliant poet, and a good Roman Catholic, and the father of an illegitimate daughter whom he loved very deeply and whose illegitimacy was, for him, a source of incurable pain. His feelings concerning himself and his daughter grew so intense that for years he would not speak her name in public, though he pronounced it often enough and lovingly enough in private. After her marriage he sought to simplify his affairs and his explanations by adopting as his foster son the man he might have called his son-in-law: his daughter's husband Brossano. With him and few others, Petrarca shared the story of his precious wound.

On the morning of 4 April 1370, in one of the upper rooms of his house in Padova, in the north of Italy, Francesco Petrarca summoned his secretary, to whom he dictated in simple Italian the first draft of his last will and testament. A later version of this document – the dry and guarded Latin rewrite which Petrarca considered suitable for public disclosure – still survives. Only an occasional flash in the Latin suggests the rough glint of its predecessor. The close, for instance, reads: *Ego Franciscus Petrarca scripsi qui testamentum aliud fecissem si essem dives ut vulgus insanem putat.* “I, Francesco Petrarca, have written this. I would have made a different testament if I were rich, as the lunatic public believes me to be.” The Italian original would, I believe, have begun with a meditative wail: *Io, Francesco, io, io...*¹⁷

In *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst prefaces the poem with a short note that opens with the Latin words of Petrarch's *Testamentum*: “*Sepe de eo mecum cogitans de quo nemo nimis pauci satis cogitant...*” Then, he gives us elemental spatio-temporal coordinates:

¹⁷ The structure of Petrarch's testament is clearly explained by Luigi Tonelli in a book entitled *Petrarca*, Milano: Edizione Corbaccio, 1980, pp. 334-335: “Raccomandata primieramente l'anima a Gesù, con l'aiuto della Vergine e dell'Arcangelo Michele, il Poeta dichiara di volere esequie “senza alcuna pompa, ma con somma umiltà e sommissione”, e di essere sepolto, secondo dove si trovi al momento della morte, in una chiesa o nell'altra, di Padova, o Venezia, o Milano, o Pavia, o Roma, o Parma: “Ma se io morirò in Arquà, nella quale ho un poderetto e casa, e mi fia da Iddio concesso tanto (il che grandemente desidero) che io vi possa fabbricare una picciola cappelletta ad onore della beatissima Vergine, eleggo d'essere in tal luogo seppellito”. Segue l'enumerazione dei lasciti: un terreno, che ha intenzione di comperare, e, nel caso che non lo comperi, la somma di dugento ducati d'oro, al Duomo di Padova, “dal quale ho avuto comodo e onori”; venti ducati alla chiesa, dove sera sepolto, e cinque per ciascun' altra degli ordini mendicanti; cento, “ai poveri di Cristo”. E poi, piccolo doni agli amici: una tavola di Giotto, “della cui bellezza non ne tranno alcun gusto gli ignoranti, ma i maestri dell'arte ne stupiscono”, a Francesco da Carrara; il condono dei debiti a Donato degli Albanzani; i suoi cavalli a due Padovani, ad uno dei quali si professa debitore; il suo breviario, a un prete, e dopo la morte di questi, al Duomo di Padova; al Boccaccio, “cinquanta fiorini d'oro di Fiorenza, per una vesta da portare il verno per lo studio e fatiche della notte”; un liuto a maestro Bambasio da Ferrara, e cinquanta ducati d'oro a Giovanni Dondi dell'Orologio, perchè si comperi un anellino. Né dimentica i servi, a cui lascia qualche regalia; né i figli dell'antico castaldo Raimondo, ai quali dona il fondo di Valchiusa, qualora l'Ospedale e “i poveri di Cristo” non possano accogliere il legato. Di quel che rimane, e cioè della meta del totale, lascia erede il suo genero e “carissimo figliuolo” Francescuolo Brossano, e nel caso che questi muoia prima di lui, Lombardo Asserigo, suo creditore. Infine, un lascito al fratello certosino, Gherardo; e la conclusione, argutamente onoraria: “Io Francesco Petrarca scrissi: e questo testamento avrei fatto in altro modo, se io fossi ricco, come è opinione del volgo insano”... Modestia e religione; fedeltà agli amici, a qualsiasi grado appartengano; riconoscimento dei legami familiari, e carità per i poveri...”

“Pavia, 4 April 1370”, as well as the names of the personae involved in the story about to be told: “Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374); [Francesca], *his illegitimate daughter*; Franceschino da Brossano, *in law Petrarca’s adopted son, but in actuality his son-in-law*.” Petrarch’s daughter is never mentioned explicitly, but only indirectly invoked in between the lines. This is made clearer in the untitled headnote preceding the poem in what might be its definitive incarnation in *Selected Poems* (2009): “Pavia, 4 April 1370. Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374) is speaking. The silent characters include his illegitimate and deceased son, Giovanni; his illegitimate and living daughter, Francesca, and his daughter’s husband, Francescuolo da Brossano. (After Giovanni’s death and Francesca’s marriage, both in 1361, Petrarch had adopted Brossano as his foster son rather than acknowledging his daughter as his daughter and her husband as his son-in-law.)”

Now, what kind of composition is *The Stonecutter’s Horses* from a purely formal or metrical point of view? Jane Munro tells us that this is a canzone, a form used by Petrarch himself for the composition of his own poems. She explains in detail how Bringhurst puts to mastery use this form of classical resonances while at the same time he gives voices to Petrarch’s thinking in spontaneous, conversational English. However, the fact that the language sounds spontaneous does not mean at all that the poet has not cared about the sonic texture of the poem. Indeed, every single word falls exactly into place, word stresses are counted in every single verse line, assonance and repetition build an appealing musicality throughout the whole composition, making it a well-wrought poem, rich in profundity of thought and memorable words that keep on ringing in one’s mind long after one has finished reading this poem aloud:

The Stonecutter’s Horses is a canzone: its twenty stanzas are each divided into two like and one unlike parts. Petrarch is famous for his sonnets but he also composed beautiful poems in the canzone form, a form which provides a rule for composition rather than a rigid vessel. The metrics of *The Stonecutter’s Horses* are the result of a tension between patterns of stress and those of quantity. Upon a first reading it may sound like Petrarch dictating his will and not discernibly like the Renaissance poetry which begat it. Bringhurst’s verse feels contemporary, though definitely ordered. Its stresses arise from the natural music of English and are counted in each line; the number of syllables of the line are also counted, and matter, their repetitions flowing in an open but rather cyclical way. Quantitative line lengths reflect classical requirements, varying between eight and fourteen syllables, centering on eleven, the canzone’s typical hendecasyllabic line. Stresses range from five to ten per line (e.g., those for the last stanza, as I count them: 9, 10, 7, 8, 5, 7, 7, 9, 7, 9, 9, 8, 5). Measure plays freely against meaning as well as against rhyme and rhythm.

And then there is the rhyme. Bringhurst has a fine ear for the progression of assonance. [...] There is typically a double pattern of rhymes – usually four of each – in every stanza. The rhymes may be repetitions of syllables only (more so after the middle when the whole fabric of the vocabulary is vibrant with echoes from earlier stanzas), or of words, or of whole phrases. They do not occur in any fixed positions within the stanzas, some being end rhymes, some initial, and many internal. The net effect is of rapids and flows, of the unfamiliar streaming over the familiar like a river which runs at varying depths and speeds over a bed of rock which is at times invisible though certain outcroppings divide the waters and the shape of the stone below channels the whole race – the shape of the stone below having been determined by the water to begin with.¹⁸

¹⁸ Jane Munro’s “Bringhurst’s Range: Essential Information”, published in *CVII [Contemporary Verse Two]* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81): 40.

As for the subject matter or content of *The Stonecutter's Horses*, we do know that Petrarch's original Latin *Testamentum* is the literal *materia poetica* for Bringhurst's poem, and, upon closer inspection, it turns out that some parts of the piece are more or less faithful renderings of the Latin prose text that has survived (the original Italian version of the testament, Bringhurst tells us, having been irrevocably lost), as we shall try to demonstrate below. The dramatic monologue is structured around four main parts. Firstly, Bringhurst dwells briefly on the socio-historical context, or rather spatio-temporal coordinates, where the text comes into the day of light, and presents Petrarch's persona speaking in the first person of his approaching death and of what is to be done with his remains when his soul has departed to the afterlife. Secondly, the poet-scholar gives precise instructions as to his burial: the city where he is to be buried and the exact location of his grave, all of which will depend on where he comes to die. Thirdly, Petrarch focuses on his possessions and properties and assigns them to his various heirs: his brother Gherardo, a number of friends and servants, and Brossano, his son-in-law and executor, who is to inherit the bulk of his estate and is to split it with Francesca, the poet's illegitimate daughter. At this point, Bringhurst departs from the Latin text and meditates on the importance of preserving the land one has managed to gain in one's lifetime. Finally, the poet concludes his testament with a reflection on the meaning of practising law justly, and giving some final instructions as to what the notary is to do with the definitive version of his will. These are then four subtle movements for the reader's soul, flowing into one another with perfect, beautiful naturalness.

The Stonecutter's Horses opens then with simple and moving verse lines where we get almost to hear the genuine voice of the Italian humanist thinking about the imminence of his own death amid the historical circumstances of his time:

I, Francesco, this April day...
 death stirs like a bud in the sunlight, and Urban
 has got off his French duff and re-entered Rome
 and for three years running has invited me to Rome...
 over the bright hills and down the Cassia¹⁹,
 back through Arezzo one more time...
 my age sixty-five and my birthday approaching,
 the muggers on the street in broad daylight in Rome,
 the hawks and the buzzards....

Take this down.

The day is 4 April 1370, four years prior to Petrarch's death, and the poet-scholar is in one of the upper rooms of his house in Padova. He feels the imminence of his own death in the air ("*a bud in the sunlight*") and has summoned his secretary, to whom he dictates his last will and testament. These verse lines offer, though, relevant information on the exact historical circumstances Petrarch is witnessing in his own time. In the glossary at the end of *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), Bringhurst provides us with the essentials regarding Urban: "Urban Guillaume de Grimoard, who reigned as Pope Urban V from 1362 until his death in 1370. In 1367 he returned the papacy to Rome from Avignon. Petrarch thinks of following him via the old Roman road through Firenze, the Via Cassia." From this brief entry, we gather that Urban has summoned the poet-diplomat "*for three years running*" (1367-1370) and that Petrarch is enthusiastic about the idea of the establishment of a new Roman

¹⁹ "Flaminia" instead of "Cassia" in the first textual incarnation of the text in C.32 and A.9. Throughout our critical analysis we quote from the definitive version of the poem as published in *Selected Poems* (2009). All relevant textual variants will be noted down in footnotes.

papacy. Thus, in 1370 he is called back to Rome by Urban V, and a detailed itinerary is recorded: down the Via Cassia, through Arezzo (Petrarch's hometown), towards Rome. But a stroke seizes the poet at Ferrara and he is obliged to spend the rest of his life in Padova and Arquà, revising the definitive versions of his various works. So on 4 April 1370 Petrarch is exactly 65 years old and his birthday is approaching (20 July). In the presence of his secretary, the poet thinks of the muggers, hawks and buzzards that crowd Rome's streets plotting and scheming in broad daylight, which points to the corruption of robbers and dishonest politicians. What Bringham manages to do with astonishing economy in these verse lines is providing the reader with the elemental spatio-temporal coordinates where Petrarch dictates his last will and testament.

What follows this threshold of *The Stonecutter's Horses* is Petrarch's moving meditation on death. The source of inspiration for Bringham's lines are the opening words of the original Latin *Testamentum*: "*Sepe de eo mecum cogitans de quo nemo nimis, pauci satis cogitant, de novissimis scilicet ac de morte – que cogitatio neque superflua esse potest neque nimium festina, cum et mors omnibus certa sit et hora mortis incerta...*"²⁰ In Bringham's hands the Latin words become conversational English words that are not a literal rendering of the original and yet capture the poignancy of Petrarch's reflection on the need to think of death, which is inevitable, inescapable, the common lot to all humankind. Thinking of death is no waste of time, and yet we tend to overlook the simple fact that death is always somewhere round the corner, possibly because we need to forget about the mystery that death itself is, to forget the terror it inspires in us all, and try to attain some peace of mind if only for a while. But the truth is that death, like the soul, is accompanying humans since the very moment they are born. We spend our whole life waiting for death to come, even if we are not aware of our waiting:

No one has thought too deeply of death.
So few have left anything toward or against it.
Peculiar, since thinking of death can never be
wasted thinking, nor can it be come to
too quickly. A man carries his death with him
everywhere, waiting, but seldom thinking
of waiting. Death is uncommonly like the soul.

As Petrarch is a man "*with a reputation for truth,*" he "*must have one also for precision*", and so, at this point of the dramatic monologue, he is about to give exact instructions regarding his possessions and properties, as well as precise instructions as to how his burial is to be conducted. First of all, with the utmost humility, the poet entrusts his soul to his Saviour and his body to the earth: "*I leave / my soul to my saviour, my corpse to the earth. / And let it be done without any parades.*" He desires fervently to be buried without any kind of ostentatious pomp or parades; he just wants to return his soul to God and to return his body where it belongs (the womb of mother earth) with humble simplicity. Beneath Bringham's words is the Latin original of Petrarch's *Testamentum*: "*Corpus autem hoc terrenum ac mortale, nobilium gravem sarcinam animorum, terre unde sibi origo est volo restitui et hoc absque omni pompa, sed cum summa humilitate et abiectioe quanta esse potest.*"²¹ Whereas the soul is immortal and finds its way back to God, the mortal body is completely dispensable and so the poet does not give a thought to the ultimate fate of his remains. Therefore, he does not care much where his bones might end up being buried, as the original Latin text makes explicit: "*De loco autem non*

²⁰ See the original Latin text of the *Testamentum* in *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, a cura di Antonietta Bufano, con la collaborazione di Basile Aracri e Clara Kraus Reggiani. Introduzione di Manlio Pastore Stocchi. Volume secondo. Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1975 (ristampa 1987), p. 1342.

²¹ *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1344.

*magnopere curo, contentor poni, ubicunque Deo placuerit et iis qui hanc curam suscipere dignabuntur.*²² Bringhurst renders these Latin words into spontaneous English: “I don’t care very much where I’m buried, / so it please God and whoever is digging.” And yet, as he feels he must leave precise instructions, he does not hesitate to insist once more on the need to bury him without parades: “But don’t lug my bones through the public streets / in a box to be gabbled at and gawked at and followed. / Let it be done without any parades.”

The second movement of *The Stonecutter’s Horses* is a detailed enumeration of the possible places in Italy where Petrarch might die and of the exact locations where he wishes to be buried. “*Si tamen expressius mea de hoc voluntas exquiratur, sepeliri velim...*”, says Petrarch in the sixth section of his *Testamentum* and then he makes an exhaustive list of the places he frequents in the Italian geography, as he points out under g) below, and where he might be eventually buried if death surprises him in one place or another. His words betray a beautiful and analytic mind in love with precision and truth, one that seeks to tidy up everything (including such mundane human affairs as one’s last will and testament) before it departs to the afterworld. Setting one’s affairs in order before one’s death comes turns out to be of the utmost importance to the 65-year-old poet-scholar who has spent a whole lifetime revising his own Italian and Latin works in search of perfection. He is, after all, a scholar, a student of ancient texts, and a diplomat who knows from first-hand experience how the world goes when it comes to one’s estate and possessions, even to one’s burial. Hence, he knows for sure what it means to pay attention to small details. The original Latin text which constitutes the starting point for Bringhurst’s words is worth quoting in full:

- a) Si Padue, ubi nunc sum, moriar, in ecclesia Sancti Augustini quam fratres predicatorum tenent, quia et locus animo meo gratus est et iacet illic is, qui me plurimum dilexit inque has terras piis precibus attraxit, preclarissime memorie Iacobus de Carraria, tunc Padue dominus.
- b) Si autem Arquade, ubi ruralis habitatio mea est, diem clausero et Deus tantum michi concesserit, quod valde cupio, capellam ibi exiguam ad honorem beatissime Marie Virginis extruere, illic sepeliri eligo; alioquin inferius in aliquo loco honesto iuxta ecclesiam plebis.
- c) Sin Venetiis moriar, poni volo in loco Sancti Francisci de Vinea, illic ante hostium ecclesie.
- d) Si Mediolani, ante ecclesiam Beati Ambrosii iuxta primum introitum, qui civitatis muros aspicit.
- e) Si Papie, in ecclesia Sancti Augustini, ubi fratribus visum fuerit.
- f) Si autem Rome, in ecclesia Sancte Marie Maioris vel Sancti Petri, ubi erit oportunus, vel iuxta ecclesiam hanc vel illam, sicut canonicis placebit.
- g) Nominavi loca, in quibus per Italiam conversari soleo.
- h) At si Parme, in ecclesia maiori, ubi per multos annos archidiaconus fui inutilis et semper fere absens.
- i) Seu ubicunque terrarum alibi, in loco fratrum minorum, si sit ibi; sin minus, in quacunque alia ecclesia, que vicinior fuerit loco mortis.
- j) Hec de sepulcro – plura fateor quam virum doctum deceat – ab indocto dicta sint.²³

A long time ago, Ezra Pound said that *Dichtung = condensare*. This is what Bringhurst accomplishes in the second part of his dramatic monologue: he follows the somewhat arid Latin original *verbatim*, clinging to Petrarch’s priorities regarding the burial options available to him, and then he renders it into spontaneous English in a sequence of conditional clauses that give precise instructions as to the poet’s burial wishes. But he does so with the

²² *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1344.

²³ *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1344 and p. 1346.

utmost linguistic economy and simplicity. The sentences are short and straight to the point, every word falls exactly into place, no item of information is redundant at all. Reading these stanzas, what catches the reader's attention above all other things is the humane dimension inherent in the dramatic persona of Petrarch speaking these words. At some point of what looks like a faithful record of his non-stop stream of consciousness, the poet is shown hesitating whether it would be a good idea to be buried in Parma, where a modest burial, with no ostentatious pomp, would be almost an impossible battle to win. At some other point, he is shown to be ironic, as when he points out that he wishes to be buried in the very centre if he happens to die in Rome, where the new papacy is established. And last, but not least, he concludes he wishes his bones (*"what flesh I have left"*) to lie peacefully in a church, a poor one, a Franciscan one if possible: *"I don't want it feeding a tree from which / rich people's children swipe apples."* By a most curious alchemy, the Latin words, long forgotten and difficult to find nowadays by the way, unless one looks for them conscientiously, become vibrant, sinewy English words full of energy and profundity of thought in Bringhurst's brilliantly accomplished rendering:

If I die here in Padova, bury me here
 near the friend who is dead who invited me here.
 If I die on my farm, you can use the chapel
 I mean to build there, if I ever build it.
 If not, try the village down the road.

If in Venezia, near the doorway.
 If in Milano, next to the wall.
 In Pavia, anywhere. Or if in Rome –
 if in Rome, in the centre, of course, if there's room.
 These are the places I think I might die in
 in Italy.

Or if I happen to be in Parma,
 there is the cathedral, of which for some reason²⁴
 I am the archdeacon. But I will avoid
 going to Parma. It would scarcely be possible,
 I suppose, in Parma, not to have a parade.

The second movement of *The Stonecutter's Horses* ends with the provision of money to the church where Petrarch is to be eventually buried, as well as the provision of money to be given out among the poor as a token of his own charity. Again, sections 9 and 10 of Petrarch's *Testamentum*²⁵ are the starting point for Bringhurst's words: *"Two hundred ducats go to the church in which / I am buried, with another hundred to be given / out in that parish to the poor, in small doses."* With the money the church is to buy "a piece of land" and from the rental money gotten from the land the parish is to pay for "an annual mass" in the donor's name. At this point, the poet speaks all too dismissingly of his own body, as he deems his name and spirit to be a better company in that church than his own physical presence *"muttering to the blessed virgin / through my hemorrhoids and bad teeth. I should be glad / to be rid of this sagging carcass."* This is what the poet truly thinks of his perishable body, which is nothing more than a heavy burden or a carcass that had rather go back to the earth where it belongs.

²⁴ This line reads slightly differently in the previous version of the poem in *The Beauty of the Weapons*: "there is a cathedral of which, for some reason,"

²⁵ See *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1348: "9. Lego autem ecclesie apud quam sepeliar ducatos viginti; aliis autem ecclesiis quattuor ordinum mendicantium, si ibi fuerint, ducatos quinque pro qualibet. 10. Pauperibus Christi lego centum ducatos distribuendos, ut videbitur presbytero Iohanni a Bocheta, custodi ecclesie Paduane; et hoc, si hic moriar; sin alibi, ad arbitrium prelati ecclesie illius in qua reconditus fuero, ita tamen ut de dicta quantitate nullus ultra singulos ducatos accipiat."

However, Petrarch immediately dismisses these words and asks his secretary not to write them down in the public instrument a testament is meant to be. Of even greater interest, though, is the passing meditation on the part of Petrarch on literary fame and on the immortality associated to the cultivation of letters by one of the first European scholars:

I have cleared no fields of their stones. I have built
no barns and no castles. I have built a name
out of other men's voices by banging my own
like a kitchen pan. My name to the Church
with the money it takes to have it embalmed.

As pointed out above, on 8 April 1341 Petrarch was crowned publicly on the Capitoline Hill and given a laurel crown as a symbol of literary excellence.²⁶ As a poet and man of letters, Petrarch was well aware of the kind of immortality the writing of literature of excellence might bring an author. It comes as no surprise that he should have been at pains to revise his entire corpus throughout his own life, conscious that his works were to constitute his true legacy to humankind and to posterity. However, in Bringhurst's lines quoted above he is shown dismissing the kind of immortality he has attained through mere words. He has accomplished nothing of true value, he seems to suggest, for he has not worked the land with his own hands or built stone architectural structures that might survive the passing of time. His only achievement, if it can be counted as such, is that he has managed to build a name (i.e., a reputation) "out of other men's voices" (namely, by revisiting and appropriating the best that his ancestors thought and said) "by banging my own / like a kitchen pan." He refers to the Eliotian concept of tradition, to the important fact that tradition and the past are the nutriment of the present, and that poetry is an ambitious enterprise whose foundations are to be found in the cumulative effort of the most lucid minds of all times, expressing themselves in any human language. Bringhurst himself is well aware of this truth, just as Pound was before him, and this may account for his keen interest not just in a number of literary traditions around the world, but also for his interest in human languages. Though humans have no monopoly on language or meaning, Bringhurst finds speech a fascinating phenomenon, possibly the key to understanding humans of all places and times, and he himself is an avid student of both classical and modern languages. This desire to learn other languages is the basis of his own poetry, of the sonic texture and prosody of his own poems, where the words are almost invisible, singing to us of elemental ideas we tend to overlook or to take for granted. Given his study of other languages and literatures, Jane Munro suggests that Bringhurst lives in a rounder world on this account:

One way in which Bringhurst lives in a rounder world than do most of us is that he has studied a wide variety of languages and literatures, from classical Greek to Latin and Spanish, to Arabic, and even to Chinese, with others for full measure. Bringhurst's verse is a product, at least in part, of these studies.

I am, I have been, a great student of metrics, of prosody. I delight in memorizing poems in languages I don't understand for the sake of the sound, and parsing the prosodic structures to see how they are made, how they function. I have schooled myself on Latin and Greek verse, as on Arabic and Hindi and other things, but I don't know whether that has any visible impact on my stuff or not. I think that the impact would be difficult to trace because it's like trying to transpose something from the piano to the guitar, the resources are entirely different, the fingerings enable different combinations and prevent you from others and everything is changed, the sonorities are all changed. In the case of language, you have not only these kinds of changes in tonality but also the whole metrical structures

²⁶ See the *Collatio laureationis* (1255), included in *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, vol. II, p. 1255 ff.

possible in one language are impossible in another. That doesn't happen when you move from one musical instrument to another. You can play in 4/4 time no matter whether you are playing a ukulele or a harp, or a tuba, but that's not quite so easy moving from a language like classical Greek to a language like English, or, again, to a language like Chinese.²⁷

The third movement of *The Stonecutter's Horses* is a detailed account of Petrarch's possessions which he assigns to various heirs – his brother Gherardo, several friends, a handful of servants and his executor, Francescuolo da Brossano, the beloved son-in-law to whom the bulk of his estate is to go. Though he has not got many possessions, the equanimity of Petrarch's heart and mind prompts him to take care of all the people whose lives his life has touched. His heirs, among others, are Gherardo (his brother), Boccaccio, Francesco Da Carrara, Lombardo della Seta, Bonzanello da Vigonza, Tommaso Bombasi, Giovanni a Bochetta, Donato degli Albanzani, Giovanni Dondi dall'Orologio, Francescuolo da Brossano, Bartolomeo da Siena detto Pancaldo (a servant) and Jean and Pierre Clermont dit Monet. For the sake of clarity in our exposition, we will atomize Petrarch's legacy into distinct items, track down the original Latin source and see what Bringhurst makes of the original in each case:

- (1) A painting by Giotto to the Duke. The starting point for Bringhurst's verse lines is section 12 of the *Testamentum*: "*Et predicto igitur domino meo Paduano, quia et ipse per Dei gratiam non eget et ego nichil aliud habeo dignum se, dimitto tabulam meam sive iconam beate Virginis Marie, operis Iotti pictoris egregii, que michi ab amico meo Michele Vannis de Florentia missa est, cuius pulcritudinem ignorantes non intelligunt, magistri autem artis stupeant; hanc iconam ipsi domino meo lego, ut ipsa Virgo benedicta sibi sit propitia apud filium suum Iesum Christum.*"²⁸ The first item of value among Petrarch's possessions is a painting by Giotto which Francesco Da Carrara (the Duke of Padova) is to inherit from the poet-scholar. In Bringhurst's rendering, the emphasis is laid on the Duke's knowledge of painting. Unlike the ignorant mass of men, the Duke is a knowledgeable man who will be in a position to appreciate the beauty and perfection of this irreplaceable work of art: "*My Giotto to the Duke. / Most men cannot fathom its beauty. Those / who know painting are stunned by it. The Duke / does not need another Giotto, but the Duke knows painting.*" The syntactic simplicity of these sentences contrasts sharply with the convoluted complexity of the Latin original composed by Petrarch.
- (2) Money to Giovanni Dondi dall'Orologio for a modest ring. Section 22 of the *Testamentum* reads as follows: "*Propter hunc respectum distuli ad ultimum, quem primum esse decuit, magistrum Iohannem de Horologio physicum. Cui lego quinquaginta ducatos auri pro emendo sibi unum parvulum anulum digito gestandum in memoriam mei.*"²⁹ In Bringhurst's rendering the details are omitted and the focus is on Petrarch's wish to be remembered by his dear friend, who he hopes will read his works: "*To Dondi, money for a plain ring to remind him / to read me.*" The ring will fulfil its purpose if it manages to remind Dondi to remember the departed friend. This is also a form of immortality: humans do not die for good as long as those who outlive them remember them.
- (3) No more loans on debt for Donato degli Albanzani. The starting point is section 14 of the *Testamentum*: "*Magistro Donato de Pratoveteri, grammaticae preceptor, nunc Venetiis habitanti, siquid mihi debet ex mutuo, quod quantum sit nescio, sat utique parum est, remitto et lego nec volo, quod heredi meo hanc ob causam ad aliquid teneatur.*"³⁰ Petrarch forgives the loan of the money this friend owes him: "*To Donato – what? I forgive him / the loan of whatever he owes me.*" These lines are reminiscent of Socrates announcing he owed someone a cock right after drinking the

²⁷ Jane Munro's essay "Bringhurst's Range: Essential Information", *CVII [Contemporary Verse Two]* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81): 40.

²⁸ *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1348 and p. 1350.

²⁹ *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1352.

³⁰ *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1350.

poisonous beverage and shortly before dying. Similarly, the Italian humanist wants to forgive Donato the money he owes him.

- (4) Money and a small silver cup to Lombardo della Seta. The starting point are sections 16 and 17 of the *Testamentum*: “16. *Et preter hoc dicto Lombardo qui rerum suarum curam deposuit, ut res meas ageret, obligatum me confiteor in centum triginta quattuor ducatos auri et solidos sexdecim, quos expendit in utilitatibus meis et multo amplius; sed facta inter nos ultima omnium ratione dicte quantitatis sibi debitor remansi, quam si ante receperit sicut spero cito facere bene erit; alioquin volo, quod heres meus ante omnia sibi satisfacere teneatur. De quo debito chirographum meum habet, quod restituat heredi meo ipse Lombardus. 17. Item lego eidem Lombardo scyphum meum parvum rotundum argenteum et auratum, cum quo bibat aquam, quam libenter bibit, multo libentius quam vinum.*”³¹ Della Seta is a close friend of Petrarch, and he wishes the money he owes him to be paid back to him. Also he gives him a small silver (and gold) cup that is only useful for water drinking, as it spoils the wine poured in it. As Bringham put is: “*And I / myself am in debt to Della Seta. Pay / that³², if I haven’t paid it. And give him / my silver cup. Della Seta drinks / water. Damned metal ruins the wine.*” The tone is absolutely conversational; this is a man speaking in the first person with perfect naturalness, with the burden of years and experience on his shoulders.
- (5) Money for Boccaccio to buy himself a coat to keep him warm at night while he works on his writing. The original text, section 19 of the *Testamentum*, reads as follows: “*Domino Iohanni de Certaldo seu Boccaccii, verecunde admodum tanto viro tam modicum, lego quinquaginta florenos auri de Florentia pro una veste hiemali ad studium lucubrationesque nocturnas.*”³³ The amount of money he gives him is large enough to pay for much more than a mere coat to protect himself from cold nights. Petrarch met Boccaccio during the former’s pilgrimage to Rome in 1350. At that point, Boccaccio even offered Petrarch a chair to be established under his guidance in the University of Florence, which the scholar refused to accept. They became close friends for the rest of their lives and an intense correspondence ensued between both men of letters. It is only natural that, in Bringham’s rendering, the portion of verse lines devoted to his life-long friend Boccaccio should be larger than that devoted to other friends:

To Boccaccio, I am unworthy to leave
anything, and have nothing worthy to leave.
Money then, for a coat to keep himself warm
when he works after dark, as he frequently does,
while the river wind stutters and bleats at his window,
and his hand-me-down cordwood fizzles and steams.

- (6) A lute to his friend Tommaso Bombasi. Section 20 of the *Testamentum* provides Bringham with the source of inspiration: “*Magistro Thome Bambasie de Ferraria lego leutum meum bonum, ut eum sonet, non pro vanitate seculi fugacis, sed ad laudem Dei eterni.*”³⁴ In Bringham’s quite faithful rendering, these Latin words are turned into these eloquent verse lines: “*My lute to Tommaso. I hope he will play it / for God and himself and not to gain fame / for his playing.*” Petrarch hopes that his friend plays the flute to honour eternal God and not to nourish his own vanity or ego.
- (7) Money to Pancaldo and to Zilio (Petrarch’s servants). Sections 23 and 24 of the *Testamentum* read thus: “*23. De familiaribus autem domesticis sic ordino: a) Bartholomeo de Senis, qui dicitur Pancaldus, viginti ducatos, quos non ludat; b) Zilio de Florentia domicello meo supra salarium suum, si quid sibi debetur, viginti ducatos; c) et si haberem plures aut alios, plures pauciores ve, domicellos, supra salarium suum pro quolibet florenos seu ducatos decem; d) famulis duos pro quolibet; coquo duos. 24.*

³¹ *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1350.

³² “Let it / be paid if I haven’t paid it” in all versions prior to *The Calling*.

³³ *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1352.

³⁴ *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1352.

*Et si isti vel amici obiissent vel domicelli seu famuli obiissent, priusquam moriar, quod eis legabam, volo ut redeat ad heredem meum.*³⁵ Petrarch's sense of equanimity and justice is crystal-clear in these words: he gives his servants money to be spent on honourable things, and he makes provision just in case the servants die before he does so that their heirs receive the money. In Bringhurst's rendering, use is made of parallelism and short sentences with no verb:

Money to Pancaldo, but not for the card table.
 Money to Zilio – at least his back salary.
 Money to the other servants. Money to the cook.
 Money to their heirs if they die before I do.

- (8) His Bible to be given back to the Church. Section 18 of the *Testamentum* reads as follows: “*Presbytero autem Iohanni a Bocheta, custodi ecclesie nostre, breviarium meum magnum, quod Venetiis emi precio librarum centum; ea tamen lege illud ei dimitto, ut post eius obitum remaneat in sacristia ecclesie ipsius Paduane ad obsequium perpetuum presbyterorum, ut ipse presbyter Iohannes et alii orent si eis placeat, Cristum et beatam Virginem pro me.*”³⁶ In Bringhurst's rendering, this long passage is simplified and condensed into just one verse line: “*Give my Bible back to the Church.*” There is nothing else to be added; Petrarch is a devout Christian and he wants his breviary to be returned to the Church where prayers may be said to honour his memory.
- (9) Horses for two of his friends. The original text in section 15 of the *Testamentum* reads thus: “*De equis meis, si quos habuero in tempore transitus mei, qui placeant Bonzanello de Viguntia et Lombardo a Serico concivibus Paduanis, volo quod inter eos sortiantur, quis primum eligat, quis secundum.*”³⁷ In Bringhurst's rendering, Petrarch speaks of his horses affectionately: “*And my horses... / my horses. / Let a few of my friends, if they wish to, / draw lots for my horses. Horses / are horses. They cannot be given away.*” Now, Bringhurst's dramatic monologue is entitled *The Stonecutter's Horses*, and this might be worth considering. Petrarch has got some horses, which he values too much to be given away in the same way he gives away his other possessions. A painting by Giotto, a silver cup, a lute, a Bible or money have got something elemental in common: they are all inanimate things, devoid of a life of their own. But with horses it is different, for they are living creatures one grows fond of. Hence the mention of the word *horses* in the title of Bringhurst's poem. But who is the stonecutter?, one may ask. Petrarch claims that he has cleared no field of stones and has not built anything of lasting value; he has only made a name out of other men's voices. But at some other point in the poem, he meditates on the importance of people being rooted in a given land and he speaks of stones to which he compares the human heart. To this issue we shall return presently below.
- (10) The bulk of Petrarch's legacy to Francescuolo da Brossano, his executor and son-in-law. Section 25 of the *Testamentum* provides the starting point for Bringhurst's words: “*Omnium sane bonorum meorum mobilium et immobilium que habeo vel habiturus sum, ubicunque sunt vel erunt, universalem heredem instituo Franciscolum de Brossano, filium quondam domini Amicoli de Brossano, civem Mediolani, porte Vercelline. Et ipsum rogo, non solum ut heredem, sed ut filium carissimum, ut pecuniam quantamcunque — sive sit plurima sive minima, quia magna utique non erit — in rebus meis invenerit, dividat in duas partes; et unam sibi habeat, alteram numeret cui scit me velle, et de ea fiat quod me etiam velle scit.*”³⁸ Brossano is the universal heir of Petrarch's remaining properties, but he is to split it with Francesca, the illegitimate daughter of the poet. She is mentioned only indirectly in Bringhurst's rendering of this Latin passage:

The rest to my heir and executor, Brossano,
 who knows he is to split it, and how he is to split it,

³⁵ *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1352 and p. 1354.

³⁶ *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1352.

³⁷ *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1350.

³⁸ *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1354.

and the names I prefer not to put into this
instrument. Names of no other importance.
Care for them. Care for them here in this house
if you can.

The section closing the third movement of *The Stonecutter's Horses*, which has been extensively revised from one textual incarnation to the next, is a moving meditation on the importance of the land. Petrarch addresses Brossano directly and tells him not to “*sell off the land to get money / in any case. Selling the earth without cause / from the soul is simony, Brossano.*” Though Petrarch spent much of his lifetime travelling from one place to another as a poet-diplomat and as a scholar (“*I have lived long enough in quite enough / cities, notwithstanding the gifts / of free lodging in some of them...*”), he is well aware that the roots of a human being are to be found in the earth or in the land where his heart grows into full bloom. The “*breath moves underfoot in the clay,*” says Petrarch’s voice in the poem, and further “*The stone quarried and cut and reset / in the earth is a lover’s embrace, not an overlay.*” Then he compares the heart to stone: “*The heart splits like a chinquapin pod, / spilling its angular seed on the ground.*” Petrarch’s meditation on the lands goes on as follows:

Though we ride to Rome and back aboard animals,
nothing ever takes root on the move.
I have seen houses and fields bartered
like cargo on shipboard. But nothing takes root
without light in the eye and earth in the hand.
The land is our solitude and our silence.
A man should hoard what little silence
he is given and what little solitude he can get.

There is only one piece of land over the mountains which Petrarch recommends selling: “*Everything / I have ever done that has lasted began there. / And I think my heir will have no need to go there.*” But should Brossano die before Petrarch does, provision is made to look to Lombardo della Seta, one of his closest friends: “*And for his part let him / look into that cup. He will know my mind.*” The original Latin passage (section 29) in Petrarch’s *Testamentum* reads thus: “*Si autem forte, quia omnes sumus mortales nec omnino ullus est ordo moriendi, dictus Franciscolus de Brossano, quod avertat Deus, ante me moreretur, tunc heres meus esto Lombardus a Serico predictus, qui plene animum meum novit, quem ut in vita fidelissimum expertus, non minus fidelem spero post obitum.*”³⁹

In the fourth movement of *The Stonecutter's Horses* Petrarch gives some more final instructions to his secretary and meditates on the meaning of practising the law:

A man who can write as I can ought not
to talk of such things at such length. Keep this
back if you can. Let the gifts speak
for themselves if you can, small though they are.
But I don’t like the thought of what little there is
spilling into the hands of lawyers through lawsuits.
The law is no ritual meant to be practised
in private by scavengers. Law is the celebration
of duty and the ceremony of vengeance. The Duke’s
law has nothing to do with my death
or with horses.

Done.

³⁹ *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1356.

Ask the notary⁴⁰ to come over
precisely at noon. I will rewrite it
and have it to sign by the time he arrives.

Few words should suffice to a mind of precious *claritas* like Petrarch's to make his last will and testament clear. The scholar wants the gifts "to speak for themselves," modest though they might be, to the various heirs. The objects that populate this world are also endowed with a meaning of their own; they seek to speak their own essence somehow. Petrarch's few possessions have not been assigned to each of the heirs at random. On the contrary, they have an inevitable connection with each of the beneficiaries: each friend or servant receives what they rightly deserve or what they need in Petrarch's opinion. Upon closer inspection, it turns out that we humans own nothing. We do not even own our hands, as Jacob sang in *Jacob Singing*; not even our feet, which remind us that we belong into something grander than the solipsistic realm of our ego. Life is for rent, life is something we borrow the moment we are born into the world of light and then it must be dutifully returned to God (with whom the human soul belongs, as Petrarch believed as a pious Christian) and to Mother Earth (we are after all a combination of the elements of which everything in this world is made). Hence Petrarch does not care at all about the destiny of the *sagging carcass* of his body; he will be happy to get rid of it at last. We own nothing; *knowing is not owning* either, as Don McKay and Bringhurst say with astonishing linguistic economy. Petrarch was well aware that material possessions are dispensable and yet he wanted his family and friends to enjoy whatever properties he had managed to obtain throughout a lifetime of effort and dedication to his work as a poet-diplomat. Therefore, in the closing lines of *The Stonecutter's Horses* we get to hear the voice of a pragmatic man celebrating the practice of law as "the celebration / of duty and the ceremony of vengeance." He does not want his little estate to end up in the hands of scavengers through lawsuits, which is a train of thought that is still relevant to the modern sensibility. This is poetry dwelling on the great heights of the human imagination and intellect. It is hard and sharp-edged; it demands concentration on the part of the readers if they are to penetrate the subtle ramifications of meaning that are not readily visible or audible in between the lines. *The Stonecutter's Horses* is, therefore, an inexhaustible work of art of the highest order, one of the indispensable compositions in Bringhurst's entire corpus.

⁴⁰ All versions of the poem prior to *The Calling* speak of *notaries* in the plural, and in fact, section 31 of Petrarch's Latin *Testamentum* mentions two notaries: "Et Nicolaum notarium, filium quondam ser Bartholomei, ac Nicoletum, filium ser Petri, notarios infrascriptos, rogavi, prout in eorum subscriptionibus infrascriptis continetur." See *Opere latine di Francesco Petrarca*, p. 1356.

PART II

Towards Maturity The Oral Literatures of the First Nations

The Beauty of the Weapons: Selected Poems 1972-1982

The Living Repertory of a Man's Poetic Output

I · INTRODUCTION

Die Sprache spricht, sagte Heidegger. Language speaks, said German philosopher Martin Heidegger, a thinker central to Bringhurst's mind, poetics and way of conceiving of poetry. Similarly, we might as well acknowledge the fact that Robert Bringhurst is *a poet through whom poetry speaks*, rather than an author who uses poetry as a medium to express opinions or subjective confessions. He works with power, passion and authority. He writes poetry characterized by a remarkable intellectual precision, a beautiful musicality and an astonishing profundity of thought. In this respect, *The Beauty of the Weapons: Selected Poems 1972-1982* represents a key volume in the author's total oeuvre. It was published in two different editions – one by McClelland and Stewart Limited in Canada in 1982 (second printing in 1984), and another by Copper Canyon Press in the USA in 1985. 1982 is, therefore, something of another *annus mirabilis* in Bringhurst's literary career (the first one being 1975, when *Bergschrund*, his first literary landmark, was published), for he has reached the decisive point in his literary career of assembling his first “selected” volume – a collection drawn from his earlier books, chapbooks, broadsides and contributions to periodicals over ten years. Douglas Barbour makes it clear that *The Beauty of the Weapons* is not only a decisive landmark in the author's literary career, but it also makes previous rare and out-of-print publications accessible:

Robert Bringhurst's *The Beauty of the Weapons: Selected Poems 1972-1982* (McClelland & Stewart, 1982) thoroughly deserved the honour of being short-listed for the Governor-General's Award for its year. Aside from *Bergschrund* in 1975, most of Bringhurst's publications have been in very limited editions, which means that until this volume, few readers had a chance to evaluate a good selection of his work. In the light of *The Beauty of the Weapons*, Bringhurst must be judged an extraordinary poet, one of the finest of his generation, the creator of a poetry which achieves what he himself calls in a poem, “the quality of crystal, / clarity's nature, / ... the stricture of uncut, utterly / uncluttered light.”

In a previous *Chronicle* I raved about “the passionate, intellectual experience” the poems of *Bergschrund* offered their readers. Since that time, Bringhurst has expanded the range of his palette, while the precision, clarity, and power he achieves have grown more profound.¹

In this new collection, Bringhurst continues to move into a thoughtful maturity evidenced by the fact that he has preserved the best of his poetic output. The title is

¹ Douglas Barbour, *Canadian Poetry Chronicle (1984)*, Kingston, Ontario: Quarry Press, 1985, p. 16. In the prefatory note to the volume, Bringhurst himself says: “Most of these poems have appeared previously in more or less elusive books, chapbooks, and broadsides issued by small presses in Canada and the United States over the last ten years. The approximate dates of first publication are noted here in the table of contents. Some form of chronological reference seemed desirable, and this one has at least the merit of verifiability, though I hope it does not suggest undue reverence for particular states of the text.” Three key aspects are worth emphasizing: (1) many of these poems have already been published in limited editions which are out of print or hard to find, so that this new volume makes them accessible to a wider audience; (2) the poet has chosen a purely chronological criterion for the arrangement of the poems included in this volume, and (3) the poems have undergone important textual modifications over time, which testifies to the fact of their being *a living repertory* or *work in progress*.

suggestive enough and the book is wholly mature. In this respect, the best poems in the book offer a hard-won exactness and intellectual precision that is often astonishing and curiously moving at the same time. Thus, the voice of Bringhurst in *The Beauty of the Weapons* heralds a difficult and mature poetic voice which is to be found for sure in the complex poems written in the decade of the 1980s: the First Nations-inspired narrative poem *Tending the Fire* (1985), the duet for interpenetrating voices entitled *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986), the ambitious dramatic impersonations of Oriental sages in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), and the ecology-minded polyphonic composition *Conversations with a Toad* (1987). The overall design of the volume is remarkable, for, in spite of the fact that a good deal of this poetry has appeared elsewhere in bits and pieces, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Each poem introduces and illuminates the next in astonishing ways. Thus, *The Beauty of the Weapons* is a finely-wrought poetic anthology, the result of a ten-year period of creative writing by a talented young man, for 35 is still the youth of a poet. As critic Sam Hamill puts it:

Thirty-five is still the age of innocence for a poet, a very tender age indeed for one to contemplate a Selected Poems. Yet Robert Bringhurst's *The Beauty of the Weapons* carries the subtitle "Selected Poems 1972-82." Bringhurst is rapidly becoming well known in southwestern Canada, and for the right reasons – his poems are clearly made things, modulations for the human voice that are chiselled and crafted and polished. His discipline is not flashy, but is clearly a part of each performance of the voice. Sometimes, however, it is exactly that (the discipline) which gives his poems a hard edge.²

In this book, nominated for the Governor-General's Award for Poetry in 1983, Bringhurst collects all the work he thinks worthy of dignifying by preserving it in his first Selected Poems, and so here we have the best of what he has thought, felt and written over ten years of hard work in his search for a poetic voice truly his own. What the reader finds when opening this book for the first time is the author's *living repertory*, as Bringhurst himself says in the prefatory note to the volume, which is no minor accomplishment. These are extraordinarily deft poems, ones that testify to the poet's shrewd elegance and delicacy, his ear for the impressive cadence of words elegantly arranged on the page to be uttered in oral performance, and an accuracy of imagery which is synonymous with accuracy of thought. Once again, Bringhurst's sharpness of imagery and linguistic clarity is at the service of an imagination haunted by the desperate need for simplicity, objectivity and impersonality in his investigations of *what is*. He looks at the world astonished by the beauty he sees and his poems are his way of tackling those fundamental questions that have been asked time and again by the sages of all ages. His poems are also his own personal response to the world and his gift to all his fellow human beings, and so we are grateful for this.

As a matter of fact, the book consists of several distinct parts: there is a prefatory note which embodies much of the essentials of Bringhurst's poetics at that moment of his life, a prologue poem entitled "These Poems, She Said" which sheds light on the rest of the poems following it, nine different sections with their corresponding epigraphs or linguistic thresholds, a "glossary of oddities and complications" at the end of the book, and an acknowledgments section that records the sources of the pieces included in the collection. The first section, *Hunters and Pilgrims*, comprises 15 pieces, most of them short lyrics or meditative poems, written between 1972-1975 and published in book form for the first

² See Sam Hamill's review of *The Beauty of the Weapons*, published in *Western American Literature* (Logan, Utah) 18.2 (Summer 1983), p. 187.

time in three earlier books – i.e., *The Shipwrights' Log* (1972), *Cadastral* (1973) and *Bergschrund* (1975). The second section, *Deuteronomy* (1974-1975), preserves three different Biblical poems: two short lyric poems and the long dramatic monologue “Deuteronomy”, published as a chapbook in 1974. The genesis of the third section, *The Old in Their Knowing* (1973-1982), which is the Presocratics sequence so central to the volume, must be traced back to the 1975 chapbook *Eight Objects* and *Bergschrund* (1975), but this time Bringhurst has introduced some changes to the previous poems and expanded the sequence up to twelve poems instead of the original eight poems. The three following sections consist of three long poems: *Hachadura* (1975), a long meditative poem on the metaphysics of being first published in *Poetry* and then republished in *Bergschrund* (1975); the dramatic monologue entitled *Jacob Singing* spoken by the biblical prophet, published as a chapbook in 1977; and *The Stonecutter's Horses* (1979), another dramatic monologue which revisits the last will and testament of the Italian humanist, poet and scholar Francesco Petrarca. Sections VII and VIII, *Ptabhotep's River* (1978-1982) and *Bone Flute Breathing* (1978-1982), collect more recent poems published here for the first time, or published somewhere else either as broadsides or as contributions to periodicals or anthologies. The closing ninth section, *Tzubahalem's Mountain*, consists of 21 short pieces published as a separate volume by Oolichan Books earlier in 1982 too.³

This general overview makes it clear that *The Beauty of the Weapons* is wide-ranging and reveals a shrewd and passionate intelligence at work. Bringhurst records debts to the Presocratics, to the prophets' voices of Moses and Jacob in the Old Testament, to Greek lyric poet Alkaios, to Italian humanist Petrarch, to the French poets Paul Valéry and René Char, and to German philosopher Martin Heidegger, among many others. His voice is, however, entirely his own, and he moves easily from precise short lyric poems to sustained meditations (like that in “Hachadura”), elegantly structured sequences (like that of the Presocratics) and dramatic monologues (*Deuteronomy*, *Jacob Singing* and *The Stonecutter's Horses*). There is a pervasive element in the book that gives the statements a memorable

³ These are the contents of *The Beauty of the Weapons*: Prefatory Note; “These Poems, She Said” (rpt. from C.37); I. *Hunters & Pilgrims*: [•] “The Beauty of the Weapons” (rev. from A.1); “Song of the Summit” (rpt. from A.2); “Ararat” (rpt. from A.6); “A Quadratic Equation” (rpt. from A.6); “Four Glyphs” (rpt. from A.2); “Three Deaths” (rpt. from A.6); [•] “The Sun and Moon” (rev. from A.1); “The Greenland Stone” (rpt. from A.2); “Poem about Crystal” (rpt. from A.2); “Stone-Lathe and Wing” (rpt. from A.6); “Study for an Ecumenical Window” (rpt. from A.2); “A Lesson in Botany” (rpt. from A.6); “The Fish Who Lived to Tell about It” (rpt. from A.6); “Some Ciphers” (rpt. from A.6); “Anecdote of the Squid” (rpt. from A.6); II. *Deuteronomy*: “An Augury” (rpt. from A.6); “Essay on Adam” (rpt. from A.6); “Deuteronomy” (rpt. from A.3); III. *The Old in Their Knowing*: Untitled headnote; [•] “Herakleitos” (rev. from A.6); “Parmenides” (rpt. from A.6); “Miletos” (rpt. from A.6); “A Short History” (rpt. from A.6); “Empedokles: Seven Fragments” (rpt. from A.6); “Empedokles' Recipes” (rpt. from A.6); “Pherekydes” (rpt. from A.6); “Pythagoras” (rpt. from A.6); “Demokritos” (rpt. from C.34); • “Xenophanes” (rpt. In B.17, B.27); • “Of the Snaring of Birds” (rpt. in C.54, B.40; see also Strophe from Sophocles in A.2); “The Petelia Tablet” (rpt. from C.22); IV. *Hachadura*: Untitled headnote; [•] “Hachadura” (rev. from A.6); V. *Jacob Singing*: Untitled headnote; [•] “Jacob Singing” (rev. from A.7); VI. *The Stonecutter's Horses*: Untitled headnote (rpt. in B.27, B.31); [•] “The Stonecutter's Horses” (rev. from A.9); VII. *Ptabhotep's River*: “The Heart is Oil” (rpt. from C.32); “Spell for White Sandals” (rpt. from C.32); “The Song of Ptabhotep” (rpt. from C.40); VIII. *Bone Flute Breathing*: [•] “Death by Water” (rev. from A.8); • “Leda and the Swan” (rpt. in B.18, B.81a, B.113, B.114, C.41); [•] “The Better Man” (rev. from C.30); “Cave of the Nymphs” (rpt. from C.37); “The Salute by Tasting” (rpt. from A.13); “Two Variations: I. Absence of the Heart; II. Thin Man Washing” (both rpt. in A.32, A.47, A.48; the latter rpt. in B.69); “Six Epitaphs” (rpt. from B.5); “Poem without Voices” (rpt. from C.39); • “Bone Flute Breathing” (rev. in A.47; rpt. in B.73, B.81a, B.114); IX. *Tzubahalem's Mountain*: [•] Untitled headnote (rev. from A.12); “Tzubahalem's Mountain” (rpt. from A.12); Glossary; Acknowledgements. See, in particular, A (8, 13, 14, 14a, 19, 26), B (9, 10, 12, 13, 18, 21, 26, 27, 36, 65, 66, 69, 73, 78a, 81a, 82, 103, 107, 112, 113, 114) and C (30, 32, 35, 38, 39, 40, 41, 47, 64, 68, 76) entries in the bibliography for more detailed information regarding the genesis and editorial history of all these poems. Significant textual variants will be noted in customary form when we come to a detailed analysis of each poem under scrutiny here.

strength, though. The search after *le mot juste* and the search after the right melody or cadence of words (the prosody or music of the mind) make Bringhurst's poetry one of the first rank on an international scale. On the other hand, the genesis and editorial history of the poems betray a certain degree of complexity as for the chronology, the list of poems anthologized and the sources of these pieces. Some of them have been heavily revised and polished over time, performance being the main test for their inclusion in the living repertory of the author's work. This gathering of the best poems Bringhurst has written over a period of ten years of hard work in search of a personal poetic voice consists of tattered fragments of wisdom and ancient languages, remnants of strange visions seen on far-away shores and distant lands. Or, to put it differently, *The Beauty of the Weapons* gathers the "fruits of the excavation" found by the poet throughout his intensely lived life, in his academic education, as well as in other literary traditions and other geographies:

His past is checkered and far-flung, his studies impressive: two years at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology studying physics when he was 16; Middle Eastern studies and philosophy at the University of Utah; a B.A. in comparative literature from Indiana University; a stint in Israel as an intelligence officer with the U.S. Army (born in the U.S., officially an American citizen, he learned he was going to be drafted in 1967, so he enlisted); two years in Panama; a year in a fishing resort on the Olympic peninsula; a stint as *Time* correspondent in Boston; a Master of Fine Arts from the University of B.C., and two years teaching poetry there.

He speaks Spanish, Arabic, French, and German, and taught himself to read old English and Greek. He has published nine books of poetry since 1972, and sold about 3,000 copies in total. The money in poetry is lousy.⁴

The prefatory note to *The Beauty of the Weapons* is important in many respects. Iain Higgins explains why this collection is so crucial to Bringhurst's poetic career with great lucidity and penetration:

Bringhurst consolidated the achievements and directions of *Bergsbrund* in *The Beauty of the Weapons: Selected Poems 1972-82* (1982). Here he made the first of a series of finely wrought prose statements articulating his cultural poetics, emphasizing the increasingly oral rather than literary basis of his own work. He also began to move away from the notion of the finished book of poems, which *Bergsbrund* represents, towards an understanding of the book as a temporary cache for his 'living repertory', a view consistent with his habit of publishing his poems in chapbooks and broadsides, often revising them with each republication.⁵

Higgins emphasizes at least two important aspects. First, in the Prefatory Note to the collection Bringhurst makes his first prose statement on his own poetics, emphasizing the all-important cluster or constellation of ideas around orality, language, breath and performance. There were other such prose statements in subsequent volumes: in the two essays included in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), in the foreword to *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), and in the prefatory notes or afterwords accompanying *The Book of Silences* (2001), *Ursa Major* (2003/2009), *The Old in Their Knowing* (2005), *New World Suite no. 3* (2005), and *Selected Poems* (2009). In addition, there were other similar statements published in the form of essays scattered in a number of periodicals, journals and magazines. In many of these statements, the same idea is repeated time and again: his poems are products of

⁴ See Pete McMartin, "Fruits of the excavation...", in *The Vancouver Sun*, 16 March 1984: A5.

⁵ See Iain Higgins' entry on "Bringhurst, Robert" in W. H. New, ed., *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002, p. 153.

oral composition rather than purely written artifacts. Or, as he himself puts it in the Prefatory Note to *The Beauty of the Weapons*:

Most of the poems are products more of oral composition than of writing, and have survived into this selection only with repeated performance as a test. Some of them have changed a good deal in the process. It seems to me they exist in the voice, to which the page, though we enshrine it, is in the right order of things a subservient medium. On this view, a man's selected poems ought to mean not his washed and dressed historical record but his living repertory: not a catalogue of the animals he has named but a festival of those who are still speaking. A book, like a performance or recording, no matter how illustrious the audience or how formal the occasion, is only one more draft.

From these illuminating words, we deduce that Bringhurst's *living repertory* is a changing corpus, in a state of permanent flux, a true *work in progress*, and that for his poems to still form a part of such a repertory they do have to comply with one essential prerequisite: they have to function as pieces of oral performance before an audience. The music of the poetry is of the essence, then, in Bringhurst's poetics. Of course, this is closely linked to the second key idea Higgins explores in the quote above: with the publication of *The Beauty of the Weapons*, Bringhurst moves away from *the notion of the finished book of poems*. He starts working on sequences instead, which he revisits and polishes time and again in successive textual incarnations of the same poems. Thus, there is a sequence of biblical poems, a sequence of dramatic monologues, there are the short jewel-like lyric poems and the long mythical narrative poems, there is the Presocratics sequence in *The Old in Their Knowing* or *The Book of Silences* sequence devoted to the Oriental sages and philosophers, and the long polyphonic poems (*The Blue Roofs of Japan*, *Conversations with a Toad*, *Ursa Major*, and *New World Suite no. 3*). All of these poems have known a number of successive editorial incarnations and have changed much over time, which makes an accurate study of Bringhurst's poems a complex enterprise. It is first necessary to track down the editorial history of each single poem and identify the relevant textual variants incorporated with each republication. Many of the poems are first published in magazines or periodicals, as chapbooks or broadsides in special limited editions, then reprinted or further revised in the author's own "Selected Poems", or made into separate books. In this way, the book becomes a *temporary cache for his 'living repertory'*, or a provisional draft that will be improved upon in subsequent versions or renderings of the same. Bringhurst's poems live in the voice after all. And, in his conviction of the pre-eminence of speech over writing, of the spoken word over the written word, "He aligns himself with the ancient tradition of the story-teller, the shaman, the troubador, speaking his verse, carrying the reverberations of the past into his tellings."⁶

At this point, it might be advisable to dwell on the relationships between space or geography and poetry. We have already claimed that Bringhurst's poems live in the voice, but there is also a purely physical space in which these poems come into being. For poetry to have a broad appeal it must be firmly rooted in the place of its birth, and Bringhurst's poetry is readily identifiable as poetry of the West Coast and also as universal poetry – i.e., poetry capable of transcending the spatio-temporal province where it came into being. Thus, the sense of place is crucial in these poems. As critic Steven Smith puts it,

In very basic terms, connection is found in one's sense of place, and place is important to Bringhurst. He has travelled considerably, and the places he visits

⁶ See Steven Smith's review of *The Beauty of the Weapons* entitled "Blood and Butterfly Bones", published in *Books in Canada* (Toronto) 12.7 (August/September 1983): 25-27. See p. 27 in particular.

provide flavour in the setting and content, as well as a somewhat exotic perspective on existence and its situations. We begin in El-Arish in 1967 amid a war, and end on Vancouver Island in 1830 involved in poems of “love and not-love.” Yet the place of much of Bringhurst’s imagery is man’s most unique habitat, the geography of his own body... [...] Blood, vein, bone, and heart references occur again and again, and give Bringhurst’s work an extremely physical presence, often as tough as a tight muscle or as primitive as our animal nature. This poet’s world is an extension of the human organism, and there is power in this landscape. Bringhurst is the archaeologist, poking about among the corpses for details of the past as seen in today’s light.⁷

Bringhurst’s poetry is also ambitious and wide-ranging in the way he conveys this sense of place. After the prologue poem, “These Poems, She Said”, we find the title poem, “The Beauty of the Weapons”, which is prefaced by the words “El-Arish, 1967”. From a short entry in the glossary of oddities provided by the author at the end of the volume, we learn that Bringhurst himself was involved in the Six Day War in the Sinai in the late 1960s. The landscape of the desert and the firsthand experience of the war provided him with the raw materials for a powerful poem in which the *genius loci* can somehow be felt. Something similar happens in *Tzubahem’s Mountain*, the closing sequence of parables placed at the end of *The Beauty of the Weapons*. We are back in time, in 1830, and amid an altogether different landscape, that of Vancouver Island, and in the company of a Salish old man who would abduct women into his remote home in the mountains. But in many other poems there is no clearly identifiable physical setting, as is the case with those Bringhurst poems that are modernist renderings of classical myths (“Leda and the Swan”, “Death by Water”, or “The Better Man”), and in still other poems the setting is the inner geography of the human body. Steven Smith is absolutely right as he points out that Bringhurst’s poems (“The Heart Is Oil”, “Spell for White Sandals”, “Song of Ptahhotep”, “Bone Flute Breathing”, or “The Salute by Tasting”, for instance) are all pervaded by references to parts of the body. There are innumerable references to *blood, heart, vein, bone* and *muscle*, but also to *stone, mountains, air, light, sea, water*, which reminds us that microcosm and macrocosm are brought into a single entity or *Gestalt* in Bringhurst’s poetry: the world is an extension of the body, and the other way around too. Or as Bringhurst himself puts it in the “Prefatory Note” to *The Beauty of the Weapons* when speaking about the spatial geography where his poems came into being:

The poems, as must be obvious, are the product of a life negligently scattered over too much ground. Canada, to which I first came in 1953, when I was six, has taken me in time and again as I arrived sullen and ungracious, bearing fragments of strange tongues and the remnants of strange visions. We had been at it a long time before I grudgingly admitted that the place was home. I would like belatedly to record that I am grateful to have had one. All the more for that, the words that come to mind when there are speeches being made are the Rinzai masters’ admonition, that the true man has no name and no address.

This reminds us that Bringhurst’s poetry is somewhere midway between the local – the Pacific West Coast in Canada – and the universal – the world at large. The weight of tradition is immense in this man, endowed with an insatiable appetite for ideas of all ages and literary traditions. And this appetite for ideas is inextricably linked to his immense erudition⁸ and to the fact that Bringhurst is a learned author, a polyglot, a connoisseur of a

⁷ Steven Smith, “Blood and Butterfly Bones”, *Books in Canada* (Toronto) 12.7 (August/September 1983): 27.

⁸ According to Chaviva Hošek, Bringhurst is not alone in his erudition. Some of his contemporary poets (Christopher Dewdney among them) also incorporate the findings of a wide range of disciplines into the making of their poems. In this respect, Chaviva Hošek writes: “Erudition returns, but in a new form: the

wide range of literary traditions and texts from the past. It is no exaggeration to say that the past constitutes the nutriment for many of his poems, where the voice is distinctly his own though. Salvaging remnants of vision from sages of all times – the biblical figures, the Pre-Socratic philosophers, the Buddhist monk-thinkers, the Haida mythtellers –, the poet produces unique poems full of wisdom and insights into the nature of reality. To this he adds a keen ear to capture the music of words, and a sharp eye for a detailed observation of the world in its purely physical dimension. As Douglas Barbour claims,

A learned writer, with a knowledge of a half a dozen languages and an obviously wide experience of many texts from the past, he also has a sharp eye for physical and emotional details. If many of his poems emerge from earlier texts, they also speak with their own new voices. The poet finds in the lines and speech of earlier people much that can speak to us today. Thus his series of high intellectual comedies on various pre-Socratic philosophers, for whom he obviously feels sympathy. But he can also put on the persona of Jacob, in a long poem of powerful questioning, or that of Petrarch facing death and meditating his will into being a poem of beautifully felt friendship and grace.⁹

Bringhurst belongs among those rare poets concerned with the nakedness of truth. It is only natural that he should seek to keep the company of the lucid minds that have been throughout all ages around the world. Humankind is one, History is one, and so is Tradition. The astonishing simultaneity of texts he handles conceived in different languages and at different moments in time converge into a vortex and are tessellated into the living fabric of his own poems. Bringhurst says that an invaluable poem like Parmenides' *On Nature* embodies a hypothesis about the nature of reality. It seems to us that his entire work (the total corpus of poems, essays and translations he has produced over time) is precisely a gigantic attempt at touching the irreducible core of reality as well. Confession, subjectivity or self-expression do not interest this poet-scholar, who seeks to make more impersonal and objective poems aimed at gaining an insight into the essence (not the fleeting appearances) of things. Or, to put it differently,

Robert Bringhurst in *The Beauty of the Weapons* [...] draws particularly on the Bible, Central American myths, and the pre-Socratic philosophers. Concerned more with truth than the supposed reality of passing moments, Bringhurst rarely speaks in the first person about his own perceptions, but tries, Pound-like, to cut the poem's umbilical cord, to leave it turning in space, an artefact which invites inspection

learning in seventies' poetry is less likely to be European and high literary; the erudition ranges from a profound rethinking of biblical images and concepts in the works of Robert Bringhurst, to a meditation based on scientific attention to the details of geology and botany in the works of Christopher Dewdney; from serious, organized, and detailed research into local history and oral history by Daphne Marlatt (*Stevenston*) and Andrew Suknaski (*Wood Mountain Poems*), to a rich and complex knowledge of the social history of foods (David Donnell), the myths of Iceland (Kristjanna Gunnars), or of the North (J. Michael Yates). The learning evinced by this poetry seems not so much a means of confirming the authors' seriousness or right to speak as a way of suggesting that such knowledge enables a pre-existent voice or vision to express itself." See Chaviva Hošek's entry on "Poetry in English 1950 to 1982", *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, edited by William Toye, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1983: 667-668. There is no entry on Bringhurst in this initial edition of the *Companion*, but Hošek discusses his work briefly in relation to that of Christopher Dewdney and others. See p. 667 in particular for the words quoted above.

⁹ See Douglas Barbour's discussion of *The Beauty of the Weapons* in *Canadian Poetry Chronicle* (1984), Kingston, Ontario: Quarry Press, 1985, p. 16.

from all sides. For Bringhurst, poetry is an act of sounding, the paring away of all extraneous language so as to make manifest the moments of creation.¹⁰

In a wide-ranging discussion on the Canadian poetry of the 1980s, Canadian author Robin Skelton focuses on Bringhurst's intimate knowledge of the past in its manifold expressions and on his interest in the mythopoeic instinct in man as he reviews *The Beauty of the Weapons*. Here is a poet interested in Poetry blooming towards perfection over time, a humanist concerned with universals:

Perhaps all good poets intuitively follow the Rinzai Master's admonition, quoted by Robert Bringhurst in his preface to his *Selected Poems 1972-1982, The Beauty of the Weapons* [...], that "the true man has no name and no address." Bringhurst's poetry surveys many cultures and probes into the past, using words, thoughts, and lives of men as various as Petrarch, Herakleitos, Ptahhotep, Empedokles, Parmenides, Eurytos, and Ssu-ma-ch'ien, to explore themes of universal significance. The poems, for all their learning, are neither obscure nor pedantic; they have the lucidity and wit of true authority, their diction is precise without being fussy, and the verse is harmonious. There is often a simplicity born of a deep awareness and understanding of the mythopoeic instinct in the center of man.¹¹

Erudition does not mean necessarily obscurity, not in Bringhurst's poems. It does mean difficulty or complexity, and in this respect his poems demand attention on the part of the reader, who must bring an effort to them for a proper understanding. Beauty is difficult; one would not bother much to read a poem that does not pose an intellectual and emotional challenge. Thus, Alan Twigg claims that there is "little that is decipherable to the common man" in his poems, which are "celebrations of the purity of his own intellect" in their detached presentation of "non-compassionate nature."¹² He is said to be "the Colonel Kurtz of Canadian poetry," though he has not much in common with Conrad's gloomy character. His poetry is not obscure, if that is what is meant by this qualification. Reading the poems of *The Beauty of the Weapons* is a rewarding experience in the end, and so it is worthwhile to make an effort, for one senses "a writer whose austerity hides a minefield of complex passions."¹³ The search after intellectual precision and clarity, the recurrent imagery (of light and darkness, for instance) and the music of the words, the simplicity of the language, the craftsmanship inherent in these perfect artefacts, all point to the ultimate elegance and harmony Pound identified as the marks of great poetry. Clarity and intellectual precision are precious virtues, rare to find among humans, rarer to find even among poets, but they are not the prerogative of humans alone. Bringhurst has looked at the world and found that there is also clarity in crystal, that there is a moving simplicity about mountains, and ultimate elegance to trees, birds, and stones. This is one of the highest achievements of Bringhurst: the intellectual rigour, the humble commitment, the admirable humanity, the moral integrity, the epistemological lucidity with which he

¹⁰ See Sandra Djwa & Ronald B. Hatch, review of *The Beauty of the Weapons*, published in the Poetry section, "Letters in Canada 1982", in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 52.4 (Summer 1983): 347-348.

¹¹ Robin Skelton, "Recent Canadian Poetry", in *Poetry* (Chicago) 144.5 (August 1984): 297-307. See p. 303 in particular.

¹² See Alan Twigg's review of several books including *The Beauty of the Weapons*, entitled "From Indian Legends to Feminist Mythology", *The Province* (Vancouver), 20 March 1983: Magazine, 6. "As much as a poet can make a name for himself these days, Vancouver's [sic] Robert Bringhurst is doing very well. "A mind dwelling on great geographical and historical heights," wrote the gentlemanly Stephen Spender after lunching with Bringhurst. "A major talent rising as sheer and sudden in its continental place as the Rockies," says William Arrowsmith. Too true. Bringhurst's celebrations of the purity of his own intellect, *The Beauty of the Weapons* [...], offer little that is decipherable to the common man. In documenting the radicalism of a non-compassionate nature, the poet seeks recognition as the Colonel Kurtz of Canadian poetry."

¹³ See Robert Fulford's article "By Persons Unknown", *Saturday Night* (Toronto), March 1984, p. 9.

approaches reality with a sort of unblinking eye. His *claritas* of mind is there from the very outset of his literary career. It has not abandoned him for a single moment since then. His insight into the nature of reality culminates in his conviction that poetry has nothing quintessentially to do with words, that it is an attribute of reality, that it is in the very texture of things. The world is alive; it thinks and sings. *Everywhere being is dancing*, and *being* is synonymous with *poetry*. Poetry is then something grander, vaster, than what we have been told at school and at university. It is imperishable, indestructible, one with the universe, even though we humans are doing our best to destroy this world, our only home.

II · Of Love and War: “These Poems, She Said” & “The Beauty of the Weapons”

“These Poems, She Said”

“These Poems, She Said”, the opening poem in *The Beauty of the Weapons*, has the force of revelation and the texture of enduring, universal poetry. It is, in fact, one of Bringham’s most accomplished and moving pieces, and also one of his most popular poems – i.e., one that has appeared in a wide range of periodicals, magazines and anthologies.¹⁴ On one level, it looks like *a beautifully atypical love poem* spoken by a masculine poetic voice which reports the words and thoughts of a feminine voice. But, on another level, it is *a bold or deft metapoem*, that is to say a poem about the nature of poetry itself, particularly about the way Bringham conceives of poetry, of his own poems. It comes then as no surprise that the poem should open with the noun phrase “these poems”, which is repeated thrice in the first two verse lines. From a purely structural or syntactic point of view, the whole

¹⁴ “These Poems, She Said” was published in a number of anthologies: 1. *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, edited by Margaret Atwood. Toronto/London/New York: Oxford University Press, 1982: pp. 438-442, along with “Deuteronomy” and “Notes to the Reader”; 2. *Lords of Winter and of Love: A Book of Canadian Love Poems in English and French*, edited by Barry Callaghan. Toronto: Exile Editions, 1983: p. 87; 3. *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, vol. 2, edited by Donna Bennett and Russell Brown. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1983: pp. 623-626, along with “Deuteronomy” and “Essay on Adam”; 4. *The New Canadian Poets, 1970–1985*, edited by Dennis Lee. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985: pp. 26-39, along with “Deuteronomy”, “Demokritos”, “Leda and the Swan”, “The Stonecutter’s Horses” and “Saraha”; 5. *Poesia canadese del Novecento*, Testi inglesi e traduzione a cura di Caterina Ricciardi. Napoli: Liguori Editore, 1987: pp. 346–349 (a bilingual anthology, English and Italian), along with “Notes to the Reader” and their respective Italian translations; 6. *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, revised & abridged edition, edited by Russell Brown, Donna Bennett & Nathalie Cooke. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990: pp. 695-699, along with “Deuteronomy” and “Essay on Adam”; 7. *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Three*, edited by Gary Geddes. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001: pp. 388-400, along with “The Beauty of the Weapons”, “Anecdote of the Squid”, “The Stonecutter’s Horses”, “Poem without Voices” and “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985”; 8. *A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, edited by Donna Bennett & Russell Brown. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002: pp. 954-975, along with “Essay on Adam”, “The Stonecutter’s Horses”, “Leda and the Swan”, “The Reader”, “Conversations with a Toad” and “Bone Flute Breathing”; 9. *This Art: Poems about Poetry*, edited by Michael Wiegers. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon, 2003: pp. 25, 94, along with “Parable of the Voices” [*Tzibalem’s Mountain* §XVII]; 10. *The Broadview Anthology of Poetry*, edited by Herbert Rosengarten & Amanda Goldrick-Jones. 2nd ed. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2009: 904–910, along with “Deuteronomy”, “The Beauty of the Weapons” and “Leda and the Swan”; 11. *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, 3rd ed., ed. by Donna Bennett & Russell Brown. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2010: pp. 989-1005, along with “Essay on Adam”, “Leda and the Swan”, “The Reader”, “Conversations with a Toad” and “Bone Flute Breathing”. And also in several periodicals: 1. *Prism International* 20.3 (Spring 1982): 26-27. Contents: • “Cave of the Nymphs” (rpt. in A.14); • “These Poems, She Said”; 2. *Saturday Night* (Toronto) 97.7 (July 1982): 64; 3. *De Tweede Ronde* (Amsterdam) 6.4 (Winter 1985): 84, with Dutch translation by Peter Versteegen; 4. *La Manzana Poética* (Córdoba) 2 (Invierno 2000): 8.

composition is articulated around the effective repetition of “*These are the poems of a man who...*”. There are then ten little movements for the soul in the form of simple, declarative sentences that aim at defining what *these poems* really are. *These poems* is a reference forward to the poems that make up the whole volume and that the reader is about to encounter on his own. As Sam Hamill points out, “Opening his book with such a poem is an act of extreme bravery, for it invites the reader to look at each poem in the light offered by the “she” of “These Poems”.”¹⁵ Two parts are easily identifiable in the poem. Here is the first part, consisting of five simple sentences marked by the remarkable use of enjambment:

These poems, these poems,
these poems, she said, are poems
with no love in them. These are the poems of a man
who would leave his wife and child because
they made noise in his study. These are the poems
of a man who would murder his mother to claim
the inheritance. These are the poems of a man
like Plato, she said, meaning something I did not
comprehend but which nevertheless
offended me. These are the poems of a man
who would rather sleep with himself than with women,
she said.

BW, p. 13.

The first part of the poem is basically concerned with the human side to the poet’s everyday life. *These poems*, the ones included in *The Beauty of the Weapons*, are not conventional love poems; they are the work of a man for whom poetry is much more important than familial affiliations or domestic life with all its petty problems and distractions, the work of a man who hoards as little or as much silence as he can get to concentrate on the writing of his own poems, and the work of a man who despises women and would rather sleep alone instead. On the other hand, these lines are not lacking in irony either, as evidenced by the witty comparison of the poet with Plato, which looks like an offence to him.

In the second part of the poem is the core of Bringhurst’s poetics to be found. First of all, the poems are said to be the work of a man whose eyes and hands are compared to a drawknife and a pickpocket’s hands, respectively. Here are the eyes of the territorial recorder that Bringhurst gives voice to in many of the poems in *The Beauty of the Weapons*, particularly in the opening section, entitled *Hunters & Pilgrims*, where the poet is at pains to encounter and define the world in objective terms. His hands are those of a pickpocket, which probably means that he is ready to steal from tradition’s inexhaustible reservoir, or rather from the sound voices of the ancestors or the masters of the past, who are a living presence to him. Thus, it is the eyes and the hands that explore the world in search of the raw materials to make his own poems. The three basic ingredients of his poems are *water*, *logic* and *hunger*. The selection of these three words is not random at all, for ‘water’ stands for the whole natural world at large, ‘logic’ for the mind or rational or spiritual side to human beings, and ‘hunger’ is the most obvious reference to the inescapable physical dimension inherent in humankind, which is vulnerable. Interestingly enough, hunger can be

¹⁵ Sam Hamill, review of *The Beauty of the Weapons*, in *Western American Literature* (Logan, Utah) 18.2 (Summer 1983): 188.

love poems: “*You are beautiful,*” to which she rightly replies *That is not love*. It is just a matter of worn words, devoid of the original force inherent in the act of loving someone in real life. In any case, these poems are artifacts, i.e., *things made* by the hand of man, and Wayne Holder reminds us that there is a sense in which the formal and architectural inevitability of Bringhurst’s poems is palpable from the very start:

But these poems are works of a man’s hand. They are not natural. They meet the Aristotelian requirements for a work of art, *claritas* (clarity), *quidditas* (essence), and *consonantia* (harmony) in a way that no natural object, organic or inorganic, can. Also in keeping with Aristotle’s tenets, these are poems that have a beginning, a middle and an end. There is the impression that each part has its place and that nothing can be added or taken away without affecting the whole. These are conscious accretions of words that seem to say, “We are poems. We may not be perfect representations of Platonic ideals but we are trying hard. Our like does not come along every day.”¹⁸



“The Beauty of the Weapons”

“The Beauty of the Weapons” is probably the oldest surviving poem in Bringhurst’s living repertory. It gives the first Selected Poems by the author its very title, and it opens the section entitled *Hunters & Pilgrims*,¹⁹ which consists of a selection of poems gathered from his earlier three poetry books – *The Shipwright’s Log* (1972), *Cadastre* (1973) and *Bergschrund* (1975). In addition, this poem has been in a metamorphic state over time and has undergone important revisions in the successive incarnations it has known since it was first published in the early 1970s until it was lately included in Bringhurst’s *Selected Poems* (2009). Textual variants are therefore of the essence in this particular case and, though we will be working on what might be the definitive state of the fixed text as it appeared in 2009, relevant textual variants will be noted down where necessary, either in square brackets or in customary footnotes. The long and complex editorial history of this poem²⁰

¹⁸ Wayne Holder, review of *The Beauty of the Weapons*, in *The Vancouver Literary News* 4.83 (April 1983): 26-27.

¹⁹ Let us remember that the section entitled *Hunter & Pilgrims* of *The Beauty of the Weapons* consists of 15 poems: “The Beauty of the Weapons” (revised from A.1, *The Shipwright’s Log* 1972), “Song of the Summit” (reprinted from A.2, *Cadastre* 1973), “Ararat” (rpt. from A.6, *Bergschrund* 1975), “A Quadratic Equation” (rpt. from A.6), “Four Glyphs” (rpt. from A.2), “Three Deaths” (rpt. from A.6), [•] “The Sun and Moon” (rev. from A.1), “The Greenland Stone” (rpt. from A.2), “Poem about Crystal” (rpt. from A.2), “Stone-Lathe and Wing” (rpt. from A.6), “Study for an Ecumenical Window” (rpt. from A.2), “A Lesson in Botany” (rpt. from A.6), “The Fish Who Lived to Tell about It” (rpt. from A.6), “Some Ciphers” (rpt. from A.6), and “Anecdote of the Squid” (rpt. from A.6). These poems we have already analyzed in depth in previous chapters of our thesis. It is now high time we turned our attention to the poem “The Beauty of the Weapons”, which is central to this particular poetry collection and to Bringhurst’s entire corpus.

²⁰ I. First incarnation: “The Beauty of the Weapons” was first published in *The Shipwright’s Log* (1972) and then reprinted in B.7 *Quingumbo: Nova Poesia Norte-Americana* (bilingual anthology, English and Portuguese), organização de Kerry Shawn Keys, São Paulo: Editora e Livraria Escrita, 1980: pp. 277-299 (alongside these poems: “Anecdote of the Squid”, “Essay on Adam”, “Poem about Crystal”, “A Quadratic Equation”, “Genesis Frozen”, “Scholium”, “An Augury”, “Song of the Summit”, “Some Ciphers”, “Pythagoras” (all rpt. from A.6); in C.3 *Quarry* (Bloomington, Indiana) 2 (Fall 1972): 33-38, together with two translations from the Arabic of Badr Shakir el-Sayyab, “Two Poems” (• “You Went Away” and • “City of Mirage”); and in C.5 Indiana University *Arbutus* (Bloomington, Indiana) (1973): 56. II. Second incarnation: “The Beauty of the Weapons” was later revised in A.14 *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982); in A.47 *The Calling* (1995); in B.27 *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Two*, edited by Gary Geddes, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988: pp. 490-505, together with “The Sun and Moon”, “Poem about Crystal”, “Anecdote of the Squid”, “Xenophanes”, “The Stonecutter’s Horses”, “The Song of Ptahhotep” (all rpt. from A.14), “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985” (rpt. from A.32); in B.43 *Lyric Philosophy*, by Jan Zwicky, Toronto: University of

testifies to Bringhurst's conception of his own poems as a *work in progress*, an entity or complex mosaic which is perpetually in the making and tested through live performance. That this poem has survived, though changed, over time, is sufficient proof that it meets the excellence standards set by the author for it to be still a significant part of his living repertory. Much in accordance with the rest of Bringhurst's poetic production, "The Beauty of the Weapons" explores weapons and the weaponry integral to humanity. It is only natural that it should be the opening poem of a volume that seeks objectivity and flees away from self-expression, and the opening poem in a collection that gathers the best that Bringhurst has written to date²¹ in his attempt to come to terms with the way humans intellectually and sensitively approach the world of which they are a tiny part. As critic Wayne Holder puts it:

Vergil begins the story of Aeneas with "Arma virumque cano..." (The arms and the man I sing [sic])." Bringhurst begins this book with a nod to the man, "These Poems, She Said," and then turns to the arms, the tools of exploration. What is is. We are reminded that we need to be reminded. *The Beauty of the Weapons* provides the metaphysics and the epistemology for a poetic exploration of our universe. The ontology is the provenance of the weapons that are, in Bringhurst's terminology, "integral to us." The nails and claws, teeth and horns, antlers and other extensions of the skeletal system are the weapons.²²

The section *Hunters & Pilgrims* with which "The Beauty of the Weapons" opens is prefaced by two short quotations. The first one is lifted from Tso-Ch'iu Ming's *Tso Chuan*, and the second from Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*. Their juxtaposition as complementary epigraphs at the beginning of this section of *The Beauty of the Weapons* sheds light on both the subsequent 15 poems comprised in this chapter of the book and also on one another. They are also remnants or tattered fragments the poet has rescued from other literary traditions. The former comes from the East, from a book entitled *Tso Chuan*, which, according to Bringhurst' entry in the final glossary, is "The commentary of Tso-ch'iu Ming on the *Ch'un Ch'iu* or *Spring and Autumn Annals*, third century B.C.," whereas the latter comes from what might have been an oral folktale in the European or Western context.

Toronto Press, 1992: pp. 33, 175, 459, together with "Poem about Crystal" and "Body, Speech and Mind" [*Tzubahem's Mountain* IV] (all rpt. from A.14); in B.78a *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Three*, edited by Gary Geddes, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001: pp. 388-400, alongside "Anecdote of the Squid", "The Stonecutter's Horses", "These Poems, She Said", "Poem without Voices", "For the Bones of Josef Menzle, Disinterred June 1985" (rpt. from A.47); in B.107 *The Broadview Anthology of Poetry*, edited by Herbert Rosengarten & Amanda Goldrick-Jones, 2nd ed. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2009: 904-910, together with "Deuteronomy", "These Poems, She Said" and "Leda and the Swan", all rpt. from *The Calling* (A.47); in B112. *Arc Poetry Annual 2010*, Ottawa: Arc Poetry Society, 2009: pp. 75-77, where it was reprinted from A.14, with commentary by David Seymour; and in C.54 *Crab Creek Review* (Seattle) 4.1 (Fall/Winter 1986): 6-8 (see also p. 2), together with "Poem About Crystal", "A Quadratic Equation", "Of the Snaring of Birds" and "Study for an Ecumenical Window", all rpt. from A.26 (the first USA edition of *The Beauty of the Weapons*). Lately it has also been published in his *Selected Poems* (2009); the text we find here is exactly the same as the text that we find in *The Calling* version.

²¹ Sam Hamill, in a review of *The Beauty of the Weapons* published in *Western American Literature* (Logan, Utah) 18.2 (Summer 1983): 189, celebrated the publication of *The Beauty of the Weapons* as a landmark volume in the poet's career in these encouraging terms: "Bringhurst, clearly, is fascinated by the beauty of the weapons, but a poem is not a knife, nor is prosody a prologue to the dance of death. The poem must live a life entirely its own. The years will be good to Bringhurst. They have *been* good to him. Because his intelligence is large enough to demand of himself a sweep of understanding, and because history reduces us all, and because history imbues a poet with a huge sadness, Bringhurst is a poet to watch. There is a depth of humanity in these poems, one that will grow, one from which we all may learn. *The Beauty of the Weapons* is a wonderful introduction to one of the finest younger poets in North America."

²² See the review of *The Beauty of the Weapons* by Wayne Holder in *The Vancouver Literary News* 4.83 (April 1983): 26.

Together with Charles Perrault and the Grimm Brothers, Andersen would rescue such stories of oral origins from *das Volk* or the popular wisdom of the people. The first epigraph goes like this: “Tzu-ch’an answered: When spiritual beings have a place to return to, they need not become malicious. I have allowed them a place to return to.” It emphasizes the existence of and belief in an afterlife, as well as the tension holding between the world of the living and the dead. The world of the living is revisited time and again by the dead, who miss their former lives, and so a pragmatic way of thinking advises that room should be left for them for peaceful coexistence, as it were. There is a spiritual side to existence, no matter whether we want to believe in it or not, for not everything of importance is visible to human eyes – *L’essentiel est invisible aux yeux*, would say the Little Prince in Saint-Exupéry’s classic. The second epigraph – “He wanted to say his prayer, but could remember nothing but the multiplication table.” – centres around a basic dichotomy or pair of opposites, that between faith (prayer) and science (multiplication table). The speaking voice beneath these words appears to wish it could believe in something of a divine nature, but he or she cannot even remember a simple prayer. All that comes up to his or her mind is the multiplication table. Calculus, mathematics, the algebra of purely objective entities like numbers are all central to many of the pieces collected under the *Hunters & Pilgrims* section, particularly in those pieces which look like scientific explorations or treatises in miniature – particularly, “A Quadratic Equation”, “A Lesson in Botany”, “Some Ciphers” and “The Beauty of the Weapons” itself.

Let us turn now to a detailed critical analysis of “The Beauty of the Weapons”. There is a biographical substratum inherent in this poem. It is like a subterranean stream, or an invisible strand, at the core of the composition. The short verse lines, the brittle expression, the dispassionate tone, the sense of objectivity and detachment, the terseness of images drawn from the world of weapons, are all ingredients that make up a unique poem. It opens with a brief spatio-temporal reference: “El-Arish, 1967”. It remains unclear whether the poem actually got to be written exactly in that place and that year, or whether the experience of war in the Sinai gave Bringham the raw materials that gave birth to this poem some time later. The poet himself explains what El-Arish means in an entry in his glossary:

EL-ARISH A town on the north coast of the Sinai, not far from Gaza. Until the Six Day War, it was the site of one of several anti-aircraft emplacements in the peninsula, where Egyptian radar, gun and missile crews were in training under Soviet advisors. Weeks and months after that quickest and least conclusive of wars, the soldier-students’ manuscript notes, on everything from elementary calculus to techniques of chemical warfare, lay in the sand with the bodies and boots and spare parts like finds of papyri. The machine-gun in the poem is the Israeli Uzi, and the radar a Russian mobile, known as Fan-Song to NATO.

The entry seems to suggest that the poet took notes on a wide range of subjects *in situ*, out of which he would then produce his own poem. The poet is presented as being a soldier and a student, a student of the Arabic language experiencing temporary apprenticeship in a world of weapons and war. Now, poetry has nothing to do with weapons, but great poets are capable of writing masterful poems out of anything. And this is the case with this particular poem: out of the debris he found in the desert and the brittle notes he would jot down amid war, he would write a poem of lasting meaning and beauty. In the Six Day War, the young poet finds there is a strange beauty to weapons, which are the embodiment of human creativity, of humans’ ability to create and to destroy at the same time. It takes much technical and mathematical knowledge to produce automatic guns, aircraft, anti-aircraft guns, radars, weapons in general. The poem is not so much a celebration of warfare

as a moving homage to humankind's capacity to create beautiful objects, even if they serve morally dubious or abhorrent purposes in the end. Hence the title of the poem: it is not exactly that weapons are beautiful, but rather that they testify to humans' genius for precision and efficiency, even if this turns out to be mortal in the context of an absurd war. As critic Wayne Holder points out,

"The Beauty of the Weapons" is the wreckage of war in the Sinai. [...] This is not a glorification of war, of the carnivore, or of masculine endeavor, as some have misunderstood it. There is no moral choice, because there is no choice for any creature or creation of natural or man-made origin but to be what it is. The only choice possible to being is non-being. This is what makes these poems so rare, they are free of, some would say lacking in, the element of civilized imprecision and vagueness we have come to expect in poetry. Armed with science and cursed with clear sight, Bringham's vision strips away the vestments of clot and flesh to show us what is.²³

Thus, the poem opens with a detailed, almost enthusiastic description of the 9-millimetre automatic gun:

A long-armed man can
carry the nine-millimetre [*millimeter* in *SL* 1972 & *BW* 1982]
automatic gun slung
backward over the right shoulder.
With the truncated butt
caught in the cocked
elbow, the trigger
falls exactly to hand.

The Calling, p. 27.

As Pete McMartin puts it, "The poem is a walk through the wreckage of an Israeli-Egyptian battlefield in the Sinai, and it is an arid, sparse examination of modern man's love of war, abetted by his worship of technology."²⁴ What the poet brings back with him after this war experience is not much. The "fruits of the excavation" include this precise memory of the automatic gun, remains of "*the innumerable / gas masks*", manuscript and notes which have turned brittle because of the exposure to the desert sand and dry weather, and tattered fragments of the brittle Arabic the poet could speak at the time. The world of writing and the world of war seem to be antagonistic, and yet many writers have managed to find the necessary peace of mind to record their own experiences in the form of journals or memoirs. There is a moving sadness in Bringham's words as he says: "*Fruits of the excavation. / This is our archaeology. / A dig in the debris / of a civilization six weeks old.*" This kind of archaeological dig has nothing to do whatsoever with Heinrich Schliemann's, for instance, which managed to bring out into daylight the remains of an ancient Trojan world of mythic proportions. The only form of archaeological investigation possible in a desert war rescues memories of the mathematical precision of weapons and tattered notes written down by a special sensibility responding to everything with a maximum of intensity. The poet is a territorial recorder, a soldier and a student, all in one in this poem:

The paper is crisp and brittle

²³ See, once more, the review of *The Beauty of the Weapons* by Wayne Holder in *The Vancouver Literary News* 4.83 (April 1983): 29-30.

²⁴ See Pete McMartin's short article entitled "Fruits of the excavation...", published in *The Vancouver Sun*, 16 March 1984: A5.

with the dry rock and the weather.
The Arabic is brittle
with the students' first exposure [from in SL 1972 & BW 1982]

to air-war technology and speed.
Ridiculous to say so, but
the thought occurs,
that Descartes would be pleased:

the calculus is the language
of the latest Palestinian
disputations
in the field of theology.

The Calling, pp. 27-28.

Irony is not lacking either in this poem. The rationalist French philosopher René Descartes, the author of the influential *Discours de la méthode*, was convinced that human beings consisted of two distinct parts: *res extensa* or body and *res cogitans* or reason. Also, he had a tremendous faith in the power of human reason and mathematics as the purest or most unpolluted form of reasoning. Bringham gets the notion that calculus is behind the functioning of the weapons of mass destruction used in the Six Day War, in the Palestinian debates “*in the field of theology*,” which were not resolved dialectically but in quite a dramatic way on the battlefield. Descartes would have been glad to know about it, which is of course absolutely ironical. And this is the end of the second movement of the poem – the first, comprising the opening three stanzas, dwelt on the description of the automatic gun and other remains found in the desert, and the second part, comprising stanzas 4 to 8, went into the manuscripts and notes the poet managed to rescue from the debris of the war.

The third movement of the poem is basically about pleasure – the pleasure the poet does not mention in his notes. “*The satisfying feel / of the fast traverse / on the anti-aircraft guns*” is somewhere else: in his memory and “*in the steel, like the intricate / mathematics / incarnate in the radar*.” Here is the poet in the Sinai, appalled, touching an Uzi, admitting there is an irresistible pleasure in the touch of weapons. What follows is an alliterative description of what happens when the soldiers' eyes are directed in one direction or another following the efficient and precise instructions of the radar with their anti-aircraft guns, “*sweeping the empty air / into naked abstraction*.” The language used is that of mathematics, but of mathematics as applied to the world of warfare machines, which speak their own language of fatal precision and destruction. But it is in the fourth movement where the language turns more lyrical and intense, as the poet now turns to the world of music in search of analogies to try to account for the pleasurable feeling he seeks to verbalize:

Invisibly, the mechanism sings. [Honesty in 1st version in SL]
It sings. It sings like a six-ton flute:
east, west, always the same [Capital letters in original txt in SL]
note stuck in the rivetless throat.

A silent song as intricate
as any composition by Varèse,²⁵ [Slightly different in SL & BW]

²⁵ The *Beauty of the Weapons* version reads: “And yet, a song as intricate / as any composition by Varèse, / and seeming, for the moment, still / more beautiful, because,” and the SL version: “Seemingly a song as fine / as any by Varèse. / And seeming for the moment / far more real, because, // despite the notes, more deadly. / Somehow also purer, more / private and familiar, / more readily feared, or desired...”

and seeming, for the moment, far [far more real in SL & still more beautiful in BW]
more beautiful, because,

to us, more deadly.
Therefore purer, more
private, more familiar,
more readily feared, or desired:

a dark beauty with a steel sheen,
caught in the cocked
mind's eye and brought
down with an extension of the hand.

The Calling, pp. 28-29.

The mechanism of the gun the poet-soldier-student is taking with him in the Six Day War sings in a natural, spontaneous way, as if it were a flute. Its monotonous melody is spellbinding, as it were. However, the music of the weapons resembles the complexity of any piece by Edgard Varèse, who, according to Bringhurst's entry, was an accomplished composer: "VARÈSE, EDGARD (1883-1965) French-born composer who immigrated to the USA in 1915. One of his finer and more famous compositions is *Density 21.5*, for solo flute. Another is the "electronic poem" entitled *L'Homme et la machine*." It appears to be no coincidence that Varèse himself should have composed a piece entitled *L'Homme et la machine*, for that is precisely one of the essential subjects at the core of "The Beauty of the Weapons". Weapons have a strange beauty about them, and beauty in this particular context is terror, for it announces the imminence of death. The song the gun sings is uncompromising, purer, and it is feared and desired at the same time. The mechanism of the gun works in a simple way: "with an extension of the hand" it will start singing its own melody, one that is fatal and mortal. Bringhurst has turned to the world of weapons for powerful analogies elsewhere in his work. His landmark study on the Haida's impressive oral literature is entitled *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (1999). Some of his contemporaries, for instance Peter Sanger, the author of the afterword of the ambitious polyphonic poem entitled *Ursa Major* in its 2003 edition (Gaspereau Press has published a new 2009 edition in a much smaller format), has written a magnificent prose poem or short essay on the beauty of knives quite recently as well. Which testifies to one simple truth: there is no intrinsically poetic or unpoetic matter at all. It all depends on the genius and the creative intuition the poet brings into the subject to transmute it into a lasting work of art.

In a brilliant essay that poet Charles Lillard devoted to *Tzibalem's Mountain* and *The Beauty of the Weapons*, the critic dwells on Bringhurst's language, on the clarity of his thought, and on the multiple references to tools and weapons that pervade much of his work:

"Concord" and "Harmony". Poetry, language, thought – working together creating that which will last. Hence Bringhurst's admiration of the Greek and Hebrew, the Roman and Egyptian; each yet a Pharos, that "vast and heroic lighthouse that dominated" the Mediterranean until its stones slid into the Nile delta and man's memory.

"Concord" and "Harmony" define human relationships; machines work together in unison and tools are in working order. Bringhurst knows this, and it is the subtle imagery of tools, often used in unique juxtaposition [...] that underline and force us to consider the frailty of man's attempt to translate thought into something as perfect as a laminated keel or beautiful as a well cared for knife. It is his use of tools (eyes like a drawknife), and mechanical functions [...] which is

frequently considered, by critics as well as friends, to be Bringhurst's greatest liability. He is "cold", "distant," and even "inhuman". Certainly he does believe:

Strangeness is frequent enough, but nothing is ever as strange as a man is.

For it is man who builds houses and walls that defy time, tools as lovely as any work of art; yet when these strange creatures struggle with thought, they resemble a dog attempting to open a door with its nose.

It is Bringhurst's total dedication to poetry, language, thought that we watch, as we turn the pages, listening to the associations and echoes fade and drop away. As we finish the penultimate section, he has defined his territory; it is the geography of his thinking. The struggle continues. He is alone.²⁶

"Bringhurst's total dedication to poetry, language, thought" is what remains simply astonishing in a long literary career spanning a period of over 40 years of untiring work and devotion to words, thinking and singing.

III · *Ptahhotep's River* (1978-1982): Remnants of Visions & Tattered Fragments from Ancient Egypt

Ptahhotep's River (1978-1982), the seventh section in *The Beauty of the Weapons*, consists of three long poems ("The Heart Is Oil", "Spell for White Sandals" and "The Song of Ptahhotep") which find their inspiration in texts rescued from ancient Egypt. They share not just the same source of inspiration, a literary tradition in an exotic human tongue far removed in time and space, but also the same incantatory rhythm and musical cadences, as if they were a modern version of the ancient voices gathered in the *Coffin Texts*, in the *Book of the Dead* or in the old inscriptions found in the pyramids built in the Nile valley so long ago. In this respect, Robert Bringhurst displays an astonishing ability to appropriate such ancient materials and to render them relevant to our modern sensibility. That these remnants of strange visions and these fragments of a strange culture come from a completely different geography and literary tradition does not prevent the poet from transmuting them into evocatively simple poems that look gnomic at times, riddle-like and enigmatic compositions. By *gnomic* we mean that they encapsulate some form of ancient wisdom, for they talk of dreams, of ancient gods and their relationship with mortals, of strange visions and premonitions, of laws governing humans' commerce. In this they resemble some of the Bible-inspired dramatic monologues and short lyrics that Bringhurst wrote throughout the 1970s – in *Deuteronomy* (1974), *Bergschrund* (1975) and *Jacob Singing* (1977).

Bringhurst is very fond of textual thresholds, epigraphs or paratextual materials surrounding and shedding light on his own words. The whole section entitled *Ptahhotep's River* is prefaced by these illuminating words:

*The one whose names are hidden said: ...
The gods took root from my sweat, but men and women
from my tears. Coffin Texts, 1130*

Being a cultural historian, interested in humans' evolution over time, Bringhurst' appetite for ideas and words is omnivorous and atemporal, and it knows of no geographical frontiers or temporal barriers. In particular, these words have been lifted from the *Coffin*

²⁶ See Charles Lillard's review of *Tzubahalem's Mountain* and *The Beauty of the Weapons* in *The Reader* 2.2 (Vancouver), June 1983: 3-4.

Texts,²⁷ which are a collection of ancient Egyptian funerary texts consisting of spells or magic formulas, painted on the burial coffins of the First Intermediate period (c. 2130-1938 BCE) and the Middle Kingdom (1938-c. 1630 BCE). Needless to say, this collection comprises some of the oldest extant texts that have been preserved from ancient Egypt. Their fragmentary nature is reminiscent of that of much of the Presocratics' work, which has also been preserved in tattered fragments that have managed to miraculously survive despite the devastating effects of the passage of time. Thus, the *Coffin Texts*, combined with the *Pyramid Texts* from which they were derived, were the primary sources of the *Book of the Dead*, which was in prominent use during the New Kingdom and Late period. These three collections represent the most extensive body of Egyptian religious literature available to modern scholars. They are a source of nourishment and inspiration for a poet like Bringhurst, who is after the beauty of the universal and the eternal. The epigraph itself refers to some superior god in the Egyptian polytheistic pantheon or hierarchy, one from whom all gods and humans came into being. In those ancient times, gods and goddesses still pervaded every single sphere of human beings' affairs, people worshipped them, and feared them, honoured them, and tried to make sure that they were propitious or benevolent towards their plans and aspirations.



“The Heart Is Oil”

“The Heart Is Oil”²⁸ is the first poem in the “Ptahhotep’s River” sequence. The title itself, a simple declarative sentence, points only subtly to the gist of the composition, which is tightly-woven and perfectly symmetrical when it comes to the way words have been arranged onto the page to form a *Gestalt* of meaning and evocation. Once again, the poem opens with an epigraph, a brief quotation from Papyrus Chester Beatty III (Thebes, 19th Dynasty), kept at the British Museum in London: “*If a man see himself in a dream seeing his face in a mirror, / beware: it means another wife.*” So this is a poem about dreaming and mirrors, about men seeing themselves in a dream in which they see their own face’s reflection in a mirror. To begin with, mirrors are a commonplace recurrence in many literary traditions around the world. The universal Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges comes up first to one’s mind; he was scared to death of mirrors, because they reminded him of the idea of the *Doppelgänger*, of the *alter ego*, of the many-sided crowd of personae one embodies within the confines of one’s own psyche. In his short story “Coleridge’s Flower”, the British poet dreams of a blue flower and, as he wakes up back into the real world, he realizes that he is holding a flower between his fingers. Lewis Carroll knew what it meant to cross the threshold separating the mirror from the real world in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. Flaubert’s words *Madame Bovary, c’est moi*, or Rimbaud’s *je suis un autre* reverberate with the same notion that *strangeness is frequent enough, but nothing is ever as strange as a man is*, as Bringhurst himself puts it in his homage to Heidegger in “The Snaring of Birds”. And Antonio Machado and Fernando Pessoa were also well aware that humans contain multitudes within themselves. Also, dreams are a commonplace topic in much earlier literature. Shakespeare, Calderón de la Barca, Cervantes and many other writers had a knowledge of dreams, of their ethereal texture, and had the intimation that life shared

²⁷ See the entry on “Coffin Texts” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, volume 6, p. 3645.

²⁸ “The Heart Is Oil” has a simple editorial history. It was first published in C.32, *The Malabat Review: An International Quarterly of Life and Letters* (Victoria, British Columbia) 45 (January 1978): 126-134, alongside “Death by Water”, “Spell for White Sandals” and “The Stonecutter’s Horses”. It was then reprinted with some minor textual variants in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), *The Calling* (1995) and *Selected Poems* (2009). Relevant textual changes are indicated in square brackets at the end of the verse lines quoted.

much of the unreality of fugitive dreams. Since Freud dared imagine dreams were the key for a proper understanding of the subconscious life hidden in humans' minds, no one questions that they are a significant part to our existence.

So this short epigraph is the starting point for Bringham's poem, which should be quoted in full if we are to appreciate the way it has been structured as a perfect artefact:

If a man should dream and should see himself dreaming
a dream, seeing himself in a mirror [a comma is added here in *The Calling & SP*]
seeing that the heart is oil riding
the blood, like a lid toward which he is moving, [comma omitted in *TC & SP*; an eyelid in *SP*]
his bones like a boat and his gut strung up
for a sail in the wind of his breathing,

if this is his eye in the mirror seeing
his eye in the dream seeing himself
in a mirror seeing his eye seeing
himself in a dream in a mirror, his face
reflected in oil which ruffles from time [that in *The Calling* and *SP*]
to time in the wind of his breathing,

the mirror will flow and the heart will set
like glass in the frame of his bones on the wall
of his breathing, his blood thin as paper and silver,
reflecting his face in his heart in a mirror
in a dream where he sees himself seeing
himself in a mirror seeing

that the bones will float and the heart will shatter,
his bones in his throat and his gut stretched tight
as a sail in the wind of his breathing, his blood
full of broken glass and his face like torn paper
seeing himself in the mirror of his heart
that scatters like oil in the mirror of his breathing. [dreaming in C.32]

BW, p. 103.

What first strikes one's attention upon first reading "The Heart Is Oil" is precisely the incantatory rhythm pervading it from the very beginning till the end. This is linguistically achieved through the repetition of key words such as *seeing* (repeated nine times throughout the whole composition), *heart*, *blood*, *bones*, *mirror*, and *dream*. At some point in the reading and decoding process, the reader seems unable to truly discriminate where one sense unit ends and another begins, for they coalesce or flow into one another in a spontaneous way that makes quoting short, isolated fragments from the whole an impossible task. In this sense, the form enhances the content, or, in other words, the way the message has been articulated highlights the very sense of unreality inherent in dreams that the poem tries to convey to the reader.

If the basic skeleton of the poem were to be identified, one more suggestion might be in order here: "The Heart Is Oil" is one long sentence, a prolonged unit of sense that flows nonstop, and a conditional sentence for that matter. Thus, from a purely structural point of view, the composition consists of two distinct and clearly symmetrical parts of two stanzas each. The first part is a long subordinate if-clause and the second is the main clause that completes the sense of the preceding one. All stanzas consist of six verse lines, which

makes the symmetry even more explicit. That the structure is clear and straightforward does not mean that it should be easy to pinpoint the exact meaning of the poem. In both parts, Bringhurst reveals an extraordinary sensitivity to cadence and a remarkable intellectual precision, even if the core of the poem explores dreaming in what looks like unending concentric circles or ripples that are lost far away in the distance. Despite the danger of impending vagueness or imprecision, the poet manages to keep things clear. Sight is of the essence, of course, for the poem is concerned with a dreamer's eye seeing itself reflected in a mirror inside a dream. Such a reflection is several degrees further removed from reality, as we are talking about a reflection in a mirror in a dream. The ultimate message, if there is anything like this at all in a poem, is difficult to understand. Possibly it is an act of foolish bravery to affirm that the implication seems to be that if a man sees himself in a dream seeing his face in a mirror, then something ominous might happen: the whole body is involved in what looks like a complete coalescence in which everything – blood, heart, bones, gut, breathing and mirror – collides with one another and is shattered into innumerable pieces. After all, the epigraph announced that it all meant another wife was on the way.



“Spell for White Sandals”

“Spell for White Sandals”²⁹ is a poem in which Bringhurst's poetic voice is truly his own. If we look up the word “spell” in a dictionary, we are reminded that it refers to “words that are thought to have magic power or to make a piece of magic work”, but also to “a piece of magic that happens when somebody says these magic words”. This poem could have well been lifted from the ancient *Coffin Texts* mentioned above. And as a spell, the whole composition is spellbinding; it holds your attention completely with the incantatory rhythm of the words with which it is woven. Lexical repetition and strongly parallelistic structures are the two simple devices that make the poem resonate in the echo-chamber of our minds with astonishing beauty. As a matter of fact, repetition in general is one of the oldest literary devices found across different literary traditions in innumerable human languages spoken throughout the history of humankind. It is already present in the Bible, or in the poem of *Gilgamesh*, in the oral poems of the First Nations on American soil, and in many other ancient texts of ancient civilizations now almost forgotten.

The whole poem seems to be articulated around five movements for the mind. In the first one, an indefinite, mysterious, vague place is invoked (“*The hall is so wide it will hold both hands*”) where the speaking voice addresses the Lord, presumably one of the fundamental deities in the Egyptian pantheon. The second part of the poem is precisely the invocation or prayer proper, addressed to the deity that is not named in any straightforward manner anywhere in the poem:

Lord, I know there is more than one justice.
 Lord, I know there is only one room
 in these numerous mansions.

²⁹ “Spell for White Sandals” has a simple editorial history. It was first published in C.32, *The Malabat Review: An International Quarterly of Life and Letters* (Victoria, British Columbia) 45 (January 1978): 126-134, alongside “Death by Water”, “The Heart Is Oil” and “The Stonecutter’s Horses”. It was then reprinted in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982) with minor textual variants, but, unlike the other two poems in *Ptahhotep’s River*, never incorporated into *The Calling* (1995) or *Selected Poems* (2009).

Lord, I have turned my hand out
 without knowing my purpose.
 Lord, I have turned my hand in
 without knowing my purpose less often.
 Lord, I have turned my hand without knowing
 my purpose against other creatures but less often still. [them in C.32]

BW, p. 104.

At least two notions are worth highlighting in these short stanzas. First, the idea that there is “*only one room / in these numerous mansions*” could be interpreted as a suggestion that everything in the world is connected to everything else, that there is a fundamental kind of unity beneath reality in spite of what the existence of fleeting appearances might suggest. And second, hands are a potent symbol of humans’ actions in the world where things happen and where they interact with other creatures, living and non-living alike. The message implicit in this propitiatory prayer is that the servant’s voice speaking in the poem has committed no crime or has made no offence to the gods, as the third movement makes clear through insistently parallel sentences:

I have not shrunk the acre, the ounce, or the hour.
 I have not halted a god in his motion.
 I have not broken the back of the river.
 I have not built in the path of the sun.

BW, p. 104.

In an act of humility and humble worship, the poetic voice acknowledges he does not know his own name. *The true man has no name and no address*, said the Rinzaï master’s admonition. This man preaching before his god has completely stripped himself of all unnecessary attributes, including his own name, in the hope that the deity grant him some kind of protection. His words are therefore propitiatory; his whole speech, a true *captatio benevolentiae*. And that this is gnomic poetry, or at least a fragment rescued from ancient wisdom literature, is made clear in the fourth movement, which is pervaded by the use of paradoxical language, a gnomic language surrounded by a halo of mystery that tries to capture the true essence of the unnameable deity:

I am the breath’s edge, the mouth of the well
 of water and mineral, of sunlight and air.
 Perhaps I remember
 not one of the names but a few of the letters:

the one who eats shadows
the one who eats air
the one who the dust is
the one who comes home without ever arriving
the one who arrives without pausing
the one whose face is behind him
the one who eats light
the one whose teeth are whiter than water
the one whose palm has no grain and no creases
the one with uncountable voices

BW, pp. 104-105.

In an true effort to capture the deity's ultimate nature, the speaking voice resorts to a list of parallelistic attributes that make the deity an ubiquitous presence everywhere in the world. The deity *is* the world, in fact. The words in italics could be a direct translation or rendering into English of the old Egyptian words, or a more or less faithful recreation of the original words found somewhere in the Nile valley. In what looks like a pantheistic view of the universe, the god is air, water, dust, light and darkness – the all-important light-darkness dichotomy is again present in this poem, by the way – and can speak with innumerable voices. For the ancient Egyptians, this is a world imbued with the presence of gods and goddesses that cannot but interfere in humans' affairs on Earth. The ancient Greeks knew it too. We modern men and women are not able to see their presence close at hand any more. The sense of the sacred is gone, probably for good. And yet, the speaking male voice in "Spell for White Sandals" still feels a sort of inescapable communion with the world at large and finds traces of himself in the well of water, in the essential mineral, in the benevolent sunlight and in the edges of the air: "*I am the wellmouth, the edge of the air, / the shape thrown up to the light / by my shadow – the lights' edge, no more.*" [No more in C.32] All this has been but a prolonged *captatio benevolentiae*; now the prayer closes with a direct reference to the feet that are wearing the white sandals and are asking to be taken in the right direction on the path of life:

I come for the names of my feet now. [added here; not in C.32]
 I come for the names of my feet as they rise
 and fall forward, I come for [I walk toward in C.32]
 the names of my feet as they fall.

BW, p. 105.



“The Song of Ptahhotep”

“The Song of Ptahhotep”³⁰ is the most complex of all three poems included in the section *Ptahhotep's River* in *The Beauty of the Weapons*. Like other Bringhurst poems – “Leda and the Swan”, for instance –, it is dedicated to another Canadian poet, George Payerle. This long poem belongs among Bringhurst's dramatic monologues, a series begun in 1974 with the publication of *Deuteronomy*, where we got to hear Moses' voice, and continued with *Jacob Singing* (1977), spoken by another important biblical ancestor, and *The Stonecutter's Horses* (1979), which gave voice to Petrarch's thoughts while preparing to tidy up his last will and testament. The poet manages short lyric poems, narrative poems and dramatic monologues with equal assurance and self-confidence. What all of them seem to have in common is a masterful command of language and musicality, as well as a rare clarity of thought and

³⁰ This is the editorial history of the poem. “The Song of Ptahhotep” was first published in C.40 *The Malahat Review* 63 (October 1982): 69-71. Shortly afterwards, it was reprinted in A.16 *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982). Much later, it was reprinted elsewhere: in C.64 *In Forma di Parole* (Bologna) terza serie 2.1 (1994): 176-186, alongside “Song of the Summit” and “Demokritos” (all rpt. from A.14); in B.27 *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Two*, edited by Gary Geddes, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988: pp. 490-505, together with “The Beauty of the Weapons”, “The Sun and Moon”, “Poem about Crystal”, “Anecdote of the Squid”, “Xenophanes”, “The Stonecutter's Horses” (all rpt. from A.14), and “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985” (rpt. from A.32); and in B.65 *The Gift of Tongues: Twenty-Five Years of Poetry from Copper Canyon Press*, edited by Sam Hamill, Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, 1996: pp. 27-30, where “The Song of Ptahhotep” is rpt. from A.26 and occurs alongside “Parśvanatha” (rpt. from A.35). Recently, it has been republished in *Selected Poems* (2009) with some minor textual variants that are noted in square brackets where relevant.

intellectual precision in the ideas explored. The fruits of these intellectual incursions into the visible and the invisible realms that exist in the world (*within* and *without* human beings) are perfect poems, artefacts of a precious beauty that have the texture of revelation as if poetry itself had spoken through the poet's lips. Some poems are *made*, others are *found*, while still others are *spoken* to the poet as if in dreams. It is his moral obligation to remain alert to what the conjunction of world, language and thought has to teach him, so that he can then convey the remnants of his vision to his fellow human beings.

As in poems like "Song of the Summit", "Hachadura" or "The Salute by Tasting", the interplay between inner and outer, between *what is* and *the perceiving self*, is again central to this difficult poem. The prism through which we get to perceive reality is already anticipated in the title of the poem. We are about to hear "The Song of Ptahhotep". The presiding consciousness from beginning to end is that of a historical figure, a flesh-and-blood man who lived many centuries ago in ancient Egypt. In one illuminating entry in his glossary, Bringhurst himself informs us that Ptahhotep was real:

PTAHHOTEP (c. 2400 B.C.) A government minister under Isesi at Memphis, 5th Dynasty. A collection of maxims under his name survives in several versions, notably in Papyrus Prisse (Bibliothèque nationale). Three or four lines of that text appear in the poem as a kind of refrain.

So the poet has searched papyruses at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and rescued luminescent fragments of wisdom from the distant shores of another place and another time. The human source of this wisdom is Ptahhotep, a vizier of ancient Egypt who attained high repute in wisdom literature. "His treatise *The Maxims of Ptahhotep*, probably the earliest large piece of Egyptian wisdom literature available to modern scholars, was written primarily for young men of influential families who would soon assume one of the higher civil offices. Ptahhotep's proverbial sayings upheld obedience to a father and a superior as the highest virtue, but they also emphasized humility, faithfulness in performing one's own duties, and the ability to keep silence when necessary."³¹ All these virtues make themselves discernible in Bringhurst's poem, which penetrates the old vizier's psychology in a most subtle way. A true constellation of difficult subjects are tackled in this long song, which is concerned with *speech and words*, with *hearing* as the most humble means of being responsive to the world, and with the *heart* as the unfailing core or centre of human beings. But there are more complex meanings embedded in this composition, which resembles a musical piece in its use of parallelism and repetition, not least in the use of a refrain which turns out to be a literal rendering of the ancient Egyptian words written by Ptahhotep himself so long ago. It is a true miracle, and also a privilege, to have access to his words and to his thought; this miracle is made possible by writing, of course, but also by the untiring devotion of Bringhurst to whatever of value has been thought and sung in the past. We are simply grateful for this.

"The Song of Ptahhotep" opens with moving words which are themselves a profound meditation on language itself:

Good speech is rarer than jade. It is rarer
than greenstone, yet may be found among girls
at the grindstones, found among shepherds
alone in the hills.
I know how a man might speak to his grandson;

³¹ See the entry on "Ptahhotep" in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, volume 23, p. 13699.

I cannot teach him to speak to the young women.

Still, I have seen at the well how the words
tune the heart, how they make one who hears them
a master of hearing. If hearing enters the hearer,
the hearer turns into a listener. Hearing is better
than anything else. It cleanses the will.

BW, p. 106.

The words constellated in the first four verse lines constitute a resonant refrain that is directly lifted from Ptahhotep's work. They punctuate the whole composition as they are repeated up to four times at decisive points in the unfolding of the song, for sometimes we need to be reminded that we are listening to the words of our ancestors, which were full of wisdom most of the time. The rhythm and cadence of these words set the tone for the rest of the poem, one that verges on the gnomic texture of much wisdom literature and one which is pervaded with biblical echoes that we also get to hear in the great dramatic monologues Bringhurst composed in the 1970s.³² To capture the voice of an ancestor is by no means an easy task: the poet is trying to rescue the timbre and the breathing words of a man who thought deeply and well, or intensely and beautifully, in the past. Impersonating another person's thinking and singing is the ambitious task Bringhurst set himself in this complex dramatic monologue. His appetite for words and ideas and pieces of exotic music is simply astonishing and insatiable. It comes then as no surprise that the two opening stanzas should be a sort of ode to good speech, which is rare and precious and difficult to find, just like so many precious stones (*jade* or *greenstone*, among them). We might ask ourselves what *good speech* is. Is it speech which strives after clarity of sound, precision of ideas and a certain elegance that is to be found in simplicity? Does it abhor ambiguity, vagueness, obscurity, mistiness, and complexity? Ptahhotep says that good speech is to be found "*among girls / at the grindstone*" and "*shepherds / alone in the hills*," which is a significant clue for us. These words are somewhat reminiscent of those of Wordsworth and Coleridge in their Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, where they claimed that simple language for poetry could only be found among peasants and simple people who still lived close to the seasonal changes and to the slow rotation of the Earth. It could be that the words spoken by people who do manual work are probably closer to the objects they name; they are not abstractions, as it were, for they have a texture and a rare consistency that is not found, for instance, among people like the governor mentioned in the fifth stanza of the poem, whose words, *orderly* and *clean* and *inexhaustible* as they might be, "*cannot be told / one from another, like funerals, like sand.*"

Bringhurst is a lover of words, of words spoken (and therefore he speaks here of the beauty of good *speech*) and of words written (hence his passionate love of typography). He is a consummate poet, a dedicated linguist and an expert typographer, which means that he has many ways of loving words. And yet he is well aware that words are not the real things dwelling in the world, he is convinced that speech is much better than writing (regardless of the intensity of his love of writing), that the voice is superior to the book or

³² According to critic Sam Hamill, "In what may be the finest poem in this exceptional book, Bringhurst says, "Good speech is rarer than jade." In this poem, "The Song of Ptahhotep," the poet is the witnessing angel. "I have seen," he says over and over in a style not dissimilar to the Song of Solomon, "I have seen in the hills how the heart chooses, / ... I have done what I could in my own time in office. / ..." It seems to us Hamill is right in hearing echoes from the Song of Solomon in this poem, but it is Ptahhotep's voice, distilled through the prism of Bringhurst's own voice, that we are hearing all the time throughout the whole poem. See Sam Hamill's review of *The Beauty of the Weapons*, published in *Western American Literature* (Logan, Utah) 18.2 (Summer 1983): 188.

handwriting, and that language cannot replace the intensity of life and reality, of *what is* and *what isn't*, to put it in more philosophical terms. Life is always larger than words, no doubt about that, but good speech is *a precision tool* in our emotional and intellectual confrontation with reality. It is difficult to find people capable of using language with elegance, clarity, simplicity and precision at the same time. Good speech, like jade or greenstone, is rare and precious. Ptahhotep knew it many centuries ago, and Bringhurst knows it too. To be able to produce good speech, it is necessary to be an attentive listener or hearer. Bringhurst also hoards as little silence as he can get in a world full of noise and dissonant discourses; hearing *cleanses the will*. Listening to the polyphonic world, to reality, with open ears, is of the essence for a poet for whom poems are the product of oral composition and for whom polyphony is the natural and spontaneous form poems should assume (*The Blue Roofs of Japan* 1986, *Conversations with a Toad* 1987, *Ursa Major* 2003/2009, and *New World Suite no. 3* 2005, are all impressive experiments in polyphony and testify to Bringhurst's growing interest in exploring this concept, which is inextricably linked to music, to philosophy, to ecology, to plurilingualism, to breathing and orality), for the universe is many-voiced and we are surrounded by many different voices coming from things, living and non-living alike, all the time. In order to be able to speak clearly, we need to learn first how to listen to the world attentively, carefully. We need to pay attention to what-is.

It might be an oversimplification to conjecture that the poem consists of six parts or movements for the mind. Whereas the first part is a eulogy to good speech and hearing, the second part (stanzas 3 and 4) explores the connection between the heart and hearing. These two stanzas could well be entitled "The Salute by Hearing", as if they were a companion piece to "The Salute by Tasting": *"I have seen in the hills how the heart chooses. / The fists of the heart hold the gates of the ears."* In Bringhurst's poetry, mountains are always a place of revelation where an acute consciousness comes to confront the universe at large. Once it leaves the summit, where the air is purer and the view clearer, it comes down armed with a new wisdom. In this particular case, the epiphany-like moment of revelation is an enthusiastic celebration of hearing as a means to access the mystery inherent in the world:

In the cave of the ear, the bones, like stars [bone in *SP*, 2009]
 at the solstice, sit upright and still,
 listening in on the air as the muscle and blood
 listen in on the skeleton.
 Tongues and breasts of the unseen
 creatures of the air
 slither over the bones in the toothless
 mouths of the ears.
 To hear is to honor the sleeping snail
 in the winter woodbox back of the forge.

BW, p. 106.

In exploring the connection between hearing and the heart, this stanza is bringing the world outside and the world inside the perceiving consciousness into a precious unity or *Gestalt*. The geography of the body in its entirety comes to be involved in the act of listening to what the world has to tell us. Projected outwards, toward the world outside, the ears "*listen in on the air*," whereas inside the human body it is the muscle and blood that "*listen in on the skeleton*." Once again, inner and outer worlds are reconciled and brought together into a perfect circle or whole – microcosm and macrocosm are one and the same thing. In hearing, the ears absorb *the world without* and turn it into *the world within*. After all, it does not make much sense to separate the *perceiving self* from the *perceived object*, or human beings from the universe at large. All beings, living and non-living, are all made of the same

elemental substance, imbued with a universal current that affirms the unity and interconnectedness of all things – present, past and future. To be respectful towards the world means to learn to listen to it with as much humility and attention as possible. It deserves this attention on our part.

The third part of the poem (the fifth stanza) is a transition movement onward towards the fourth part. The third part is concerned with mundane matters inasmuch as it dwells on the attributes of the new greedy and mean governor: his ears, eyes, face, bones, heart and words are shown to be devoid of any capacity whatsoever to discriminate in the raw data his senses give him between high and low, visible and invisible, important and unimportant things. His speech is not good speech, for it is vague and imprecise and empty. On the contrary, Ptahhotep acknowledges he has tried to do his best during his own “time in office”. The river Nile has been a mute witness to his office in power. He is endowed with a sensibility capable of noticing the contraries out of which the whole reality is woven: “*I have seen sunlight nest on the water. / I have seen darkness / puddle like oil in the palm of my hand.*” Parallelism enhances one of those elemental pairs of opposites in Bringhurst’s poetry – light vs. darkness. He is also aware that his hand and his whole body are subtly connected to the river of life and death so central to ancient Egyptians. However, it is in the fourth (stanzas 6 and 7) and fifth parts (stanzas 8 and 9) of the poem that we reach a core of essential and irreducible meaning in “The Song of Ptahhotep”. Both share the same subject (i.e., the nature of the human heart), but each gives a different point of view. In the fourth part, “*the heart is an animal*”:

The heart is an animal. Learn where it leads.
Know its gait as it breaks. Know its range, [Learn in *SP*, 2009]
how it mates and feeds.
If they shear your heart bald like a goat, the coat
will grow back, though your heart may shudder from cold.
If they skin out your heart,
it will dry in your throat like a fish in the wind.

Speak to your grandson by saying,
my grandson, the caves of the air
glitter with hoofmarks
left by the creatures
you have summoned there.

BW, p. 107.

So “*the heart is an animal.*” This is the simple metaphor that is then explored in depth in a language marked by an intense lyricism and by a mastery command of the euphony of sounds and ideas. Ptahhotep/Bringhurst encourages the reader or listener to observe the animal’s conduct. That the heart is an animal means that it is basically instinct and so it behaves in a natural and spontaneous way. It might have, therefore, much to tell or teach us. And the heart has also a natural tendency to persist, to survive. No matter whether it is sheared bald like a goat or skinned like a fish, it will survive despite its absolute nakedness and exposure to the elements of the world. It does not matter much, for the world is an inexhaustible feast for the senses. The eyes and the ears are capable of reading into the invisible signs hovering somewhere in mid-air, for the caves of the air “*glitter with hoofmarks,*” i.e., they are written with signs and glyphs left by creatures “*summoned there*”.

In the fifth part, *the heart is a boat* and so the implications of the heart being a boat are then explored with extreme subtlety and clairvoyance:

The heart is a boat.
If it will not float, if it have no keel,
if it have no ballast, if it have
neither pole nor paddle nor mast, [nor rudder nor mast SP, 2009]
there is no means by which you can cross.

Speak to your grandson by saying,
my grandson, the wake of the heart
is as wide as the river, [in SP, 2009]
the drift of the heart is as long as the wind
and as strong as the rudder that glides through your hand.

BW, p. 108.

For a heart to be a boat in perfect working condition, it has to be equipped with everything a boat is supposed to have. It will go down unless it has keel, ballast, pole, paddle, rudder and mast. Without them there is no way of crossing. *Where to?*, we may ask. There is no simple answer to this question. Only by having a heart capable of responding to life with the maximum of intensity is it possible to lead an authentic life, Ptahhotep seems to imply with his words. That is the ancestral lesson he is probably trying to convey. Possibly. By comparing the heart's measurements (wake, drift and rudder of the boat that the heart is) to the river, the voice speaking these words is only emphasizing the simple fact of the sheer immensity of the human heart. It knows no limits, no boundaries, no frontiers. Through strongly parallelistic structures the voice brings his message home: listen to what the heart has to tell you, obey its commands and instructions, for it is an animal that knows instinctively its place in the world, for it is a boat that knows intuitively how to float down the river of life to cross somewhere else. This *somewhere else* is either death or a more perfect stage in one's life towards nakedness and maturity. And the river is the Nile and, by extension, all the rivers of the world. And Ptahhotep's message is still relevant nowadays, for human beings have changed much, but not that much, since ancient Egyptians trod on this Earth.

In the sixth part of "The Song of Ptahhotep" (stanzas 10 and 11), we are back into the intimate geography of the human body. Many of Bringham's poems take place exactly within the boundaries of this peculiar geography we all share:

The fists of the heart as they open and close
on the rope of the blood in the well of the air
smell of the river.
The heart is two feet and the heart is two hands.
The ears of the blood hear it clapping and walking;
the eyes of the bones see the blooded footprints
it leaves in its path.

BW, p. 108.

At this point in the poem, heart, blood, feet, hands, bones, ears, eyes and river are brought into a unified and indistinguishable whole. The heart is an animal and is a boat and now it is also a body in itself, so that it has its own feet and hands. Needless to say, feet and hands are extensions of the body through which humans experience what it means to be alive in a world which is itself inexhaustible. We plant the soles of our feet firm on the ground to feel earth's gravity; we touch the objects that populate this world with our hands to get to know their elemental texture. The blood has its own ears to listen in on this heart walking and dancing, clapping its own hands and stamping its own feet. In its walking and dancing it

leaves footprints on the path that the eyes of the bones can see. The closing lines recommend humility and respect in the face of the mystery the heart embodies:

Speak to your grandson by saying,
my grandson, set your ear
on the heart's path,
kneeling there in honor
of the sleeping snail.

BW, p. 108.

That is the end of it, or rather this is the beginning of the whole thing again. By preaching silence, humility, obedience to a father and a superior, faithfulness in performing one's own duties, the ability to keep silence in the presence of the awe-inspiring grandeur of the universe, and hearing the beating of one's own heart, Ptahhotep/Bringhurst has given voice to an ancestral lesson, one we need to be reminded of, if only from time to time. *Good speech is rarer than jade*, said the opening verse line. And so is the capacity to listen to reality singing its own song. Throughout his life, Bringhurst has untiringly tried to capture the subtle modulations of this singing in poems that are of a nature midway between serene meditation and philosophical speculation. In "The Song of Ptahhotep" he has found the source of inspiration in a few words rescued from an ancient papyrus consulted at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, in much the same way he travelled back in time to the tiny villages on the coast of Asia Minor to rescue the tattered fragments of the Presocratics in *The Old in Their Knowing*, and in much the same way he would travel to the Far East in search of the illuminating words of the revered Oriental philosophers and sages to compose *The Book of Silences*. Speech and silence are of the essence to a poet who has learnt to listen in on an elemental world made of air, water, trees, mountains, heart, blood and bones. Precisely all these things sing the song that Bringhurst is fast enough to jot down before it vanishes into nothingness.

IV · Bone Flute Breathing (1978-1982)

"Death by Water"

"Bone Flute Breathing" is an important section in *The Beauty of the Weapons*. It consists of quite a significant handful of poems concerned with Greek mythology in one way or another. And it is no coincidence that this section should open with a poem like "Death by Water",³³ which bears the same title as section IV of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922),³⁴

³³ "Death by Water" was published in a number of places over time, which means that it is a poem that has been a long time in the making. (1) It was first published as a broadside 61 × 40 cm, 20 copies on handmade paper, with a drawing by Michael Bullock, University of British Columbia Library Press, Vancouver, 1977; it was also issued as 51 × 38 cm, approx. 100 copies on newsprint. Then it was reprinted in B.9 and C.32 and revised in A.14, A.19, A.47, A.92, B.21, B.66 and B.103. (2) It was published in C.32, *The Malabat Review: An International Quarterly of Life and Letters* (Victoria, British Columbia) 45 (January 1978): 126-134, alongside several other poems – "The Heart is Oil", "Spell for White Sandals" and "The Stonecutter's Horses". (3) It was also published in the following anthologies: (a) B.9, *News and Weather: Seven Canadian Poets*, edited by August Kleinzahler, Ilderton, Ontario: Brick Books, 1982: pp 10-16, alongside "Ararat", "Song of the Summit" and "Jacob Singing"; (b) B.21, *Vancouver Poetry*, edited by Allan Safarik, Winlaw, B.C.: Polestar Press, 1986: p. 165; (c) B.66, the bilingual anthology (English and Italian) *Parole sull'acqua: Poesie dal Canada anglofono e francofono*, a cura di Liana Nissim e Caterina Ricciardi, Roma: Edizioni Empiria, 1996: pp. 200-204, alongside "Saraha's Exercise for Beginners"; and (d) B.103, *Water: A Selection of Poems on the Theme of Water* [edited by

the great Modernist masterpiece alongside *The Cantos* of Ezra Pound. Robert Bringhurst's poem is a most creative and moving rendering of the classical myth of Narcissus and Echo, as told by two important literary sources – Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, III, 339-510, and Pausanias, IV, 31, 6ff. As announced by the opening poem in this collection, “These Poems, She Said”, “Death by Water” delves into the death-in-life inherent in self-love, which is “*an ending and not a beginning*”. For this poem is ultimately concerned with love, a type of love that ends in self-destruction or self-annihilation because it is loving the wrong thing. Narcissus dies of anguish at the sheer impossibility of loving his own image as reflected on the limpid waters of a quiet pool. He is desperately in love with a delusion, with an eel-slippy entity that is but a pale reflection of himself. The story of the classical myth is simple and moving enough and so it could only have caught Bringhurst's attention from the very beginning. In much the same way he borrowed the biblical voices of Moses in *Deuteronomy* (1974) or of Jacob in *Jacob Singing* (1977), or of dying Petrarch in *The Stonecutter's Horses* (1979) tidying up his last will and testament, now the poet borrows the ancestral *materia poetica* of an ancient myth that has an important lesson to teach humankind even today. He transmutes this primordial poetic matter into a completely original poem of a rare beauty and perfection, one that is no doubt central to his corpus. Thus, the composition consists of three concentric circles as it were, articulated around the two proper names mentioned in the poem – Narcissus and Li Po. They are different characters but they are two echoes in time sharing the same fate: death by water. The former is a mythological figure that pines away because of an unrequited love for his own self-reflection, whereas the latter is a flesh-and-blood, real Chinese poet who drowned to death quite unexpectedly while trying to embrace the moon's reflection in the river. The third concentric circle affects the modern reader's sensibility, as the first-person personal pronoun *we* appears to suggest in the last stanza of the poem.

It might as well be advisable to start at the very beginning, by summarily outlining the essentials of the original myth. Narcissus³⁵ (Νάρκισσος) was the son of the river god Cephissus and the nymph Leiriope. Since he was a child, he was distinguished for his beauty. According to the most well-known account of the myth given by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, III, 339-510, the seer Tiresias told his mother that Narcissus would have a long life, provided he never looked upon his own features. Nobody knew what that strange vision meant for sure. Both men and women loved the irresistible beauty of Narcissus, who remained absolutely aloof in his own pride, unmoved by the pain he inflicted on broken-hearted rejected lovers of both sexes. But his rejection of the love of the nymph Echo or of his lover Ameinias drew upon him the vengeance of the gods. As he was returning from a hunting day, he stopped to drink fresh water from a pool. Quite unexpectedly, he fell in love with his own reflection in the waters of a spring and pined away (or killed himself), for he could not simply stand the suffering and the anguish it caused him not to be able to embrace or kiss his own reflection. His body was never found; the flower that bears his

Graham Moss], Oldham, Greater Manchester: Incline Press, 2008, as the last poem in the book. (4) It was also printed as a chapbook, [4] p. paper, 13.5 × 21.5 cm, approx. 15 copies, in Mission, British Columbia, for a student workshop at Barbarian Press, in 1984 (see A.19).

³⁴ This is section IV of *The Waste Land* in full: “Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead, / Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell / And the profit and loss. // A current under sea / Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell / He passed the stages of his age and youth / Entering the whirlpool. // Gentile or Jew / O you who turn the wheel and look to windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.” T. S. Eliot, *Selected Poems*, London: Faber and Faber, 1982, p. 63.

³⁵ The basic details about the myth of Narcissus and Echo have been lifted from a number of sources: the entry on “Narcissus” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, volume 20, pp. 11747-8, and, as elsewhere in our thesis, the information provided by two classics: Pierre Grimal's *Dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine* and Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths*.

name, the narcissus, sprang up where he died instead. There is yet another version of the story: according to Pausanias IV, 31, 6ff, to console himself for the death of his beloved twin sister, Narcissus would sit gazing into the spring to recall her features. But it has been Ovid's more dramatic version which has proved to have a stronger appeal for subsequent generations and literary interpretations. Thus, in Ted Hughes' rendering of the myth in *Tales from Ovid*, the story goes like this:

There was a pool of perfect water. [...]
Weary with hunting and the hot sun
Narcissus found this pool.
Gratefully he stretched out full length,
To cup his hands in the clear cold
And to drink. But as he drank
A strange new thirst, a craving, unfamiliar,
Entered his body with the water,
And entered his eyes
With the reflection in the limpid mirror.
He could not believe the beauty
Of those eyes that gazed into his own.
As the taste of water flooded him
So did love. So he lay, mistaking
That picture of himself on the meniscus
For the stranger who could make him happy.

He lay, like a fallen garden statue,
Gaze fixed on his image in the water,
Comparing it to Bacchus or Apollo,
Falling deeper and deeper in love
With what so many had loved so hopelessly.
Not recognising himself
He wanted only himself. He had chosen
From all the faces he had ever seen
Only his own. He was himself
The torturer who now began his torture.

He plunged his arms deep to embrace
One who vanished in agitated water.
Again and again he kissed
The lips that seemed to be rising to kiss his
But dissolved, as he touched them,
Into a soft splash and a shiver of ripples.
How could he not comprehend
What the deception was, what the delusion.
He simply became more excited by it.
Poor misguided boy! Why clutch so vainly
At such a brittle figment? What you hope
To lay hold of has no existence.
Look away and what you love is nowhere.
This is your own shadow.
It comes with you. While you stay it stays.
So it will go
When you go – if ever you can go.

He could not go.
He wanted neither to eat nor to sleep.

Only to lie there – eyes insatiably
Gazing into the eyes that were no eyes.
This is how his own eyes destroyed him.³⁶

The texture of Bringhurst's rendering of the myth is completely different from that of Hughes'. It is characterized by an elegant austerity and a straightforward simplicity. The rhythm of the words on the page when spoken aloud is also different. There are at least two easily identifiable parts, the first one comprising the two first stanzas and the second one comprising the third stanza. In the first part of the poem, the focus is on Narcissus contemplating his own image reflected in the water:

It was not his face nor any
other face Narcissus saw
in the water. It was the absence there
of faces. It was the deep clear
of the blue pool he kept on coming
back to, and that kept on coming
back to him as he went to it, shipping
out over it, October after October [this comma is new in *The Calling*]
and every afternoon,
walking out of the land-locked summer,
out of the arms of his voice,
walking out of his words.

It was his eye, you might say, [may in later version in *The Calling & SP*]
that he saw there, or
the resonance of its color. [colour in *The Calling & color SP*]
Better yet, say it was what
he listened for – the low
whisper of light along the water, not
the racket among the stones.

BW, p. 111.

In Bringhurst's interpretation of the myth, Narcissus sees no face at all in the water. What keeps on bringing him back to the pool is the sheer absence of faces there and the sheer clarity of the water. Water is, after all, one of the primordial elements out of which the whole universe is made. 25 hundred years ago, Thales himself, one of the essential Presocratics, claimed that everything was made of water. All you could find as far as you could go into the ultimate matter of things was water. But in that particular context, water means life, it is a life-giving gift for humans and for all things, living and non-living, on Earth. The mirror-like texture of water in "Death by Water" has ominous connotations though. Had Narcissus not stopped by this clear blue pool to drink water, he would have never seen his own face reflected there, would not have fallen in love with himself, and would not have died as a result of an unrequited love for a pure delusion. Love is blind, it is true; sometimes it might as well be based on self-induced delusion, which is the case in Narcissus' story. He does not see (= understand) that the eyes his eyes see are his own, that the face he sees is but an imperfect reflection of his own face, and that it all is unreal. Therefore Bringhurst is completely right when he says that Narcissus saw "*the absence there of faces*". Paradoxically enough, such an absence appears to have an irresistible attraction on the young man. Escaping from "*the land-locked summer*," he turns once and again to the blue

³⁶ See Ted Hughes, *Tales from Ovid*, London: Faber and Faber, 1997, pp. 78-80. The whole version is, of course, longer.

pool of water, where he stretches his arms into the reflection that the limpid waters give him back and where he speaks to a mute presence that utters no words at all. “*Walking out of his words*” is possibly a subtle reference to poor Echo’s punishment, as she was condemned to repeating only the ending words of other people’s sentences.

In the second stanza of the poem, Bringhurst shows a masterful use of synaesthesia to try to capture the fascination his own reflection holds for Narcissus. There is an eye seeing itself, seeing “*the resonance of its color,*” as if it were possible to see any sound at all. As in so many other poems in *The Beauty of the Weapons*, light is central to this stanza too. Narcissus’ ear is attentive to “*the whisper of light along the water,*” far away from the unpleasant noises among the stones he has left behind, in a mundane world of mediocrity and ugliness. The mixing up of senses here contributes in a decisive manner to the complex texture of the poem, which is further prolonged into the third and final stanza, where it is even more difficult to clearly pinpoint an ultimate meaning.

In the second part of the poem, the emphasis is laid on Li Po and the modern reader’s sensibility instead:

Li Po too. As we do – though [Lǐ Bó in *The Calling* & Li Po in *SP*]
for the love of hearing
our voices, and for the fear of hearing
our speech in the voices of others come back
from the earth, we speak while we listen and look
down the long blue pools of air coming toward us and say [that
come in later version in *The Calling* & *SP*]
they make no sound, they
have no faces, they have one another’s eyes. [“they make no sound,
they have no / faces, they have one another’s eyes” in *The Calling* & *SP*]

BW, p. 111.

Li Bai,³⁷ also spelled Li Bo, Wade-Giles romanization Li Po or Li Pai (b. 701, Jiangyou, Sichuan province, China – d. 762, Dangtu, Anhui province) is one of the classical Chinese poets who rivaled Du Fu for the title of China’s greatest poet. Li Po, who lived in Tang China in a time of splendour, pretended he belonged to the imperial family, but the truth is that he belonged to a humble family of the same surname. In his early twenties, he left his parents’ home to start a period of wandering in search of experiences, and when he came back he married and lived with the family of his wife in Anlu (now in Hubei province). Since early in his life, he had begun to write poetry and showed it to various officials in the vain hope of becoming employed as a secretary. Wandering was central to Li Po’s existence. His entire life was punctuated by sporadic periods of wandering with no clear destination whatsoever. In 742, after another nomadic period, he arrived at Chang’an, the Tang dynasty capital, where he hoped to be given a post at court. No official post was available for him; yet he was welcomed and accepted into a group of distinguished court poets. He embraced a romantic conception of life in his poetry. One of the most famous wine drinkers in China’s long tradition of imbibers, Li Po often celebrated in his poems the joy of drinking, the importance of friendship and of solitude, the passage of time, and the joys of nature with an unsurpassed brilliance and great freshness of imagination. In the autumn of 744 he began his wanderings again and in 756 he became unofficial poet laureate to the military expedition of Prince Lin, the emperor’s 16th son. The prince was

³⁷ See the entry on “Li Bai” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 17, p. 9843, for detailed information on the Chinese poet.

soon accused of intending to establish an independent kingdom and was executed; Li Po was arrested and imprisoned at Jiujiang. In the summer of 758 he was banished to Yelang; before he arrived there, he benefited from a general amnesty. He returned to eastern China, where he died aged 61 in a relative's house, though popular legend says that he drowned when, sitting drunk in a boat, he tried to seize the moon's reflection in the water.

As pointed out above, Li Po shares the same fate as Narcissus. Both are deluded into thinking that what they see reflected in the water is real; both seem to fall in love with the irresistible beauty of two very different kinds of reflection – that of the moon and that of one's own face. In the case of Li Po wine appears to be instrumental in bringing about a special kind of blindness and death, whereas in the case of Narcissus, the blindness is brought about by a different kind of thirst, an irresistible love that turns out to be unrequited because it is unreal. The modern reader's sensibility is invited to take part in this meditation on delusion and on the unreal quality of existence: we no longer see what Narcissus or Li Po could see, for we have learnt not to trust our senses and whatever raw data they provide us with about the world out there. We love the sheer sound of our voices, but we fear or refuse to listen to the voices of "*others come back / from the earth,*" which are possibly the voices of the dead and the voices of the ancestors. This is precisely what Bringhurst is able to do with great mastery: from the past he has rescued tattered fragments and visions that are still relevant to us if we dare listen with open ears and open eyes to what they have to teach us. Not everything that matters in reality is completely visible to our eyes or audible to our ears. Bringhurst's poem is, in the end, an invitation for us modern readers to follow in closely the steps of Narcissus' and Li Po's mode of perception of the world. They were visionary men in a way, like Moses or Jacob or Petrarch before or after them; they all could see what most of us cannot see (the clarity of water unpolluted by subjectivity, the nuances of light on the surface of a pool), and they responded to all of this with the maximum of intensity and clairvoyance. One cannot avoid thinking that Li Po's clarity of mind is hopelessly lost and irrecoverable for good.



“Leda and the Swan”

“Leda and the Swan”³⁸ is a modern retelling of the well-known classical Greek myth. Bringhurst is following closely in William Butler Yeats' steps; the Irish poet also wrote a

³⁸ “Leda and the Swan” was first published in A.14 *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982). Later, it was reprinted in C.41 *The Canadian Literary Review* (Scarborough, Ontario) 1 (Fall/Winter 1982): 16-17; in B.18 *The New Canadian Poets, 1970–1985*, edited by Dennis Lee, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985: pp. 26-39, together with “These Poems, She Said”, “Deuteronomy”, “Demokritos”, “The Stonecutter's Horses” and “Saraha”; in B.81a *A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, edited by Donna Bennett & Russell Brown, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002: pp. 954-975, alongside “Essay on Adam”, “The Stonecutter's Horses”, “These Poems, She Said”, “The Reader”, “Conversations with a Toad” and “Bone Flute Breathing”; in B.107 *The Broadview Anthology of Poetry*, edited by Herbert Rosengarten & Amanda Goldrick-Jones, 2nd ed. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2009: 904-910, together with “Deuteronomy”, “The Beauty of the Weapons”, and “These Poems, She Said”; in B.113 *Elements of Literature: Fiction, Poetry, Drama*, 4th Canadian edition, ed. by David Staines et al. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2010: pp. 693-700, together with “Essay on Adam” and “The Stonecutter's Horses”; and in B.114 *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, 3rd ed., ed. by Donna Bennett & Russell Brown. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2010: pp. 989-1005, alongside “Essay on Adam”, “These Poems, She Said”, “The Reader”, “Conversations with a Toad” and “Bone Flute Breathing”. “Leda and the Swan” was later reprinted with some minor textual variants in a second version in *The Calling*. The final text we have in *Selected Poems* (2009) remains exactly the same as in *The Calling*, and so this is the text that we have used for our critical analysis. Where relevant, textual variants are noted in square brackets.

completely different kind of poetic composition³⁹ on the same subject. Both compositions, Yeats' and Bringham's, share the same title and the same ancestral *materia poetica*. The resulting poems are dissimilar in many respects. Considered as one of the most technically masterful poems ever written in English, "Leda and the Swan" had been first written by the Irishman during the Irish Civil War of 1922-23 and later revised into its present form at the height of his literary career, in 1939, when he was precisely awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. For Yeats himself it was one of his major accomplishments, for, in addition to its technical perfection, it encapsulated much of his own poetic thought in his maturity. His daring sonnet describes the details of a story from Greek mythology – the rape of Leda by the god Zeus in the form of a swan. Yeats uses the traditional fourteen-line Petrarchan sonnet in a completely radical, new and modernist style to convey an explicitly violent and sexually aggressive story of mythic proportions. He calls up a series of unforgettable, bizarre images of an immediate physical event using abstract descriptions in terse language, while at the same time offering a distanced view of that occurrence in the sweep of time. With an astonishing economy of language and a skilful use of rhythm, the poem has the lyricism and complexity of Yeats' mature work in its allusions to mystical ideas about the universe. Thus, the ultimate emphasis is laid on the very fact that a single event – the rape of Leda by Zeus – brings about an inexorable or relentless chain of events as part of a larger scheme: the result of the god's assault on Leda is the birth of Helen of Troy, her abduction or kidnap by the Trojan prince Paris, the long siege on the city of Troy by the Achaean heroes (Achilles, Agamemnon and Ulysses, among them), the utter destruction of Priam's city after ten years of unceasing battle as recounted in the *Iliad*, the subsequent destruction of early Greek civilization, and the beginning of the modern era.

Written in free verse, Bringham's poem has a different quality about it, but it shares with Yeats' an elegant use of language, as well as a rare clarity, depth and beauty. In its plain diction and rhythmic vigor, Bringham's rendering of the same mythical story is also something of a technical accomplishment. It dwells on the relationship of human and divine, subtly on the cycles of history, and, above all, on the kind of knowledge Zeus, metamorphosed into a swan, derives from his violent sexual encounter with Leda. It is the Olympian god that takes the best part of it all with him: he takes with him a kind of knowledge that is eminently physical but also of a metaphysical nature. On the contrary, she is dropped like "a looped rope" once she has been used up and explored in depth, and pushed further into emptiness by a second sexual encounter with her king and husband on the same day. Her pregnancy will bring only much havoc and destruction with the passage of time, for she will give birth to two important women: the beautiful Helen, who will bring about the war of Troy and its eventual destruction, and Clytemnestra, who will end up killing Agamemnon.

The title of a poem is important, basically because it gives the reader essential clues as to the subject matter of the composition. Yeats and Bringham assume that the reader is familiar with the classical story of Leda (Λήδα) and the swan. Neither of them ever mentions the names of Leda or Zeus in their poems. The deity's name, in fact, appears neither in the title nor in the text of the poem, so that the attentive reader is to understand

³⁹ This is Yeats' famous poem quoted in full: "A sudden blow: the great wings beating still / Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed / By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill, / He holds her helpless breast upon his breast. // How can those terrified vague fingers push / The feathered glory from her loosening thighs? / And how can body, laid in that white rush, / But feel the strange heart beating where it lies? // A shudder in the loins engenders there / The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead. // Being so caught up, / So mastered by the brute blood of the air, / Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" It was first published in *The Tower*.

that the swan is an incarnation of the powerful god. However, at the end of *The Beauty of the Weapons*, Bringhurst gives us one entry devoted to Leda in his glossary about odd terms. It summarizes the essential aspects of the story. It reads like this:

LEDA The Greek storytellers said that a woman of this name was raped by Zeus, who assumed the form of a swan for this purpose. Later in the day her husband, Tyndareos, King of Lakonia, also took her to bed, and this accounts for the fact that her daughters – Helen of Troy, who was kidnapped by Paris, and Klytaimnestra, who married and later murdered Agamemnon – were hardly identical, though they were twins. One, the very beautiful Helen, had been sired by Zeus, and the other twin by Tyndareos.⁴⁰

Bringhurst saw that there was a tremendous poetic potential to this ancient story and so he wrote a complex poem dedicated to the Hungarian-born poet George Faludy. In Bringhurst's rendering, the first stanza opens with a recounting of the occurrence in mid-scene or *in medias res*. It begins abruptly, as the swan has finished its assault on Leda "letting her drop" and the poet starts brooding on the violent love act and on the transaction of knowledge implicit in this rape by a potent Olympic god. On the contrary, Yeats' sonnet of the same title dwelled on a masterful description of the great swan hanging in the air above the girl with its wings beating, as well as on a description of Leda that indicated her physical (and perhaps psychological) state, as she staggers under her assailant. The swan has its body over Leda as she falters under him; he caresses her thighs with his webbed feet. There is an almost sensuous description in the phrase "her thighs caressed," but this is followed immediately by the grotesque image of the swan's "dark webs" in line 3 and the image of Leda's neck in his bill as he holds her helpless against him. The swan is never referred to directly as a swan, but its presence is expressed in ordinary metonymic images like "great wings" and "dark webs" that in the context of the poem seem quite extraordinary. Leda is simply "the girl" who is caught in the bird's beak like a small helpless animal.

In Bringhurst's version of the story, the swan is referred to through an ominous metonymy ("*the black beak reappeared / like a grin from in back a drained cup*") that emphasizes the fact that she has been emptied and then dropped, after she "*fed at the sideboard of his thighs.*" Zeus takes on an active, aggressive role during the whole sexual assault; Leda appears only to give in or surrender to the god's threatening and overwhelming presence quite unwillingly. At that point, Bringhurst directs his attention towards knowledge, i.e., the kind of knowledge inherent in a violent sexual encounter between a god and a mortal. Leda does not put on "*knowledge / with his power.*" What she preserves from the rape is "*his power alone*" for her daughter, the beautiful Helen of Troy, who would unknowingly bring about the destruction of Priam's city. "*Not his knowledge.*" Knowledge of an intense kind is what Zeus takes with him after his exploration of every single square millimeter in Leda's body; he gains an intimate knowledge of the geography of her body. The references to an act of sexual penetration are conveyed in a language marked by a strong lyricism. The use

⁴⁰ For further information on alternative versions of the story's subsequent implications, see also the entry on "Leda" in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, volume 16, p. 9699. "Leda, in Greek mythology, daughter of Thestius, king of Aetolia, and wife of Tyndareus of Lacedaemon; alternatively, mother by Tyndareus of Clytemnestra and Castor, one of the Dioscuri. She was also believed to have been mother (by Zeus, who had approached her in the form of a swan) of the other twin, Polydeuces, and of Helen of Troy, both of whom hatched from eggs. Variant tales gave divine parentage to both the twins and possibly also to Clytemnestra, with all three of them having hatched from the eggs of Leda, while others say that Leda bore the twins to her mortal husband, Tyndareus. Still other variants say that Leda may have hatched Helen from an egg laid by the goddess Nemesis, who was similarly approached by Zeus in the form of a swan."

of simple images and the conceptualization of Leda's body as being a constellation of musical instruments emphasize the explosive violence of the act:

He was the one who put on knowledge.
He was the one who looked down out of heaven
with a dark croak, knowing more
than he had ever known before,
and knowing he knew it:

knowing the xylophone of her bones,
the lute of her back and the harp of her belly,
the flute of her throat,
woodwinds and drums of her muscles,
knowing the organ pipes of her veins; [organpipes in *BW*]

The Calling, p. 90.

Interestingly enough, Zeus, an omnipotent god, is even aware that he has come to know something of a different nature. He now knows even more than he knew before. The second stanza of the poem is a beautiful vortex of metaphors in which Leda's body is depicted as being a complete orchestra. Percussion, brass, strings and wind instruments are all mentioned here, for it is music that Zeus is playing on her body, as he touches every single part of her anatomy – her bones, back, belly (notice the alliteration), throat, muscles and veins. The musicality of these words is astonishing: it is an *outward* kind of music, for there are explicit references to musical instruments, and also an *inward* kind of music, for alliteration and parallelism build on a rhythmic cadence that is unequalled elsewhere in the poem. And yet, something of a technical prodigy is what we find in the third stanza, which keeps on dwelling on the kind of knowledge Zeus has derived from this sexual encounter:

knowing her as a man knows mountains he has hunted
naked and alone in –
knowing the fruits, the roots and the grasses,
the tastes of the streams
and the depths of the mosses,
knowing as he moves in the darkness he is also
resting at noon in the shade of her blood –
leaving behind him in the sheltered places
glyphs meaning mineral and moonlight and mind
and possession and memory,
leaving on the outcrops signs meaning mountain
and sunlight and lust and rest and forgetting.

The Calling, p. 90.

In the verse lines just quoted Bringhurst explores Zeus' knowledge from a different perspective. Now he has chosen to draw analogies from the natural world instead of from the realm of musical instruments. The god has managed to get to know Leda as a naked man gets to know the mountains where he has hunted time and again. An intimate knowledge of fruits, roots, grasses, mosses, streams is gained by the naked man through the sheer physical contact with the elemental world of nature that sight, taste, smell, hearing and touch provide him with. He knows the landscape in the darkness of night and in the daylight, resting "*in the shade of her blood.*" And he leaves signs behind him of his action as a territorial explorer: glyphs, signs or inscriptions both in "*the sheltered places,*" those that are not easily seen or visible ("*glyphs meaning mineral and moonlight and mind*" is a perfect verse line

of rare perfection), and “*on the outcrops*”, on the visible rocks (“*signs meaning mountain / and sunlight and lust and rest and forgetting*”). By the audacious algebra of a potent metaphor, Leda’s body has become something beyond itself, transcending her own finite boundaries: it becomes the Earth in its entirety, *terra matrix*, an *ur-Gea* that is penetrated by an *ur-Uranus* to give birth to every single thing, living and non-living, in this world. For a short while, the reader appears to forget the violence implicit in the rape of Leda by Zeus metamorphosed into a swan. Now it seems love is present all of a sudden in this furtive encounter.

But it is all an illusion, for a swan is a swan, and Zeus is Zeus, and he must go back to Olympus. Once he has satisfied his sexual appetite, he must be gone. “*What is known is as lean / as the day’s edge and runs / one direction.*” The truth is elusive and eel-slippery after all, “*indigestible, like a feather*”. Too much truth may turn out to be fatal. It remains to be known what is become of the lady afterwards, in the aftermath:

The lady

herself, though – whether [a comma instead of a dash in *BW*]
or not she was truth or untruth, or both, or was neither – [a dash omitted before *or untruth*]
she dropped through the air like a looped rope,
a necklace of meaning, remembering
everything forward and backward – [“everything forwards and backwards,” in *BW*]
the middle, the end, the beginning – [new verse-line in *TC*; not in *BW*]
and lit like a fishing skiff gliding aground.

The Calling, p. 91.

Leda is no more than a *looped rope* that Zeus lets drop, exhausted and emptied. At this point it does not appear to matter much whether she was truth or not, a source of revelation for the god. What does matter is that she has become “*a necklace of meaning*”, which is probably meant as a reference to the subsequent events that followed her pregnancy on a grander scale. This seemingly insignificant event in time is rich in implications in a larger scheme: Leda’s rape will eventually bring about much havoc and destruction, much suffering for Achaeans and Trojans alike, and much death to innocent people. Leda knows how it all begins. She knows the beginning, the middle and the end of the horrible rape she has suffered at the hands of Zeus, who did not bother to ask her whether she would consent to this; and she also knows somehow what the outcomes will be.

She is now pregnant, “*lit like a fishing skiff gliding aground*,” but the day is not yet over for this woman. She is also the wife of Tyndareus, King of Lacedaemon. She is mother by Tyndareus of Clytemnestra and Castor, one of the Dioscuri, and mother by Zeus of the other twin, Polydeuces, and of Helen of Troy. When evening falls on that same day when Zeus approached her, Tyndareus also takes her to bed and lies with her. Her body becomes a full orchestra, and so the king strides “*through the orchestra / pit of her body, touching / this key and that string in passing.*” There is not much love involved in the encounter this time either:

she lay like so much
green kindling,
fouled tackle and horse harness under his hands [horsebarness in *BW*]
and said nothing, felt
nothing, but only
lay thinking
not flutes, lutes and xylophones,
no: thinking soldiers
and soldiers and soldiers and soldiers

and daughters,
the rustle of knives in his motionless wings.

The Calling, p. 91.

Once again, her only choice is to stay still, say nothing at all, feel nothing at all. The king of Lakonia does not manage to make music on her body or set her body on fire (“green kindling” does not consume itself in flames); his rough hands are those of a warrior, not accustomed to subtleties of touch or of love, but only to *horse harness*. Leda’s encounter with Zeus, a divine creature, at least conjured up images of “*flutes, lutes and xylophones*” in her mind; now her mind is turned into a blank slate, in which there appears to be room only for soldiers, the ones that will fight to death close to the Trojan walls. So Bringhurst’s poem closes with a veiled reference to the war of Troy, which marks the beginning of Western literature at its very cradle and the making of the monumental poems by the blind aedos Homer. What is heard at the end is not any kind of celestial music of the spheres, but the “*rustle of knives*” (the weapons of the Trojan war) in the “*motionless wings*” of the king of Lakonia, who is after all only one more mortal on Earth. Heinrich Schliemann, the polyglot archaeologist who found out the remains of the superimposed cities of Troy, would certainly have loved reading Bringhurst’s free verse account of the beginning of that magnificent story as a counterpoint to Yeats’ magnificent sonnet, for both renderings are of unsurpassed beauty, clarity and technical perfection.



“The Better Man”

“The Better Man” is a metamorphic poem that has changed much over time. Though it was first published in a literary magazine in 1977, it has undergone significant textual variants⁴¹ since it first came into being about 35 years ago. No doubt, this testifies to the importance it probably has in Bringhurst’s entire poetic output, in his *living repertory*. An attentive ear to the almost colloquial cadences of this poem is not enough for a proper understanding of all its complexity. To the careful reading of words on the page, or, even better, to the careful hearing of the words of the poem spoken in the air, a rudimentary knowledge of Greek mythology must be added. For “The Better Man” is a modern and original retelling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. The poem opens *in medias res*, as it were. The opening verse lines remind us of Orpheus’ death. But who was Orpheus? Who are the characters in this simple story of love and pain and death? Orpheus and Eurydice, of course, but also Hades and Persephone, and some minor characters like Aristaeus (who tried to rape fleeing Eurydice), the ferryman Charon, the dog Cerberus, the maddened Maenads that eventually killed Orpheus, and the Muses, who buried what was left of poor Orpheus. The story is simple enough,⁴² as the poem itself suggests in its opening verse lines:

⁴¹ “The Better Man” was first published in *Kayak* 45 (May 1977): 50-51, and later revised in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), *The Calling* (1995) and *Selected Poems* (2009). The original text published in *Kayak* was heavily revised and expanded in *BW*, slightly revised in *The Calling*, and with some more minor variants in *Selected Poems*. Significant textual variants are noted where relevant at the end of verse lines in square brackets.

⁴² The basic details about Orpheus, Eurydice and Hades have been lifted from a number of sources: the entry on “Orpheus” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, volume 21, pp. 12488-89; the entry on “Hades” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, volume 12, p. 7148; and, as elsewhere in our thesis, the information provided by two classics: Pierre Grimal’s *Dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine* and Robert Graves’ *The Greek Myths*.

Simple enough. At the sound of him singing
their names, rocks, trees, middle-aged
women and most of the rest of creation
shot straight for his head and collided.

BW, p. 114.

Orpheus ('Ορφεύς) is the archetypal singer and poet, the ancient Greek hero endowed with superhuman musical skills. Allegedly, he was the son of a Muse (Calliope most probably) and Oeagrus, king of Thrace (other versions give Apollo). According to some tales, Apollo gave Orpheus his first lyre. His singing and playing were so beautiful that animals, trees, and rocks danced about him, and humans would calm down in a most mysterious way. Also, he was one of the Argonauts, and he saved them from the Sirens' maddening music by playing his own music. On his return, he married Eurydice, a beautiful dryad, who was soon killed by a snakebite. She was bitten by a snake and died when she was walking on a meadow in Thrace. According to Virgil, the terrible accident happened when she was trying to flee from Aristaeus, who wanted to rape her. As a matter of fact, the best version of this myth is found in Virgil's *Georgics*, Book IV, 453ff., which explains how Orpheus descended into Hades in search after his dead wife. On the other hand, Hades, from the Greek *Aïdes* ("The Unseen"), also called Pluto or Pluton ("the Rich"), was the son of the Titans Cronus and Rhea, and brother of the deities Zeus and Poseidon. After Cronus was killed, the kingdom of the underworld fell by lot to Hades, while Zeus ruled over the heavens and Poseidon over the seas. There he ruled with his queen, Persephone, over the infernal powers and over the dead, in what was often called "the House of Hades", or simply Hades. Though he supervised the trial and punishment of the wicked after death, he was not normally one of the judges in the underworld; nor did he personally torture the guilty, a task assigned to the Furies (Erinyes). Forbidding and aloof, Hades was depicted as stern and pitiless, unmoved (like death itself) by prayer or sacrifice.

Returning to the myth, it must be said that, overcome with grief, Orpheus attempted to bring Eurydice back from the land of the dead. This was an act of bravery and true defiance. With his singing and playing he charmed the ferryman Charon and the dog Cerberus, which controlled access to Hades. His music and grief so moved Hades and his queen Persephone that Orpheus was allowed to take Eurydice back with him. Hades set but one single condition, however: upon leaving the land of death, both lovers were forbidden to look back. The couple climbed up towards the opening into the land of the living, and Orpheus, seeing the sun again, turned back to share his delight with Eurydice. He might have thought Persephone had lied to him and wanted to make sure Eurydice was following him. In that exact moment in time, she inevitably disappeared and vanished back into the land of the dead forever. In his own version, Bringhurst gives us a movingly poetic rendering of this part of the myth:

They said that the death had nothing to do
with shaped light or the sheer
edges of the air. They said he had sung
the earth wide open and walked in,

either to bury her or to retrieve her,
and almost succeeded. They said when he slipped
he was on the way up; he ought to have known
not to look down.

BW, p. 115.

Orpheus himself was killed and torn into pieces by a group of maddened women from Thrace. The earliest known account, that ascribed to Aeschylus, says that they were Maenads urged by the nature god Dionysos to tear him to pieces in a Bacchic orgy because Orpheus preferred the worship of the rival god Apollo. His head, still singing, with his lyre, floated to Lesbos, where an oracle of Orpheus was established. The head prophesied until the oracle became more famous than that of Apollo at Delphi, at which time Apollo bade the Orphic oracle stop. The dismembered limbs of Orpheus were gathered up and buried by the Muses, and his lyre they placed in the heavens as a constellation. In Bringhurst's version of the myth, Orpheus' burial is summarized with a striking economy: "*Sailors and the hill people / buried what they could find of him.*" The scattered limbs were buried, the head placed in an oracle, and the lyre was made into a constellation guiding sailors at sea.

Now, much of the rest of the poem delves into different versions of the facts that make up the mythical story, particularly the specific circumstances surrounding the death of Orpheus and Eurydice: "*the explainers / moved through the towns with their versions / and justifications.*" In the first place, whatever might have happened to Eurydice is explored from different perspectives:

Some of them said that the red-headed [one in SP, 2009]
 woman who loved him had left
 and was dead when he found her.

Others insisted he'd killed her. A third [another in SP, 2009]
 told a long and haphazard story
 in which she had gone on a pilgrimage
 down the valley and met, unexpectedly
 but quite simply, a better man,
 with a liking for conversation
 and chess, and a milder
 face, and a foreign name. [no comma in SP, 2009]

BW, pp. 114-115.

As pointed out above, the familiar version of the story says that Eurydice died of snakebite in a meadow in Thrace, probably while trying to escape an imminent rape. In Bringhurst's exploration of the myth, other conflicting views are brought into the fore. It was probably Eurydice that gave Orpheus his song, i.e., that he sang out of love or because he was deeply in love with her. Three different accounts of her death are then given: (1) she simply left and died, of reasons that are left unspecified; (2) it was Orpheus himself that killed her; or (3) she met *a better man*, which is probably meant as a reference to some anonymous male figure or to Hades himself, in which case this means that, by choosing him, she preferred death to love and life.

The most accomplished part of the poem possibly comes in the second half of the composition, where Orpheus' death is explored in depth. These are resonant verse lines, punctuated by the all-pervasive imagery of light and darkness, which is central to many of the poems in *The Beauty of the Weapons*, as well as by a masterful command of synaesthesia and enjambment. When compared to the opening stanzas of the composition, the music of the poem turns now lyrical and acquires an oracle-like texture:

Or they said he died like a midge,
 of his own luminescence,
 or it was darkness and light that he named

and they came together and killed him.

Still in the hills they tell simpler stories.
They say his voice shone
like a blue stone. Some of them say
it was air he drank when thirsty, [when he was thirsty in *The Calling* and in *SP*, 2009]

water he breathed. It may have been only
his hands, some of them say,
that gave way, crushed
when the words closed over them; [him in *The Calling* and in *SP*, 2009]

and for days his voice
could be seen overhead, next to the sun,
his words tasted in the wellwater, [name in *The Calling* and in *SP*, 2009]
wind out of season heard in the young grain.

BW, p. 115.

Several accounts are then possible: either Orpheus died consumed in his own light as if he were a midge and his art of singing were a form of self-destruction or self-annihilation; or he invoked the opposites of light and darkness into existence and they killed them; or he became a sort of pantheistic deity in total communion with *the air he drank* and *the water he breathed*; or his song was eventually extinguished when there were no more words to be sung, once his hands had been torn into pieces by the Maenads; or his voice was really drowned by death, or rather shone eternally in the heavens, next to the sun, as his lyre was made into a constellation, and was to be heard everywhere in the fields and the wellwater. And the poem closes with truly resonant words: “*All light since / has bent through his silence.*”



“Cave of the Nymphs”

“Cave of the Nymphs”⁴³ is a deceptively simple piece amid the much more complex poems to be found in *The Beauty of the Weapons*. It looks like a naïve short lyric poem in its astonishing compression and language economy, but much is concealed in between the lines. Multiple layers of meaning seem to be stored in the jewel-like string of words that make up such a short composition, which, once read, reverberates in the reader’s mind forever. The very title is suggestive of ancient Homer’s epic poem the *Odyssey*. One thinks inevitably of Odysseus (or Ulysses), the hero whom Homer portrayed as a man of shrewdness, eloquence, resourcefulness, courage, and endurance, and also of the sirens, of the enchantress Circe and of the nymph Calypso, of the sirens’ episode where Odysseus listens to the maddening song of these fantastic creatures, half women and half birds of prey. But this should come as no surprise in a poetry book like Bringham’s, whose very foundations are a sort of universal literary tradition – one that embraces the best works composed in many different human languages over time. And Homer’s *Odyssey* is precisely one of those fundamental cornerstones upon which the whole of the edifice of the Western canon has been built throughout centuries of unending effort.

⁴³ “Cave of the Nymphs” was first published in *Prism International* 20.3 (Spring 1982): 26-27, together with “These Poems, She Said”. It was then reprinted in *The Beauty of the Weapons* shortly afterwards.

Odysseus is the prototypical solitary wanderer, the traveller who undergoes a number of adventures before he manages to get back home. Bringhurst himself has much of a wanderer himself: he is the polyglot cosmopolitan who has travelled widely, read extensively and lived much which is worth living in the first-person, without intermediaries; he is the true citizen of the world, a small and big world at the same time, who feels at home anywhere he happens to be; and he is the man who is convinced, as the Rinzai master's admonition goes, that *the true man has no name and no address*. Odysseus was *no one* too, at least at some point in the unfolding of the plot of the *Odyssey*, when he blinds Polyphemus. The very idea of a journey⁴⁴ is central to the architectural conception of the *Odyssey* and is of the essence in much of the literature that has been written since then in the Western world, probably because life itself is sometimes seen as being an irreversible journey *in* and *through* time. Bringhurst's poem evokes indirectly, rather than states in a straightforward manner, this subtle connection with Homer's epic masterpiece. We find no reference to any of the characters in particular (Odysseus himself, Penelope or Telemachus), but some of the cantos or episodes of the *Odyssey* are somehow invoked in a just a few linguistic strokes. This is Bringhurst's poem quoted in full:

Daily, daily walking out of our eyes
in order to meet them returning,

the face full of acorns and mice,
the teeth pumping like heddles.

Daily peeping from under our tongues,
the ears like oars rowing backward and burning.

BW, p. 117.

The voice speaking in the poem is presumably that of the nymphs, those inferior female divinities in Greek mythology, usually associated with fertile, growing things, such as trees, or with water. Though they were not immortal, they were extremely long-lived and were on the whole kindly disposed towards men. Depending on the sphere of nature they were connected with, nymphs could belong to one category or another. Thus, the Oceanids were sea nymphs; the Nereids inhabited both saltwater and freshwater; the Naiads presided over springs, rivers, and lakes. On the other hand, the Oreads (from the Greek *oros*, "mountain") were nymphs of mountains and grottoes; the Napaeae (from the Greek *nape*, "dell") and the Alseids (from the Greek *alsos*, "grove") were nymphs of glens and groves; the Dryads or Hamadryads presided over forests and trees.⁴⁵ Now, there are several pieces of evidence

⁴⁴ Odysseus' wanderings and the recovery of his house and kingdom are the central theme of the *Odyssey*. After leaving Troy he arrives at the land of the Lotus-Eaters and only with difficulty rescues some of his companions from their lotos-induced lethargy; he encounters and blinds Polyphemus the Cyclops, a son of Poseidon, escaping from his cave by clinging to the belly of a ram; he loses eleven of his twelve ships to the cannibalistic Laistrygones and reaches Circe's island. On the island of the enchantress Circe, he has to rescue some of his companions whom she had turned into swine. Next he visits the Land of Dead (Hades), where he learns from the Theban seer Tiresias how he can expiate Poseidon's wrath. He then encounters the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, and the Cattle of the Sun, which his companions, despite warnings, plunder for food. He alone survives the ensuing storm and reaches the idyllic island of the nymph Calypso, where he spends almost nine years before he leaves and arrives in Ithaca, his homeland, where faithful Penelope, his wife, and Telemachus, his son, have been struggling to maintain their authority during his prolonged absence. Recognized at first only by his faithful dog and a nurse, Odysseus proves his identity by accomplishing Penelope's test of stringing and shooting with his old bow. He then, with the help of Telemachus, slays Penelope's suitors and is accepted as her long-lost husband and the king of Ithaca. See entry on 'Odysseus' in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 21, p. 12340.

⁴⁵ See entry on 'nymph' in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 21, p. 12290.

that suggest that Homer is beneath this particular poem: (1) the *them* mentioned in the second verse line is probably a reference to Odysseus' men, (2) the reference to the "*the face full of acorns*" and the "*teeth pumping like beddles*" is probably to these men being metamorphosed into swine by Circe in the *Odyssey*, and (3) "*the ears like oars rowing backward and burning*" suggests that they are unwilling to leave Circe's island, because they are under the enchantress' spell, and points to the subsequent episode in which Odysseus' sailors try to escape the maddening song of the sirens. From a purely linguistic point of view, the poem builds on an incantatory rhythm which is achieved through pure repetition and alliteration. And the symmetry is perfect: three two-line stanzas written in elegant language of utter simplicity.



“The Salute by Tasting”

In a complex poem like “The Salute by Tasting”,⁴⁶ we are back in the elemental world of mountains, sea, air and light that we find in such poems as “Song of the Summit” or even “Ararat”. In some ways, it also resembles “The Beauty of the Weapons”, for both poems explore the fruits of a peculiar excavation, or the archaeological remains lifted from a primordial encounter between a naked self and Nature. And the self is responding to this encounter with the maximum of intensity, as it were. It might be a risky conjecture to say that this poem possibly belongs among the best Romantic tradition of meditative pieces that came into being with Wordsworth or Coleridge almost two centuries ago in Britain, near the Lake District, a geography of mountains and lakes which is not altogether dissimilar to that Bringham must have known firsthand in the woods in British Columbia. This is a strongly meditative poem, indeed, but it also has much of the quality in other poems where the poet as territorial recorder is at pains to capture the world as it is and to rescue what remnants of visions and tattered fragments of truth he can take with him back into the world of humans in the form of poems which are jewel-like artefacts of beauty and perfection. The spellbinding or awe-inspiring grandeur of Nature brings about the *salute* mentioned in the title of the poem. In this particular context, *salute* means “a thing that you say or do to show your admiration or respect for somebody and something.” At first, it does not seem to make much sense that this should be a salute *by tasting*, precisely because sight appears to be so central to the whole composition and because the encounter between self and Nature is carried out through the eye. *I am an eyeball*, said Emerson in his groundbreaking essay “Nature” (1836); and sight is the most Romantic of all five senses. But the reference to *taste* makes absolute sense when we get deeper into the recesses of the poem in the interpretive process and learn that the whole body is actively involved in this fundamental encounter between the perceiving self and the world at large. That the encounter takes place amid a natural landscape and not in a cityscape may support our conjecture that this is a truly Romantic poem, even if the whole act of perception has gone

⁴⁶ “The Salute by Tasting” has a very simple editorial history. It was published as (A.13) a broadside, 43 × 23.5 cm., in an edition of 100 copies, numbered and signed by the author, by Slug Press in Vancouver in 1982. The colophon in this first limited edition, which is truly rare to find in the bibliophile market, says: “Copyright © 1982 Robert Bringham. *Contemporary Broadside Number Seven. Printed on 12 × 8 Westman & Baker jobbing press at Slug Press, of 128 East Twenty-third Avenue, Vancouver, British Columbia, V5V 1X2. Published in an edition of 100 copies, numbered and signed, Spring 1982. This is copy no.-*”. The poem had already been published in (C.35) *Hand Book* (Columbus, Ohio) 3 (1979): 3. Three years later it was published as a beautiful broadside and, shortly afterwards, it was reprinted again with no textual variants at all in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982). It has not been republished anywhere else since then, not even in *The Calling* (1995) or *Selected Poems* (2009), which comes certainly as a surprise, for it seems to us that this poem is essential in Bringham’s polymorphic corpus.

through the prism of objectivity and impersonality, which is one of the landmarks of Modernist poetry.

The poem remains a beautiful and inexhaustible enigma, though. What follows is but a modest proposal of a possible reading of the words on the page; this does not exhaust, of course, all the potential layers of meaning that are to be found between the lines of this magnificent poem. The complexity of the ideas and the well-wrought structure of the composition are such that it is not easy to pinpoint an ultimate meaning or message for good. Thus, the *Gestalt* the poem is is the fruit of a perfect balance of the right ingredients: the music and rhythm of *le mot juste*, the right constellation of profound ideas, and the clarity and elegance to move the reader's sensibility to accept the elemental truth presented in these lines. This does not prevent the poem from being demanding and hard to understand, and even obscure at times. To begin with, the formal skeleton of the poem is simple enough at least. From a purely metrical point of view, "The Salute by Tasting" consists of four stanzas marked by perfect symmetry – two five-line stanzas and two eleven-line stanzas alternatively arranged on the page. All four stanzas are punctuated by lexical repetition and alliteration (*white-water, closed-cup, jut-jumbled, loose-light*), which give the poem charm and an irresistible musical cadence throughout. Now, the first stanza provides the elemental spatio-temporal coordinates or axes of the poem:

White water on the mountain,
cwmms and seracs of the sea,
and the voice moving out like a small boat or a solitary climber,
too far away to see if it resembles
someone else or itself or yourself or me.

BW, p. 118.

The combination of mountains and sea indicates that this is a natural setting – a landscape of air, light, water and stone. To these basic ingredients, the rest of the poem adds *blood* and *bone*, which are recurrent elements in Bringhurst's poetry. Solitude is also present in this rare alchemy that makes possible a profound meditation on the part of the poetic voice. An accurate knowledge of the words in the poem is an essential prerequisite for a proper understanding of what Bringhurst is trying to convey. He makes use of technical words that are not easy to understand, but this only testifies to his wish to name things with precision and exactitude. The compulsion is scientific at bottom; poetry, after all, shares with science or philosophy the same love of clarity and knowledge that we find in much of Bringhurst's work. As early as 1975, Bringhurst's love of mountains compelled him to entitle his first groundbreaking poetry volume *Bergschrund*, which is also a technical term lifted from the realm of geology. Now, in the glossary at the end of *The Beauty of the Weapons*, the poet himself tells us what *cwm* means: "A glaciated alpine valley or cirque." A *serac* is a block or column of ice formed by intersecting crevasses on a glacier. Seracs are found within an icefall or on ice faces on the lower edge of hanging glacier. They are usually very big and dangerous to mountaineers since they may topple with little warning. As a matter of fact, they are a well-known obstacle on many of the world's highest mountains, in particular Kanchenjunga. Amid the ancestral mountains, alpine valleys and the Homeric sea of the first stanza, the only thing we find which is clearly identifiable as human is a voice. The voice is disembodied, as it were, and it resembles *a small boat* sailing the sea or *a solitary climber* climbing the mountains. Uncertainty remains as to whether this voice takes after "*someone else or itself of yourself or me.*" It is, therefore, an enigmatic voice, but it is absolutely relevant that it should be like that – just one simple voice amid the grandeur and immensity of a natural world. Bringhurst's poems are born out of his voice, they are the products of

oral composition, and they are as much made of living or spoken words as of tattered visions gathered by the poet himself in his contemplation of Nature.

The second stanza is a truly complex statement that brings man as microcosm and Nature as macrocosm together into a single unity or whole. Now the world is presented as being a prolongation or extension of the human body, or we might say it could also be the other way around. What we get to see in these lines is the actual merging of the perceiving self and the perceived world. The world is absorbed into the body, while the body acknowledges an elemental kinship with everything outside itself. Boundaries are then blurred all of a sudden and we are back in an elemental, almost prehistoric world like that depicted in “Hachadura” (1975), another long meditative poem on the metaphysics of being and non-being. These are Bringhurst’s words:

Between the bone and the unleashed blood:
the uncarved stone
and the landforms hammering gods
out of the godshapes of the air.
Between the hair that is the nail of the head
and the chin that is its heel:
brainleather, gunflint chert
and a broken ploughshare
heaped into a closed cup and triggered,
a cranium full of saltpeter and teeth, the mallet and anvil
detonator interwired with the ocular fuse.

BW, p. 118.

In a primitive world of flint and stone, humans work with their own hands and make their rudimentary utensils to interact with the world. They still embraced a vision of the world pervaded by the ubiquitous presence of gods and goddesses that would interfere in humans’ affairs on Earth with a graceful spontaneity. Such natural forces as the sun, the sea, mountains, trees and rivers would be the home to some deity or another. Alone in the middle of nowhere in the mountains, capable of reading the book of Nature, with open eyes and alert ears, an attentive sensibility may still feel how the gods emerge out of the blue, out of the air and the land, whispering in their ancestral quiet voices. What came after the dawn of the gods is a well-known story. Bringhurst encapsulates in just five short verse lines of condensed meaning what could be interpreted as being the whole history of humankind in miniature – *Sternstunden der Menschheit*, as Stefan Zweig would possibly put it – or the geological evolution on a planetary scale. The pieces of evidence, the fruits of the archaeological excavation, are all contained between the hair and the chin, i.e., in the head, the receptacle of reason and imagination, which are the most perfect faculties of *homo sapiens sapiens*. So from the *homo faber* who could produce his own instruments made of stone⁴⁷ and discovered fire, we move on to *a broken ploughshare*, which is possibly meant as a reference to the invention of agriculture in the Neolithic, on to human remains (a *cranium*

⁴⁷ Hence the reference to *gunflint chert*. Chert is also a technical geological term. It is a fine-grained silica-rich microcrystalline, cryptocrystalline or microfibrinous sedimentary rock that may contain small fossils, ideal for the preservation of early life forms. It varies greatly in colour (from white to black), but most often manifests as gray, brown, grayish brown and light green to rusty red. In prehistoric times, chert was often used as a raw material for the construction of stone tools. Also when a chert stone is struck against steel, sparks result, which makes it an excellent tool for starting fires. Both flint and common chert were used in various types of fire-starting tools, such as tinderboxes, throughout history. A primary historic use of common chert and flint was for flintlock firearms, in which the chert striking a metal plate produces a spark that ignites a small reservoir containing black powder, discharging the firearm.

and *teeth*), utensils as various as a *mallet* or *anvil* (the work on metals), *saltpeter* to preserve food and also to make matches and gunpowder for weapons that kill other humans in the many wars that have punctuated the history of humanity. But, of course, this is only one possible interpretation, and it could well be far-fetched and inaccurate.

The third stanza is also a perfect enigma. The reference to the flutes charming the chain or the serpent to rise up into the verticality of the air is a disquieting reference. Are these flutes meant to be a metaphor for music or art in general, for all that is creative and imaginative in humankind, or for the highest calling among human beings? Are they simply a reference to the sound air makes up there in the mountains, some sort of celestial music to which human ears are not truly accustomed or tuned? We are not sure. Maybe this stanza marks a transition onwards to the closing stanza, which is again charged with multiple layers of complex meaning. We are now back into the world of human beings:

Between lover and lover, brother and brother,
other and other of you:
ropehold in the ravelling fissure.
Women and the broken gods
jut through the jumbled weather,
snagging the fibres of the jewel.
In the loose light's
glycerine-flow, metamorphic, between them, the rule.
Between one and one, one and other,
one neither one and one one another,
the use of love: to make the hate run true.

BW, p. 119.

This stanza somehow encapsulates the second part of the vision attained in the mountains, somewhere near the sea and the valleys, possibly on a summit where the eye is capable of seeing far away into the distance and into great expanses of unpolluted land. There is a sort of gloomy tension in these verse lines, but there is also light, and love and hate. *Eros* is still the governing force beneath the universe that keeps chaos at bay; it is a pervasive force in human relationships too. If light and darkness are one of those elemental pairs of opposites in Bringham's poetic universe, here love and hate constitute another pair of indissoluble contraries that keep the world going. In all forms of human interaction (between lovers, between brothers, between one and oneself) a fissure has emerged that announces impending danger. Now, in a secular world that does not believe in divine presences anymore, the gods are broken, the weather is mixed in a confused way, and a *jewel* is being layer by layer destroyed. Light itself, which is usually a benevolent presence elsewhere in Bringham's poems, has now turned into something ominous similar to *glycerine-flow*. It suffuses everything around it with a strange quality and imposes *the rule*, which is possibly a cataphoric reference forwards to the closing verse line: "*the use of love: to make the hate run true.*" This simple equation has negative and pessimistic resonances. If love is to be a redemptive force, how is it possible that its use should be to make hate appear or come true? *Run true*, says the line, as if hate itself were liquid, a glycerine flow that might come to destroy everything.

Literary critic Wayne Holder emphasizes the important fact that there is a perceiving consciousness at the very centre of this poem. His thought and his words are illuminating and, therefore, worth quoting in full as a way of conclusion:

One of the most challenging poems in the collection, “The Salute By Tasting”, employs the methodology of Lucretius and possibly Heraclitus, to show us a dialectic of opposites setting up the tension that we know as consciousness. Here too, there is the special light of the uncharted territory ... [...] These exposures, flashes of imagery burned onto x-ray plates, seem the work of a scientific mind, grounded in mathematics and physics. The language, with which syllogisms are built from simple observations of natural phenomena, is informed by the precision of the researcher and projected onto the larger field of a poet of wide scope and intrepid vision. And always there is light.⁴⁸



“Six Epitaphs”

That there is a wide range of traditions converging into the making of Bringhurst’s poetry as collected in *The Beauty of the Weapons* seems to be out of the question. Many a critic have highlighted this as one of the distinctive features of Bringhurst’s poetry. As Canadian poet and critic Robin Skelton puts it in an early review of the book, “Bringhurst is an acutely intelligent writer, his mind at once austere and sensual. He reanimates fragments of Greek, Chinese, Egyptian and Aztec thought so that they illuminate our present, and he does so in a style of utmost clarity and simplicity.... *The Beauty of the Weapons* is a book to place beside Eliot’s *Prufrock* and Stevens’s *Harmonium*.”⁴⁹ A least two key aspects are worth highlighting in this short quotation. First, the poet’s mind is marked by austerity, but this does not mean he does not care to invoke, revisit and recreate the words of his true ancestors, who come from a wide range of literary traditions and languages. Coming to terms with fragments (for instance, those of the Presocratics, which are central to the architectural design of *The Beauty of the Weapons*, by the way) means that at some point the poet should try his hand at producing his own poetic fragments. Just like those tattered fragments he has rescued from the past and oblivion, these new texts produced by an acute modern sensibility, which speak with elegant clarity and simplicity, have much to say about the condition of humankind and the world nowadays. They are, therefore, illuminating fragments – i.e., pieces that shed light on whatever they touch upon. And secondly, Robin Skelton places Bringhurst’s first *Selected Poems* beside two landmarks of High Modernist poetry: Eliot’s decisive volume *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) and Wallace Stevens’s *Harmonium* (1923). Our poet is heir to the best Modernist tradition; he is in search after serious, demanding and complex poetry that comes to terms with reality.

The persistence of tradition is of the utmost importance and central to Bringhurst’s poetics. This is clearly the case in a curious poem entitled “Six Epitaphs”⁵⁰, which consists, as the title itself suggests, of six short fragments that evoke the life and achievements of six relevant cultural figures drawn from a number of different traditions – John Scotus Erigena, Herakleitos, Ch’ü Yüan, Ssu-ma Ch’ien, Goethe, and Aeschylus. Seen in retrospect, with all the burden of knowledge the poet has brought into the composition of these short pieces, these epitaphs look like biographies in miniature instead. They are concerned with life rather than with death. And they also pay due respect and homage to

⁴⁸ See the review of *The Beauty of the Weapons* by Wayne Holder in *The Vancouver Literary News* 4.83 (April 1983): 28.

⁴⁹ Robin Skelton, “Poetry Selected, Collected, and Resurrected”, in *Quill & Quire* 49.3 (February 1983): 33. This is a review of several books, including *The Beauty of the Weapons*.

⁵⁰ “Six Epitaphs” was first published in B.5 *Aurora: New Canadian Writing 1978*, edited by Morris Wolfe, Toronto & New York: Doubleday, 1978: pp. 121-122. It was then reprinted in A.14 *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982) and revised in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009), where it was republished with minor textual variants.

the masters of the past, men of letters, intellectuals, who are not dead at all for Bringhurst, for they are the bone and flesh of a tradition that *leaves nothing en route*, as Eliot would say in his influential, groundbreaking essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919). What all these men seem to share is the same appetite for life and knowledge that characterizes the poet’s life-long concern with trying to understand what is going on at all in the world. In listening attentively to *what is*, the voices of the dead have resonant strands of truth in them and so Bringhurst cannot simply ignore them. This makes his poetry universal, one that belongs with the best that has been thought, said and sung in a number of languages around the world over time. In so doing, West and East meet, the Occident and the Orient flow into one single poem in time.

In their fragmentary nature, these six epitaphs resemble Sappho’s extant poems, for instance, or the poems of many other early Greek lyric poets, Alkaios and Ibycus among them. But they also resemble the inscriptions found on tombs or fragments of stone that have been preserved from the wreckage of time. All six pieces share the same structure: first the place and date of death of the historical figure in question are recorded, and then some outstanding feature concerning their lives and the specific circumstances surrounding their deaths are highlighted in just a few linguistic strokes, with the utmost clarity, simplicity and economy. The overall impression is one of precision, austerity and concision. Following Ezra Pound’s dictum that *Dichtung = condensare*, Bringhurst manages to put a burden of information into a handful of short poems which are only four to five lines long. The first of the epitaphs is devoted to Erigena. It reads as follows:

Malmesbury, 881 A.D., [AD in SP]
 Erigena, aged about seventy,
 stabbed with a pen
in finibus mundi, for heresy.

BW, p. 122.

John Scotus Erigena, also called Johannes Scotus Eriugena (b. 810, Ireland – d. c. 877), theologian, translator, and commentator on several earlier authors in works centring on the integration of Greek and Neoplatonist philosophy with Christian belief, lived at the court of the West Frankish king Charles II of the Bald, near Laon (now France), from about 845, first as a teacher of grammar and dialectics. Erigena made several important contributions to the theological culture of his time. Firstly, through translation, he made it possible for medieval scholars to have access to the Greek patristic writings of a number of important thinkers; and secondly, he was actively involved in theological disputes over the Eucharist and predestination and set forth his position on the latter in *De predestinatione* (851), a work condemned by church authorities. He also wrote *De divisione naturae* (862-866), a book that explored the nature of reality while trying to reconcile basic tenets of Neoplatonism and Christianity. Though highly influential upon Erigena’s successors, notably the Western mystics and the 13th-century Scholastics, *De divisione naturae* eventually suffered condemnation by the church because of its pantheistic implications.⁵¹ This

⁵¹ The entry on “Erigena, John Scotus” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 9, p. 5403, provides further information on the doctrines he put forward in his works: “Erigena’s translations of the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Epiphanius, commissioned by Charles, made those Greek patristic writings accessible to Western thinkers. Erigena’s familiarity with dialectics and with the ideas of his theological predecessors was reflected in his principal work, *De divisione naturae* (862-866; “On the Division of Nature”), an attempt to reconcile the Neoplatonist doctrine of emanation with the Christian tenet of creation. The work classifies nature into (1) that which creates and is not created; (2) that which creates and is created; (3) that which does not create and is created; and (4) that which does not create and is not created. The first and the fourth are God as beginning and end;

accounts for the *heresy* mentioned in the epitaph: he was stabbed *in finibus mundi* (“at the edge of the world”), which is a Latin expression used to refer to the British Isles at that time, as we learn from Bringhurst’s glossary of oddities and complications placed at the end of *The Beauty of the Weapons*.

The second epitaph is about Greek philosopher Herakleitos, one of the Presocratics that figure prominently in the section entitled “The Old in Their Knowing” in Bringhurst’s volume:

Ephesos, 475 B.C., [BC in SP]
Herakleitos, called atrabilious, called
the obscure, sweating out his last fever
on the barnfloor, buried to the ears in warm manure. [new in SP]

BW, p. 122.

Herakleitos, also spelled Heraclitus or Heraclitus (b. c. 540 BCE, Ephesus, in Anatolia [now Selçuk, Tur.] – d. c. 480), is a Greek philosopher remembered for his cosmology,⁵² in which fire forms the basic material principle of an orderly universe. Little is known about his life, and the one book he apparently wrote is lost. What we do have is the tattered fragments of his wisdom that have been preserved in the short texts quoted and attributed to him by later authors. From these extant fragments we gather that change was inherent in the ultimate essence of reality: πάντα ῥεῖ, he would say, everything is in a state of perpetual flux and yet it somehow remains the same. Though unpopular in his time (he was *atrabilious*, i.e. irascible and *obscure*) and frequently scorned by later biographers, Herakleitos had a beautifully sharp mind. His primary contribution or unique vision lies in his apprehension of the formal unity of the world of experience. From Bringhurst’s epitaph we learn that he died of a fever, a subtle manifestation of fire itself (the ultimate substance out of which reality is made) in a barn, surrounded by manure, as if trying to return to the universal equilibrium in which everything is constantly turning into something else.

the second and third are the dual mode of existence of created beings (the intelligible and the sensible). The return of all creatures to God begins with release from sin, physical death, and entry into the life hereafter. Man, for Erigena, is a microcosm of the universe because he has senses to perceive the world, reason to examine the intelligible natures and causes of things, and intellect to contemplate God. Through sin man’s animal nature has predominated, but through redemption man becomes reunited with God. [...] The works of Erigena are in J.-P. Migne’s *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. 122.”

⁵² For summary information on Herakleitos’ cosmology, see the entry devoted to him in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 13, p. 7503: “Though he was primarily concerned with explanations of the world around him, Heraclitus also stressed the need for people to live together in social harmony. He complained that most people failed to comprehend the *logos* (Greek: “reason”), the universal principle through which all things are interrelated and all natural events occur, and thus lived like dreamers with a false view of the world. A significant manifestation of the *logos*, Heraclitus claimed, is the underlying connection between opposites. [...] His understanding of the relation of opposites to each other enabled him to overcome the chaotic and divergent nature of the world, and he asserted that the world exists as a coherent system in which a change in one direction is ultimately balanced by a corresponding change in another. Between all things there is a hidden connection, so that those that are apparently “tending apart” are actually “being brought together”. Viewing fire as the essential material uniting all things, Heraclitus wrote that the world order is an “ever-living fire kindling in measures and being extinguished in measures.” He extended the manifestations of fire to include not only fuel, flame, and smoke but also the ether in the upper atmosphere. Part of this air, or pure fire, “turns to” ocean, presumably as rain, and part of the ocean turns to earth. Simultaneously, equal masses of earth and sea everywhere are returning to the respective aspects of sea and fire. The resulting dynamic equilibrium maintains an orderly balance in the world. This persistence of unity despite change is illustrated by Heraclitus’ famous analogy of life to a river: “Upon those who step into the same rivers different and ever different waters flow down.” Plato later took this doctrine to mean that all things are in constant flux, regardless of how they appear to the senses.”

Diogenes Laertius IX, I provides us with an interesting biographical sketch, which seems to be based on the fragmentary sayings of the philosopher that have survived the passing of time:

Heraclitus son of Blosson (or, according to some, of Herakon) of Ephesus. This man was at his prime in the 69th Olympiad. He grew up to be exceptionally haughty and supercilious, as is clear also from his book, in which he says: 'Learning of many things does not teach intelligence; if so, it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, and again Xenophanes and Hecataeus.' ... Finally he became a misanthrope, withdrew from the world, and lived in the mountains feeding on grasses and plants. However, having fallen in this way into a dropsy he came down to town and asked the doctors in a riddle if they could make a drought out of rainy weather. When they did not understand he buried himself in a cow-stall, expecting that the dropsy would be evaporated off by the heat of the manure; but even so he failed to effect anything, and ended his life at the age of sixty.⁵³

In the third and fourth epitaphs we move back in time to ancient China with two enigmatic figures: Ch'ü Yüan and Ssu-ma Ch'ien, who lived in the third and first century BCE, respectively. These are the epitaphs quoted in full:

Hunan, 289 B.C., [BC in SP]
Ch'ü Yüan, finding air insufficient [Qū Yuán in SP]
for certain syllables, taking
the springwater into his lungs.

*

Shensi, 90 B.C., [Shaanxi & BC in SP]
Ssu-ma Ch'ien, his left hand hovering [Simǎ Qiān in SP]
where his balls had been
and his beard going, still pushing
the brush, bringing the record to its end.

BW, p. 122.

On the one hand, Ch'ü Yüan takes his own life by drowning himself in the Mi-lo River, a tributary of the Yangtze. Death by water: that was his fate. One of the greatest poets of ancient China and the earliest known by name, Ch'ü Yüan⁵⁴ (b. c. 342 BCE, state of Ch'u, central China – d. c. 289, Ch'u) wrote verse that had a tremendous influence over early Chinese poetry. He was born a member of the ruling house of Ch'u, a vast state in the central valley of the Yangtze River. As a young man he was appointed as a trusted counselor of his kinsman Huai Wang, the ruler of Ch'u. However, due to the malice of rival courtiers who intrigued against him, he was estranged from the throne and banished to the south of the Yangtze River by Huai's successor. He wandered about southern Ch'u in despair, writing poems while observing the shamanistic folk rites that influenced his own work. In the end, he decided to take his own life and drowned himself in despair in the Mi-lo River, a tributary of the Yangtze. His works survive though in the *Ch'u tz'u* (*Elegies of Ch'u*). On the other hand, from the entry devoted to him by Bringhurst in the final glossary, we learn that Ssu-ma Ch'ien was a "historian, author of the *Shih Chi*. After speaking too boldly in front of the emperor, he was sentenced to castration – an invitation,

⁵³ Quoted by G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, in *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge: CUP, 1957/1983 (2nd edition), reprinted 1990, p. 181.

⁵⁴ See the entry on 'Chü Yüan' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Micropaedia, vol. 3, p. 295.

in the custom of the time, to take his own life instead. But Ssu had not yet finished his book. To the court's consternation, therefore, he accepted the punishment and went on with his writing."⁵⁵ Thus, the Chinese historian is presented as a model of perseverance, integrity and devotion to one's calling in life: instead of taking his own life once and for all, he makes up his mind to cut his own testicles and keep on working on his last book. In this he resembles other sages, ancient and modern: Socrates drinking the poisonous drink, or Seneca cutting his own veins. Sometimes visionary and audacious minds are unjustly condemned to untimely deaths by the tyranny of obscure minds.

Goethe's appetite for life and knowledge and experience resembles Bringhurst's appetite for ideas as a cultural historian in search of illuminating fragments of the past that might shed light on obscure or shadowy areas of the present. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (b. Aug. 28, 1749, Frankfurt am Main [Germany] – d. March 22, 1832, Weimar, Saxe-Weimar), was a polymath: a German poet, playwright, novelist, scientist, statesman, theatre director, critic, and amateur artist, considered the greatest German literary figure of the modern era. In the European context of his time he is probably the epitome of the Classicist and Romantic movement, broadly understood. He embodies the spirit of the era that has come to be termed *the Enlightenment*, in much the same way Dante epitomized the spirit of the High Middle Ages, or Cervantes and Shakespeare represented the culture of the Renaissance. Goethe led a chameleon-like and prolific life; he lived his life with a rare beauty and intensity. The last years of his existence he spent working with astonishing energies till the very end, for, if nothing at all, he was a man with a tremendous appetite for life – the life of the senses and the life of the mind. Though his literary output and total oeuvre is simply astonishing in volume and wide-ranging in thematic interests, he is probably best remembered by his *Werther*, *The Wanderings of Wilhelm Meister*, or *Faust*, which is one of the long poems central to the Western canon, alongside John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. He had a tremendous calling for poetry, drama and science, but he was also involved in mundane issues as a statesman throughout his long life, wrote complex works, autobiographical and scientific writings. But there was no decline in Goethe's amazing energies. During the last years of his life, he stayed in Weimar and its immediate surroundings. It was a final stage of renunciation, an acknowledgment of the reality of the passing of time, strength and life. But it was also a time of extraordinary, indeed probably unparalleled literary achievements⁵⁶ by a man of advanced age. "Only in August 1831 – when, shortly before his 82nd birthday, he sealed the manuscript of part two of *Faust* for publication after his death – did he say he could regard any life that remained to him as a "pure gift". The following spring, having caught a cold, he died of a heart attack, sitting in his armchair in the modest little bedroom beside his study, on March 22, 1832, at about 11:30 in the morning."⁵⁷ In Bringhurst's recreation of the last sigh of the German poet, we get to hear his last words:

Weimar, 1832 A.D., not [AD in SP]
 stared down, staring back, nor even
 staring, gutbürgerlich Goethe simply [gutbürgerliche in SP]

⁵⁵ See *The Beauty of the Weapons*, p. 158.

⁵⁶ From the entry devoted to Goethe in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, volume 12, pp. 6703-13, we learn that "Partly in order to secure the financial future of his family, [...] he prepared a final collected edition of his works, initially in 40 volumes, the *Ausgabe letzter Hand*. In the course of this huge task, he rewrote and greatly expanded *The Wanderings of Wilhelm Meister* (1821; 2nd ed. 1829). He also wrote a fourth section of his autobiography *Poetry and Truth*, completing the story of his life up to his departure for Weimar in 1775; he compiled an account of his time in Rome in 1787-88, *Zweiter Römischer Aufenthalt* (1829); and above all he wrote part of *Faust*, of which only a few passages had been drafted in 1800." (p. 6711)

⁵⁷ See the entry on 'Goethe' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 12, p. 6712.

peering in at it, muttering
for more light, more light, more light, another angle. [a better in SP]

BW, p. 123.

So here Bringhurst has chosen as one of his “Six Epitaphs” Goethe’s last words. Light is life, and darkness is possibly death in this particular context. By now we are well aware that light is a pervasive presence in Bringhurst’s poems in this collection. There is light in “Song of the Summit”, in “Four Glyphs”, in “Poem about Crystal”, in “Three Deaths”, in “Demokritos”, in “Poem Without Voices”, among others. For more light in his poems we can look almost anywhere. And there is also darkness, of course. In a lucid critical essay on Bringhurst, Canadian poet Charles Lillard claims that Pound is the source from where the poet has lifted light for his poems:

Light. Another echo. Pound? Clearly, Bringhurst has read Pound and learned much, but Pound’s light is the light of the justly famous Seven Lake Canto: “Boat fades in silver; slowly; / Sun blaze alone on the river.” Light is clarity; thought. Bringhurst is not infatuated with the play of light on objects, images of sensation not intellect. For these are not the poems of an observer; they are the poems of a prying and curious intelligence...⁵⁸

In the last place, the sixth epitaph, comes the oldest of ancestors – Aeschylus⁵⁹ (b. 525/524 BCE – d. 456/455 BCE, Gela, Sicily), the first of classical Athens’ great dramatists alongside Sophocles and Eurypides, who raised the emerging art of tragedy to great heights of poetry and theatrical power. Aeschylus’ father’s name was Euphorion. He and his family probably lived at Eleusis (west of Athens). The ancient dramatist grew up in a difficult time when the Athenian democracy, having thrown off its tyranny, had to prove itself against both self-seeking politicians at home and invaders from abroad. At the age of 35, Aeschylus himself took part in the Battle of Marathon – in his city’s first struggles against the invading Persians. On that particular occasion, the Athenians managed to repel the Persians quite successfully. But above all, Aeschylus was a prolific dramatist and he wrote approximately 90 plays, including satyr plays as well as tragedies. Of these, about 80 titles are known, but only seven tragedies have survived entire. Some official records concerning the first prizes awarded the winning playwrights testify to the great success he achieved in the Great Dionysia, Athens’ major dramatic competition, which was a part of the festival of Dionysus. Each of three dramatists would produce three tragedies, either connected or unconnected in plot sequence, followed by a satyr play of a burlesque nature. Aeschylus is recorded as having participated in this competition, probably for the first time, in 499 BCE. He won his first victory in the theatre in the spring of 484 BCE, and his later career was marked by sustained dramatic success, though he was eventually defeated by the young Sophocles in 468 BCE. But in the next year Aeschylus was victorious over the younger’s poet entry with his *Oedipus* trilogy (of which only the third play, *Seven Against Thebes*, survives).

Aeschylus was then both a man of letters and a man of arms. While actively immersed in dramatic production, he fought and was possibly wounded at the Battle of

⁵⁸ Charles Lillard, review of *Tzohalem’s Mountain* and *The Beauty of the Weapons* published in *The Reader* 2.2 (Vancouver), June 1983: 1-4. See p. 1 in particular.

⁵⁹ See the entry on ‘Aeschylus’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 1, pp. 153-156, for detailed information about the life and literary career of the dramatist, as well as the fundamental contributions he made to the art of the theatre at the very beginning of Greek drama. In his MFA thesis, *Carmina propria et opuscula translata* (1975), Bringhurst includes “Four Fragments” from the Greek of Aeschylus, also published in C.11 Two poems and one translation, in *West Coast Poetry Review* (Reno, Nevada) 3.3 (Spring 1974): 50–52.

Marathon, in which his own brother was killed. Aeschylus singled out his participation in this battle years later for mention on the verse epitaph he wrote for himself. After producing the masterpiece among his extant works, the *Oresteia* trilogy, in 458, Aeschylus went to Sicily again. History has it that Aeschylus' death took place at Gela (on Sicily's south coast) in 456/455, aged 69. A ludicrous story that he was killed when an eagle dropped a tortoise on his bald pate was presumably fabricated by a later comic writer. At Gela he was accorded a public funeral, with sacrifices and dramatic performances held at his grave, which subsequently became a place of pilgrimage for writers. Bringhurst's epitaph broods precisely on the burial place in southern Sicily, where a simple stone amid a wheat field signals the exact location of Aeschylus' remains. No reference at all is made to his facet as dramatist; the focus is on his role as a soldier instead. Now that he is quite dead and immortal at the same time, the only eulogy he needs is that of the trees surrounding his tomb and that of the enemies (Persian enemies in the battlefield and dramatic competitors on the scene) who are still alive:

Sicily, 456 B.C., [BC in *SP*]
 a stone in the wheat stubble speaking
 for Aeschylus, charging in summary: only [Aiskhylos in *SP*]
 seacoast trees and surviving
 enemies be permitted to praise him.

BW, p. 123.



“Poem Without Voices”

“Poem Without Voices”⁶⁰ is a precious love poem of rare beauty and perfection in Bringhurst's entire corpus. There are other love poems in *The Beauty of the Weapons*: for instance, “These Poems, She Said” is a *sui generis* love poem and also a meditation on the nature of poetry itself; the enigmatic “The Heart Is Oil” explores the heart as the love organ *par excellence* through audacious metaphors; “Leda and the Swan” delves into the obscure recesses of a myth and into a violent form of love. Needless to say, love is an anthropological universal and one of the eternally recurrent topics of the poetry written in innumerable languages and literary traditions throughout the history of humankind. There is love, there is death, and there is time. There is not much else. The strand of love could not be lacking in such a rich tapestry as *The Beauty of the Weapons*. As critic Douglas Barbour puts it:

There is much to admire and enjoy in this volume, from the severely intellectual poems of the early years to the strangely lyrical yet violently aware poems on the vagaries of love which fill out the second half of the book. Most of Bringhurst's poems are too long to quote, but “Poem Without Voices” (despite the fact that here as elsewhere it is the various and vigorous voices which make the poem so

⁶⁰ “Poem Without Voices” was published elsewhere before it was incorporated into *The Beauty of the Weapons*: (1) In *Canadian Literature* (Vancouver) 93 (Summer 1982): 176 and (2) in *Toronto Star*, 3 June 1995: J2. Later it was also published in the anthology *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Three*, edited by Gary Geddes, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001: pp. 388-400, alongside “The Beauty of the Weapons”, “Anecdote of the Squid”, “The Stonecutter's Horses”, “These Poems, She Said” and “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985”. Recently, it has been reprinted in *A.92 Selected Poems* (2009).

intriguing; but perhaps this title points to the lyrical quality of the poem – without other voices, it implies) provides a glimpse of his abilities.⁶¹

For a proper understanding of “Poem Without Voices”, more than a simple or accurate knowledge of words and their subtle evocations or connotations is required. One needs a knowledge of words and a knowledge of trees to understand a poem uttered by no voices at all. But voices cannot come *ex nihilo* or out of the blue. They emanate from a real, physical body, and this is possibly the case in this piece, alternately spoken by two voices that are engaged in a sort of silent dialogue. Bringham is a poet concerned with orality and breath, with poems as being the breathing emanation from a soul, and performance is the test his poems must stand so as to keep on being a part of the unending *work in progress* which his corpus or *living repertory* has come to be with the passage of time. It is only natural that one of the poems in this volume should be entitled “Poem Without Voices” – or, for that matter, that one of the central sections in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986) should be entitled “The Book of Silences” (a long meditation in the form of short poems on Oriental sages and philosophers), which became a completely autonomous and different book on its own in 2001.

Simple and straightforward as it is as a poetic artefact, four movements for the mind are easily identifiable in “Poem Without Voices”, which turns out to be articulated around a potent dichotomy that comes into full circle by the end of the composition. This is at least a plausible interpretation of a poem that allows for no easy interpretations. In any case, the elemental universe of the poem consists of three simple ingredients – light, wind and silence – which are recurrent images in Bringham’s poetry, as already pointed out somewhere else in our critical analysis of the poems in *The Beauty of the Weapons*. In the first movement (the three opening lines), one of the voices says:

The light that blooms in your body
blooms in my hands. Around us the ground
is strewn with its petals.

BW, p. 124.

Light is life in other Bringham poems, but here it possibly stands for love. If light is what we need to be able to see the world in its manifold ramifications and subtle nuances, then it must also be essential for love to make itself manifest to the other’s eyes. We humans do not need much to live: air for breathing, food for sustenance, light for seeing, and love for making sense of the world at large. Everything else is redundant, secondary, superfluous. The light that blooms in the loved person’s body is subtly connected to Neoplatonism, to the idea that human beings are surrounded by a special kind of halo that makes them unique and irreplaceable to another person’s sensibility. But Bringham’s major accomplishment in these three verse lines is an astonishingly complex image in which light becomes a sort of flower that blooms in the beloved’s body and in the lover’s hands. Both things, the beloved’s body and the lover’s hands, are reunited in the petals that the flower of light sheds on the ground around both of them. Of course, light cannot bloom as if it were a flower or have petals covering the ground around the lovers. But this is audacious poetry, and this is a beautifully complex image, almost a vortex. This first movement is thus punctuated by the use of possessive adjectives (*your* body / *my* hands) and the personal first-person object pronoun *us*, which brings the lovers together.

⁶¹ Douglas Barbour, *Canadian Poetry Chronicle* (1984), Kingston, Ontario: Quarry Press, 1985, pp. 16-17.

The first-person personal pronoun *I* enters the poem and marks the beginning of the second movement, where the reader is given some important clues for understanding the piece:

I have seen on a street in Guadalajara
wind set the petals of a jacaranda
down on the ground surrounding a pine.

BW, p. 124.

At first sight, this looks like poetry based on the contemplation of an image. This looks like a piece of purely objective recording of phenomena taking place in the world as perceived by the poetic voice. Detachment is the predominant tone in these verse-lines. It is curiously reminiscent of such Imagistic pieces as “The Red Wheelbarrow” or “This Is Just to Say” by William Carlos Williams, or of some short lyric poems like “Anecdote of the Jar” by Wallace Stevens. The reader begins to feel that every single impression, each reflected quality of light, each image recorded within the limits of the poem as artefact, is somehow verifiable. The raw data out of which the poet makes his own poems must exist somewhere in an objective way, in an accurate archive perhaps, or written on the inside of Bringham’s skull. Here the poet is the territorial recorder, or the attentive reader of signs and indices in the world outside. But he is also an acute observer and is endowed with an intelligence alert to the subtle nuances of reality. In addition, he also has got an immense knowledge of many different things, including botanical knowledge of flowers and trees. The relevant question to ask here is then *What kind of trees are a jacaranda and a pine tree?* A jacaranda is a tropical tree that grows in warm climates; it has got blue flowers and pleasant-smelling wood. By contrast, a pine is a tall forest tree with leaves like needles that is evergreen and grows in cool northern countries. The wind in Guadalajara has set the petals of a jacaranda down on the ground around a pine. This piece of simple information seems to be unimportant, but it is not at all, as we shall see. It makes sense when we get to read the two following movements of the poem:

Love, this is evergreen. Let it be. [;let in in *SP*]
You will see, they fall also. Listen
again: the silences

ripen
deep in the sullen beaks
of the intricate wooden flowers.

BW, p. 124.

One of the voices engaged in this silent dialogue says that “*this is evergreen*”, where the demonstrative *this* possibly means “this love relationship”. If this love is evergreen, then it is eternal, everlasting, like the pine tree, which never loses its needles. To this reasoning, the other voice replies quite laconically and pessimistically that these needles will also fall – *the intricate wooden flowers* are probably the pine cones, which are hard and wooden – and so this love is ephemeral, transitory, and is bound to die in much the same way petals fall down onto the ground. The falling of leaves is a common metaphor evoking physical decadence. (Petals are already a potent metaphor for human lives in Homer’s *Iliad*, by the way. They fall off the tree of life into a secure death associated with the dust on the ground.) At this point of the poem, the dichotomy at the core of “Poem Without Voices” is crystal-clear: while the pine tree is an evergreen tree, the jacaranda is a deciduous one. Though love is

born with a vocation for eternity and it wants to be evergreen, it turns out to be deciduous or ephemeral, like so many other things in this world of transient things.



“Bone Flute Breathing”

“Bone Flute Breathing”,⁶² the title poem of this important section in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), is another complex and accomplished composition. Bringham’s love of bone, of light, and of the stone mountains are made of, is palpable throughout what looks like a narrative poem with appealing mythic resonances about it. His love of music and of poetry is also palpable here. Like other poets of his generation such as Christopher Dewdney, Bringham ranges widely in time and space for his ostensible subject matter. The fruits of his incursions into corners of the world literary tradition unknown to us is a poetry which is also wide-ranging and reveals a shrewd and passionate intelligence. And myth is no doubt one of the major distinctive features of his poetic sensibility. Under the section *Bone Flute Breathing* there are several poems concerned with myth in one way or another, for, though Bringham is a modern poet, he is deeply rooted in tradition and mythology. Thus, “Leda and the Swan” recounts the story of the young woman’s rape by Zeus under the guise of a swan; “Death by Water” offers a fresh perspective on Narcissus’ self-annihilation because of his anguished love of his own image as reflected in the water; “The Better Man” revisits the myth of Orpheus’ descent into Hades in search of his beloved wife Eurydice and his subsequent loss; and “Cave of the Nymphs” is rich in echoes from some chapters in Homer’s *Odyssey*. They are all variations on classic stories and myths lifted from Greek mythology, which is the very cradle of the Western mythopoeic thinking. However, the poet uses myth in much the same way the Modernist masters (Pound, Eliot and Joyce among them) used myth: as a potent prism through which to analyze modern reality *sub specie eternitatis*, as if outside the ephemeral province of time where all human experience takes place. There is an atemporal quality about mythical poems in Bringham’s corpus, precisely because he is asking fundamental questions that have been asked time and again by poets, scientists and philosophers over time.

Myth is then of the essence in Bringham’s poetics, for he is interested in matters of universal significance, and myth, like science or philosophy or poetry, looks for universals that are pertinent to humankind in its entirety. In this approach to mythology lies a distinctive feature of Bringham’s work. He looks over his shoulder to the past to find his connection to the world and to a larger poetic context that includes the voices of his ancestors, and he rescues what illuminating fragments he can find from that inexhaustible reservoir of myths which remain relevant to our modern sensibility. In a wide-ranging

⁶² This is the editorial history of the poem. It was first published in A.14 *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982) and then it was revised in A.47 *The Calling* (1995) and further revised in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009). Later it was reprinted in its successive incarnations in B.73 *Currents: Stories, Essays, Poems, and Plays*, edited by Kevin McNeilly, Noel Elizabeth Currie, William H. New & William E. Messenger, Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice Hall, 2000: pp. 354-356; in B.81a *A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, edited by Donna Bennett & Russell Brown, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002: pp. 954-975, together with “Essay on Adam”, “The Stonecutter’s Horses”, “Leda and the Swan”, “These Poems, She Said”, “The Reader” and “Conversations with a Toad” (all rpt. from A.47); and in *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, 3rd ed., ed. by Donna Bennett & Russell Brown, Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2010: pp. 989-1005, alongside “Essay on Adam”, “Leda and the Swan”, “These Poems, She Said”, “The Reader” and “Conversations with a Toad” (all rpt. from A.92). The text we use for our critical analysis is that of *Selected Poems* (2009), though textual variants are noted in customary form where relevant.

discussion on contemporary Canadian poetry, poet and critic Robin Skelton points out that there is in Bringhurst's work "a simplicity born of a deep awareness and understanding of the mythopoeic instinct in the center of man."⁶³ Myth is concerned, after all, with what remains the same in spite of the passage of time. Unlike mathematical language, which is written in an elegant combination of abstract symbols and ciphers and figures, mythical language is closer to the language of poetry or of music. It has got its own ancestral echoes, its own naïve way of looking at the world as if through fresh or new eyes. Therefore, what we get to see in a poem like "Bone Flute Breathing" is a new view of the world through the prism of mythical structures. It belongs among such early poems as "The Sun and Moon" and it anticipates another long narrative poem like *Tending the Fire* (1985). All three poems betray the mythic compulsion inherent in humankind; to the philosophical or scientific way of thinking, it is necessary to add the mythical and poetical way of thinking about the world from a completely new standpoint. In his conscientious exploration of myth as a kind of universal *Ursprache*, Bringhurst has followed in the steps of his mind as further into the light as it has taken him. He has explored not just *civilized* Greek mythology, but also remnants of myths from other traditions, especially from the world of the First Nations that first dwelled in what is now Canada many years ago, as preserved in the great oral poetry of the Haida. Ethnopoetics and the work of anthropologists and linguists such as Franz Boas, John Swanton, Benjamin Lee Whorf, Edward Sapir, Dell Hymes, Dennis Tedlock and many others have illuminated the paths he has taken.

In much the same way *Tzubalet's Mountain* (1982) is a *sonata in three movements*, "Bone Flute Breathing" is a myth-like narrative poem in three movements. It consists of three distinct parts – a beginning, a middle and an end –, and three characters are involved in a simple plot. The poem tells the story of a woman who could play a bone flute beautifully and would feel offended by a stranger playing it without having asked for permission. Then she would ask her brother to take revenge for this offence and, after a demanding and long musical duel for a guitar and a bone flute, the stranger is killed and metamorphosed into a strange creature by the man with the guitar. Douglas Barbour claims that "Even as he seems to be inventing new tales, as in the extraordinary "Bone Flute Breathing," with its insistence on the violence implicit in art and love, the ghost of an ancient archetypal tale hovers over the lines."⁶⁴ We are not sure about the exact source for this story, but we shall return to these illuminating words later in our critical analysis. 1982 is an important year in Bringhurst's life: he starts studying the Haida language on his own. That would prove a life-long passion that has continued up to the present. It takes a lot of intellectual stamina to start learning an Indian language from scratch as it were, producing one's own study dictionary as one goes along; and it takes a lot of creative talent and passion to be able to read the old Haida oral poems, comparable to Homer's epic monuments in complexity and breadth, and to transmute all that knowledge into something new and original as part of one's own poetic corpus. The whole process of learning Haida would culminate in the publication of the impressive trilogy devoted to Haida oral literature – *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World* (1999), *Nine Visits to the Mythworld. Ghandl of the Qayahl Llaanas* (2000), and *Being in Being. The Collected Works of a Master Haida Mythteller. Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay* (2001) –, which included translations into English of the masterworks by Haida mythtellers Ghandl and Skaay. Since the early 1980s, Bringhurst's passionate study of the world of the First Nations has given its own fruits in the form of

⁶³ See Robin Skelton's essay entitled "Recent Canadian Poetry", published in *Poetry* (Chicago) 144.5 (August 1984): 303.

⁶⁴ See Douglas Barbour's discussion of *The Beauty of the Weapons* in *Canadian Poetry Chronicle* (1984), Kingston, Ontario: Quarry Press, 1985, p. 16.

works⁶⁵ devoted to oral literature and myth, the visual arts, Haida artist Bill Reid, language and ecology. This is an essential part of his writing that testifies to the wide-ranging interests of a poet, a linguist, a typographer and a cultural historian endowed with an immense appetite for knowledge, an immense generosity and love of all things, human and non-human alike. In any case, in this particular context, this is just to highlight the fact that “Bone Flute Breathing” is possibly full of echoes from this new interest in Bringhurst’s intellectual life. The influence of the oral literatures of the First Nations is already latent somewhere in the background of this astonishing piece, premonitory of *Tending the Fire* (1985) and subsequent works in many respects. It is impossible to put the finger exactly on one source or another, but the world of the First Nations is lingering somewhere mid-air in this complex poem.

A narrative poem in three movements that tries to capture a new myth is the gift we find in “Bone Flute Breathing”. The title itself is already illuminating and eloquent enough. The alliteration found in *bone* and *breathing* is no random choice either. All three words constellated into this succinct title remind us of three simple ingredients that are involved in the main subject matter of the poem: *bone* means the human body at large, or the irreducible skeleton of our material part (incidentally, it is also the material both musical instruments in the story are made of); *flute* as a musical instrument represents music in general or humans’ creative impulse, which is to be found everywhere in the history of humankind; and *breathing* reminds us of Bringhurst’s *poems being products of oral composition*, of the *physical dimension inherent in the making of poetry as spoken or sung words*, of the *superiority of speech over writing*, especially in the case of poems that are still part of a living repertory provided they are fit or suitable for oral performance before an audience. Now, speech, like music, emanates from the living body. Both are tools of communication human beings have at their disposal to be able to convey their amazement in the face of the overwhelming grandeur of the world. *Bone*, *flute* and *breathing* are then inextricably linked to one another as isolated lexical units that evoke worlds of meaning subtly connected to each other. Of course, a second reading of the title unravels significant clusters of meaning (*bone flute* being the pre-modifier of *breathing*): this poem we are about to listen to as performed by Bringhurst’s voice is concerned with the story of a woman who breathed her music through a flute made of bone. The poem itself might be the song this strangest of women played on her bone flute.

The poem opens with two stanzas written in simple, understandable, clear language that provide the reader with the setting of the story:

They say that a woman with steel-gray [This line opens like this: *Love*, in *BW*]
eyes has lived for a thousand years

⁶⁵ *The Raven Steals the Light* (with Bill Reid), 1984; *Part of the Land, Part of the Water: A History of the Yukon Indians*, (with Catherine McClellan et al.), 1987; *The Black Canoe: Bill Reid and the Spirit of Haida Gwaii* (with photographs by Ulli Steltzer), 1991 (2nd, augmented ed. 1992); *Native American Oral Literatures and the Unity of the Humanities*, 1998; *Solitary Raven. The Selected Writings of Bill Reid*, by Bill Reid, edited by Robert Bringhurst, 2000; *Translating Haida Poetry: An Interview with Robert Bringhurst*, by Therese Rigaud, 2002; *Prosodies of Meaning: Literary Form in Native North America* (Belcourt Lecture), 2004; Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay, *Sixxa / Floating Overhead: The Qquuna Cycle 3.3.*, 2007; and *Solitary Raven: The Essential Writings of Bill Reid*, by Bill Reid, edited by Robert Bringhurst, with an Afterword by Martine Reid (2nd expanded edition), 2009.

in these mountains. They say that the music
you almost hear in the level blue light
of morning and evening is music she played
in these mountains many years ago
on a flute she'd cut from the cannon bone
of a mule deer buck she'd tracked and wrestled
to the ground.

They say that at the first few notes
she played, her sisters started giggling, because,
instead of listening, they were watching
the change that came over her face.
She stalked off in anger, and for years thereafter
only in darkness did anyone ever hear [hear in the following line in *BW*]
the flute. Day after day
it lay silent on the mountain,
half hidden under a whitebark pine.
No one else was permitted to touch it,
much less to watch her while she played.

Selected Poems, p. 88.

The verse lines are harmonious, the language is kept crystal-clear, and the musicality keeps ringing in one's ears once one has stopped listening to the words spoken aloud. The story takes place in the solitude of the mountains, where so many Bringham poems find their right spiritual setting. And the story is meant as a mythical explanation of the music that is heard in "*the blue level light of morning and evening*." Once upon a time there was a woman resembling the Greek goddess-huntress Artemis who killed a mule deer buck. With its cannon bone she made herself a flute that she would play only in solitude under the cover of night and darkness, for her sisters giggled at her the first time she played her first notes. They were unable to truly listen to the magnificent melodies she played; they paid attention to the way her face changed with the playing instead. This is the first, simple movement of the poem. Next, the second movement brings to the fore other fundamental questions: "Bone Flute Breathing" also dwells on the violence that appears to be implicit in the creative act, on the relationships holding between poetry and music as the expression of the same ancestral creative instinct in humans, and on the interaction between omnipotent gods and goddesses and simple mortals (the interaction between the divine and the human). The second character in the story enters the scene now:

But a man came by one day from another
country, they say, who had never heard either
the flute or the story, and he found the flute
on the ground, under the pine tree, where it lay.
As soon as he put it to his lips, it played.
It breathed her music when he breathed,
and his hands began to find new
tunes between the tunes it played.

Selected Poems, p. 88.

This stanza marks the beginning of the true unfolding of the poem; we are installed right in the middle or core of the story. A man coming from a different land, a complete stranger, finds the woman's flute and starts playing it. To his surprise, in his playing he finds out that it is her breath that is playing tunes on the flute. All the same, he manages to find his own tunes "*between the tunes it played*." It might be a far-fetched conjecture to say that the woman

represents tradition, that inexhaustible reservoir of potential tunes that has been treasured and expanded over time, and that the stranger is the poet himself, trying to find his own poetic voice among the tattered fragments or remnants of melodies rescued from the past. At this point, the poem would turn into something of a meta-poem (i.e., a poem about the act itself of making a poem), and the song would turn self-reflexive for a second in a way. The point is that it is no easy task to turn back to tradition in search of one's voice without much effort being required on the part of the striving poet. The strange woman feels angry "at this intrusion" and "complained about the stranger to her brother, / who lived on the other side of the world." The woman's brother is the third important character in this story. He lives far away and decides to get rid of the stranger in an astonishing way, as we shall see below. The fact that he lives so far away and that he makes his own musical instrument (a guitar) out of "an elk's skull and antlers and a mountain cat's / intestines" and teaches himself to play it in almost no time, possibly supports our hypothesis that brother and sister are not human. The brother embodies an elemental natural, brute force of creation and violence at the same time; he is the masculine principle in the world, in much the same way his sister might well represent the impulse towards creation inherent in humankind. (We are reminded at this point of Wallace Stevens's astonishing poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar" too.) He is the one who challenges the stranger to a musical contest, one that is strongly reminiscent of the classical duels among shepherds in much Greek-Latin literature and eclogues in the history of Western literature:

Coming over the hills that way,
without a name, one stranger to another,
he challenged the stranger with the flute to a musical
duel to be judged by the woman who lives
in these mountains.

Selected Poems, p. 89.

Two unnamed strangers consent to participating in a musical contest of a very peculiar nature. It remains unclear whether the stranger was wary enough or not, or whether "he could see only / one choice." The musical duel is a nonstop duel that lasts a whole week:

They played night and day, and the stranger,
while he listened, watched the eyes,
and when they wandered, watched the lips
of the woman who lives in these mountains.
Sister, said the eyes; *sister of the other* [; instead of . in BW]
who is playing the guitar. But the lips said, *Music*
of the breath, music of the bone. And the breath [comma instead of and in BW]
of the woman, whether she willed it to or no,
kept moving in the flute whenever the stranger
played. After seven nights and days,
everyone knew the stranger was the winner.

Selected Poems, p. 89.

At least two key aspects need to be emphasized here. First, it is the woman's eyes and lips that remain an inexhaustible source of inspiration to the stranger's playing all the time. It is her breath that plays the tunes on the bone flute in the hands of the stranger. If we keep on taking to new extremes the metapoetic analogy propounded above, this means that tradition (the best that has been thought and felt by the masters of the past) affirms itself and finds its own voice in the work of the aspiring poet-singer. And second, the alliterative and parallelistic message the woman's lips deliver to the stranger – "Music of the breath and

music of the bone” – reminds him (and the aspiring poet) that true poems are music born from the inside of one’s body, from one’s own lungs and bones. For poems to be valuable at all, the whole body, attentive to what is going on out there in the world, must be actively involved, because the body is a prolongation of the world, and the other way around. It is at the interplay of world and body/consciousness that great art is born. This is a sort of meditation on poetics in miniature. It is a succinct statement, with the force of aphoristic brevity and the clarity of water. To write everlasting poems it is necessary to pay attention to *what is* and *what isn’t*, within and without the body, for poetry is not mere subjective self-expression or narcissistic outpourings of the soul. However, this is only the first of the lessons the woman teaches us. At this point in the story, it appears that the stranger is to win the musical contest for sure, but the man with the guitar goes a step further by suggesting that they should sing a song to the accompaniment of their respective musical instruments: “*Stranger, can you sing? Stranger, can you sing us / a song along with the music you play?*” The man with the guitar’s superiority is out of the question now: his hands become water spiders that play the guitar with the talent of a virtuoso, and a song leaves his lips with a spontaneous naturalness that astonishes everyone. When the stranger’s turn comes, he seems to be unable to utter a single word:

The stranger in his turn stared
hard into the air and far into the eyes
of the woman who lives in these mountains.
And the eyes stared back, and the eyes said, *These* *Sister. / Sister of the other who is playing the guitar in BW*
are the eyes of the sister of the other, and the stranger
played and the stranger played, and no word *[Note after note he played, but no word in BW]*
came. He stared long at her lips,
and the lips said, *Bone*. The lips said,
Wordless breath in the bone. And breathe
as he would, he could not
sing through the music he played.

Selected Poems, p. 90.

It is now the stranger’s turn to sing his own song. Hard as he may try to find inspiration in the air and in the woman’s eyes and lips, he is unable to sing a song. Now he learns the second part of the lesson: “*Bone. Wordless breath in the bone.*” Bones do not speak at all; they do not have a language of their own. It is only breath that we will find there. This may sound paradoxical, for *How*, one may ask, *is the poet then to transmute what is and what isn’t into poetry if it is not through the medium of words? What other tools has he got to accomplish it?* We have reached an impasse in the interpretive process of this poem. There seems to be no way out, unless these words are an invitation to silence, to pay attention, to remain awe-struck by the immediacy and sublime grandeur of reality, to listen to what it has to tell us before we become articulate enough to do something about it. Breathing and hearing are the essential prerequisite for *an attentive mode of being in the world*, one characterized by the humility of learning to have an open mind, open eyes and ears in the face of *what is*.

Violence, love and creation appear to go hand in hand in the third closing movement of the poem. Once the man with the guitar is declared as the winner of the duel, the woman tries to take hold of the bone flute, but her brother takes both instruments and breaks them into innumerable pieces. In words marked by an intense lyricism and daring images, Bringhurst describes the way the man with the guitar kills the stranger with a simple splinter from the bone flute. After peeling his entire body, he ends up by cutting his limbs into thin fillets. One is inevitably reminded of Orpheus, the mythical singer and poet

par excellence from antiquity, who got torn into pieces by maddening Maenads at the end of his life. Possibly this stranger has attempted to become a new Orpheus, but he has quite forgotten that he is but a simple mortal and that it is an act of *hybris* to try to compete with pitiless gods and goddesses. The whole scene is visually dynamic and written in terse language:

Then, taking the stranger by the throat,
he threw him flat against the ground. [full stop instead of , in BW; spun in BW & TC]
And taking a splinter from the flute,
and moving swiftly, like a crouching
dancer, he peeled the living flesh
away from the stranger's feet and hands.
He peeled his face and hips and ribs
and neatly filleted each of his limbs. [carefully in earlier version in BW]

One by one he extracted the stranger's
bones, and one by one he replaced them
with the splinters of the deerbone flute
and the shattered skulls and antlers
that had been his own guitar. [which in previous version in BW]

He stitched the splinters into the stranger's
fingers, into his head and chest
and limbs with the mountain cat's intestines,
and set him on his feet, and propped the last splinter
of the bone flute upright in his hand,
and walked off, stopping to scrub
his own hands in a shrinking bank
of spring snow, never uttering a sound.

Selected Poems, pp. 90-91

Now the circle is complete. The man with the guitar has not simply killed the man who dared play the bone flute; he has metamorphosed him into a strange creature. Demiurgus-like, he has threaded the shattered fragments of the guitar and the bone flute into his body, which he has stitched with the intestines of a mountain cat. The stranger's body has now absorbed, as it were, the remnants of both musical instruments – the ineffable pain and violence that creation itself entails. The closing verse lines are sad and moving: after spending a long time without being able to move at all, now this stranger is trying to go back home. A second, different explanation is given about the music heard in “*the level blue light of morning and evening*”:

The stranger stood there motionless [Love, ... in BW]
for years – but they say that the music you almost
hear in the level blue light of morning
and evening, now, is the sound of the stranger
moving, walking back toward his own country,
[painfully,] one step at a time. [painfully, omitted at the beginning of this verse-line]

Selected Poems, p. 91.

The music is the sound of the stranger trying to go back home, not the woman's playing the bone flute any more. The end of this story is enigmatic and sad. It is unfair that the poor stranger should end his days like this. He is no longer human, he has drunk the milk

of Paradise, as Coleridge would say. He now knows what it means to try to get new tunes out of the bone flute, which is possibly a symbol for art and creation. It is a demanding, painful task, one that brings about almost the annihilation of the self. But, after all, life is like that: sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. It might be necessary to lose to be able to start all over again from scratch. The closing words – “*one step at a time*” – suggest that it takes time to make oneself whole again. Art makes one exhausted, and working with your brains is not the same as working with your hands. It takes time to find the necessary peace of mind and concentration to be able to produce a work of valuable, lasting poetry.

Tzuhalem's Mountain

A Sonata for Solo Intelligence, in Three Movements

I · INTRODUCTION

*Tzuhalem's Mountain: A Sonata in Three Movements*¹ was first published in a special limited edition beautifully designed by Oolichan Books in 1982. Robert Bringhurst has always paid attention to the very material design of his own books; he is a devoted typographer and a lover of books as *perfect artifacts* or *beautifully made objects* after all. The first edition of *Tzuhalem's Mountain* is no exception, of course. Afterwards, it was revised in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), and further revised in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995) and in *Selected Poems* (2009), where the original poem shows some significant textual variants. The poem consists of 21 short poems or sections arranged into a structure resembling that of a sonata, which is a musical form for one or more instruments in three or four movements. The original dedication, acknowledgment and colophon² of the first edition would never again be reprinted in subsequent written incarnations of the text, though the untitled headnote was expanded in *The Beauty of the Weapons*. This sort of prologue to the poem was omitted in *The Calling*, where it is replaced by a short entry on 'Tzuhalem' in the "Cast of suspicious characters", and completely omitted in *Selected Poems*, where the subtitle is slightly different: "Sonata for solo intelligence, in three movements". In addition, the first edition also included some notes clarifying oddities and special terms in the poem (entries on 'birdsnest lichen', 'earthlute', '*hic amor, haec patria*', 'empetrum', '*lonicera involucrata*' at the end of *Tzuhalem's Mountain*), which were preserved in the glossary at the end of *The Beauty of the Weapons*, but not in *The Calling* or *Selected Poems*. This is just to suggest that *Tzuhalem's Mountain*, like the rest of Bringhurst's *living repertory*, has known subsequent written incarnations and that it is a poem that is still truly alive only in the voice, not so much frozen on the page.

Tzuhalem's Mountain is a crucial poem in the unfolding of Bringhurst's literary career over time towards maturity for a number of reasons. It is also a special kind of experiment. It was immediately published after the great dramatic monologues of the 1970s in the tradition of Robert Browning in search of a much cherished objectivity and impersonality – *Deuteronomy* (1974), *Jacob Singing* (1977) and *The Stonecutter's Horses* (1979) –, so that the idea of impersonating another person's voice was not something new. Here he appropriates the voice of a man called Tzuhalem who lived in the 19th century in a mountain that bears his

¹ A.12 • *Tzuhalem's Mountain: A Sonata in Three Movements*. Lantzville, British Columbia: Oolichan Books, 1982. 40 p. Cloth without dustjacket, 17.5 × 28.5 cm. "The edition is limited to 250 copies, the first 26 of which are lettered A–Z and the remaining 224 of which are numbered with Arabic numerals, all copies being signed by the author." ISBN 0-88982-044-9. Contents: A poem in 21 sections (rpt. in A.14, A.47 & A.92), with untitled headnote (rev. in A.14). Includes a dedication and acknowledgement not reproduced in subsequent appearances. One excerpt of the poem, "Body, Speech and Mind" [*Tzuhalem's Mountain* IV], was reprinted in B.43 *Lyric Philosophy*, by Jan Zwicky, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992: pp. 33, 175, 459, together with "Poem about Crystal" and "The Beauty of the Weapons" (all rpt. from A.14).

² "This first edition of *Tzuhalem's Mountain*, by Robert Bringhurst, composed in Intertype Baskerville with Centaur heads and printed on Carlyle Japan paper by MORRIS PRINTING COMPANY LTD. of Victoria, British Columbia, is published by Oolichan Books, Lantzville. The frontispiece engraving is reproduced from a drawing by Paco Castillo. The edition is limited to 250 copies, the first 26 of which are lettered A-Z and the remaining 224 of which are numbered with Arabic numerals, all copies being signed by the author. THIS IS COPY --."

name to this day. Who exactly is Tzuhalem? Bringhurst himself gives us the details in the untitled headnote preceding the sonata itself:

I have set these poems of love and not-love under the name of a deformed man, out of a nagging feeling that they belong there. The spectre, and in due course the speaker, or one of the speakers, is a hunchbacked, sausage-mottled, dead Coast Salish Indian named Tzuhalem. Once I sailed into his cove – now on the charts as Genoa Bay – and camped looking up at his rock, still called Tzuhalem’s Mountain.

Around 1830, leaders of the Halkomelem Salish villages near the mouth of the Cowichan River, on Vancouver Island, excommunicated and banished one of their own people. This exile was Tzuhalem, whom his elders had convicted in absentia of bride-theft and murder. The sentence must have been for judicial rather than practical effect, for Tzuhalem, if we may believe the tradition, had scarcely been seen in his native village for twenty years. He and his family, then estimated at fourteen wives and an unknown number of children, lived alone on the steep granite bluffs of what since then has been his mountain.

Some say that Tzuhalem acquired and kept his cluster of loves through occult means, others that he used more brute physical methods. Whatever the case, in spite of his deformity there were women in his camp, and new ones among them every year. Though the sentence of banishment made him fair game, he was killed only in December 1854, at the age of about sixty – his head halved with a Hudson’s Bay axe as he tried to kidnap yet another wife from one of the Gulf Islands.

I have nothing to add to his story. I have taken his name; and I have transported even that into other and higher mountains, elsewhere in the Salish country.³

So here is a Coast Salish Indian, a hunchbacked man who had an immense appetite and an irrepressible passion for women. Whereas in *Deuteronomy* and *Jacob Singing* Bringhurst borrows the quiet voices of the Biblical prophets, and in *The Stonecutter’s Horses* he borrows the voice of the Italian humanist Francesco Petrarca (all three figures preparing to die, by the way, which is no happy coincidence either), here he has chosen to impersonate Tzuhalem’s voice in a dramatic monologue in bits and pieces, composed in 21 tiny parts on an analogy with a sonata. At the very basis of all four compositions is a profound love of *the human voice as an instrument of breathing* and the firm conviction that *poems are born in and out of the voice*, not out of written language. As Bringhurst himself puts it in the crystal-clear prefatory note to *The Beauty of the Weapons*, his poems are products more of orality than of written composition, and they remain alive as part of a living repertory as long as they meet the standards of oral performance before an audience. It remains to ascertain whether *Tzuhalem’s Mountain* is woven with voices other than Tzuhalem’s, for at times we get to listen to a lover’s voice speaking of a beloved that is now vanished, and at times we get to listen to a subtly autobiographical voice which resembles that of the poet himself, and even at other times we get to listen to the voice beneath *the song of the flesh* (or the song of existence itself) that the *old woman* invoked in some of the sections of the poem sings. These are *poems of love and not-love* after all; they sing of the birth and the extinction or

³ The prefatory note in *The Beauty of the Weapons* has got an extra paragraph that reads as follows: “And what of the sound and taste of that name? If we take the names of the dead in our mouths, shouldn’t we do so in voices the dead might understand? The pronunciation of this one poses a problem for those who do not speak a Salish or Wakashan language, and who have not had phonetic training. The usual anglicization rhymes with *New Salem*.”

metamorphosis of love into something else. Whatever the case, from the whole experience the speaking subject emerges renewed, refreshed, made wiser in a way.

Apart from orality and the human voice, there are other important strands interwoven in the making of this complex poem:

- (1) Bringhurst's interest in the oral literatures, languages, visual arts and cultures in general of the First Nations had, no doubt, a major impact on his way of conceiving of his own poetry, and so, in this respect, *Tzubahalem's Mountain* anticipates much of the author's subsequent research work in the field of the First Nations as cultural historian and translator of the monumental poems of Haida literature. This long poem in 21 sections is also strongly reminiscent of the long poem "Bone Flute Breathing" (first published in *The Beauty of the Weapons*), which must have been composed in the same period in Bringhurst's life, and it anticipates *Tending the Fire* (1985), a long myth-like narrative poem also pervaded by echoes from the oral poems of the First Nations.
- (2) Bringhurst has always been interested in prosody and music, and the relationships holding between music and poetry. It is no happy coincidence that *Tzubahalem's Mountain* should have such a subtitle: *A Sonata in Three Movements*. In this respect, it anticipates many of the much more complex polyphonic experiments that Bringhurst would accomplish in the following years – notably *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986), *Conversations with a Toad* (1987), *Ursa Major* (2993/2009) and *New World Suite no. 3* (2005). Possibly it all began with the publication of *Hachadura* (1975), a *chaccone for solo intelligence* in 12 parts, where the poet already drew on the world of music in search of analogies with poetry. As Iain Higgins has put it,

Tzubahalem's Mountain reveals him shifting the focus of his interest in indigenous cultures from South and Meso-America to the Pacific Northwest. Designated 'a sonata in three movements' (perhaps after Bunting's use of the term, but also influenced by Beethoven), *Tzubahalem's Mountain* also reveals the important influence of music on his habits of composition.⁴

- (3) A third strand in the making of *Tzubahalem's Mountain* is not so easy to put the finger on: it is related to an emerging awareness of what we could call an *environmental or ecological concern*, which is pervasive in the later polyphonic poems, especially in *Conversations with a Toad* and *New World Suite no. 3*. This is closely connected to yet another essential dimension in Bringhurst's poetry which we could call *the sublime in Nature*. His poetry is full of moments of revelation that take place amid the solitude of mountains. *Tzubahalem's Mountain* is set in the mountains too. In fact, in a short acknowledgements note in the first edition of the poem, the author himself informs us that it came into being thanks to the financial and institutional support of the Canadian Council:

This is one among several Anishnabe-Madhyamika-Gringo sonatas begun during a year of work and solitude financed largely by the Canada Council. To those who supported my application for the money, and to the jury which approved it, I am shamelessly grateful.

I am grateful, too, to my friend William Hoffer, who rescued the text from a desert of praise. To him, in honor of our profound disagreements concerning the

⁴ See Iain Higgins' entry on "Bringhurst, Robert," in W.H. New, ed., *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002, p. 153.

rape of the earth – disagreements in which, of course, I am right and he is wrong – and to the lady already named, for reasons she’s well aware of, this edition is affectionately dedicated.⁵

Thus, the poem came into being *during a year of work and solitude* spent near Tzuhalem’s Mountain. Bringhurst’s experience brings to one’s mind echoes from other such literary enterprises as that of Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, working on *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, amid the solitude of trees in New England in the 19th century. In the woods it would be possible for him to get to know the truer, deeper even more primitive being of humankind, and to reach a much more profound communion with what is essential in life. This elemental confrontation between self and Nature is at the very heart of American Transcendentalism and it has clear Romantic affiliations. Its roots are to be found in German and English Romanticism on European soil, which believed in the possibility of an unmediated communion between the soul and Nature, the Emersonian *Over-soul*. It seems to us that, in his year of work and solitude spent in the mountains, Bringhurst is following closely in the steps of his Romantic ancestors. In this respect, dwelling on Bringhurst’s dramatic monologues, especially those spoken by Moses and Jacob, literary critic Wayne Holder speaks of “the savage amorality of the voice of many of the other poems, particularly that of the Tzuhalem sequence. This is the effect of wild landscape unmitigated by civilization or religion. It quite simply brings us to our knees. It is something most Canadians know something about. It is the voice of the Wendigo whispering on our ears.” And he expands on the all-important idea of *a primeval confrontation between man and landscape* still further in words that are worth quoting in full:

Bringhurst is very much a man of the West. He is an outdoorsman who has chosen to measure himself against the mountains rather than the buildings of Toronto or Montreal. His are the eyes cleansed by the astringency of the salt spray, the far-seeing eyes that can see what lies beyond the Pacific and that look backward from the heights of the Rockies across the imagination-begging expanse of the West. They have their place in a scale that dwarfs the human figure and have little to do with the bench marks of critical opinion calibrated in the East. They are a challenge to us in the West to find a critical and poetic language with which to further the exploration of *our* world through the use of the only tools, the only weapons we can rely on. [...]

There is a primeval confrontation rejoined here between man and landscape, which can batter the spirit and destroy the mind. I take it *Tzuhalem’s Mountain* poses this problem, Here is a new voice, recreating legend in the absence of God, The legend is more than oral history and more than song. As all legends, the Tzuhalem cycle is in part instructional. There is danger there, in the hills, for the human spirit is unprotected by belief. This is the authentic emergence of a voice of a new generation addressing itself to the Nietzschean directive, “God is Dead.”⁶

It is simply unbelievable that such a literary accomplishment as *Tzuhalem’s Mountain* should have eluded the critics’ attention when it first saw the light of day in 1982. Poet and critic Charles Lillard was truly enthusiastic about the work. It was clearly no minor poem in Bringhurst’s unfolding corpus. Bringhurst himself is grateful for William Hoffer’s having rescued it from such an unbelievable desert of praise. In any case, Charles Lillard emphasizes the quality of the language – one of intense lyricism, clarity and beauty – as well

⁵ The poem in this first edition is dedicated to William Hoffer, printer, and to a lady that is only named through her initials: *for L.T. & William*.

⁶ See Wayne Holder’s review of *The Beauty of the Weapons*, published in *The Vancouver Literary News* 4.83 (April 1983): 30-31.

as the musicality pervading the whole poem, its capacity to sing a song that one cannot but listen to attentively with open, receptive ears:

In the last section, “Tzuhalem’s Mountain” (also published as a separate volume by Oolichan Books), this struggle becomes autobiographical – “I have set these poems of love and not love – but the poems are not a mirror.” “Love,” a metaphor; the object: to make the language sing... [...] The haunting beauty of these poems will take the reader back to an earlier poem [“A Quadratic Equation”]... Everywhere today is heard the complaint, poetry is not read. But, as someone once remarked, “When poets sing people listen.” Bringhurst is singing. He is the poet people have been waiting for; his voice is genuine.⁷

For his part, literary critic Steven Smith highlights the thematic concerns of the sequence, while not forgetting that the 21 sections that comprise *Tzuhalem’s Mountain* speak of a more subtle song which is not easily audible – *the song of the flesh*, the song of existence:

My own preference is for Bringhurst’s most recent work, the parables included in “Tzuhalem’s Mountain,” written in 1982. It is a sonata in three movements that deals with existence and the natural elements. The final movement concludes with the “Parable of the Sun” and man’s, perhaps the poet’s, struggle, presented in an image that echoes through time:

The man in the sun, savaged
by cats, drags his cloak through the waters...

One emerges continually provoked, yet satisfied from Bringhurst’s vision and his “panning for the bones of existence.” Bringhurst/shaman brings us “not a catalogue of the animals he has named, but a festival of those who are still speaking”; the song of existence, as heard by the poet.⁸

So the 21 sections are grouped in three movements dealing with the song of the flesh, the song of existence. The words are pervaded by a sensuous musicality, the language is kept simple, and the profundity of thought is again palpable in all the well-wrought pieces that make up this beautiful mosaic. Great poetry captures the reader’s attention in the first place through acoustic means. Such was the conviction of the Modernist masters Pound and Eliot. Bringhurst is convinced that a good poem fits the voice, the breath, which is the organ with which we handle words. And he is convinced that his poems are more the product of oral composition than of writing. His words rise as if naturally from his own voice, in a spontaneous way that makes us feel that every single word falls exactly into place, that none can be removed without seriously damaging the whole. There is indeed a sense of inevitability about the arrangement of words in his poems. In great poems there is no room for improvisation: every single detail has been carefully studied and placed exactly into place to contribute to the overall effect. Great poems also penetrate the ear first and move humans’ taste for euphony before they touch the intellect, or they do both things simultaneously. Reading the little 21 jewel-like sections of *Tzuhalem’s Mountain*, perfect works of art in miniature, one is under the impression that each single poem has been lovingly carved out of the undifferentiated mass of speech, fashioned out of words with great care, attention and struggle as well. On one level, there is a sense of absolute

⁷ See Charles Lillard’s review of *Tzuhalem’s Mountain* and *The Beauty of the Weapons*, published in *The Reader* 2.2 (Vancouver), June 1983: 4.

⁸ Steven Smith, “Blood and Butterfly Bones”, a review of *The Beauty of the Weapons*. *Books in Canada* (Toronto) 12.7 (August/September 1983): 25-27.

spontaneity in the words chosen; on another level, one senses that there is much craftsmanship implicit in the whole sequence. *Effortless perfection* – this is what probably best defines the overall impression one gets in the face of this work of art. Bringhurst’s achievement is breathtaking; that it should have been the fruit of a sojourn in the mountains in utter solitude strikes the attentive reader as being a miracle. The poet goes to the mountains broken-hearted, possibly dispirited, and comes back whole, with a bundle of poems of difficult beauty under his arm, or a mouthful of live words in his voice. None would have imagined that the precious conjunction of mountains, solitude and the ghost of a Salish Indian who lived in the 19th century could produce such a sonata for the mind’s delight.

II · The Sonata of *Tzubahalem’s Mountain*: A Critical Analysis

First Movement

The first movement of the sonata that *Tzubahalem’s Mountain* consists of seven short poems: “Parable of the Three Rocks”, “Parable of the Harps”, “Parable of the Yew Trees”, “*Body, Speech and Mind*”, “Parable of the Stream”, “Parable of the Thinker”, and “Parable of the Two Birds”. Even if each piece has got the beauty and perfection of a circle in its own right, all seven short compositions are subtly connected to one another, not just through lexical recurrence and parallelism, but also thematically in the subject matter they all deal with. The pattern will make itself discernible as we go deeper into the way each poem has been tightly woven as a perfect linguistic artefact which is inevitably linked to the preceding and following pieces in the whole composition. The pattern in the carpet will become visible in due time as we progress in our detailed critical analysis of the whole sonata. Needless to say, the poems that make up this *Gestalt* are complex and difficult, even if they are written in a muscular, deceptively simple language that strives after precision all the time. The subtle modulations of the voice or voices we get to hear beneath these poems, speaking these verse lines, evoke the spectre of Tzubahalem, that Coast Salish Indian who lived in the 19th century in the mountain that bears his name to this day. His long shadow pervades the whole sonata from beginning to end, though on some occasions the speaking voice is clearly not his own. Though Bringhurst set out to impersonate the Indian’s voice, though *Tzubahalem’s Mountain* is bits and pieces, as it were, of a dramatic monologue – or a dramatic monologue in tiny parts –, we suspect there are other voices that can still be heard in these poems apart from Tzubahalem’s. These are, after all, poems of love and not-love. Sometimes it a lover’s voice amid the solitude of the mountains that we hear in these poems, and it is appealing and moving because of its sincerity and the intensity of the emotions it tries to depict in a simple, straightforward language which has the immediacy of the natural world and its elements.

“Parable of the Three Rocks” is the title of the very first composition in this sonata. Sonatas are said to be a musical form for one or more instruments, usually consisting of three or four movements. From Bach’s time onward, the first movement was generally in allegro tempo and in sonata form. *Allegro*, in this context, means fast-moving, dynamic and probably with a festive quality about it. In this respect, we should expect this movement to be a triumphant celebration of love, and yet we find poems of both love and not-love within the short space of just seven short poems. “Parable of the Three Rocks” is a love poem, no doubt, but the closing stanza leaves something of pessimistic taste on one’s tongue, for it flouts the reader’s expectations all of a sudden, as we shall see. The

apostrophe “love” or “my love” that opened the poem in its first two textual incarnations in the Oolichan Books edition and *The Beauty of the Weapons* in 1982 is now missing. In *The Calling* (1995) and *Selected Poems* (2009) versions of this sonata, the opening vocatives addressed to someone referred to as “love” in the earlier versions have been systematically omitted as a rule, which is an eloquent gesture in itself. There are at least three distinct parts in this poem. The conceptual skeleton is tightly-woven into the perfect symmetry of the whole composition. In the first two parts of the poem, the speaking voice has seen a man take two basic ingredients from the natural world, *birdsnest lichen* and *three white stones*, and lay them into the cup of the lichen nest to represent the two lovers and the world. Nothing else needs to be added: the universe is complete, and love makes sense of it all. This could be as well an act of cosmogony and the man would be a sort of demiurgus; it is as if we readers were present at the first day of creation. These are Bringhurst’s words:

I have seen in the mountains a man pluck [Love, L., in 1st ed. & BW. Love omitted in TC & SP]
 birdsnest lichen from the limb of an alpine
 fir, where it hung in the wind like sea-green
 goat hair; I have seen him gather three
 white stones, as sharp and clear as milkteeth. [milk teeth in 1st ed. & BW]

I have seen him lay these cracked
 pieces of rock into the deep
 cup of the nest like a creature
 half hunter, half long-legged bird,

and seen him carry them away: three
 razor-sharp stones: two
 to stand for two lovers
 and a third to stand for the world.

I have seen three razor-edged, milk-white
 stones in a nest of sea-green lichen
 on a table and heard them explained to inquisitive
 visitors as the teeth of deepwater fishes [deep-water in previous versions in 1st ed. & BW]
 or the eggs of carnivorous birds.

SP, p. 95.

Moved by a scientific impulse that makes him love precision as a sign of respect for the complexity and beauty of the world, Bringhurst tries to be as much precise as possible in his use of words. *Birdsnest lichen* is one of those terms that need clarification, and so, in his notes at the end of the Oolichan Books edition, and in his glossary on oddities and difficult terms in *The Beauty of the Weapons*, the poet devotes a short entry to this special kind of lichen that is to be found near Tzuhalem’s Mountain:

BIRDSNEST LICHEN *Alectoria sarmentosa*, also called, in spite of its pale green color, Old Man’s Beard. It is ubiquitous in the subalpine forests of the Coast Range, where it grows, along with the darker lichen called Bear’s Hair (*Bryoria* spp.), in the branches of conifers.

With a handful of birdsnest lichen and three little milkteeth sharp-razor stones, the unknown man mentioned in the poem manages to build a nest that stands for the whole world in its entirety. It is only natural that a poem like *Tzuhalem’s Mountain*, set in the physical space of mountains, should begin with a piece devoted to stones. They are the essential matter that mountains (and the whole Earth) are made of, but in this particular

context they take on resonant, cosmic connotations. There are at least two possible interpretations of what the three rocks lying on their nest might represent: one, they are the two lovers and the world (a cosmos in miniature, as it were, which is an excellent homage or eulogy to love), and this is the metaphorical or figurative interpretation; or two, they are simply “*the teeth of deepwater fishes*” because of their sharp-razor shape, or “*the eggs of carnivorous birds*” because of their colour and their being placed in what looks like a nest, and this is the literal interpretation based on the perception of the objective appearance of physical things in the world (i.e., the way objects appear to our sensibility through our senses). The little “*milkwhite stones*” possibly represent the naïvete and innocence of a look at the world capable of penetrating into the invisible layers of meaning inherent in things – also the innocence of true, great love, or of humanity in its infancy. That they are nothing more than teeth or eggs turns out to be a disappointing, odd or even exotic explanation. In any case, the *carnivorous birds* mentioned at the end of the poem have already ominous connotations about them that will become even more obvious in the III poem.



“Parable of the Harps” is a technical accomplishment. It is clearly a most beautiful love poem. It is a pity the poet should have decided to omit all the apostrophes addressed to the beloved that we find in all earlier versions prior to *The Calling*. Whereas the physical setting in “Parable of the Three Rocks” was the crystal clear landscape of mountains in the open air, the setting in “Parable of the Harps” turns out to be completely different: we are back into the familiar geography Bringhurst explores so often in his poems – the inner, labyrinthine geography of the human body. This accounts for the proliferating or recurrent references to *blood, heart, vein, muscle, bone, limbs, eye, and ear* that we find in so many Bringhurst poems. It is only in the closing stanza that we learn that we are witnessing a love encounter in a bed in the lovers’ room, which is in the best tradition of such anthology poems as John Donne’s “The Canonization”. The poem is worth quoting in full if we are to really appreciate the masterful control over form and content on the part of the poet in the space of just four three-verse-line stanzas:

In the drum of the heart [Love, in... in 1st ed. & *BW*. Love is omitted in *TC* & *SP*.]
are the hoofbeats of horses – the horse
of the muscles, the horse of the bones.

In the flutes of the bones are the voices
of fishes – the fish of the belly,
the fish of the fingers and limbs.

In the streams of the limbs [Love, in in 1st ed. & *BW*. Love is omitted in *TC* & *SP*.]
we are swimming with fishes
and fording with lathering horses.

In this bed full of horses [My love, in this bed... in *BW* & Love, in this bed... in *TC*.]
and fishes, I bring to the resonant gourds
of your breasts the harps of my hands.

SP, pp. 95-96.

From a purely technical point of view, a closer look at the inner structure of the poem reveals that several devices have been deployed to make it such a powerful statement on love. First, there is metaphor, which is central to the whole composition. The first part of the poem (stanzas 1 and 2) are a necklace of brilliant metaphors that bring parts of the

body, musical instruments and animals together into magnificently resonant clusters of meaning. The metaphors are nothing but linguistic and conceptual equations stated in simple declarative sentences: (1) the hoofbeats of the horses of the muscles and the bones can be heard in the drum of the heart and (2) the voices of the fish of the belly, the fingers and the limbs can be heard in the flute of the bones. This lends the poem a rare and precious physical immediacy that we also find in other poems of the Bringhurst corpus such as “Leda and the Swan” and, most significantly, in “Bone Flute Breathing”, where the poet draws on similar analogies that bring the realm of the human body and the realm of music together. Indeed, the new ingredient in “Parable of the Harps” is the reference to animals (horses and fish), which turn out to be central to the whole sonata, as we shall see below.

Secondly, parallelism and structural symmetry and alliteration (particularly of /h/ and /f/ sounds) give the poem an astonishing texture and muscular rhythm. They also make the verse lines sound harmonious. This is then a finely-wrought poem or artefact in which every single word falls into place. Thus, every single stanza ends with a word which is then taken up in the following stanza and expanded upon (*bones-limbs-horses*) in a masterful way. In the second part of the poem (stanzas 3 and 4), the metaphors unfolded in the opening stanzas are brought into a perfect circle, while new ones are added to make the circle even more perfect. Now the limbs of the lovers’ bodies are conceptualized as being a stream in which they have the company of both fish and horses – this is possibly meant as a lyric or poetical reference to the sexual act. There is only one musical instrument lacking, the one mentioned in the very title of the poem. “In this bed” the lover’s hands become harps that touch the gourds the beloved’s breasts are. Whereas in “Parable of the Three Rocks” the three white stones stood for the two lovers and the world, in “Parable of the Harps” the whole world has been brought into or absorbed by the lovers’ bodies and bedroom. Microcosm and macrocosm – the human body as the world in miniature, or the world as an extension of the human body, or the human body as part of the universe at large – are again all-important notions beneath Bringhurst’s way of perceiving the beauty of the world. He says the world is much more complex and interesting than sheer subjectivity and private emotions, which does not mean that humans are unimportant in themselves. They are just part of that grander scheme of things that the world is.



Now, “Parable of the Yew Trees” is a poem of not-love, even if it is subtly connected to the two previous love poems. The *bed full of horses and fishes* of “Parable of the Harps” provides the reader with the immediate physical setting of the new poem, while the *carnivorous birds* already present in “Parable of the Three Rocks” are a menacing presence with gloomy connotations in the very first stanza:

In this bed full of horses [Love, in... in 1st ed. & *BW*. Love is omitted in *TC* & *SP*]
 and fishes, carnivorous birds
 are leading us down into oceans
 and up into mountains. My love,
 in this bed full of fishes and horses, [horses and fishes in 1st ed. & *BW*]
 carnivorous birds are screaming
 their names and repeating their stories,
 though no one can hear them.

SP, p. 96.

The lovers' bedroom appears to be no idyllic place any more. Carnivorous birds feed on other animals' meat; they are pitiless, they do not care. That they should intrude into the lovers' bed all of a sudden is certainly an uncanny or even threatening idea. They are screaming their own names and their stories, but no one seems to hear them, or no one can simply understand what they are saying. In the second stanza we have the core of this poem of not-love. Simile or comparison is central to the whole construction of this stanza, for lovers are successively compared to *foraging ospreys* that are falling (onto their prey, we presume), to salmon climbing up out of the sea, and to horses climbing up into the mountains that are pervaded with the horrifying sounds of carnivorous birds. But then, all of a sudden, the lovers are said to be carnivorous birds themselves that are still climbing further into somewhere else – up out of the mountains and further into the untrodden recesses of the air. The progressive movement has been upwards, from the sea through the mountains and into the unknown verticality of the air. We could as well conjecture that love is taking the lovers higher where they belong, into an ethereal province of bliss and eternal joy, but the fact remains that through metaphor they have been identified with carnivorous birds, which is not a felicitous term of comparison in the context of a love poem. Lovers are dehumanized, as it were, deprived of their human qualities, and this dehumanization reaches a true climax in the third part of the poem:

They say when we reach there
in the salt mirrors of your eyes
I will see only birds, and you
on the walls of my eyes only fishes.
They say in this bed full of fishes
and birds, all the men you have known
will ride through your face and fall
from their horses, drowning in sunlight and ashes,
the ospreys will dive and the salmon will climb [this line = beginning of a different stanza in 1st ed., BW & TC]
from the sea and the yew trees will lend us their voices,
though nothing we say with them then
will reach through these distances. [those in 1st ed. & BW]

SP, pp. 96-97.

Nothing is left of the lovers when they reach the higher spheres of the air, nothing except eyes that reflect birds in her eyes and fishes in his eyes. And it is birds that eat fish, not the other way around. In fact, nothing seems to be left of her lovers once they share her bed with her; they are consumed into ashes, into nothingness. They fall off their horses into a secure death in a bed which is full of fishes and birds. All animals – birds, fishes, salmon, horses and ospreys – are conjured up into this tiny space which is the lovers' bed, but to no purpose at all, it seems. That the yew trees should lend the lovers their own voices to try to speak some kind of truth proves completely useless, for “*nothing we say with them then / will reach through those distances.*” “*Those distances*” is an anaphoric reference back to “*when we reach there*” – the far away regions in the upper spheres of the air, or, to put it figuratively, some new stage of their love relationship in which words no longer serve their purpose because there is nothing left to be said.



“Body, Speech and Mind” is the pivotal centre or central poem in the first movement of *Tzubahalem's Mountain*. It is a perfect meditative love poem of rare beauty and perfection. It comes as no surprise that Jan Zwicky should have decided to include it in her

impressive *Lyric Philosophy*, an intense meditation on poetry and philosophy as ways of coming to terms with reality and truth. It recalls the earlier poem “A Quadratic Equation” in its purely thematic concerns and also in its concision. The title itself is eloquent enough, as it announces the subject matter the author is about to tackle. It brings together the Cartesian *res extensa* (body) and the *res cogitans* (mind) together, and to these fundamental elements it adds a third basic ingredient which makes human beings precisely human beings: speech. The poet could have chosen another word, like *language*, but by choosing *speech* he is emphasizing the fact that words, those weapons charged with so many nuances of meaning, are an emanation of the body, are spoken out of our lungs, and have a purely physical or physiological basis. Words are nothing more than modulated air that gets out of our body and finds its way back into the air out there. In this sense, words unite the human body and the world at large of which it is a part in an astonishing way. Speech is words emanating from one’s own body and speaking one’s own mind in harmony with the world. Thus, in “Body, Speech and Mind” we get to hear a profoundly gnomic voice on the verge of revelation, trying to communicate an almost ineffable truth to those who might care to listen with open ears to what it has to say about fundamental questions. It is the poet as seer or bard, in the tradition of his Romantic predecessors (Coleridge and Blake, among them), that is speaking these words addressed to a “love” that is possibly the beloved, with whom he desires to share his revelation in the first place.

Bringhurst has suggested time and again that the world is much more complex and interesting than we humans with our petty preoccupations and feelings, but, to us, it is even more fascinating to explore the interaction or the interplay between both – between the perceiving self and the perceived world. It seems to us that this is precisely what Bringhurst is dwelling on in this poem. This short poem consists of three simple stanzas. In the first stanza, we are back into a recognizably physical setting, an elemental world of stones and air which the poet depicts with simple economy by means of just a few linguistic strokes:

In the high passes the stones turn,
tuning the air. They are silent
who live there. As the cat
kills at the throat and then opens
the belly, those who can speak
lurk back toward the valley,
into the alder over the river,
where the air is played.

SP, p. 97.

There is a marked contrast set up between silence and speaking. Up there in the mountains there are only silent creatures and there are turning stones tuning the air. Stones are silent and cannot do anything except this: tuning the air. The air is played somewhere else – in the valley, among the rustling leaves of the alder, next to the flowing waters of the river, where “*those who can speak / lurk back.*” And yet, in the total book of Nature, every single creature seems to have a language of its own and to be able to speak it. Even non-living things like stones have stories to tell about the past of the Earth, or have left glyphs and signs for humans to interpret them in search of the truth. But the core of the poem is found in the second and third stanzas. The equation at the heart of the second stanza is that *tuning and playing* are *knowing and saying*:

This is tuning and playing, love,
this is both, this is knowing and saying,
this is the dark heart of the bone

breathing like pine trees, this
is the heart like a claw in the ground.

SP, p. 97.

Knowing means tuning the mind into the world and it possibly stands for philosophy; *saying* means playing the song of truth and it possibly stands for poetry. All of a sudden we are back into the intimate geography of the human body, but this time it is spontaneously reconciled with the world outside. That the “*the dark heart of the bone*” is able to breathe like pine trees and that the heart is like “*a claw in the ground*” means that a perfect, blissful communion with Nature has been achieved. The sublime in Nature is touched for a while, exactly at the point in which the perceiving self and the perceived world become one and the same thing – the painful abyss separating the *res extensa* and the *res cogitans* is bridged. In many of his poems Bringham is after this mystic union, after these precious moments of revelation in which humans feel that they belong among a world of beauty and perfection of which they are but a tiny part. In this sense, the poet is always striving hard to take knowledge back to a pristine state of purity. We do not need to learn much, but only the essentials, and this is one of the fundamental things we need to know about *our being here in the world*: that it is possible to find a salutary peace of mind, to experience a new kind of wholeness, to know harmony and equilibrium amid the world. Even if everything is in a state of permanent flux, it is still possible to know stasis, to contemplate everything as if out of the whirlpool, in a province outside time, untouched by change. If we manage to make our breathing synchronous with the breathing of the air in the trees or in the water, a new peace of mind is achieved quite effortlessly. Stasis within motion is suggested by the repetition of *-ing* forms throughout the poem that are midway between the essences named by nouns and the actions evoked by verbs – *tuning, playing, knowing, saying* and *breathing* in the second stanza. Significantly enough, *singing* is repeated three times in the closing stanza:

This is the sound of the body
singing, the voice in its place,
under cliffs, by the bloodstream,
holding the skull in its outstretched
arms like an overturned bowl,
and singing, and singing
the song they dream near the rocks
in the difficult air.

SP, p. 97.

The third stanza brings together the three words constellated into the title. Now the body sings a song, the voice (speech) is in accord with the world and embraces the skull (physical container of the mind). The song the body is singing is possibly a celebration of the sublime in Nature, and a celebration of the truth that has been revealed to the presiding consciousness in this poem: that body, speech and mind belong among the things in the world if they are to be whole and in peace. And yet, it remains unclear what the personal pronoun *they* refers to in the penultimate verse line. Does it denote the silent creatures *who live there*, in those remote places up there in the mountains where there seems to be only room for stones and silence? Or is it an impersonal reference instead, meaning the indecipherable messages that come into being “*near the rocks / in the difficult air*”?



“Body, Speech and Mind” is followed by two short jewel-like poems that are subtly connected to the preceding poem. The word *bone* provides the best possible lexical connection in this intertextual web that is being woven among the 21 poems in *Tzibalem’s Mountain*. This is the equivalent of musical variations on the same theme, which is explored from a number of different points of view but never completely exhausted. What “Parable of the Stream” and “Parable of the Thinker” clearly have in common is the same enigmatic aura about them (they are riddle-like poems), as well as palpable traces of Bringhurst’s love of language and *le mot juste* (the one and only correct word to use), his love of the music of sounds and the music of ideas, and his love of crystal-clear imagery with the force of physical immediacy. Or as Pound himself would put it: *melopoeia*, *phanopoeia* and *logopoeia*, the dance of the intellect among sounds, images and ideas. Every single word falls exactly into place; none can be removed or added without substantially changing the whole. One is reminded of Charles Lillard’s short lyric meditation on the gift to readers’ ears that the language in Bringhurst’s poetry is:

Incantation. The clear precise value and strength of the word. Each word
in its own space, alone, deep in its own history and meaning.
Eliot. Arnold. Cavafy. Richard Howard and W. S. Graham.
Associations. Echoes.
Thus Alcaes: “Child of the rock and the grey sea.”
Bringhurst’s love of stone, [...] and the light.⁹

This type of language is clearly discernible in “Parable of the Stream”, to begin with. It is a seven-line poem in just one simple stanza. In its concision and precision, it is strongly reminiscent of other poems in Bringhurst’s corpus like “Poem about Crystal”, “A Quadratic Equation”, “Scholium” or “An Augury”:

Love, he has seen them
before, he has known
they were there,
scattered and gleaming.
Now in the clear
stream of your flesh
he is panning for bones.

SP, p. 98.

The poem opens with an apostrophe or vocative, “love”, possibly addressed to the beloved. In any case, what is truly enigmatic about this short composition is the third-person personal subject and object pronouns *he*, *they* and *them*. Who is the *he* mentioned three times in such a short poem? Is it intended as an anaphoric reference to one of the ominous *carnivorous birds* mentioned in sections I and III of *Tzibalem’s Mountain*? Or is the lover referring to himself in the third person? And is the *them/they* a cataphoric reference to *bones*, which is the last word in the poem? Whatever the case might be, this unknown creature has an intimate knowledge that what it is looking for is already there. The carnivorous bird is searching for bones in *the clear stream* of the beloved’s flesh. One usually pans for precious things like gold pieces in the waters of a river, but in this particular context it looks as if the bird had an insatiable hunger for bones, the precious core of the beloved’s body – the dark heart of bones that are able to sing a song in accord with the natural world. The beloved’s body is a source of life and so the central metaphor in this

⁹ See Charles Lillard’s review of *Tzibalem’s Mountain* and *The Beauty of the Weapons*, in *The Reader* 2.2 (Vancouver), June 1983: 1.

short poem equates her to a stream. What one (the bird or the projected image of the lover himself) hunts in the beloved's stream of a body is not slathering fish, but their equivalent – singing bones.

The meaning of “Parable of the Stream” becomes clearer if read in conjunction with “Parable of the Thinker”, another short poem of only eight verse lines. Once again, the poem is addressed to a “love”, the beloved. Now the speaking voice in the poem shifts to the first-person personal pronoun *I*; we presume it is the lover's voice speaking:

Love, in the bright
mirrors of your eyes
in the dark I have seen him
again: I have seen there
the great, angular
bird who feeds in the mountains¹⁰
on the thinker's pain.

SP, p. 98.

Like the previous poem, “Parable of the Thinker” has no easily identifiable physical setting. We are not installed in the real world of air and stone, but within the more intimate geography of the human body again. At the beginning of this parable there is a most potent metaphor around which the whole composition spins till the end. In the beloved's eyes, which are mirrors, the lover gets to see *him*, and now the pronouns' referents in “parable of the Stream” seem to make sense, for *him* refers forward to “*the great, angular / bird*” (one of the *carnivorous birds*). This is an ominous kind of bird, for it feeds on *the thinkers' pain*. What the lover sees in the beloved's eyes is probably a reflection of himself suffering in the solitude of mountains in the aftermath of love. Thinking entails pain sometimes, for in thinking one comes to terms with one's own consciousness with uncompromising sincerity. There is no way out. And the image of the angular bird preying on the thinker's pain is rich in echoes or reminiscences of Prometheus chained up there in the mountains while a pitiless eagle eats from his liver for eternity. The images conjured up in one's mind are eloquent enough. Therefore, these two parables are probably poems of not-love, even if they open with vocatives addressed to the beloved. True, blissful love has no room for pain, at least not for a pain like the one that is evoked in such forceful statements as we find in “Parable of the Stream”, where an ominous bird looks for the beloved's bones and in “Parable of the Thinker”, where the ominous bird feeds on *the lover as thinker's pain*. Probably both poems are meant to signal a prelude to a farewell to a love relationship between two persons who have loved one another intensely, passionately, perhaps too much. It is not easy to understand that love can be too much, or that loving too much is dangerous. Sometimes it is better to cut yourself free of what you love and hope that the wounds heal. Both birds come to the fore in the following section in *Tzubahalem's Mountain*, which is also the end of the first movement of the sonata.



“Parable of the Birds” represents then the climax of the first movement of the sonata. If we look up the meaning of the word “parable” in a dictionary, we learn that it is

¹⁰ These two verse-lines read like this “bird who feeds *on your joy / as he feeds* in the mountains / on the thinker's pain” in the first edition and *The Beauty of the Weapons* incarnations of this little poem. One line has dropped because the words in italics have been omitted in the subsequent versions of the text in *The Calling* and *Selected Poems*.

“a short story that teaches a moral or spiritual lesson”. The lesson, we guess, is not just for the person who has made up the story, or at least not primarily for him or her, but rather it is intended for a general audience instead. We wonder what the moral to be drawn from this parable might be. It comes right at the end, but it is necessary to unravel first what happens in a poem which is a parable consisting of two distinct parts plus a moral as a way of conclusion. Indeed, in spite of the titles of the remaining pieces in this section, this poem is probably the first true parable we find in the first movement of *Tzubahalem’s Mountain*, and it comes right at the end of what might be seen as a long prelude to an ominous end. We readers are now back again into the natural world of brute force and violence, where only the fittest manage to survive. In stanzas one through four we witness what could as well be a slow-motion scene in a documentary film on birds. While in the first two stanzas the focus is on the birds themselves, it shifts to the fish being caught by them in the other two stanzas. But the poet as territorial recorder manages to see into this sequence of *stasis in motion* with astonishing lucidity and objective detachment. He is recording stark reality as it is, and he finds out that, when it comes to one’s sustenance, birds are pitiless and survival is of the essence. Nature is pitiless sometimes, or most of the time, and, in this respect, “Parable of the Two Birds” is the perfect antithesis of “Body, Speech and Mind”, which was a celebration of the sublime in Nature, of the harmony which is still possible between humans and non-humans. The scene of two birds catching the same fish in the stream and hovering mid-air as if united by one common wing gives the poet a chance to meditate on what this slice of natural life might have to teach us humans or the lovers in the poems of love and not-love in *Tzubahalem’s Mountain*. For the sake of poetic convenience and structural arrangement of the poem as an artefact in itself, the sequence is divided into two parts, as pointed out above:

I have seen in the mountains a shape [Love, I... in 1st ed.; omitted since then]
 like two birds with three wings
 between them and seen them [a comma after them has been omitted here in *TC* & *SP*]
 swooping, seizing the same fish

from the stream and hovering
 there until the shared wing
 opened. I have seen the dark bone glide
 like a knife blade out of the feathers. [knifeblade in 1st ed. and *BW*]

SP, p. 98.

These two birds are probably the carnivorous birds announced in the preceding poems. The image of two birds with three wings is strange and gloomy and frightening at the same time, for we know it is a kind of aberration. Perception by the human eye is misleading in this particular case, for it is only in their intermittent fight with each other while seizing the same fish that the birds appear to share one wing. It is all an optical illusion, as it were. The “shared wing” points to something beyond itself: it is quite literally a wing, but it is also figuratively the love shared by two persons who love one another – the emotional life with the texture of truth that binds two people together when true love exists. Thus, the two birds catching and feeding on the same fish are not a menacing presence exterior to the lovers; now it turns out that the lovers themselves are the birds. No wonder it is a knife blade that finally emerges out of the feathers separating the bodies of the two birds. The *dark bone* between them is sharp as a knife, and possibly as damaging.

In the second part of the poem there is a close-up of the fish being caught by the birds. With almost photographic precision in the details being recorded, the poet draws the

reader's attention to the way the birds dismember the fish in their claws with astonishing spontaneous violence. In the darkness projected by the shadow of their wings "*the one bird suddenly clutching fins and flesh, / the other with the head and skeleton*", we are witnessing the violence inherent in love itself. The parallelism and alliteration (*feathers-fish-flesh-floated*) in these verse lines contributes to enhance the sense of fatal efficacy and automatic death the birds inflict on the fish:

Love, the bird with the feathers took the flesh
of the fish and floated toward the ocean.
The bird with the bone wing rose
toward the peaks, and in his talons hung the skeleton.

SP, p. 99.

By now it should be crystal clear that this is a poem of not-love. The moral of the parable comes right in the last verse line in the form of unexpected revelation: "*Love, I have felt the world part in our hands.*" The moral is spoken by the oracular voice of the poet. At this point, the equation between lovers and birds is out of the question. If the lovers are the birds, and if their hands are the claws of birds, then the world is the fish they have fed on together – or the love they have shared, *the shared wing*. One of the birds (the one with the feathers) takes the flesh of the fish toward the ocean; the other (the one with the bone wing) takes the skeleton toward the peaks, as if in opposite directions, taking their own part of the prey – taking whatever they have managed to salvage from a love relationship that is now broken into pieces. It is no happy coincidence that the bird that takes the skeleton should fly (or rise) up into the mountains, into the realm of silence, where the turning stones tune the air that is then played in the valley, near the stream and the alder. The songs played and sung in the air are possibly the poems that make up *Tzuhalem's Mountain*, and the singing bones of the fish skeleton are the only remnants left to the poet/lover. The bird that floats toward the ocean would then be the beloved, who takes only the nourishing but perishable flesh of the fish with her. Bringhurst himself informs us, in a brief note in the first edition of this poem in 21 parts, that he spent a year of solitude working on this and other sonatas near Tzuhalem's Mountain. Was he trying to make himself whole in the mountains after an intense love relationship that had come to an end? It does not matter much after all. If there is a subtle autobiographical substratum here, it has been completely transmuted into impersonal, universal poems. And the moral is relevant to everyone willing to listen to what these poems have to tell us about love, and not-love. Sometimes there is not much to be salvaged from what looked like a genuine, true relationship uniting two sensibilities. Or, to put it differently, love and pain sometimes go hand in hand, and it takes a long time to make oneself whole, back into serenity and peaceful calm and harmony, because of the bitterness inherent in saying farewell to everything that had been shared. The world and the heart are rent apart.

Second Movement

The second movement of *Tzuhalem's Mountain* consists of seven more poems: "First Light", "Questions for the Old Woman", "Stalking the Earthlute", "*Song of Tzuhalem*", "Hic Amor, Haec Patria", "Lonicera Involucrata", and "Last Light". A quick look at the titles themselves reveals that there are no parables in this second part of the poem, and that some sort of pattern makes itself discernible. This is supposed to be a slow movement

within the framework of the sonata structure. As a matter of fact, thinking turns out to be central to this much more meditative section, concerned with the rape of the world and a new environmental awareness that becomes much more explicit in Bringham's poems with the passage of time. The spectre of Tzuhalem is now invoked back into life, alongside that of an old woman addressed in several of the poems who might as well stand for the Earth itself (*terra matrix*) or a kind of primordial, creative and spontaneous natural force. This woman may be an earlier incarnation of the old woman that appears in Bringham's later long myth-like narrative poem entitled *Tending the Fire* (1985). In any case, that the poems in this second section have been arranged in order according to some kind of logic is out of the question: the sequence begins with a poem entitled "First Light" and closes with "Last Light". What comes in between could be a long meditation in parts thought throughout a day to the rhythm of the revolving sun in the sky.

"First Light" is a very short poem consisting of two little stanzas. To the attentive reader's surprise, there are in this short composition subtle lexical echoes from the preceding poems of the first movement. Thus, *alder* is already mentioned in section IV ("Body, Speech and Mind") and *pain* is mentioned in section VI ("Parable of the Thinker") of the previous movement. The new poetic voice speaking in these lines speaks with serenity and calm, with a gnomic voice that verges on clairvoyance, even if imbued with sadness and melancholy. There is a complex constellation of nouns, but there are almost no verbs in the whole composition, which testifies to the fact that this is a static image for the contemplation of the lover's mind, giving him nourishing food for thought so as to try to make his tired soul whole again. It could be that the poet as meditative thinker is hidden beneath the speaking voice in this short poem:

Hawk and owl in the dead
 red alder: daybird and nightbird asleep in the tree
 while the spilled light builds in the snowchutes [spilt in 1st ed. & BW]
 high on the mountain.

Unopened, like roses,
 the milk-smooth, identical faces
 of those I have loved for the eloquence
 of their pain.

SP, p. 100.

What strikes one's attention in "First Light" is the quietness of the whole scene. It is early in the morning, the moment of sunrise or dawn, and the speaking voice is surprised to find two very different kinds of bird sleeping together on the same bow of the same tree. The birds are *alive* though asleep, whereas the tree is a *dead* red alder; life and death go hand in hand in Nature with such spontaneity. Far away in the distance the first sun rays are spilling their light onto the snow up there in the mountain caps. The hawk and the owl are a pair of contraries ("and without contraries there is no progression" said William Blake), for the former is a daybird and the latter a nightbird, and yet they are able to live together in peace, if only for a little while. Both are birds of prey, but whereas the hawk hunts in the day, the owl, with its large round eyes, hunts at night. The former is said to be one of the strongest birds of prey, a perfect killing machine, whereas the latter has traditionally been thought to be wise, closely associated in our Western minds to Athena, goddess of wisdom in Greek mythology, for instance. In addition, they have some physical features in common – their white faces, still unopened to the sunlight – and also some new "psychological" trait the poet identifies in them. In "*the eloquence of their pain*", the speaking voice finds a new kinship

and sense of communion with the birds and the natural world at large. This humanization of the birds is exactly what is so moving about this poem of utter simplicity. The poet brings two simultaneous moments in time together and juxtapose them in a jewel of a poem: on the one hand, there is a new sunrise going on, with the sunlight slowly gathering in the summit of a mountain in the distance or close at hand; on the other hand, two simple birds are still innocently asleep, unaware that a new day is about to be born. Their fierceness is unabated, for they are birds of prey, but while asleep, they seem innocent and inoffensive. To this unique juxtaposition the poet brings his own sensibility, which finds out that it hoards an infinite love for these birds that have given voice to a pain similar to the one he has experienced himself. And there is nothing else to be added to this perfect image of bliss and nostalgia mixed together amid the solitude of the mountains. At this point, it might be advisable to remember that in the textual incarnation of *Tzibalem's Mountain* in *Selected Poems* (2009), the subtitle was slightly altered, changed into "A Sonata for Solo Intelligence, in Three Movements". The poetic voice we listen to in the second movement of the sonata is clearly identifiable as the poet's, and it is gnomic at times; sad, resigned and disenchanting at others; and celebratory of a new kind of peace it finds in the natural world most of the time.



"Questions for the Old Woman" and "Stalking the Earthlute" are two impressive poetical compositions. In their outward or structural appearance, they are completely different to one another, but deep inside they share a moving musicality and a new awareness that Nature is a source of healing wisdom. Both are addressed to the same old woman, a woman that we take to stand for Earth or Nature as a whole. Reminiscent of the female goddess Gea (the earth), wife to Uranus (the sky) in Hesiod's *Theogony*, she might be a sort of *Ur-mother*, Mother Earth (*terra matrix*), a primordial force out of which everything on Earth has come into being in an ancestral cosmogony. Therefore, she must embody for sure the knowledge (the *song of the flesh* mentioned in section X) the poetic voice is looking for in what looks like a desperate manner. After tasting the pain left on the tongue by the poems of not-love in the first movement, the male poetic persona is searching a new kind of healing wisdom to make himself whole again and so he turns to the old woman in the hope of finding the answers to his urgent questions. Despite the pain and the melancholy, the poetic voice is articulate enough to put the right questions all the time. Thus, "Questions for the Old Woman" consists of a complex constellation of what could be interpreted as being rhetorical questions, for the poetic voice appears to know the answers to them beforehand, or so it seems. It is possible to distinguish two parts in this poem. In the first part (stanza 1) the old woman's body is described through brilliantly apt metaphors that reconcile discrete parts of the body with natural elements of the landscape:

From the hills of your breasts to the ruined wells
of your eyes is how many miles, old woman?
And how many days to the outwash fans
and gravelled channels of your thighs?

SP, p. 100.

The lyricism of the simple and elegant metaphors is something of a virtuoso's accomplishment: the old woman's breasts are *hills*, her old eyes are *ruined wells* because of the inexorable passage of time, and her thighs are *outwash fans and gravelled channels*. The body is first fragmented into bits and pieces, then equated with elements of Nature which are not chosen at random, of course, and then brought together as if into a new *Gestalt*. The old

woman's body is a vast immensity; it comprises the Earth in its entirety, for she *is* the Earth itself – with its mountains (land), and with its rivers, wells, channels and oceans (water). The sheer vastness of the Earth is already evoked in the first two questions being asked in this stanza: the hills, wells and channels of the old woman's body are many miles and many days far apart. It takes a long time and effort to get from one place to another because of the big expanses of space in between them.

In the remaining stanzas of the poem, woven of a nonstop flux of rhetorical questions, we are back into the elemental geography of the human body. The old woman is explicitly addressed for the first time at the beginning of the second stanza. Afterwards, the apostrophe or vocative is followed by a string of seven questions that seem to convey her intimation that the only reliable knowledge available to human beings is a knowledge of one's own body. This points out to a kind of solipsism, the conviction that only the self exists or can be known, but Bringham is not interested in the self as an abstraction or mental construct, but rather in the sheer physical immediacy of the body, which is tangible, observable, close to one's bones. Once again, the human body is fragmented into separate parts – tongue, eyes, fist, hand, lungs and blood –, which are then turned into the core of the questions the poetic voice puts to the old woman. There is not much to be known except “*the swollen / thumb of the tongue against the cranium*” or “*the bloodshot / knuckles of the eyes*”, “*the sting of the light*” and “*the ache of the darkness*” in one's tightening fists or hands. Light and darkness and pain are all mixed together here, but one of the saddest questions asked by the poetic voice is possibly this one: “*What do we know but the innocent / songs of the lungs in their cage never mating?*” Breathing is essential to Bringham's poetics: it is the air coming out of the lungs and into the world, air being the means through which speech finds its way into intelligibility and into the hearer's ear. The lungs are therefore conceptualized as being birds singing innocent songs in their separate cages, but never actually having the possibility of mating. This most powerful image is probably meant as a reference to the impossibility of total communion with someone else through love, even true love.

The closing stanza consists of one single prolonged question, which makes it clear that the poetic voice's mood is one of utter barrenness, a true waste land that *cannot connect nothing with nothing*:

What do we know but the dry rasp
of a banjo pick against paper, the whisper
of blood against wood in the stunted trunk
of a tree, uprooted and running?

SP, p. 100.

The pick or plectrum of a banjo is meant for plucking the strings and bring out a melody out of them, not for making a dry rasp against paper. And blood is meant for running free through the body, singing its own song of life, not for whispering timidly against the wood of a dead tree. The euphony of sounds (/t/ and /r/) in these lines helps enhance the sense of utter devastation that has invaded the poetic persona's spirit from the inside. Nothing seems to make sense any more, and the metaphor of one's own blood whispering unintelligible words against the trunk of a tree that is uprooted, that embraces the Earth no more, is the best metaphor for the desolate state of mind of the poetic persona in the aftermath of not-love.



In the following poem, “Stalking the Earthlute”, the tone and the mood of the poetic voice are completely different. In the face of the rape of the natural world’s resources at the hands of *the hungry ghosts* that seek nothing except their own benefit, the poetic voice turns angry and vindicates a genuine reverence for Mother Earth. The title itself of the poem evokes the violence inherent in this systematic rape of the Earth on the part of humans that are not aware that this is the only home we have available for the time being. Thus, the verb *stalk* means literally “to move through a place in an unpleasant or threatening way”. *Earthlute* is a word that needs clarification and so Bringhurst himself explains its meaning in one of the entries in the notes or glossary at the end of the poem:

EARTHLUTE One of the simplest of musical instruments: strings stretched over the mouth of a hole in the ground, so that the whole earth serves as a resonator.

So the whole Earth (the old woman) is turned into a gigantic musical instrument that will yield the *song of the flesh* full of healing wisdom that is mentioned in the heart of the poem. However, the *invisible ghosts* or the hungry men are *stalking the earthlute* violently, in search of whatever profit they may take with them, regardless of the pain inflicted on the old woman and the irreversible damage caused to the Earth. This is a form of rape, an expression of disrespect for everything that is sacred in this world, for the Earth does not belong to human beings – we are just a tiny part of the grand design or scheme of things, living and non-living alike. Blind are the men and the women who are not able to understand this simple truth. One only needs open one’s eyes and ears to the song of existence. Poets and philosophers are always trying to capture this song, this endless singing of the Earth in its complexity, naturalness, largesse, spontaneity and beauty.

From a purely structural point of view, the poem consists of three elegant movements of music for the mind. There are still lexical echoes from the previous poems: *swollen tongues* is an echo from section IX, for instance; and the birds and fish come from far away, from the earlier pieces in the first movement of this sonata. The first part of the poem concerns the rape of the Earth by the invisible ghosts who are moved by an insatiable hunger they do not seem to be able to appease:

Old woman, the hungry
ghosts as they gather
lick dry lips and gibber
against your thighs.
What will you
say as you chase them
away? You can neither
ignore them nor feed them.

SP, p. 101.

The song these ghosts sing with their *swollen tongues* is truly macabre: “*the dead are dying of thirst*”, they repeat over and over again. The thirst of these men who are already dead is an unquenchable desire to rape the resources that the Earth so generously puts at the disposal of humans for their survival. But the old woman seems to have no way of getting rid of them, hard as she may try with her fingers “*chanting / already to chase them / away.*”

The antithesis of this song of violence is the song of the flesh that only the poet might produce if he plays and listens to the song of the Earth. This song is precisely the core of the second movement of the poem, which turns out to be a celebration of humans’ communion with the sublime in Nature. The *song of the flesh* the old woman sings is full of

an ancestral wisdom, the wisdom of Nature, which is eventually characterized as spontaneous love. In his primeval confrontation with the landscape, the poetic persona learns to see a new kind of wisdom in the natural world of fish, birds, trees and men. In the unmediated encounter between self and Mother Earth, the poetic persona starts appreciating the wisdom of simple fish that manage to swim upstream from the ocean; the wisdom of birds that instinctively know when to leave and when to return to their tundra; the wisdom of hummingbirds feeding amorously on generous flowers; the wisdom of men capable of spending a time of their lives in solitude near the sea or in the mountains; and, of course, the wisdom of trees that are not stunted, uprooted or dead:

... the immense
wisdom, old woman,
of trees who remain
in their places, embracing
the earth,

SP, p. 101.

This is the song of the flesh the poetic voice learns to hear in the words spoken by the old woman. “*They say / if I play you will sing me / a song of the flesh, old woman.*” A moving ecological awareness is come into being and is brought to the fore in this poem. These are the reflections of a man capable of a most profound respect for the world at large, who feels whole in the company of birds and trees in the solitude of the mountains and the woods. This poem is the song of a man who has chosen to measure himself against the sheer immensity of an awe-inspiring natural world.

In the last movement of “Stalking the Earthlute” the poet turns back to the old woman’s body, but this time her entire body is conceptualized as being made of musical instruments. In other Bringham poems (“Leda and the Swan” and “Bone Flute Breathing”, for instance), the author also draws the same analogy between parts of the body and musical instruments in astonishing metaphors. If only for a little while, this poem turns into a meta-poetic composition: it is said that if the poet manages to play the musical instruments that make up the body of the old woman, she will sing the song of the flesh and give him the words of the song he needs. If he plays the *unstrung lute* of her back, the *cracked piano* of her bones, the *wrinkled guitar* of her whole body case, and the *banjo* of her belly, she will sing him a song of wisdom and truth:

Old woman, they say
you will sing if I play
on the unstrung lute
of your back, on the cracked
piano built
of your bones, on the wrinkled
guitar in the threadbare
case of your body.
Old woman, the banjo
hangs like an arrowless
bow in your belly,
but they say if I can play it
you will sing. They say
you will sing me
the words of the song.

SP, p. 102.

Thus, the old woman is an earthlute in itself, a gigantic resonator for the music of existence being played on it all the time. The poet only has to listen attentively to what she has to teach him if he is to decipher the words of the song. However, the poet has to cleanse his senses and his will to be able to listen to this song of wisdom and truth. He has to try hard, for the musical instruments in the body of the old woman seem not to be tuned at all, at least not yet. She has been raped time and again by voracious ghosts that are dying of hunger and thirst in their shameless and endless exploitation of the Earth. “Stalking the Earthlute” ends on an optimistic note, though. Here is a man, next to Tzuhalem’s Mountain, at the edge of the world, amid the solitude of mountains, trying to learn the words the old woman has to teach all of us humans. He is breathing through the lungs and through the feet, looking at the world from a fresh perspective, as if for the first time, or at the first day of creation, for he is the bard and he is the seer, and he brings back a song of wisdom with him for the sake of the rest of human beings who are still unable to see and to hear.



Section XI, “Song of Tzuhalem”, could be a good example of what the *song of the flesh* sounds like, for Tzuhalem, the old Coast Salish Indian who lived in the solitude of mountains with his many wives and children in the 19th century, might be a good embodiment of the man who is able to listen to the old woman’s song. He breathes through his feet and pays attention to what is going on around him. No wonder this song is right the middle point of the second movement of the sonata; it has been placed right there for some reason. At first sight, upon first reading the song the Indian sings, it might seem it is pure nonsense and exuberance of sounds beautifully arranged – an eloquent expression of Bringhurst’s love of prosody and the music inherent in great poetry. There is certainly musicality in this song, otherwise it would not be a song, to begin with. The music of the words of the song is brought about by the extraordinary conjunction of both lexical repetition and alliteration, or to put it more simply, by simple repetition, no matter whether of the same words or of the same sounds. Upon closer inspection, though, the pattern of the stanzas makes itself visible. The poet has made use of what could be called a *recombinatory poetics*, that is to say he has produced a perfect set of 5 verse lines which he has then arranged according to a strict formal criterion. Thus, throughout the six stanzas that make up the poem, the same words are repeated over and over again. The result is incantatory rhythm, a perfect and credible song that a 19th-century Coast Salish Indian living in the mountain bearing his name might have well sung to make his days brighter. Because it is his voice that sings the song, the lyrics are written in italics and so the typography pays a faithful homage to the content and to the poetic persona, to the song and the singer.

The set of 5 verse lines that establish the basic sense unit of the poem reads as follows:

*Belly and back
beak of the bird
claw of the cat
plucking the taut
muscle and gut*

If we assign each verse line a number, the resulting pattern underlying the whole composition would be something like this: 12345 / 21345 / 21245 / 12345 / 1223. So

there are six stanzas, arranged into four clusters of meaning plus an irregular coda at the end. This makes a total of 24 verse lines, with two stressed syllables per line. In this way, the perfect symmetry, the insistence on the same idea over and over again, the use of alliteration (of /b/ in *belly*, *back*, *beak*, *bird*; of /k/ in *claw* and *cat*) and assonance (the vowels sound in *plucking*, *muscle* and *gut*) build on the cumulative musicality that the poem exudes. In addition, there are also important echoes from earlier sections in *Tzubalem's Mountain*. For instance, *belly* and *back* are taken directly from the immediately preceding section X: the *banjo of the belly* and the *unstrung lute of the back* of the old woman. Bird, claw and muscle are rescued from even earlier pieces in the sonata. The subtle intertextual web of allusions and associations is then still under way; the whole tapestry of the sonata is only complete when all the 21 sections that make up the poem are brought into a perfect circle seen in the distance.

One last question should be asked about the meaning of this incantatory constellation of words so artfully arranged on the page for the performance of the voice. "*Belly and back / beak of the bird / claw of the cat / plucking the taut / muscle and gut*" subtly evokes the cycle of life and death inherent in the natural world of the mountains, where birds and cats (animals dwelling in the air or on the land) kill and feed on other animals following their survival instinct. This is no amoral action; it is instinctive action. This the sheer force of Nature at work, doing its job in a natural and spontaneous way.



"Hic Amor, Haec Patria" is the twelfth section of this unrelentingly unfolding sonata, and another masterpiece of a poem, a genuine technical accomplishment. It borrows its Latin title from Virgil's epic poem *Aeneid*. Not all readers might be familiar with classical Latin literature, and so Bringham himself provides a short but illuminating entry in his glossary of oddities and special terms so as to make clear the literary allusion from the very beginning: "HIC AMOR, HAEC PATRIA "Love here, land there." With these words among others, Aeneas takes leave of Dido, whom he has jilted." The poet/lover borrows Aeneas' words of farewell to Dido, who stands for the beloved beneath the poems in *Tzubalem's Mountain*. But the Latin words appear to take on new nuances of meaning in this context, for the lover seems reluctant to say goodbye to his beloved and there is no homeland awaiting him somewhere else. Because of the pain following the end of a love relationship, the lover must leave and look for a place where he can become spiritually whole again. Possibly the mountains are "haec patria" for him to come back to his former self; in the mountains he might have the chance to heal his own wounds. The spectre and the echoes of Aeneas' voice are therefore lingering somewhere mid-air beneath the poetic persona speaking these lines; both voices are superimposed one upon another, as it were. In addition, this is the last poem in this movement and in the whole of the sonata addressed to the old woman. As we shall see, this is a poem of love and not-love, both things at the same time. It is written in the language of utter simplicity, intense lyricism and crystal-clear sincerity. Once again, metaphor and simple repetition in the form of parallelism are central to the architectural skeleton of the whole composition. Thus, "Hic Amor, Haec Patria" consists of four simple stanzas and four distinct parts. The poem opens with a straightforward declarative sentence; there follow parallelistic sentences that emphasize the state of mind of the poetic voice speaking these words:

Old woman, a man
comes into the mountains
alone in high summer
because he is eaten.

His body is eaten
 by darkness in winter,
 his mind is eaten
 in spring by the deepening
 pulse of his hunger.
 The bees know his blood
 on the hillside in summer
 as bright as red heather.
 [The birds, old woman, [these 2 lines from 1st ed. & BW are omitted here]
 the birds, the birds,]
 The birds know his blood
 on the mountain in autumn
 as black as empetrum.

SP, p. 103.

The old woman is addressed in the opening apostrophe, and then the lover complains about the miserable state he finds himself in. He seems to find no peace for his mind or for his body. In the summer he cuts himself free from what he loves and comes into the mountains to make himself whole, in the hope that the wounds heal for good. The perfect parallelism of these verse lines emphasizes the state of utter spiritual devastation the poetic persona is going through. All round the year he is eaten by one thing or another: in the summer he is eaten, possibly by not-love; in winter his body is eaten by darkness; in spring his mind is eaten by a strange kind of hunger; and in summer and autumn the bees and birds stalk for his blood. (There are, by the ways, certain echoes from section VI, “Parable on the Thinker”, where another ominous bird feeds on “*the thinker’s pain*.”) The blood changes colour depending on the season: it is “*bright as red heather*” in summer and “*black as empetrum*” in autumn. ‘Empetrum’, by the way, is another word that needs clarification; Bringhurst informs us that it is a type of plant:

EMPETRUM *Empetrum nigrum*, an evergreen alpine plant – known also as crowberry or crakeberry, for the dry black fruits which follow its somber flowers.

In the second stanza (which is the second part of the poem), the poetic voice puts two new questions to the old woman. The lover unveils his purpose in coming into the mountains: “*to make himself whole*”, but two pressing questions keep on coming up:

Why is it the knife
 of love redivides us?
 Why is it a man
 cannot heal the wounds
 in a woman by bringing
 her also up into
 these mountains?

SP, p. 104.

The “*knife of love*” is an eloquent metaphor; it recalls the “*knife blade*” of section VII (“Parable of the Two Birds”) of *Tzubahalem’s Mountain*, where it had ominous connotations in the fight of two birds preying on the same fish, which stood for “*the whole world parting*” in the lovers’ hands. The contrast set up between lover and beloved, man and woman, is simple and straightforward. The poetic voice explains that a man can easily go up there in the mountains to heal his wounds, the wounds of love, but he does not seem to be able to comfort a woman in the same way. The sense of utter spiritual barrenness is now complete:

love does not bring man and woman together; it is a knife that rends them apart instead. That the lover is still in love with the beloved seems to be out of the question, if only for a while, as the third stanza makes clear. It is a moving description of the beloved's body in just three simple strokes of the linguistic brush: "*her body like water, / her flesh like a fish, / the wind in the air / underlying her name.*" In its associations, it recalls section V, "Parable of the Stream", where "*the clear stream of your flesh*" seemed the only possible constellation of words to evoke the beauty of the female body. And water is a primordial element in Nature, a fundamental substance out of which the whole world is made. The alliteration of *flesh* and *fish* suggests the whisper of flowing water itself.

The final stanza puts one last question to the old woman, while the poetic voices comes to a sudden moment of revelation with the texture of transcendence:

All knowledge is carnal.
 Knowledge is meat,
 knowledge is muscle.
 Old woman, old woman,
 what is this hunger
 grown hard as a bone?

SP, p. 104.

The poetic voice claims here that there is a purely physical basis for all human knowledge. *Go in fear of abstractions*, it seems to suggest. The only kind of reliable knowledge is the one we experience through our own bodies in close connection with the world out there. It is possible to surpass the painful Cartesian dualism of *res extensa* and *res cogitans* if we learn only to pay attention, respectful attention, to what is going out outside ourselves. This is, of course, an invitation to go beyond mere subjectivity, to live the sheer experience of *what is* with a maximum of intensity, to understand that everything in the world is subtly connected to everything else. On a continuum of life and death there is room for human beings, for all kinds of living and non-living creatures, human and non-human alike, that are singing the song of existence, the *song of the flesh* the old woman is able to sing and the poet is able to transcribe into lasting poems as beautiful *things made* or *things found*. However, another possible interpretation is close at hand: it might be that only love renders everything meaningful; it might be that only love is the ultimate reliable source of knowledge, and so we must be ready to experience the pain that sometimes love brings with itself, especially when not-love sets in. Love could well be our only way to get to the truth, to touch it with our fingertips for just a second. The closing question keeps ringing in one's ear long after we have finished reading this poem aloud: hunger, this unappeasable hunger the poet feels inside, has grown hard as a bone, but we already know that bones are capable of singing beautiful songs in the air tuned by turning stones up in the mountains.



"*Lonicera Involucrata*", section XIII of *Tzibalem's Mountain*, has got another exotic title, but this time the words have not been lifted from a literary work written in Latin, as was the case in the preceding section XII with *hic amor, haec patria* – Virgil's words as spoken by Aeneas during his farewell to Dido, whom he jilted in Carthago –, which were surrounded by the sad halo of an unrequited love. *Lonicera involucrata* is the technical term denoting a bush whose flowers and fruits provide the poet with the central metaphor at the very heart of this lyric love poem. Once more, out of an intense love of intellectual precision and respectful accuracy (i.e., faithfulness to reality), Bringhurst gives us the

essential information concerning the meaning of the Latin words in a short entry in his glossary:

LONICERA INVOLUCRATA The coast twinberry, a bush of the honeysuckle family. Its binocular yellow flowers are followed by bright black fruits staring in pairs from blood-colored collars. The berries, though bitter to the human palate, are a favourite food of cedar waxwings.¹¹

The profound implications of these words will make themselves explicit below. For the time being, it may suffice to say that, for a proper and accurate understanding of the poem, the reader might need this basic piece of information. Needless to say, the words that make up the poem are perfectly arranged into three meaningful sense units that cohere into a perfect composition. “Lonicera Involucrata” opens with echoes from a rhyme image in section X, “Stalking the Earthlute”: “mouth to mouth” recalls the words “*the wisdom / in summer of hummingbirds, / mouth to mouth / in the air with the open-mouthed / flowers*”. The echo is no random choice, of course, for the first stanza of this love poem is a vivid description of the lovers kissing one another at sunset. As in previous sections, metaphor is a literary device central to the making of this opening stanza. “*The lids of our skulls*” is an apt metaphor that conveys the way in which the lovers’ faces, mouths and eyes approach one another in the act of kissing one another’s lips. And when placed next to the words from section X, these words seem to evoke that the lovers are like hummingbirds feeding on the nectar of flowers as they kiss each other:

Mouth to mouth, our faces
closing one another’s faces,
the lids of our skulls
closing one another’s eyes.

SP, p. 104.

In the untitled headnote preceding the sonata *Tzuhalem’s Mountain*, Bringham explains in beautifully written prose that Tzuhalem, the 19th-century Coast Salish Indian whom his own elders exiled from their home village on account of bride-theft and murder, lived alone in the mountain bearing his name with *a cluster of loves* and their children. The fact of his hunchbacked deformity did not prevent the cluster of wives or children around him from increasing from one year to the next. It is precisely the ghosts of his wives that are being conjured up in the second stanza of “Lonicera Involucrata” (which is the second part of the piece):

And the ghosts of the butterscotch eyes
of Tzuhalem in pairs in the twilight
like twinberry flowers.
Ghosts of his women
probe for their nectar like needle-beaked birds.

SP, p. 105.

¹¹ This entry is slightly different in the Notes section found at the end of the first edition of *Tzuhalem’s Mountain* by Oolichan Books in 1982: “LONICERA INVOLUCRATA The coast twinberry, a bush of the honeysuckle family, *Caprifoliaceae*. Its binocular yellow flowers are followed by bright black fruits staring in pairs from blood-colored collars. The berries, though bitter to the human palate, are a favourite food of cedar waxwings.”

As if they were hummingbirds feeding on the nectar of flowers, the ghosts of Tzuhalem's wives are invoked in alliterative words (/t/ in *twilight* and *twinberry*; /n/ and /b/ in *nectar*, *needle-beaked*, *birds*) of intense lyricism. The apparition of their eyes in the dying light of evening is compared to the bright black fruits of the *lonicera involucrata* (or the coast twinberry), "*staring in pairs from blood-colored collars.*" Thus, their eyes shine in pairs in the fading light of twilight. Their eyes are said to be *butterscotch eyes* because they feed on the sweet nectar of the flowers of the twinberry, whose bitter fruits are the favourite of cedar waxwings, by the way. Now, if we look up the word 'waxwing' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, we learn more specific details that might shed light on the understanding of Bringhurst's poem:

Waxwing, any of three species of birds belonging to the songbird family Bombycillidae (order Passeriformes). They are elegant-looking birds named for beads of shiny red material on the tips of the secondary wing feathers. All species are gray-brown, with tapering crest. The common, or Bohemian, waxwing (*Bombycilla garrulus*) is 20 cm (8 inches) long and has yellow and white wing markings in addition to red. It breeds in northern forests of Eurasia and America and every few years irrupts far southward in winter. The cedar waxwing (*B. cedrorum*), smaller and less colourful, breeds in Canada and the northern United States. Flocks of waxwings may invade city parks and gardens in winter, searching for berries.¹²

Waxbirds are elegant-looking birds on account of their colourful secondary wing feathers and they love berries in spite of their bitter taste to the human palate. The emphasis is on beauty, even if the cedar waxwing is less colourful, which means that Tzuhalem's wives ("*needle-beaked birds*" in search of nectar) are beautiful women, even more when measured against the deformity of hunchbacked Tzuhalem. Their own beauty is enhanced by the quietness and stillness of the closing movement of this poem, which has got the quality, concision and texture of a Japanese haiku. It does remind us of "In a Station of the Metro", the memorable two-line haiku by the poet Ezra Pound on the apparition of faces on the subway, resembling wet leaves on a bough. In April 1913 the Modernist master published in the prestigious magazine *Poetry* the famous haiku, which in its original typographical arrangement looked like this on the page:

The apparition	of these faces	in the crowd:
petals	on a wet, black bough.	

This haiku was soon incorporated into the literary magazines Pound was championing at the moment and probably into *Des Imagistes*, the Imagist anthology published in 1915. Pound's jewel of a literary work of art consists of only a handful of resonant words, in which faces are conceptualized as being leaves, hanging on a wet bough. It is a simple but eloquent statement in the form of an intensely lyrical image. In fact, the three famous principles of the Imagist manifesto of summer 1912 demanded that poetry be founded on the Image: "An "Image" is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. [...] It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art." What is relevant here is the affinity between the poetics propounded by Imagism and the conception itself and accomplishment of the haiku¹³. Pound's "In a Station of the

¹² See the entry on 'waxwing' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Volume 30, p. 17704.

¹³ The haiku is probably the shortest poetic structure ever known. It traces its origin from *haikai*, a rather longer composition (36, 50, 100 lines), whose initial line was called *bokku* ('opening line'). From this line the

Metro” is a masterpiece of its kind. Written in the best tradition of the Japanese haiku, it offers the reader a snapshot, a moment frozen in time, associated with a sudden epistemological revelation. The epiphany-like moment of revelation has the texture of transcendence: faces are petals on a bough, humans are trees in the woods.

After this interlude on Pound’s haiku, let us return to Tzuhalem and his wives. The haiku-like description of the landscape in Bringhurst’s poem is also rich in reminiscences from Wallace Stevens’s musical cadences:

The waxwing sits
in the willow tree, waiting.

In the wilted light,
the beaten blue metal of the sea.

SP, p. 105.

These two short stanzas are a handful of resonant, beautiful words. Alliteration is pervasive: the repetition of /w/ in *waxwing*, *willow*, *waiting* and *wilted*, and of /b/ in *beaten* and *blue* highlights the calm in this landscape observed at twilight by the attentive lover’s poetic persona. Stillness is absolute: no action is going on in these verse lines. Only the waxwing is waiting on a bough, if this might be considered an action at all. *What for?*, we may ask. It is waiting for its pick, for its turn to feed on the berries the ghosts of Tzuhalem’s women are eating metamorphosed into *needle-beaked birds* or hummingbirds, because the fruits of the twinberry are its favourite food after all. Far in the distance, as the sun sets, it seems that the sea is a mute witness to the whole scene. The closing metaphor is powerful: *the beaten blue metal of the sea* it reads, as if the metallic surface water of the ocean were being shaped into something else by the force of a hammer under the last sun rays falling on Earth.



“Last Light” is the last poem in the second movement of the sonata. It began with “First Light”, with sunlight building on the snow of mountain caps, and now the circle is brought to full perfection with the sunset. The revolving sun in the sky is about to set, and the speaking voice has a look around and records what it can see. The poem consists of just three sentences arranged into two separate stanzas that spin around a complex simile. Installed in a recognizable landscape beneath Tzuhalem’s mountain, the lover directs his attention first to the herons croaking “*from the broken hemlocks*”, gliding in mid-air, but then he turns his look inward to see what his heart feels deep inside. At this point, the heart is compared to a bat flying after its prey in the darkness. Of all animals in the world, he has

independent structure of the haiku developed. Composed of three parts of 5, 7, 5 syllables each, the poem is considered a one-line composition because it expresses one single emotion, complete and perfect *per se*. Two elements are essential to the haiku, one expressing a natural condition of generic character, very often represented by characteristics of the seasons; the other being constituted by the perception of the moment. Their necessary syntactic and semantic connection is assured by a specific word (*kakekotoba*, ‘pivot-word’), which directs the situation expressed in the haiku because of its capacity to assume a different meaning according to the context in which it is inserted. For more detailed information on the haiku, see: Sanki Ichikawa (ed.), *Haikai and Haiku*, Tokyo: Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai, 1958; Donald Keene, *Japanese Literature: An Introduction for Western Readers*, New York: Grove Press, 1955; Harold G. Henderson, *An Introduction to Haiku: An Anthology of Poems and Poets from Bashō to Shiki*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958; Roland Barthes, *L’empire des signes*, Paris: Flammarion, 1970, pp. 89-94.

chosen a mammal that hunts at night and has gloomy connotations about it. In its irregular flight, this almost blind animal resembles the lover's uneasy heart:

The heart, like a bat going out
after moths in the shadows, unfolds and floats, singing [this comma is new in *SP*]

to rocks, trees and its prey, its shrill
but inaudible syllables pulsing and quickening,
eats, and retreats once again to the stench
of its cave, strung up by one foot, with the other foot

bathing.

SP, p. 105.

Upon closer inspection, we find that the simile is complex indeed. The heart is a bat that leaves its cave in search of prey (moths) under the protection of the night shadows. While flying after moths, it sings what looks like a spontaneous *song of the flesh* in honour of the natural elements around it, both living (rocks) and non-living (trees). It celebrates even the prey on which it feeds. The bat sings a song of its own, made of "*shrill but inaudible syllables*" it has possibly learnt from the old woman. Or, to put it differently, the poet has played and Mother Earth has given him the words for his song promised him in section X "Stalking the Earthlute" ("*They say / you will sing me / the words of the song.*"). For a fraction of a second, the poem would thus turn metapoetic. There is not much left for the bat to do once it has fed on its prey but to return to "*the stench of its cave.*" That the bat, that is to say the heart, should come back to stench means that it exudes the pain of not-love. This is a poem of not-love and a poem about a split self, whose heart is "*strung up by one foot, with the other foot / bathing.*" The closing words convey the sense of uneasiness or spiritual desolation the lover's heart is going through at this very moment. And yet the very fact that it is able to feel the vitalizing touch of water suggests that it is on its way toward making itself whole again. At least "Last Light" and with it the second the movement of the sonata do not close on a completely pessimistic note. There is a place for hope in the lover's heart. Sometimes we are all a little desperate, but that is life after all. If you are strong enough, you learn to conquer the despair.

Third Movement

The third movement of the sonata consists of seven more poems: "Parable of the Moon", "Parable of the Truth", "Parable of the Voices", "*His Dream*", "Parable of the Lake's Edge", "Parable of the Indestructible", and "Parable of the Sun". As in the first movement, all but one section are identified as being parables. Since Bach's time, the last movement of a sonata as a musical form was generally a minuet, rondo, or theme and variations. In Bringham's sonata, which is made of words instead of musical notes, what we find is a number variations on themes that have already been announced in previous sections, as we shall see below. Once again, the old woman invoked in "Questions for the Old Woman", "Stalking the Earthlute" and "Hic Amor, Haec Patria" is addressed by the poetic voice in search of answers, simple warmth and consolation. The lover experiences the way his wounds of not-love start healing; the sense of the sublime in Nature is out there to remind him that he belongs among a grander design where all creatures have a place, no matter whether they are living and non-living, human and non-human creatures. The prevailing tone is still largely meditative, sometimes verging on the celebratory though

tinged with traces of melancholy, and the words are gnomic, full of a new wisdom that comes from an awareness that pain is also an inescapable part inherent in true love.

“Parable of the Moon” is another clear illustration of the perfect short lyric poems Bringham is able to produce. The first poem of the third movement is a moving celebration of the sheer pleasure of bodies in motion while dancing. Dancing is also the expression of love, and this is no doubt a love poem. Dance is incarnation: while dancing, the self enjoys the simple movements of its body with its soul, its body-soul. If only for a while, one can feel that one is not divorced from one’s own body, that the body *knows*. When the body feels the rhythm inside it, it does not need to think. In dancing, body and soul are indistinguishable; the body *is* the soul. An intangible spectre throughout the whole sonata, Tzuhalem becomes now a real presence. This short jewel of a poem gives us a vivid snapshot of the Coast Salish Indian dancing with his wives in the moonlight and having a good time. Lexical repetition makes this poem a tightly-woven composition. Thus, key words like *moon*, *dancing*, *move* and *three shoulders* are all repeated several times and woven into a perfect whole. The poem is worth quoting in full:

In the cave of the moon
thirteen women are moving.
At new moon a man
with three shoulders will rise
and move with them, his three-shouldered
dancing joined to their dancing
in front of the fire.¹⁴

SP, p. 106.

The opening words of this little poem somehow recall the first section of a well-known poem by Wallace Stevens, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”: “*Among twenty snowy mountains / The only moving thing / Was the eye of the blackbird.*” There are enough birds in other sections of *Tzuhalem’s Mountain* for sure, but here it is human beings that are moving. The thirteen women moving in Bringham’s poem are Tzuhalem’s wives; the number is probably intended as a subtle allusion to Stevens’s poem. But the truth is that 13 is not an accurate figure. In the untitled note preceding the sonata in three movements, the poet himself explains that Tzuhalem had 14 wives and an unknown number of children living with him up in his mountain. At about the age of 60, he was killed as he was about to kidnap yet another wife for himself. The deformity of his hunchbacked body was no obstacle to his preserving such a big amount of women by his side, and it has been suggested, Bringham goes on, that he managed to keep them with him “through occult means” or even through more brutal methods. Whichever the case, he managed to keep a big cluster of presumably beautiful women by his side. It remains to be known whether he loved them all with the same emotional intensity and sincerity. What is out of the question is that he needed women desperately, and that he saw no amorality in the whole enterprise. Bringham imagines for a while how they might have spent a night up there in the mountains, dancing in front of a fire in the moonlight. A man with three shoulders (i.e., hunchbacked Tzuhalem) is seen dancing with his wives; they appear to have a good time together, and to love each other in a natural way. The composition verges on mythical thinking, for the women are said to be moving somewhere “*in the cave of the moon*”, and

¹⁴ The lines of this poem are arranged differently in the first edition of *Tzuhalem’s Mountain* published by Oolichan Books: “In the cave of the moon / thirteen women are moving. / At new moon a man / with three shoulders will rise / and move with them, / his three-shouldered dancing / joined to their dancing / in front of the fire.”

Tzuhalem is said to participate in their dancing “*at new moon.*” At new moon, the moon is completely shrouded by darkness to the naked human eye. It is then in the shadows that the hunchback dances shamelessly with his loving wives. And the moon remains the only witness to this dancing that happened so long ago.



“Parable of the Truth” is another impressive poem in its simplicity and sincerity. Hence the title. There is no reason to think of this short composition as a parable; there are no hidden nuances of meaning at all that the reader must unveil. The message is crystal-clear and it comes close to a sincere love confession, in spite of all the difficulties encountered and experienced by the lovers. It is the lover’s voice that is speaking again. Trapped somewhere in between love and not-love, the lover feels that he loves and loves not. In Latin poetry, Catullus formulated this feeling in masterly words: *odio et amo*, that is “I hate and I love”, both things at the same time. These Latin words must somehow echo beneath Bringhurst’s words in the first part of the poem, which is nothing but a paradoxical statement about the confusing emotional state which the lover finds himself in. The words are addressed to a “love”, the beloved. The vocative is followed by short verse lines marked by enjambment; they reach a climax exactly at the point where the lover opens his heart and confesses his love: “*I love you / anyway, as well / as I am able / in these difficult / conditions.*” (*SP*, p. 106.)

The second part of the poem consists of one simple question. Stripped of all ornament, it is the expression of utter simplicity. It is a simple rhetorical question, and the speaking voice awaits no answer to it. It is something of a *captatio benevolentiae* addressed to the beloved, or a humble apology on the part of the lover. But it could also be the sincere expression of utter existential uncertainty, verging on painful anguish:

What
can a man come back
to say, who does not
know the word
hello, who never said
goodbye, and also
does not know
if he has ever reached
or left his destination?

SP, p. 106.

This is recognizably the same voice that we get to hear beneath the lines in “These Poems, She Said”, the prologue poem in *The Beauty of the Weapons*. The same sense of emotional detachment is palpable somewhere in between the lines, but these verse lines are moving precisely because of their uncompromising sincerity. From this poem emerges an intriguing map of an anguished heart struggling to make sense of what not-love has done to it. This lover is a man who would rather spend his time with animals and plants rather than with humans, or so it seems to suggest the fact that he does not even manage to control such simple decorum formulae for civilized social interaction as *hello* or *goodbye*. He is not an at-ease man, after all. The closing words are indicative of an anguished existential pain and uncertainty for which only love seems to be the only remedy or cure. With unblinking honesty, the speaker looks inside himself and finds a landscape of spiritual desolation, but, of course, his sense of loss is perfectly natural and human.



“Parable of the Voices” is a very special love poem, a poem of the love the poet feels for such essentials as earth and air. But it is also a metapoem, concerned with the way in which the human voice is capable of creating new things out of air, out of the blue. In its concern with the human voice and speech, it is subtly linked to other poems in the Bringhurst corpus, such as “Poem Without Voices”, “A Quadratic Equation” or “Body, Speech and Mind” (section IV of *Tzibalem’s Mountain*). That it is a perfect artefact is self-evident; this is a poem that reminds us that a poem might be *a thing made* or *a thing found*. Sometimes it looks as though language itself were speaking through Bringhurst’s lips with clarity, elegance and profundity. He is not interested in poetry as narcissistic self-expression or as an outlet for one’s emotions, which may not be relevant at all to the rest of humankind. “Parable of the Voices” is also a piece for oral performance before an audience. We need only to look into the way the poet has managed to put such an astonishing density of meaning into two concise stanzas, of two sentences each. The language is kept simple and the music of words flows naturally from one stanza into another without the reader ever experiencing that the meaning is obscure or difficult to grasp. There is certainly profundity of thought in “Parable of the Voices”, for it is a thoughtful meditation on the way the human voice interacts with air and earth, with the world at large, while at the same time bringing to the day of light nuances of reality that are somewhere in obscure regions still unexplored.

The first stanza is built on a deft metaphor according to which the heart is a broken drum a deaf musician is beating. It may seem that there is something wrong about a heart which is conceptualized as being a broken musical instrument and being played by a deaf musician – musicians are said to be endowed with a good ear after all. Possibly this is meant as a reference to the lover’s broken heart, suffering the ineffable pain that comes in the aftermath of not-love. Or possibly the musician behind the heart has not yet learnt to find the necessary peace of mind to realize that the world is speaking a language of its own; it only has to listen to what it is saying to understand its simple words. Whatever the case, animals are leaping through the hoops of our voices (*whose voices?*, we may ask) to the beating of the drum, as if they were taking part in a show at the circus:

Behind the heart
is a deaf musician
beating a broken
drum. He is watching
the animals leap
through the hoops of our voices.

SP, p. 107.

The human voice is a place, a tangible space where creatures come and go in a natural way. This is the original intuition, the flash of light that crosses Bringhurst’s mind exactly at this point in time. The equation at the centre of the second stanza dwells precisely on this pristine idea. Air and earth are a pair of contraries central to Bringhurst’s poetry, but to the poet’s sensibility air is but one more form of earth:

The air is another
earth full of burrows
the animals enter
and leave through the doors
of our voices. Down through our voices

the waterbirds dive.

SP, p. 107.

So there are hoops and there are doors in our voices. But, why is it that the author only mentions animals in this poem? What about the human presence? Bringhurst loves the company of trees and animals much better. Through the prism of the poet's voice come into being all the animals that live in the air, on land and in water (notice the reference to the *waterbirds*). If there is room for air, land and water in the human voice, then the human voice is the world in its entirety. Or maybe this is a far-fetched interpretation, or this is taking this train of thought to new extremes. Possibly, through the human voice everything we know to exist on Earth may find its way into a poem. There is then an inexhaustible reservoir of *materia poetica* everywhere you turn to look. To Bringhurst, the power of the human voice to make itself heard amid a polyphonic or many-voiced world and to bring new creatures into life remains a mystery. The sacred space where this comes to happen is poetry. The poet is a word-finder and a maker that shapes words into something else which is truly alive only in the human voice. The poet knows how to use words and how to handle them to make them sing *the song of existence* – the analogy that holds music and poetry together is pervasive in Bringhurst's poems. Speech and voice are of the essence to the poet, for he conceives of his own poems as being products more of orality than of written composition. They are meant to be spoken aloud before an audience, and true poetry is best enjoyed primarily through the ear. In fact, T. S. Eliot said it was not necessary for a reader/hearer to fully understand the meaning of a poem so as to be able to appreciate or enjoy the sheer musicality of its words. For it is a pleasure to read a poem aloud, when we are not granted the privilege of having the poet next to us reciting it for us, and to feel that it certainly lives in the voice. One can almost feel its texture on one's tongue, one can almost feel what the words' taste is like. So it is the perfect conjunction of content and form that is so remarkable an achievement in Bringhurst's poem. "Parable of the Voices" is a profound meditation on air, earth, water, voice and poetry (on the way they interact with one another), and also a gift for our voices as we read the poem aloud just for the sake of its beauty.



"His Dream" is the central poem in the third movement of the sonata *Tzubalem's Mountain*. In this disquieting dream that the speaking voice tells, it refers to itself in the third person. It might be a poem of not-love, or even a poem of existential anguish, because in the self-projection the lover explores in *his dream* he cannot even recognize himself in the shattered faces afloat on the lake that appears in his dream. Dreams remain a mystery; they are dangerous and destabilizing for they seem so real that one is not sure where exactly the barrier between what is real and what is unreal lies. In the special framework where dreams happen or take place, time is cancelled, and so is space. The matter of which dreams are made is fugitive, volatile, eel-slippery, and yet dreams hide a wealth of meaning about the self that Freud put the finger on in the early decades of the 20th century. That the subconscious preoccupations and obsessions of the individual come up to the surface in dreams appears to be now a truism taken for granted. Apollonian reason is no longer in control, and so the troubled life deep inside emerges into the world of light unimpeded and uninvited. In "His Dream" Bringhurst comes to terms with the dream of an anguished voice, the one speaking in the poem in the third person, which might as well be his own at a difficult moment in his own life. Again, it does not matter much whether there is an autobiographical substratum here, for the personal has been

transmuted into the universal – that which is not private anymore and so may as well be relevant to another human being’s sensibility.

In the first stanza of the poem, the reader is installed right into the speaking voice’s dream, *in medias res* as it were. A man is trying to take his own life by drowning in a lake. Water is a recurrent element in Bringhurst’s poems, and the theme of *death by water* is also found somewhere else: consider, for instance, “Death by Water”, a poem that explores the deaths of Narcissus and Li Po by water. The image conjured up in these alliterative lines is simply disquieting:

In his hands is a face
full of fossils and pebbles.
A mask. It comes out of
the lake where a man
who is dying is trying
to drown and keeps failing.

SP, p. 107.

There are two human presences in this stanza, or maybe one split self that sees its own specular (mirror-like) projection in the water of the lake. It could be his *alter ego*, or a *Doppelgänger*, which is a notion that has been explored time and again throughout the history of Western literature – consider Rimbaud’s *je suis an autre*, Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary, c’est moi*, or the crowded multitude living within Fernando Pessoa or Antonio Machado’s psyche. In Bringhurst’s poem, the lover holds “*a face full of fossils and pebbles*” in his own hands which he finds out to be just a mask. The idea is terrifying in itself, because a mask is an illusion, and the lover speaking here is not a man easily fooled by appearances. He is Apollonian, after all, which means that he relies in the faculty of reason to see things clearly. A mask hides the truth or essence of things, as it relies on appearance instead, or pretends that appearance is truth. The second part of the poem (stanzas 2 and 3) dwells precisely on the multiplicity of faces that are afloat on the surface water of the lake as a result of the unknown man’s repeated failure at committing suicide. “*When they shatter / he holds them together*”, and then the whole thing starts anew. The point is that none of these faces are his own, which evokes the sense of fear of not recognizing oneself in the image of one’s face one sees reflected in a mirror or in the water. This sense of estrangement or alienation is unbearable and a source of emotional destabilization.

In the last movement of “His Dream” the speaking voice asks his sister for help. This sister could as well be the beloved. She manages to get the faces out of the water by fishing them out to the surface, but they shatter into pieces again. At that point she decides to make a mask for him out of “*the jagged pieces of faces*” she has fished. But wearing a mask is not a solution; it perpetuates the pain of not recognizing oneself in what one is going through in the experience of not loving any more. There seems to be no way for the lover to make himself whole. As he wears the mask made for him, he becomes something of an odd shaman whose hands are rattles as he moves:

He calls to his sister
to help him. She baits
a fishline with feathers
and casts, and the faces
come up from the water
and shatter. Out of
the jagged pieces

[this verse line marked the beginning of a different stanza in previous versions]

of faces, she gathers
the mask. When he wears it,
his hands twitch like rattles.

SP, pp. 107-108.

“His Dream” is a sad poem. The lover is at a loss and does not know which direction to take. His dream reveals to himself everything he keeps hidden in the recesses of his anguished soul by daylight. And the poem is a desperate cry no one seems to care to listen. This is part of life and part of the pain inherent in love. When you do not love or are not loved anymore, there are only two options left: (1) either you let yourself go under and are depressed and you almost lose your dignity (for that is the risk you run when you give yourself up over completely to another person), or (2) you decide to stand on your feet and be strong and forget everything there is to forget to start anew. By being strong you conquer your pain and you learn to find your way back to serenity. In any case, what remains an indestructible appeal about this poem is precisely the imaginatively audacious portrait of the lover as a split, anguished self in search of order amid emotional chaos.



“Parable of the Lake’s Edge” is a perfectly-woven web of musical words, the musicality being enhanced no doubt by alliteration of /l/, /m/ and /st/ throughout the whole composition. Opening with a vocative addressed to the old woman, the poem is written in gnomic language, one that verges on obscurity and wisdom at the same time. In three short movements for the mind arranged into one single, prolonged stanza, the speaking voice meditates on a man’s attitude who wishes to fish in the lake of the daylight. This is, by the way, the central metaphor upon which the whole poem is built. Daylight is a gigantic lake from which the man fishes “*standing on his shadow*.” The man must stand still, while his shadow keeps moving morning and evening. There are echoes here of course of the gnomic words Herakleitos uttered almost 25 centuries ago: *παντᾶ ῥεῖ*, which is to say that everything is in a state of permanent flux, changing all the time. But the emphasis is laid on the need for the man to stand still while everything around him moves, even if only imperceptibly. This is absolute stillness or *stasis* amid endless motion. This is also the mystery that everything changes and yet remains somehow the same.

What comes next in the poem has got the texture of transcendence and the taste of an important revelation and discovery on the part of the poetic voice: “*Morning after morning / a man must rename / the sun without breathing*.” (*SP*, p. 108.) Human beings’ capacity to name things in the universe was a gift they were given by God in Genesis, the opening book in the Old Testament. God’s word was creative in the sense that it could bring things into existence by simply naming them. Walter Benjamin himself draws an interesting distinction between divine, adamic and post-adamic language. The first belongs to God alone; it is the kind of language in which naming and creating things are one and the same thing. Adamic language is the privilege humans were given to name things exactly as they are so as to unveil their essence. By contrast, post-adamic language, which came after the fall, is imperfect and unreliable, for it hides the essence of things and shows only appearances. Language in its present state is then an unreliable tool of knowledge and communication among humans. The speaking voice in Bringham’s poem might have borne in mind as it says that “*morning after morning / a man must rename / the sun without breathing*”, either because language is actually inefficient when we come to terms with such an elemental thing as the sun, or because renaming the sun without actually saying a word means that we humans simply acknowledge its awe-inspiring beauty, its presence up in the sky giving all creatures

on Earth its benign light and warmth. To put it shortly, *renaming the sun without breathing* is an act of humility and devotion to *what is*. No words are needed any more; the soul has found the peace it needs.

In the closing lines of “Parable of the Lake’s Edge” we are witnessing the dance of the intellect among words, as it were:

Morning after morning
a man standing still
as a stick at the lake’s edge
must gather the dance
in his hands without moving.

SP, p. 108.

Dance is incarnation; dance is the joy the body experiences within itself as it feels its own free motion in and through space. But the dance of the man fishing from the shore, and standing still on his shadow without ever moving, is of a different nature. We are ready to offer several possible interpretations: (1) the dance is the dance of his own shadow moving to the rhythm of the revolving sun; (2) the dance is *the dance of existence* itself, of everything that is moving around him (the flux of life) to the rhythm of *the song of the flesh* that the old woman sings; or (3) the dance is the dance he feels in his hands as he fishes from the lake and feels the motion of living fish struggling for their own survival under water. Or simply the dance is *the feeling of being alive amid such exuberance*, under the warmth and protection of the sunlight, which reminds him that he belongs there. The sun will give the anguished lover the peace of mind he needs and make him whole again, so that he can celebrate the beauty and connectedness of everything in this world.



“Parable of the Indestructible” is a moving and subtle meditation on the aftermath of not-love. In three movements for the soul emerges a picture of an anguished heart struggling to make sense of what has happened to the world once love has ceased to be its guiding compass. With unblinking honesty, the lover asks three simple rhetorical questions and then makes a forceful statement. *Ubi sunt?*, seem to ask the first two questions. Like the human voices in “Parable of the Voices”, the lovers’ bodies are conceptualized as being a place. The beloved’s body is a vast expanse of land the lover traverses carrying a *golden bough* with him, i.e., giving himself up over completely to her in an act of sincere generosity, whereas their mouths, which closed upon one another for the exchange of kisses, had enough room for sweet water that is now gone. Both questions testify to what sounds a truism: understanding that love can be too much, or that loving too much entails its own risks. Love not only brings out what is best in yourself, especially when both lovers give themselves wholeheartedly to one another. In the aftermath of not-love, one cannot help feeling that such an exuberance was risky, even dangerous, for, when loving too much, one runs the risk of losing one’s dignity. Cutting yourself free of whom you love in the hope that the wounds heal is no easy decision. It is a hard, painful decision, for one cannot forget what has been shared, what has been kept and what has been inevitably lost in the whole process. Unnaturally, one seems to be much more interested in the things that have been lost, not in the things that have been kept. Loss – this is what these questions are dwelling on:

Where is it now, the golden bough

I carried through her body?
Where is the taste of sweet water
torn from our mouths?

SP, p. 109.

What follows is something of a technical accomplishment: a picture of complete chaos emerges among animals that have ceased to sing and to hunt. This is the world upside down as it were, and the speaking voice in the poem directs the reader's attention with an explicit imperative to a disquieting and confused choir of animals that recalls the Babel episode in the Bible:

Listen: the bleat of the widgeon,
the moan of the loon and the croak of the heron,
the hawks howling like wolves and the sea eagles¹⁵
neighing like horses, the gibber of gulls,
and the small owl barking in daylight:
like bones in their throats their own

indestructible questions.

SP, p. 109.

Homo sapiens sapiens is also *homo loquens*. Humans can speak their own languages, which serve the purpose of communication. In other words, languages exist so that we can communicate with each other. But humans are not alone in the world in their capacity to communicate by means of a set of more or less complex signs and conventions. No living creature is cast out into everlasting silence, except the dead. Animals can also speak a language of their own. What is simply astonishing and moving about Bringham's picture of the animals trying to communicate, is that they have forgotten their natural or original language. Hence we are witnessing a sort of new Babel, among animals this time, in which widgeons bleat, loons moan, herons croak, hawks howl, sea eagles neigh, gulls gibber and owls bark. The sense of utter confusion is stylistically emphasized through the use of parallelism and alliteration in these lines. By the end of the poem, we come to the intimation that something of a transcendental nature is going on in this poem. Out of empathy among sentient beings, a strong sense of communion and kinship emerges between the lover and all the birds mentioned in the poem. This is called *personification* in this particular case, or *pathetic fallacy*. Moved by a shared existential pain, the lover/poet and the birds are asking the same indestructible questions. Or maybe the birds commiserate the lover and share his pain in this way. Whatever the case, the questions they are asking are bones in their throats, which is clearly a reminiscent echo from section XII ("Hic Amor, Haec Patria"): "*what is this hunger / grown hard as a bone?*" *All knowledge is carnal*, said the speaking voice in that poem, and so is all pain, especially the pain that comes from not-love. It has got a physical texture about it that is simply inescapable. That all the birds have stopped doing what they normally do – singing and hunting – to share the lover's pain is a sign that Nature is compassionate, that we all belong among the same grander scheme of things. This unity of feeling makes them all ask the same indestructible questions: *Where are the happiness and bliss associated to love gone when love is over? Where is the sense in one's life, if one did not ask to be born in the first place? What, if not love, can redeem humankind and all living creatures and save them from chaos, disorder and emptiness?*

¹⁵ This verse line marked the beginning of a different stanza in previous versions.



“Parable of the Sun”, the closing poem in the sonata of *Tzuhalem’s Mountain*, is a love poem, a poem celebrating the poetic persona’s infinite love of life. It brings to the fore the same sun that has been celebrated in section XIX (“Parable of the Lake’s Edge”), where morning after morning the sun is renamed “*without breathing*” by man. It also brings into a perfect vortex of meaning the “*belly and back*” and “*claw of the cat*” of “Tzuhalem’s Song” in section XI. Whereas the sonata opens with a miniature cosmogony on rocks that stood for the two lovers and the world, it closes with a hymn to the sun and to the life that thrives in the sunlight. What do fish and men have in common?, one might be tempted to ask upon first reading this little jewel-like poem. For the whole effect and impact of the poem is derived from the stark juxtaposition of two simple images in each of the stanzas that make up “Parable of the Sun”. This Bringham accomplishes in a language of physical immediacy and transparency. Whereas in the first stanza we clearly see an image of struggling fish trying to get home and struggling for their own life, in the second stanza it is man that is being savaged by cats and yet manages to limp off up into the mountains. Strength for survival, an insatiable appetite and an unquenchable thirst for life – this is what both fish and men have in common. Their struggle happens in the sunlight, under the benign warmth and protection of the sun:

Bright fish in the shallows
breaking their guts to come home to these gravels,
their bowels chewed by the unborn,
their backs by the eagles.

The man in the sun, savaged
by cats, drags his cloak through the waters
and limps up the mountain,
his footprints in tatters.

SP, p. 109.

This shared desire for survival amid a hostile world is to be found among animals and humans alike. But who is the man savaged by cats in the middle of nowhere up in the mountains? It could be Tzuhalem, the lover himself, or even the poet/Orpheus. The spectre of Tzuhalem, the Salish Indian, is somewhere in the background in this short lyric poem. Once again, Bringham gives us the details concerning his death: at about the age of 60, he was killed with an axe as he was about to kidnap yet another wife to take away into the mountains with the rest of the cluster of loves he had there. In this new, mythical version of his death, he is not quite dead. Hunchbacked, savaged by cats that leave his cloak in tatters, he simply walks away, limping off up the mountain, his mountain. But if we take *the man* to mean *the lover* speaking in these poems, then a new interpretation is close at hand: after the anguish and pain of not-love, the lover is about to embark on a process of spiritual recovery. Broken-hearted as he may be, torn into pieces by the savage cats of not-love, he is determined to make himself whole again. Also, one cannot help thinking of Orpheus, the *Ur-singer* and *Ur-poet* from Greek mythology that was dismembered, torn into pieces by maddening Maenads. Like Tzuhalem, who has his own mountain, he also became immortal: he was made into a constellation in the heavens. By this point, the poet must have learnt a simple lesson: pain is an inevitable part of life and one must try to conquer it, even turn it into appropriate *materia poetica* for perfect, moving poems like the ones we find in *Tzuhalem’s Mountain*.

Tending the Fire

An Unparable of the Relations of Rabbits & Dogs & Old Women, &c.

Tending the Fire (1985) is a hauntingly beautiful long narrative poem that tells of the creation of the world by Old Woman. In a sense, it is a creation myth in which men and women come last of all and receive their recognizably human attributes thanks to the intercession of Dog. Into the brilliant tapestry of the composition are woven a number of threads Bringhamst has discovered in his encounters with anthropology, with West-Coast native mythology and with the oral literatures of North America, the impressive legacy of the so-called First Nations which constitutes one of the fundamental cornerstones of his personal literary canon, alongside Western and Eastern traditions, as represented by the Pre-Socratic poet-philosophers and the Buddhist monk-thinkers who lived so many centuries ago. In the larger context of Bringhamst's entire oeuvre, *Tending the Fire* is preceded by other long poems which are masterpieces on their own, such as the early *Deutoronomy* (1974), a dramatic monologue spoken by Moses; *Hachadura* (1975), a monologue for a solo intelligence on the ontology of nothingness; *Jacob Singing* (1977), another biblical dramatic monologue on Jacob facing death; and *The Stonecutter's Horses* (1979), an original literary recreation of the last will and testament of the Italian poet-scholar Petrarch preparing to die. But, the early 1980s marked the beginning of a life-long passion with Bringhamst: the oral literature and visual arts of the Haida, a First Nation people living in Haida Gwaii, an archipelago off the west coast of British Columbia. Bill Reid, the famous Haida master carver, and Bringhamst became close friends at a decisive moment in the poet's literary career's development. From Reid he learnt how to love best the legacy of a native people that has come to mean so much to him as a cultural historian, linguist, translator and poet – as a humanist concerned to study humankind in its manifold expressions. Bringhamst started to learn Haida on his own, producing his own dictionary and struggling to understand the transcriptions made by John Swanton of Haida myths and stories at the turn of the 20th century. This would turn out to be a lasting interest that led to the impressive trilogy *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers* (1999-2001) – an ambitious study of the Haida and their world, followed by translations of Ghandl and Skaay. Out of the fruitful collaboration between Reid and Bringhamst came the first result: *The Raven Steals the Light* (1984), which collects ten stories or episodes from Haida mythology accompanied by Reid's accomplished drawings.¹ One year later, *Tending the Fire*, a long narrative poem reminiscent of West-Coast mythology, saw the light of day. It was only natural that Bringhamst should have tried his own hand at producing a myth-like poem that resonates powerfully in the reader's mind with its simplicity and its profundity of thought.

¹ Bringhamst's life-long passion with the Haida and their culture (and with the oral literatures of the First Nations) has produced an impressive body of work: (1) *The Raven Steals the Light* (with Bill Reid), 1984; (2) *Part of the Land, Part of the Water: A History of the Yukon Indians* (with Catherine McClellan et al.), 1987; (3) *The Black Canoe: Bill Reid and the Spirit of Haida Gwaii* (with photographs by Ulli Steltzer), 1991 (2nd, augmented ed., 1992); (4) *Native American Oral Literatures and the Unity of the Humanities* (Garnett Sedgewick Memorial Lecture), 1998; (5) *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers: vol. I, A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World*, 1999; *Nine Visits to the Mythworld. Ghandl of the Qayabl Ljaanas*, 2000; and *Being in Being. The Collected Works of a Master Haida Mythteller. Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay*, 2001; (6) *Solitary Raven. The Selected Writings of Bill Reid*, 2000; (7) *Translating Haida Poetry: An Interview with Robert Bringhamst*, by Thérèse Rigaud, 2002; (8) *Prosodies of Meaning: Literary Form in Native North America* (Belcourt Lecture), 2004; (9) Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay, *Sixcha / Floating Overhead: The Qquuna Cycle 3.3*, 2007; (10) *Solitary Raven: The Essential Writings of Bill Reid*, by Bill Reid, edited by Robert Bringhamst, with an Afterword by Martine Reid, 2nd expanded edition, 2009.

Originally published in a beautifully designed chapbook in a limited edition by The Alcuin Society in 1985, *Tending the Fire. An Unparable of the Relations of Rabbits & Dogs & Old Women, &c.*² was afterwards reprinted in the literary magazine *CutBank* (1986) and in Bringhurst's twelfth book, *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986),³ a ground-breaking collection that brought together different sequences of poems and two prose pieces (an impressive autobiographical meditation and an interview). Then it was reformatted and printed by Heather Hodgson with the permission of Robert Bringhurst in Regina (Saskatchewan) in 1996 and 1997. Curiously enough, it was never reprinted again anywhere else, not even in the subsequent Bringhurst collected volumes – *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995) and *Selected Poems* (2009). *Tending the Fire* is quite of an exception in the whole Bringhurst corpus, for it has remained unchanged from one textual incarnation to the next. Only a new prefatory note was added in the *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* incarnation of the poem. In its first edition (October 1985) published by The Alcuin Society, the poem displayed a most curious dedication: “*This poem / is for those who appear in it / and for those who don't.*” The colophon at the end of the chapbook reads as follows: “*Tending the Fire* is the sixth in a series of chapbooks published by The Alcuin Society. It has been designed and printed by Glenn Goluska at The Nightshade Press, Toronto. The typeface is Linotype Electra, printed by hand on Mohawk Letterpress Text. The edition is limited to 126 copies, of which 26, lettered, are for the author's own use and 100, numbered and signed by the author, are for sale.” At any rate, the first edition of the poem is truly a beautiful artifact, one that harmonizes both the content and the form of a unique work of art. Glennis Zilim praises it rightly enthusiastically in an early review of *Tending the Fire* published in the prestigious journal *Amphora*:

² The editorial history of *Tending the Fire* can be best summarized as follows: (1) A.27 •• *Tending the Fire*. Alcuin Chapbook No. 6. Vancouver: The Alcuin Society, 1985. [16] p. Paper, 14.5 × 24 cm. “The edition is limited to 126 copies, of which 26, lettered, are for the author's own use and 100, numbered and signed by the author, are for sale.” ISBN 0-919026-14-1. Contents: A poem (rpt., with new prefatory note, in A.32, A.54, A.54a, C.50). (2) C.50 [Eleven poems]. *CutBank* (Missoula, Montana) 26 (Spring/Summer 1986): 37–58. Contents: 1) “Six Poems from *The Book of Silences*”: • “Uddalaka Aruni: A Song for the Weavers” (rev. in A.32); • “Wáng Bì” (rpt. in A.32, B.44; rev. in A.65); • “Jízàng” (rpt. in A.32, A.65); • “Línjì Yìxuán” (rpt. in A.32, rev. in A.47, A.65); • “Dānxiá Zìchún” (rpt. in A.32, A.47, A.65); • “Nánquán Puyuàn” (rpt. in A.32, A.65; see also F.2); 2) • “Sutra of the Heart” (rpt. in A.32, A.47, C.51; cf. S.241); “Rubus Ursinus: A Prayer for the Blackberry Harvest” (rpt. from A.28); “Thirty Words” (rpt. from A.25, where it appears as “Thirty Words for Deborah Peaker”); • “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985” (rpt. in A.32, A.47, B.27, B.59, B.60, B.78a, B.83a, B.93); “Tending the Fire” (rpt., with new prefatory note, from A.27). (3) A.32 •• *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986. With calligraphy by Yim Tse. 128 p. Paper, 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 0-7710-1661-1. “Tending the Fire” is reprinted from A.27 here. (4) A.54 *Tending the Fire*. n. p. [Regina, Saskatchewan], 1996. 8 p. Paper, 14 × 21.5 cm. “100 copies ... reformatted and printed by Heather Hodgson with the permission of Robert Bringhurst.” Contents: A poem, rpt. from A.32. (5) A.54a *Tending the Fire*. Regina, Saskatchewan, 1997. 8 p. Paper, 14 × 21.5 cm. Issued in a printed envelope bearing a short text by the Cree elder Êkosi (Christine Wilna Hodgson) and a folded sheet entitled “Robert Bringhurst: Biographical Sketches,” by Heather Hodgson. “100 copies ... printed by Heather Hodgson for delegates attending the 36th Canadian Regional Conference....” (A variant edition of A.54, issued later.)

³ In this respect, Ronald Hatch, in a review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* entitled “Poems of a Modern Saint – or is It a Preacher?”, published in *The Vancouver Sun*, 25 October 1986: C12, says of *Tending the Fire*: “In this connection, one of the finer pieces [in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*] is a long narrative poem which retells the creation myth, centering on the ‘Old Woman’ at the beginning of time and ‘Dog,’ who asks that she improve her handiwork by creating men and women. It is hauntingly lovely, humorously sad.” Ronald B. Hatch, in another review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* published under the Poetry section of “Letters in Canada 1986” in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* 57.1 (Fall 1987): 40-41, says of *Tending the Fire*: “Judging from the order of the poems in the volume it would seem that Bringhurst is moving increasingly towards the oral tradition. One of the finer pieces is a long narrative poem which retells the creation myth, centering on the ‘Old Woman’ at the beginning of time and ‘Dog’ who asks that she improve her handiwork by creating men and women. It is hauntingly lovely, humorously sad.” (p. 40) The emphasis now is on orality, another important aspect central to *Tending the Fire*.

The work also represents Bringhurst's dedication to the belief that form and format must complement and enhance the substance of a fine poem. A dedicated book designer himself, in *Tending the Fire* Bringhurst has worked closely with master printer Glenn Goluska of The Nightshade Press and imprimerie dromadaire, Toronto. Together they have developed a high-quality and strikingly visual work using a Linotype Electra typeface printed by hand on Mohawk Letterpress Text paper. Despite the soft, tactually-pleasing paper, the type comes through with a clear, crisp inking that reflects the dedication of the printer. The stone coloured cover is ornamented with a wave-like line printed in a rust ink that complements the black ink used for the text. This ornament – possibly representing “Communication” – is continued in colour at the top and bottom of the pages throughout the chapbook. Delicate single-thread stitching is used for binding. The result is a delight. [...] In sum, this is a singularly beautiful presentation of an intensely interesting new work by an increasingly important writer. Book lovers will want this chapbook for any one (or all) of these reasons.⁴

As can be gathered from this long paragraph, Glennis Zilm's review focuses on the technical and typographical description of Bringhurst's poem. Only in passing does Zilm devote a few commentaries to the simplicity and elegance of Bringhurst's language, as well as to the influence of West-Coast mythology on the subject matter of the poem: “The influence of west-coast mythology is evident. The narrative tells of an old woman who made the world, and then, as a gift, supplied humans to cure the loneliness of her dog. The dog guides his humans out into the new and beautiful world – but returns four times to ask for additional gifts, each time for them. The language is unpretentious, clear and evocative...”⁵ Indeed, from a purely stylistic point of view, *Tending the Fire*, like all of Bringhurst's poems, is a long, narrative poem written in a language characterized by simplicity and elegance. This is, by the way, the only kind of language suitable for rendering a simple story into comprehensible and moving words. And, as a matter of fact, Bringhurst makes use of unostentatious and plain words that embody an astonishing profundity of thought. He is a poet of deep vision and with a deep concern for words. There is no random choice of words; all the words tessellated into this beautiful narrative poem fall exactly into place, they are not redundant or dispensable at all. Repetition of words and phrases is also put to eloquent use on the part of the poet. In fact, *Tending the Fire* could be said to resemble a circle in its sense of inevitable completion and perfection. At some point, the old woman even speaks of *the circle closing*, and in its textual incarnation in *Pieces of Map*, *Pieces of Music* the poem is preceded by a simple circle on a blank page.

The native traditions of the West Coast resonate powerfully between the lines of this unique poem.⁶ Unlike its predecessors (the long poems of the 1970s), *Tending the Fire*

⁴ See Glennis Zilm's review of *Tending the Fire*, published in *Amphora* (Vancouver) 62 (December 1985): 24-25. [This review was later reprinted in *In Praise of the Book: Being a Facsimile of Important Articles from Amphora* 1965–1990. Vancouver: Alcuin Society, 1992: 46-47.] Elsewhere in the same review, Zilm says: “The sixth in a series of limited edition, finely-wrought poetry chapbooks from The Alcuin Society contains a new narrative “unparable” from the highly-talented Robert Bringhurst. This relative newcomer to the Canadian literary scene brings a strong, versatile and imaginative poetic voice and a dedication to quality writing and beautiful presentation. *Tending the Fire* is a polished and penetrating example of his work.” *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵ Glennis Zilm's review of *Tending the Fire*, p. 24.

⁶ As Jane Munro claims in her review of *Bergschrund*, *Jacob Singing*, and *The Stonecutter's Horses*, with a partial account of an interview, in “Bringhurst's Range: Essential Information”, *CVII [Contemporary Verse Two]* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81): 38-41, “Bringhurst is interested in our West Coast native traditions and cultures, he is “very eager, I must say, to learn and to inherit as much of their knowledge as possible.” And the poet himself says: “The way Greek civilization, which we've been taught to admire very much, came to be when the Greeks came into Greece, conquered the country, and were spiritually and mentally conquered by the culture which they had subdued. If that happens to us, as European immigrants to the New World, if it happens that

has something unique about it. To begin with, it is not a dramatic monologue for just one voice, as three different voices are threaded into the living fabric of the composition – the narrator’s, the old woman’s and the Dog’s. Furthermore, the impulse informing the poem is of an essentially mythopoeic nature: here is Bringhurst trying to produce a mythic account of the creation of the world that has nothing to do with the biblical cosmogony as recounted in the Book of Genesis or with the cosmogonies associated to Western (Graeco-Roman) mythology as told by Homer, Hesiod or Ovid. This is not an anthropocentric account of the origins of the world where human beings are the ultimate *raison d’être* of the universe, for whose sake everything that exists is created. Here is not an omnipotent god or goddess but an old woman (possibly the same old woman mentioned in *Tzibalem’s Mountain*, a sonata in three movements also reminiscent of the native people of North America, and in “Bone Flute Breathing”, a woman possibly endowed with telluric connotations and subtly associated to Mother Earth) creating the world *ex nihilo* in its varied beauty and perfection, at the centre of which stands not man but all living (non-human) creatures that populate this world. Accompanying the old woman is Dog, who asks her to complete her handiwork by creating human beings that might cure his own solitude. Man is not the owner of the world just created, but one more piece in the complex mesh of living things. Man is not commanded to have dominion over all that exists, but is almost an afterthought as it were. Only because Dog cares for humans and asks the old woman to provide them with unique faculties and skills, do they come to possess all the recognizably human attributes: speech, laughter & dreaming, crying & praying, dancing & singing. The sad irony pulsating at the heart of the poem is that Dog renounces all these things for the benefit of human beings that will never remember to thank him at all.

Let us turn now to the eloquent subtitle of Bringhurst’s poem: “*An Unparable of the Relations of Rabbits & Dogs & Old Women, &c.*” The dictionary tells us that a parable is “a short story that teaches a moral or spiritual lesson, especially one of those told by Jesus as recorded in the Bible”. But what exactly is an ‘unparable’? This is a made-up word that the poet intends possibly to mean that this myth-like narrative poem has no moralizing intentions, seeks not to deliver a moral lesson by presenting a simple story that sheds light on the human condition and on the nature of the world. But the truth is that in exploring the way humans relate to other living creatures of this world, some kind of elemental lesson is being conveyed to the reader. Though these relations are not exactly at the heart of the poem, they are certainly evoked indirectly in the way Dog acts as an intermediary in this creation myth to ask the old woman to give humans a wealth of invaluable attributes. The sad thing is that humans’ ingratitude is brought sharply into focus by the end of the story, and this could well be the moral lesson the poet set out to teach, even if very subtly, from the very start. *Tending the Fire* is an *unparable* that seeks to objectively present an alternative account of the origins of the world where humans are not the centre and are yet the ultimate beneficiaries on account of the intercession of Dog. The *&c.* of the subtitle is all-encompassing enough, as it is meant to refer to all living (non-human) creatures of this

we come here and conquer the Indians and then find that their wisdom wells up and nourishes us, then we are fortunate for that fact and they are not. ... Wisdom has nothing to do with age and it has something to do with experience. Experience will not necessarily produce wisdom.... But it seems to me that to be able to live over your own Bronze Age or Stone Age roots is an opportunity towards wisdom which one ought not to forgo easily, but all of us... are deprived of that sense of deep history. We can get it in one of two ways, both of two ways. One is by devoting ourselves to the study of the European tradition, fancying ourselves to be simply far-flung Europeans, which seems to be a tragic mistake. Or, we can try to identify with this new country and, in a sense, try to Indianize ourselves... And that doesn’t really work very well either because it’s false. So, we’re vagrants, we’re migrants, we’re intruders, although the land is ours now as much as it is anybody’s and we have to do the best we can by it.” (p. 41)

world just made by the old woman, a peculiar demiurgus that has nothing to do with Ouranos and Gea, or with the biblical God of the Christians.

In a review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* entitled “Poetry Lighting Up our Dark Corners to Show the Invisible”, Patricia Keeney Smith claims that “in a superb creation myth called “Tending the Fire” (possibly pre-Columbian), Bringhurst’s voice seems totally at the service of a completely satisfying and marvellous tale involving an old woman and a dog and the first human beings. It answers all the questions worth asking.”⁷ *Tending the Fire* answers all the questions worth asking, says this lucid reviewer. One wonders what those questions might be, and in what follows we shall try to find them out. “All that is visible clings to the invisible”: this illumination by the German poet Novalis lights up the unseen corners of Bringhurst’s poetry. He penetrates the visible very quickly, knowing it to be the conventional costume only of a richly hidden inner life. It seems that existence covets its marvellous secrets, but Bringhurst understands how to reach the core of the invisible. It seems to us that myth is one of the possible paths leading towards the invisible (and the inaudible too), at least for Bringhurst. Now, *Tending the Fire* is a creation myth concerned with the origins of *what is*. He has left the disappointments of the visible and stands on the threshold of a tantalizing unseen. The wonder of the visible is that it leads everywhere, but in the case of this poet it leads to an ultimate numinous presence that sheds light on all existence. The kind of attention that Bringhurst pays to the world behind the world makes possible such masterpieces as this unique creation myth, in which that life beyond the eyes has been distilled into purity and motionlessness. Its beauty is quietly mystical, humorously sad and intensely humane. In the end, our emotional allegiance is with Dog, who has sacrificed himself by renouncing all the gifts that were his by right just for the sake of ungrateful human beings.

Myth is of the essence in Bringhurst’s poetics and *Tending the Fire* is a creation myth after all. Mythology is atemporal and universal, a sort of ecology of interconnected stories with a huge explanatory potential in the face of the awe-inspiring grandeur of *what is*. In Bringhurst’s own definition, “A myth is a theorem about the nature of reality expressed not in algebraic symbols or inanimate abstractions but in animate narrative form.”⁸ In the prefatory note preceding the poem in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, the author himself explains the sources of the myth he is about to tell. What matters above all other things is the fact that a myth manages to talk to us with the utmost relevance. He has gotten to hear the story from a number of storytellers in various places across the American continent, but the words are ultimately his, and that is no minor achievement, even if Bringhurst insists that “Real myths are not created by humans, any more than the laws of physics are, though we rely on human beings, using human languages, to formulate and explore them”⁹:

This story belongs to Ron Evans of Saskatchewan and to Jesús Elciaga of Oaxaca and to others from whom I have heard it, in one shape or another, in Tamazulapán and the Sawtooth Mountains and Toronto. In some lesser way the words – and in some greater way also the places – through which it is told in this version belong to me. What interests me, though, isn’t the shifting and tenuous ways in which the story belongs to one or another of us, but the deeper ways in which we all (all of us here, now, in this moment which repeats through space and time) belong to the story – and belong to the places through which it is or might be told. It is a simple – some say much too simple – story after all. As well as a true one.

⁷ Patricia Keeney Smith, “Poetry Lighting Up our Dark Corners to Show the Invisible”, a review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* published in *The Star* (Toronto), 29 November 1986: M4.

⁸ See Bringhurst’s entry on ‘mythology’ in W. H. New (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*, p. 791.

⁹ Bringhurst’s entry on ‘mythology’, *ibid.*, p. 793.

The story *Tending the Fire* tells is simple and yet absolutely true, Bringhurst reminds us. Sometimes simplicity is the most reliable and effective way of approaching the world, which is of a subtle complexity indeed. Reality is one, but the paths humankind might choose to touch its heart are truly diverse: science, philosophy or poetry are instances of paths leading to the ultimate truth and, sometimes, if one is lucky enough, even to wisdom. A myth embodies then a form of truth on a par with scientific or philosophical or poetic truth. In humans' hands, mythology is a sharp tool of knowledge and a way of coming to terms with the real world. Thus, it penetrates the heart of the nature of reality and leads human beings towards some kind of enlightenment. In this respect, Bringhurst's poem is a wonderfully accomplished creation myth, "not only a creative embellishment of a Native American tale, but a delightful lyric poem",¹⁰ and also a moving meditation on the human condition arranged in five movements for the reader's soul. At any rate, the myth *Tending the Fire* tells is wonderfully summarized by Gary Geddes in a lucid review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*:

A long poem towards the end of *Pieces* seems to me more ambitious and interesting. "Tending the Fire" is an endearing and engaging account of creation, which attributes creation to Old Woman, known as Grandmother, and the existence of man and woman to the special pleadings of dog. Dog intercedes on behalf of his new playthings, asks to give them speech, then the gifts of tears and laughter, and, finally, the ability to dance. The irony of the narrative lies not only in the humble origins of mankind, but also in the fact that dog's intercessions have cost him, personally, all the gifts he requested for mankind, leaving him in his present, pitiable state. The narrative retelling of this myth strikes me as quite brilliant; it moves with perfect naturalness and conversational ease, giving both creator and dog very recognizable human qualities and expressions.¹¹

The influence of West-Coast mythology on *Tending the Fire* is self-evident, not just in the purely formal dimension of the composition – a long narrative poem punctuated by symmetrical patterns of repetition and variation, reminiscent of the oral literatures of the First Nations of North America –, but also as far as the subject matter is concerned – an account of the origins of the world that focuses on the creation of human beings. In oral traditions, stories are living organisms as it were, being passed uninterruptedly from one generation to the next by word of the mouth. Writing, by contrast, freezes stories down onto a blank page in the form of inert words that are only truly alive in the storyteller's unstoppable breath. The act of telling a story is a communal act that binds human beings together and reminds them of elemental truths that persist despite the passage of time. One of those elemental truths *Tending the Fire* teaches us humans is that we belong among a larger and grander scheme of living things. It teaches us a lesson of humility and urges us not to forget to be grateful to other beings. According to Jon Davis, Bringhurst's myth draws our attention to the simple fact that humans are not separate from nature:

The finest poem in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* is the haunting narrative "Tending the Fire," a creation myth that reminds us we are not separate from nature. The poem recalls Edwin Muir's "The Horses" in its power, sweep, and sympathy. Bringhurst has heard the tale he retells in "Tending the Fire" in places as diverse as Saskatchewan and Oaxaca. He's engaged here in anthropology as poetry, which is not surprising, given his comments in the

¹⁰ Glenn Sheldon's review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* in *Small Press Review* (El Cerrito, California) 20:12 (December 1988): 12.

¹¹ Gary Geddes' review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, in *Journal of Canadian Poetry* (Nepean, Ontario) n.s. 3 (1988): 15-18. See, in particular, p. 17.

“Prose Caboose”: “I spend more time reading the works of biologists and anthropologists [than poets]. I think of them often as the real poets of my age.”¹²

As pointed out above, *Tending the Fire* consists of five parts or movements that complete a circle of utter beauty and perfection. The characters at the heart of the narrative poem are the Old Woman (Grandmother), Dog and human beings, and the speaking voices are those of the Old Woman, of Dog, and of a sort of omniscient narrator in control of the story’s unfolding into full bloom. The language is kept simple, straightforward and elegant throughout, as it should be, for this is a primordial account concerned with origins. Back in a primordial time marked by utter temporal indeterminacy (“*It was either a little or a long time ago*”, says the opening verse line of the poem), we readers are present at the primeval creation of a pristine, brand-new world. This the beginning or the first part of *Tending the Fire*, which shows the Old Woman paring her nails after the creation of the world, satisfied with his handiwork and looking for approbation from her dog. She is staying in a high meadow, not far away “*from the middle of things*” (a phrase repeated several times throughout the poem that might refer to the primordial origin of all existing things or to the heart of earth itself), looking at the new world where light traverses space and pervades the very air for the first time:

It was either a little or a long time ago,
and the old woman who made the world,
day before yesterday, had only just made it.
The wind picked up, and the sunlight cut
through the air, where it had never been before,
and the old woman who made the world
pitched her camp in a high meadow
not very far from the middle of things,
and looked at the world, and said to her dog,
Well, dog, do you think it'll do?

The dog’s response is complimentary and sincere at the same time. From his point of view, the world created by the Old Woman is exactly as he had imagined it to be. He says: “*The spruce trees look like spruce trees, the mountain / larches look like mountain larches, the balsam / firs have the unmistakable odor of firs.*” The dog celebrates the natural exuberance of existence by mentioning trees and birds, different kinds of land and air animals, as well as mosses and lichen on rocks. And yet he feels everything created by the Old Woman seems “*to have places to be in the world,*” which is to say that they fit in or belong among the grand scheme of things, while he is the only one that seems to be out of place. All living species on Earth have found their own niche in the world, they have a purpose to their lives, whereas the dog is lonely in this new paradise:

*The rabbit, the mountain cat, the blacktailed
deer, the varied thrush, the squirrel
all have their places, like the mosses
on the rocks and the bright green
lichen hanging in the lodgepole pine.
I'm the only one here, grandmother,
with no one to chase or to run from
or run to, and I'm lonely in this world.*

¹² Jon Davis’s review of two books including *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, entitled “For What We Fashion”, published in *American Book Review* (Boulder, Colorado) 2.1 (March/April 1989): 22.

Moved by the dog's pitiable solitude, the Old Woman is determined then to make him "someone to love / and look after if that's how it is." At that point, she pokes up the fire, sighs and makes the first human beings (men and women) "as a gift, / to cure the loneliness of the dog." In the cosmogony recounted in the biblical Book of Genesis, humans come also last in the piecemeal process of creation, but they are commanded to reign over the whole world – all the plants and birds and animals are for them. In this new account of the origins of humankind, men and women see the light of day on the intercession of the dog. They are the playthings of Dog, as it were, who will look after them and plead the Old Woman to give them their recognizable human attributes. So, contrary to the reader's expectations, it is humans that are created for the benefit of the dog, and not the other way around. Once created *ex nihilo*, the dog "guided the humans out into the world." This statement is a bit enigmatic: Does the dog show human beings the way leading to the different corners of a vast world unknown to them? Possibly. What is out of the question is that Dog is the protector and guide of these primordial humans that are at a loss amid the vastness of creation.

The four movements that follow and that form the core of *Tending the Fire* show the dog asking the Grandmother to give the newly-created men and women a number of gifts – skills and faculties – that make them truly human. The four gifts are nothing more (and nothing less) than speech, laughter, crying and dancing. Each of these gifts is produced in exactly the same way: the Old Woman stirs the fire she is tending with a stick and takes out a stone associated to each gift; then she places the stone at a particular cardinal point on the meadow, where it will remain forever undisturbed. Prompted by generosity and humility, the dog is eager to renounce what could be his own gifts just for the sake of his playthings. All four movements show exactly the same pattern: first the Old Woman is shown sitting quietly in contemplation of the natural world she has created, then the dog comes out of the blue to ask her for one new gift to give to the humans, the Old Woman grants the dog each gift by poking up the fire and placing the right stone in the right place, and finally the dog thanks her and leaves once more to be with his humans again. Furthermore, each gift, stone and cardinal point seems to be associated to a particular season of the year. The circle reaches full completion and perfection as the Old Woman pokes up the fire and produces different stones and gifts progressively as one season evolves into the next. There might be some kind of symbolism inherent in all four gifts, stones and cardinal points.

Four movements of utter simplicity devoted to each of the four gifts (speech, laughter, crying and dancing) constitute then the palpitating heart of *Tending the Fire*. Meanwhile, the Old Woman is the guardian that makes sure that the fire by which she is sitting does not extinguish, for it probably symbolizes life itself. Upon closer scrutiny, the gifts are no random choice and so Bringhurst's poem turns out to be not just a long narrative poem recounting a creation myth, but also a moving meditation on communication. Hence, the wave-like line printed in a rust ink at the top and bottom of the pages throughout the first-edition chapbook might well represent communication in a broad sense of the term. However, even if communication is at the heart of Bringhurst's reflection, the story is directing the reader's attention also towards the human condition in general and to the relation holding between humans and the rest of the world. Speech is the most obvious way we have at our disposal to communicate with other humans, but it is just one possibility among others. Non-verbal forms of communication include laughter, crying and dancing. Thus, when a given emotion afflicting the human heart is too strong, the body reacts by laughing or crying. Also, the sheer love of motion in space and an innate sense of rhythm inform humans' dancing, which is another way of sending relevant

messages to others. That we humans are desperately in need to communicate what we think and feel to other humans seems to be a truism that we tend to forget most of the time. This is an undeniable anthropological universal though. Over time we have devised different art forms and a huge diversity of natural languages just to be able to communicate what we hold in our hearts and in our minds. Expression and self-expression are tasks we are engaged in naturally in our everyday existence; aware as we are that everything in this world *means* something, we feel we need to understand the plurality of meanings surrounding us and to be able to convey new meanings to others. Speech and thinking¹³ go hand in hand in our intellectual confrontation with reality, as we need words to verbalize what is going on in our mind as it handles and conceptualizes the raw-data provided by the senses. To Bringham, it is clear that the body is also actively involved in the process of knowing reality and so body, speech and mind are a potent triad recurrent in his poetry from the very start of his literary career. The great error that the highly egoistical anthropocentric Western mind has made is to sever itself from the world: in the Genesis account of the creation of the world man came last in the process and was put on the top (at the very summit of the world) to control everything. That was the beginning of the original, fatal split. Bringham reminds us time and again that man is not the centre, that he belongs among a larger scheme of things where nonhuman beings are as important as we are. That is the reason why he goes back in time to the elemental lessons taught by the Pre-Socratic poet-philosophers, by the Buddhist monk-thinkers and by the mythtellers of the oral literatures of North America. All of them were sages in possession of an elemental form of wisdom that Westerners seem to have shamefully forgotten. In this context, *Tending the Fire* has its own roots steeped in orality and seeks to remind us that humans are not separate from the rest of Nature.

Let us now turn to each of the four gifts the Old Woman gives the newly-created human beings. The first one is speech. Man is *homo loquens* or *homo dicens*, that is to say *speaking man*. Or, to put it differently, it is speech that defines human beings as genuinely human. We tend to take it for granted, for speech is almost the very air we breathe¹⁴ and so it is naturally overlooked (poetry, by the way, directs our attention to words *per se* in astonishing ways). Of the over 6,000 natural languages spoken around the world, a distinct human community speaks a given language and uses it as a sharp tool of knowledge and communication, one that enables people to preserve (and perpetuate) the thoughts and findings¹⁵ of their ancestors and to communicate with people present or absent, either

¹³ Being one of the most lucid minds of the twentieth century, Ortega y Gasset writes: “Las lenguas nos separan e incomunican, no porque sean, en cuanto lenguas, distintas, sino porque proceden de cuadros mentales diferentes, de sistemas intelectuales dispares – en última instancia –, de filosofías divergentes. No sólo hablamos en una lengua determinada, sino que pensamos deslizándonos intelectualmente por carriles preestablecidos a los cuales nos adscribe nuestro destino verbal.” See his ground-breaking essay “Miseria y esplendor de la traducción”, *Obras completas*, vol. V, Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1964, pp. 446-447. And, for his part, Wilhelm von Humboldt, one of the earliest scholars to claim that language is a reflection of a people’s culture, draws a distinction between *ergon* and *energeia* in his *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* (posthumous, 1836): “Die Sprache in ihrem Wesen aufgefasst, ist etwas beständig und in jedem Augenblick vorübergehendes... Sie selbst ist kein Werk (Ergon), sondern eine Tätigkeit (Energeia)”. In *Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie, Werke in Fünf Bänden*, vol. III, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978, p. 418.

¹⁴ In the very opening paragraph of *Language. An Introduction to the Study of Speech*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company (1921), Edward Sapir says: “Speech is so familiar a feature of daily life that we rarely pause to define it. It seems as natural to man as walking, and only less so than breathing.” (p. 1) Somewhere else, he says: “language is the most massive and inclusive art we know, a mountainous and anonymous work of unconscious generations” (*ibid.*, p. 235). Thus, language is the most ambitious of all the works of the human spirit, a true *work in progress* of sublime and gigantic dimensions.

¹⁵ In his *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772), Johann Gottfried Herder claims: “Kein Gedanke in einer menschlichen Seele war verloren, nie aber war auch *eine* Fertigkeit dieses Geschlechts auf einmal ganz da

because they lived long ago and are now dead, or because they have not been born yet. Language is then of the essence to human beings of all places and times. Though language was first oral, then writing was devised to reach where the word of the mouth could not reach. Bringham himself insists that his poems are the product of oral composition, and yet he devotes much of his attention to typography as the solid form of language, to the beautiful design of books as finely-wrought artefacts or works of art. Now, tending her fire, the Grandmother is sitting in the high meadow, “*watching the anemone and yellow lily / sprout through the snow, and the plox and the grouseberry / flower...*” (is it spring time?). All of a sudden, she sees the dog trotting up in her direction and he tells her there is something wrong with “those humans” she gave him:

*They listen, you know, but they don't seem to learn,
and I came back to ask you to give them something
I think they should have. Grandmother, please,
would you teach them to speak? Would you teach them
words, so they can tell one another their lies
instead of keeping them secret?*

So the problem with these new humans is that they listen but they are dumb. Deprived of words, they seem to have no way of reaching out towards others' sensibility or to learn anything at all. An existence without words is simply inconceivable to us. Installed in the realm of utter silence¹⁶ forever, humans would find the situation of not being able to communicate with others simply unbearable. What is most curious though about the dog's pleading is that he is asking for words with which humans can tell their *lies* to one another, “*instead of keeping them secret.*” One would expect words to give voice to the truth, not to lies. There might be some form of untruthfulness inherent in writing, but in speaking the subject is uttering words emanating directly from his or her lungs. Ideally, breath should not be false or give voice to lies. Whichever the case, the Old Woman stirs the fire with a stick and finds “*a jagged, black stone, / like a piece of black basalt,*” washes it in the stream and sets it “*in the north end of the meadow.*” The dog asks only for words, but the woman is giving him a stone that embodies both words and an infinite reservoir of stories and myths that humans will tell to account for the mystery inherent in reality. For, as the Old Woman conceives of it, speech is primarily meant to serve the purpose of storytelling. Telling stories that are simple and true might be not only therapeutic to human beings, but also a torch illuminating their coming to terms with the world. However, humans are endowed with free will and so they are free to choose whatever words they might need and for whatever purposes they may have in mind. Words may be true or false, depending on the

wie bei den Tieren: Zufolge der ganzen Ökonomie war sie immer im Fortschritte, im Gange, nichts Erfundnes, wie der Bau einer Zelle, sondern alles im Erfinden, im Fortwürken, strebend. In diesem Gesichtspunkt, wie groß wird die Sprache! *Eine Schatzkammer menschlicher Gedanken*, wo jeder auf seine Art etwas beitrug! *Eine Summe der Wirksamkeit aller menschlichen Seelen.*” See *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, Berlin: Christian Friedrich Boß, 1772, p. 136.

¹⁶ In his *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, Herder also meditates on man as a dumb animal: “Ein stummer Mensch, in dem Verstande, wie es die Tiere sind, der auch nicht in seiner Seele Worte denken könnte, wäre das traurigste, sinnloseste, verlassenste Geschöpf der Schöpfung und der größte Widerspruch mit sich selbst! Im ganzen Universum gleichsam allein, an nichts geheftet und für alles da, durch nichts gesichert, und durch sich selbst noch minder, muß der Mensch entweder unterliegen oder über alles herrschen, mit Plan einer Weisheit, deren kein Tier fähig ist, von allem deutlichen Besitz nehmen oder umkommen! Sei nichts oder Monarch der Schöpfung durch Verstand! Zertrümmere oder schaffe dir Sprache! Und wenn sich nun in diesem andringenden Kreise von Bedürfnissen alle Seelenkräfte sammeln, wenn die ganze Menschheit, Mensch zu sein, kämpfet – wieviel kann erfunden, getan, geordnet werden!” *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

use humans put them to; they may be sharp-edged tools that unveil the mystery of *what is* or that cloud the essence of things. Hence, she says to Dog:

*Dog, that stone
is the stone of speech and storytelling.
Those humans will be able to say what they choose to say
as long as it's there. And no one I know
would want to disturb it.*

Now, the second gift the dog asks the Grandmother for humans is laughter and dreaming. It seems speech does not suffice to give humans all they need to communicate what they think and feel to others. Non-stop talking may turn out to be too monotonous; exuberance of speech or excess of words may simply be overwhelming, and so humans need a more varied palette of communication tools from which to choose the right one depending on the situation they find themselves in. Once again, the Old Woman is comfortably sitting by the fire, watching “*the swelling swamp-laurel shells / and the ripening willow galls and the wind,*” and also “*the purple saxifrage, the yellow / heather and the partridgefoot flower*”, for there is no end to the beauty of the world she has created. It is possibly springtime now, and the dog reappears again at the edge of the meadow where the woman has pitched her camp. When asked whether there is anything wrong and whether she can help, the dog answers thus:

*Grandmother, yes. It's the humans again.
You remember I asked you to teach them to talk,
but now they just talk and talk all the time.
It isn't enough, and it's too much.
Grandmother, please, would you teach them to laugh?*

Words are either not enough or too much to convey what humans want to say at any given moment in time. That is part of the inevitable misery and also part of the inescapable splendour inherent in human languages: either words fall short of what we intend them to mean, or they mean much more (or something completely different) than we intend them to mean. Laughter is therefore necessary if these primordial men and women are to become genuinely human. Thus, the Old Woman pokes her fire once more and produces “*a crooked, yellow stone – pale, / like yellow quartz,*” scrubs it in the stream, and sets it “*in the east of the meadow.*” This is the stone of laughter and of dreams, which will give humans new speaking matter too. Though the dog asked her to teach them to laugh, the Grandmother is much more generous than that and also gives humans the ability to dream at night. Dreaming still remains a huge, impenetrable mystery to us: what happens in our minds when not awake seems too real and is not real though. Being of an eel-slippery and evanescent nature, dreams are hard to decipher and entail a prolongation of our self beyond the state of wakefulness. Sleep is a form of death, but dreaming shows us a door wide open onto a new dimension – the realm of the unconscious or subconscious where all the feelings and emotions repressed by reason and decorum in the waking hours find an outlet for themselves. Before the dog goes back to his humans, the Old Woman tells him:

*That stone, dog,
is the stone of laughter and the stone of dreams.
Those humans will be able to laugh
just fine, and maybe have a few
new things to talk about too,
when you see them again.*

The third gift the dog asks for is crying. Once again, the old woman who made the world is tending the fire, while watching *“the mountain windflowers spilling / their plumes, and the willow leaves turning / and the aspen leaves starting to turn, / and then the aspen leaves falling, / and the fir scales floating down out of the firs...”*, for the autumn has come. The falling of tree leaves betrays the passing of time, and also the aging of human beings, whose lives are compared to falling leaves early in the Western tradition – in the *Iliad* of Homer. Once more, the dog comes back to the Grandmother to ask her to teach humans how to cry:

*I asked you to teach them to talk and to laugh,
and they talk and they laugh just fine, grandmother.
No matter what happens, no matter what
their dreams say, they keep on talking, no matter
what their stories say, they just laugh.*

Grandmother, please, would you teach them to cry?

Laughing is no panacea after all, for humans react in exactly the same way and do not know yet what it means to suffer and to let the body be overwhelmed by pain. They do not know the meaning of ‘shedding tears’, even if their stories or dreams speak of sad things that should prompt them to cry. Life is a tragicomedy in which happiness and sadness go hand in hand most of the time. Therefore, the Old Woman stirs the fire again and finds *“a smooth, grey pebble, / like a piece of stream gravel,”* cleans it and sets it *“in the south of the meadow.”* This is the stone of weeping and of prayer, and when the dog sees his humans again they will *“have tears in their eyes.”* Dog asked only for tears, but the woman also gives humans the capacity for prayer, which is a form of recovering one’s peace of mind when it is lost on account of a bad time of suffering or pain. But praying is associated to religion, to the belief in benevolent gods and goddesses that may protect humans from all evil.

The fourth gift the dog asks the Old Woman for humans is dancing. Now the winter is come, and she is still sitting by the fire, *“listening to the geese bark in the darkness / overhead and watching the winter wrens / flit through the mountain rhododendron / in the shortening afternoon, and the troops / of waxwings stripping the blueberries bare.”* The first snow of winter has already fallen and melted, and *“the rabbits / moulted, and the marmots disappeared.”* The dog comes once more, after a long time, to ask for one last gift. The Old Woman asks him to choose carefully *“because the circle is closing.”* That the circle is closing means that the reservoir of gifts is about to be exhausted, but this might also meta-poetically refer to the fact that the poem itself (*Tending the Fire*) is coming to its end. The dog does not hesitate for a second in asking her to teach humans to dance. At that point, she pokes up the fire again and produces *“a half-round, blood-red / stone, like jasper or red chert”*, cleans it in the snow, and sets it *“in the west end of the meadow.”* All four gifts are brought together now in the closing words of the Old Woman, who says:

*That stone, dog,
is the stone of dancing and the stone of song.
Those humans can dance now, and sing.
And they can talk and tell stories
and laugh and dream and cry and pray,
and I hope it is enough, because the circle
is closed.*

All four gifts constitute the essential ingredients that make humankind: speech and storytelling, laughing and dreaming, crying and praying, dancing and singing. These were meant to be the Dog’s gifts, but he has generously renounced them for the sake of human

beings that turn out to be not grateful at all. Hence, the closing words of the Grandmother who has created the world to be a perfect place resonate with a tone of sadness in the face of the destitute condition the Dog has been reduced to:

*Whatever those humans say from now
on, you'll only hear the pain
and pleasure in their voices. Soon you'll forget
you ever heard the words. Now nothing
but barks and yips and howls will form
in your own throat. Now when they laugh,
you'll make no sound. They'll weep,
and you'll whimper. Now when they dance,
you'll scamper between their legs. You'll jump
up and down, but the music will never
enter your body. The words and the music
and the tears and the laughter will be theirs.
They owe you all this, dog, and I somehow
think they may never remember to thank you.*

In the end, *Tending the Fire* reminds us of an elemental lesson that can be summarized in just one single word – gratitude. Dog has given up speech, laughter, crying and dancing for humans' benefit. They might not deserve any of these unique gifts. In any case, humans do receive this wide array of genuinely unique attributes and yet they seem to have forgotten to thank Dog for his generous gesture. Sometimes you win, but some other times you lose, and this time it is Dog that has taken the worst part after all. In this respect, Bringham's creation myth anticipates somehow the ecological commitment pervading subsequent polyphonic works for several voices like *Conversations with a Toad* (1987) and *New World Suite No. 3* (2005), book-length poems where the place of humans in the larger scheme of things is explored through a form of prosodic experimentation taken to new extremes. The world is conceptualized as being a many-voiced place where the realms of the human and the non-human coexist side by side. *Everywhere being is dancing* and singing, hiding itself away from the inquisitive and rapacious look of humans that only seek to exploit and rape the multifarious abundance Mother Earth gives them for their comfort and pleasure. Far from believing themselves to be at the very centre of the living mesh of things (or on top of creation), humans should be humble enough to acknowledge that they are simply a tiny part in a cosmos rich in teeming forms of life that feed on one another while preserving a precious form of equilibrium and harmony. *Tending the Fire* reminds us that once upon a time an Old Woman created the world for both humans and nonhumans to live peacefully together. In that primordial time of the origins of everything we know in this world, Dog taught us humans an elemental lesson we seem to have already forgotten: the almost ineffable lesson of generosity and the need for us to make room for gratitude in our lives.

PART III

Lyric Philosophy
Philosophical Poetry & Poetic Philosophy

The Old in Their Knowing

*The Lessons of the Greek World: The Presocratics' Insights into the Essence of Reality,
Or when Poetry Fell in Love with Philosophy*

INTRODUCTION

Along with *The Book of Silences*, the 12-part sequence *The Old in Their Knowing* is possibly the most fascinating of Robert Bringhurst's poetic achievements, not just because it brings together poetry and philosophy, but also because it accomplishes much which is new in Canadian literature. For a long time it has been a work in progress that the author has been improving upon and expanding, revisiting and polishing with every new textual reincarnation of the poems. The 12 poems that make up the entire sequence are poems-essays or philosophical treatises in miniature that illustrate Ezra Pound's dictum that *Dichtung = condensare* as propounded in his *ABC of Reading* (1934), in the sense that Bringhurst manages to condense the essence of W.K.C. Guthrie's six-volume *A History of Greek Philosophy* into a series of 12 poems of a rare beauty and perfection with the utmost linguistic economy, each poem being devoted to a Pre-Socratic philosopher's way of thinking, philosophical system or genuine insights into the ultimate essence of reality. Thus, *The Old in Their Knowing* is the result of a profound assimilation of ancient philosophy, the product of a deep, first-hand familiarity with the Greek texts that have been preserved in fragmentary form. This in-depth knowledge of Presocratic philosophy partly accounts for the concentrated intellectual precision of these poems, which are philosophical poems in themselves. Beneath them is an intellectual understanding of Presocratic philosophy, but the result is something more immediate and more inclusive, emotionally more the truth. Into all this he puts both the intellectual skills of a scholar, of a devoted erudite, and the musical and verbal skills as well as the craftsmanship of a poet. The intellect comes back in his poetry as part of the very texture of his poems, and so all their intellectual atmosphere is simply amazing.

That poetry and knowledge go hand in hand in Bringhurst's poetry seems to be out of the question at this point of our thesis. He is a man interested in asking fundamental questions – those asked by philosophy, science and art time and again throughout the history of humankind. There is a gnomic dimension inherent in Bringhurst's poetry from the very outset of his literary career: in fact, "Herakleitos", the earliest piece in *The Old in Their Knowing* was first published as early as 1973 in *Cadastré*, Bringhurst's second poetry collection. In his hands, poetry becomes a path leading towards light, helping him to explore human knowledge as a most effective tool of getting to know whatever is going on at all in the world. There is a sense in which the whole of the history of humankind on earth is a search for knowledge: it seems to be an anthropological universal that humans should look at the world around them, seek similarities, analogies, generalizations amid the chaos of sense impressions, and find an overall pattern that renders everything intelligible all of a sudden. At the very heart of the achievement of much Romantic poetry, for instance, was the all-important mind-world relationship and the importance of perception in human's intellectual confrontation with the world. This, according to Robert Pinsky (see his illuminating essay entitled *The Situation of Poetry*), is still at the very centre of Modernist poetry, and Robert Bringhurst is, as we have already pointed out in our introduction, an heir to Pound, Eliot and Stevens' Modernist poetics: he shares with them the same vocation and the same poetic agenda. The relationships holding between poetry and philosophy, the conceptualization of poetry as a path towards knowledge, is a recurrent

subject in the writings of such Romantic authors as Friedrich Schlegel or Samuel Taylor Coleridge or instance.

What Bringham accomplishes in *The Old in Their Knowing* is of paramount importance in another sense. What we find in this 12-poem sequence is a sort of archaeology of human knowledge by one single man. Bringham is a thinker of the first rank indeed. Like T.S. Eliot, he is concerned with history and tradition, with the very notion of the simultaneity of the best that has been thought, felt and written by all the wise men from the past. Needless to say, this is a hard, difficult, demanding and ambitious enterprise. It is no easy task for a single man whose shoulders are not that broad to carry the burden of the whole reservoir of indispensable human knowledge. It seems to us that in fashioning his entire literary corpus (in fact, his whole output, no matter whether in the form of poetry collections, translations or essays on language, typography and the native oral literatures of North America) he has been following in the steps of Ezra Pound. Pound's monumental poem *The Cantos* remains the great 20th-century High Modernist epic encompassing, embracing or embodying the whole of human history: that was the ultimate ambition he was after. Is Bringham emulating Pound in this respect?, one may ask. Possibly, but he has gone beyond his ancestor's achievement. A prolific author himself, like Bringham, Pound seems to be the unacknowledged presence pervading the author's work all the time.

Now, why should Bringham have turned to the Greek philosophers in search of his *materia poetica*? With the Presocratics we stand at the beginning of rational thought in Europe, and at the very cradle of Western philosophy. From the mists of a pre-scientific age emerged scientific observation and reasoned explanation as reliable tools to gain a firm knowledge of reality. As W.K.C. Guthrie himself suggests, there is, however, no clear-cut boundary between "pre-rational, mythical or anthropomorphic conceptions and a purely rational and scientific outlook"¹, which was born with the so-called pre-Socratic philosophers in Asia Minor. There is much *latent mythology* within the new philosophical systems propounded by these men who lived so long ago. Of course, in the pursuit of truth at an early stage of civilization, myth was "the only available means (and an effective one) of expressing profound and universal truths"², so we should not condemn myth as an illegitimate way of approaching the essence beneath reality. After all, reality is *one* and the paths leading to its irreducible core are many. A good way to start our consideration of the Presocratics might be paying attention to Guthrie's words on the emergence of rational thinking in the eastern fringe of Greek settlement, in Asia Minor, in the 6th century BCE:

Here in Ionia, on the western border of Asia Minor under Lydian and Persian rule, something happened in the sixth century before Christ which we call the beginning of European philosophy. Here opened the first, or Presocratic period of our subject, with the Milesian school. These men, inhabitants of one of the largest and most prosperous of Greek cities, with numerous colonies of her own and widespread foreign contacts, were endowed with an indefatigable curiosity about the nature of the external world, the process by which it reached its present state, and its physical composition. In their attempts to satisfy this intellectual craving for knowledge, they by no means excluded the possibility of divine agency, but they reached a conception of it very different from the polytheism current in contemporary Greek society. They believed that the world arose out of a primal unity, and that this one substance was still the permanent base of all its being, though now appearing in different forms and manifestations. The changes were

¹ See W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. I, *The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans*, p. 1.

² Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, volume I, p. 2.

rendered possible by an everlasting motion of the primary stuff due, not to any external agent, but to its own essential animation. The distinction between a material and an efficient principle had not yet been felt, and the primary entity, since it lived for ever and was the author of its own movement and change, and of all the ordered world of earth, sky and sea, was naturally thought to merit the epithet 'divine'.³

As Guthrie puts it in the stimulating chapter entitled "The Beginnings of Philosophy on Greece", the conception of Greek philosophy "occurred when the conviction began to take shape in men's minds that the apparent chaos of events must conceal an underlying order, and that this order is the product of impersonal forces", not of "superior and incomprehensible forces, which sometimes seem to act with little regard for consistency or justice."⁴ These are the assumptions of the kind of polytheism dominating the early mind of Greece, where men and women felt that they were in the power of something beyond their own control: they were the playthings of powerful but morally imperfect gods and goddesses that concerned themselves intimately with human affairs and that put humans in a very humble and pitiable position indeed. The fate and fortune of communities and individuals were dependent on the favour or enmity they earned from these imperfect deities who in their ultimate invincibility governed people's lives. With the birth of philosophy in Europe, these early thinkers abandoned mythological solutions and the theologian's accounts of the world at a conscious level. What they embraced instead was "the faith that the visible world conceals a rational and intelligible order, that the causes of the natural world are to be sought within its boundaries, and that autonomous human reason is our sole and sufficient instrument for the search".⁵ Thus, they abandoned the mythological and theological modes of thought, while relegating the gods to the background. Aristotle himself drew a distinction between those who described the world in terms of myth and the supernatural (the *theologi*) and those who tried to account for it by natural causes (the *physici* or *physiologi*). The philosopher, in this context, is he who aims at a knowledge which is both accurate and all-embracing, a knowledge of causes, for only universals are the true object of human knowledge: only generalization can lead to the discovery of causes or general laws.

As in much of the rest of his poetry, Bringhurst's language and style in *The Old in Their Knowing* is characterized by an astonishing naturalness, apparent simplicity and musical elegance. His is a crystal-like language of sharp edges, hard as stone or granite, and yet it is the embodiment of a *poor man's art*, as the title of a critical essay on his early by poet Peter Sanger went. The serenity and the meditative quality, the direct quietness and moving lyricism of Bringhurst's poetry is something to be enjoyed for its own sake. Robert Pinsky

³ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, volume I, pp. 3-4. Guthrie suggests that the second main period in the history of Greek philosophy is marked by the arrival of the outstanding figures of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, who represent the zenith of Greek philosophy. With them, the "shift of interest which marked the beginning of this period may be described as being from the universe to man, from interesting intellectual questions of cosmology and ontology to the more pressing business of human life and conduct." Ibid., pp. 7-8. In this context, it seems natural that Bringhurst, convinced that the world at large is much more interesting than humans, should have directed his attention from the first to the Presocratics, poet-philosophers who were interested in seeking answers to ultimate questions related to the essence of the real world. Their intuitions about the world were firmly rooted in the real, after all; they did not poetize, they did look reality in the eye and tried to give the first intellectual answers to the big mystery the world was in their astonished eyes. See Bringhurst's meditation on these philosophers in his essay "Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation", in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), p. 109, where he confesses that he admires their archaic sense of intellectual, moral and spiritual integrity.

⁴ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 26.

⁵ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 29.

meditates on the nature of the relationship between language and experience, and he comes to this enlightening conclusion: “Language is absolutely abstract, a web of concepts and patterns; and if one believes experience to consist of unique, ungeneralizable moments, then the gap between language and experience is absolute. But the pursuit of the goal, or the effort to make the gap seem less than absolute, has produced some of the most remarkable and moving poetry in the language.”⁶ Reading the article entitled “Poetry as Prose” [actually a review of *Alfred and Guinevere*, by James Schuyler, from *Poetry* 93, no. 5 (February 1959), by Kenneth Koch, in *The Art of Poetry*], it is inevitable to think of what Ezra Pound said about the quality of great poetry: poetry should have at least the qualities of well-written prose. In this sense, Bringhurst’s poetry has the simplicity, clarity and precision of good, well-wrought prose. One has only to have a look at his essays to make sure this is actually the case. To a certain extent, Bringhurst has transferred the excitement and meridian clarity of well-written prose to his poetry, and *The Old in Their Knowing* is a good place to start with if we are after this particular quality which is found in all great poetry.

The Old in Their Knowing has been a work in progress for a long time. This is the editorial history of the sequence:

- (1) A.2 • *Cadastré*. Bloomington, Indiana: Kanchenjunga Press, 1973. 80 p. Paper, 17.5 × 21.5 cm, approx. 300 copies. ISBN 0-913600-03-2. This early poetry book already includes the poem entitled “Herakleitos” (rpt. in A.5, A.6, C.22, and rev. in A.14, A.47, B.69).
- (2) A.4 • *Pythagoras*. Kanchenjunga Broadsheet No. 2. San Francisco & Vancouver: Kanchenjunga Press, 1974. Broadside, 22 × 56 cm, 500 copies. Contents: A poem (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.5, A.6, A.14, A.47, B.7).
- (3) A.5 • *Eight Objects*. Kanchenjunga Chapbook N°. 4. San Francisco and Vancouver: Kanchenjunga Press, 1975. 20 p. Paper, 15.5 × 24.5 cm, 250 copies. According to the colophon, “This first edition is limited to 258 copies. Eight of these are signed copies hand bound in boards, boxed and lettered a through h.” But the eight hardcover copies were never bound and the sheets apparently destroyed. ISBN 0-913600-39-3. Contents: “Herakleitos” (rpt. from A.2); • “Parmenides” (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.6, A.14, A.47); • “Miletos” (rpt. in A.6, A.14, A.47); “A Short History” (rpt. from C.22); “Empedokles: Seven Fragments” (rev. from C.12); “Empedokles’ Recipes” (rpt. from C.24); “Pherekydes” (rpt. from C.25); “Pythagoras” (rpt. from A.4).
- (4) A.6 • *Bergschrund*. Vancouver: Sono Nis Press, 1975. 104 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 16 × 23.5 cm. [ISBN 0-919462-14-6.] *Section II* consists of the eight poems included in *Eight Objects*: “Herakleitos” (rpt. from A.2); “Parmenides” (rpt. from A.5); “Miletos” (rpt. from A.5); “A Short History” (rpt. from A.5); “Empedokles: Seven Fragments” (rpt. from A.5); “Empedokles’ Recipes” (rpt. from A.5); “Pherekydes” (rpt. from A.5); “Pythagoras” (rpt. from A.5).
- (5) A.14 • *The Beauty of the Weapons: Selected Poems 1972–1982*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982. 160 p. Paper, 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 0-7710-1660-3. The section entitled *The Old in Their Knowing* consists of an untitled headnote and a sequence of 12 poems: [•] “Herakleitos” (rev. from A.6), “Parmenides” (rpt. from A.6), “Miletos” (rpt. from A.6), “A Short History” (rpt. from A.6), “Empedokles: Seven Fragments” (rpt. from A.6), “Empedokles’ Recipes” (rpt. from A.6), “Pherekydes” (rpt. from A.6), “Pythagoras” (rpt. from A.6), “Demokritos” (rpt. from C.34), • “Xenophanes” (rpt. in B.17, B.27), • “Of the

⁶ See Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry*, p. 59.

Snaring of Birds” (rpt. in C.54, B.40; see also “Strophe from Sophocles” in A.2); “The Petelia Tablet” (rpt. from C.22).

- (6) A.47 •• *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970–1995*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995. v256 p. Paper. 14 × 22 cm. ISBN 0-7710-1651-4. The section “The Old in Their Knowing” includes: I: [•] “Herakleitos” (rev. from A.14), II: “Parmenides” (rpt. from A.14), III: “Miletos” (rpt. from A.14), IV: “A Short History” (rpt. from A.14), V: “Empedokles: Seven Fragments” (rpt. from A.14), VI: “Empedokles’ Recipes” (rpt. from A.14), VII: “Pherekydes” (rpt. from A.14), VIII: “Pythagoras” (rpt. from A.14), IX: “Demokritos” (rpt. from A.14), X: [•] “Xenophanes” (rev. from A.14), XI: [•] “Of the Snaring of Birds” (rev. from A.14), XII: “The Petelia Tablet” (rpt. from A.14) [The sequence is the same as in A.14, but the poems are numbered here for the first time, and there are several small revisions to the text.]
- (7) A.76 *The Old in Their Knowing*. Berkeley: Editions Koch. 2005. 48 p. 15 × 25.5 cm. Contents: I: “Herakleitos”, II: “Parmenides”, III: “Miletos”, IV: “A Short History”, V: “Empedokles: Seven Fragments”, VI: “Empedokles’ Recipes”, VII: “Pherekydes”, VIII: “Pythagoras”, IX: “Demokritos”, X: “Xenophanes”, XI: “Of the Snaring of Birds”, XII: “The Petelia Tablet” (all rpt. from A.47), with added Greek text on facing pages and a new dedication: “To the memory of Jane Ellen Harrison, scholar and heretic.”
- (8) A.92 •• *Selected Poems*. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press. 2009. 272 p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-068-6. Section III, “The Old in Their Knowing”, includes: “Herakleitos”, “Parmenides”, “Miletos”, “A Short History”, “Empedokles: Seven Fragments”, “Empedokles’ Recipes”, “Pherekydes”, “Pythagoras”, “Demokritos”, “Xenophanes”, “Of the Snaring of Birds”, “The Petelia Tablet”. All of them reprinted from A.76.

I · HERAKLEITOS

“Herakleitos”⁷, the opening poem in the 12-part sequence entitled *The Old in Their Knowing*, is also the oldest of all the compositions that make up the entire suite. It is then only fair that it should come first. The poem consists of five parts of unequal length and yet they do embody the gist of the Presocratic philosopher’s system. That this is a complex poem is out of the question: for a proper understanding of the wealth of ideas beneath the concision of the whole composition one needs to have a Heraclitean mind, that is, to be intimately familiar with the subtlety of Herakleitos’ thinking. Therefore, we have turned

⁷ “Herakleitos” was first published in A.2 *Cadastre* (1973), later reprinted in A.5 *Eight Objects* (1975). Afterwards, it was revised in A.6 *Bergschrund* (1975), further revised in A.14 *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982) and once again in A.47 *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995). It was then reprinted in its definitive form (A.47) in A.76 *The Old in Their Knowing* (2005) and in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009). It was also reprinted in three more places: (1) It was reprinted from A.2 in C.22 “Eight Poems and Translations”, in *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* (Boston) ns 1.4 (1973/1974): 561–575. Contents: [•] Excerpt from “The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods” (rev. from A.2); “Strophe from Sophocles” (trans. from Greek, rpt. from A.2); “Herakleitos” (rpt. from A.2); • “The Petelia Tablet” (trans. from Greek, incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.14, A.47, B.67, A.76, A.92), “Four Glyphs” (rpt. from A.2); [•] “Isthmian” (rev. from A.1); • “A Short History” (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.5, A.6, A.14, A.47); “Antistrophe from Leopardi” (trans. from Italian, rpt. from A.2). (2) From A.47 it was also reprinted in B.69 *A Matter of Spirit: The Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry*, edited by Susan McCaslin. Victoria, British Columbia: Ekstasis Editions, 1998: pp. 41-58. Contributions: Ten poems and a short prose piece. “Poem about Crystal”, “Deuteronomy”, “Herakleitos”, “Parśvanatha”, “Nagarjuna”, “Sengzhào”, “Hán Shan”, “Yúnmén Wényan”, “Thin Man Washing”; “Sunday Morning” (all rpt. from A.47); • brief essay, “In Praise of Vacant Lots.” (3) Reprinted as B.106, *Affix: This to That with Poetry*, Gaspereau Press poetry sampler. Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau, 2009: [ii–v]. Contributions: “The Greenland Stone,” “Rubus Ursinus,” “Herakleitos,” all rpt. from *Selected Poems* (A.92).

time and again to such classic ambitious works as those by W.K.C. Guthrie, G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, Charles Kahn and Guy Davenport's translation of Herakleitos' fragments, in search of illuminating clues to understand the tattered fragments of wisdom that Bringhurst has salvaged from the past and rendered into a well-wrought poem suggestive in itself of the beautiful intricacy of the sage's thinking. Measured against the background erudition provided by these philosophic scholars, "Herakleitos" turns out to be a poem of an astonishing complexity, in that it brings together into a unique tapestry Bringhurst's own translation of some of the original extant fragments composed in Greek 2,500 years ago by Herakleitos, echoes of his audacious world-view as propounded in the over one hundred fragments that have been preserved in the form of quotations or commentaries in subsequent authors, and an intelligent penetration into this original and suggestive *materia poetica*, such is his passion for both verbal and intellectual accuracy. Like Herakleitos, Bringhurst is concerned with fundamental questions, those that have been asked time and again by philosophy, science and art over time. That Herakleitos himself was a poet and a philosopher at the same time, endowed with an inquisitive and penetrating mind, partly accounts for the fascination it held from the outset for Bringhurst himself, a rare modern poet-philosopher too.

Not much is known for sure of the life of Herakleitos⁸, Heraclitus or Heraclitus (b. c. 540 BCE, Ephesus, in Anatolia [now Selçuk, Tur.] – d. c. 480), except that he was born and spent his life in Ephesus in Asia Minor (the birthplace of Western philosophy), that he belonged to an old aristocratic family of ancient lineage, and that he was not on very good terms with his fellow citizens – he was something of a misanthrope and had a lively contempt for humankind.⁹ The one book he wrote, entitled *On Nature* (a generic title assigned by Aristotle to works by the so-called *physikoi* or natural philosophers), is now lost, and his views survive only in fragmentary bits and pieces quoted and attributed to him by later authors.¹⁰ Kirk tells us that "the surviving fragments have very much the appearance

⁸ See the entry on 'Heraclitus' in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, volume 13, p. 7503, for the essential information.

⁹ Herakleitos was frequently scorned by later biographers, and so the kind of stories that proliferated around him in the Hellenistic period were invented with malicious intent to make the philosopher look ridiculous. These apocryphal anecdotes arise for the most part out of his own surviving fragments. Thus, Diogenes Laertius IX, I provides us with an interesting biographical sketch, which seems to be based on the fragmentary sayings of the philosopher that have survived the pitiless passage of time: "Heraclitus son of Blosson (or, according to some, of Herakon) of Ephesus. This man was at his prime in the 69th Olympiad. He grew up to be exceptionally haughty and supercilious, as is clear also from his book, in which he says: 'Learning of many things does not teach intelligence; if so, it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, and again Xenophanes and Hecataeus.' ... Finally he became a misanthrope, withdrew from the world, and lived in the mountains feeding on grasses and plants. However, having fallen in this way into a dropsy he came down to town and asked the doctors in a riddle if they could make a drought out of rainy weather. When they did not understand he buried himself in a cow-stall, expecting that the dropsy would be evaporated off by the heat of the manure; but even so he failed to effect anything, and ended his life at the age of sixty." Quoted by G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, in *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge: CUP, 1957/1983 (2nd edition), reprinted 1990, p. 181. Bringhurst devotes another short piece to Herakleitos early, in a poem entitled "Six Epitaphs" included in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), which focuses on the sage's death. Ultimately, the source for the epitaph is clearly Diogenes Laertius' words quoted just above. Furthermore, two more recent poems in his poetic corpus, "Demons and Men" and "Children of the Old Horse", included in the section "The Physics of Light" in *Selected Poems* (2009), also deal with Herakleitos' thinking.

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion on the sources of Herakleitos' extant fragments, see Charles Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, an edition of the fragments with translation and commentary, Cambridge: CUP, 1979, pp. 3-9. Kahn tells us that "the original text of Heraclitus is lost. We are entirely dependent upon quotations, paraphrases, and reports in later literature that happens to have survived the collapse of ancient civilization and the destruction of its papyrus libraries." (p. 4) He then proceeds to a detailed analysis of the extant sources: Theophrastus, Diogenes Laertius, Zeno, Cleanthes, Plutarch, the Christian bishops Clement of Alexandria and Hippolytus of Rome (whose *Refutation of all Heresies*, composed in the third century CE, is our richest single source of actual quotations according to W.K.C. Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 405), Origen of Alexandria,

of oral pronouncements put into a concise and striking, and therefore easily memorable, form; they do not resemble extracts from a continuous written work”, even if fragment 1, a complex sentence, looks like a possible introduction or proem to the original book now lost. The fragments we possess were “framed as oral apophthegms rather than as parts of a discursive treatise; this was in keeping with Heraclitus’ oracular intentions”.¹¹ As a matter of fact there is an indubitable gnomic dimension to his sayings, and Herakleitos was renowned for his obscurity, his fondness for riddles and cryptic messages. He seemed to delight in paradoxical statements and in isolated aphorisms, expressed in symbolic or metaphorical terms. W.K.C. Guthrie suggests that he was treading on new ground and so the language available to him was inadequate¹² to convey the originality of his thought: he was highly obscure and intentionally oracular, a verdict borne out by the extant fragments. Hence he was forced to make use of symbols and enigmatic language, pushing the frontiers of whatever resources he had available to the limit. Like all the other Presocratic philosophers, Herakleitos was fascinated by a simple fact: “the dominance of change in the world of our experience”¹³ or, to put it differently, the universality of change in the realm of sensible experience or appearances. His primary contribution lies in his apprehension of the formal unity of the world of experience, of the unifying reality underlying sensible appearances, which he called λόγος and assimilated to fire (the basic material principle of an orderly universe). He complained that most people failed to comprehend the λόγος (Greek: “reason”), the universal principle through which all things are interrelated and all natural events occur, and thus lived like dreamers with a false view of the world.

In Bringhurst’s poem, the meditation on Herakleitos’ philosophy starts *in medias res*, as it were. Thus, section 1 focuses on the sage’s conception of the human soul as being fire. A well-known fragment seems to be the starting point for the poet’s piece, fragment 118 by Stobaeus *Anth.* III, 5, 8, which Kirk renders as “A dry soul is wisest and best.”¹⁴ Bringhurst follows the scholar’s translation *verbatim* in the very first line of his poem: “*Herakleitos says a dry soul is wisest and best.*” Kirk says that for Herakleitos the soul is composed of fire and that

Plotinus, and John Stobaeus. Curiously enough, there is very little *verbatim* quotation of Herakleitos in Plato’s or Aristotle’s works (vid. Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 185). By contrast, G.S. Kirk, in his *Heraclitus: the Cosmic Fragments* (Cambridge, 1954, p. 7), argues that Heraclitus wrote no book at all: “I hazard the conjecture that Heraclitus wrote no book, in our sense of the word. The fragments, or many of them, have the appearance of being isolated statements, or γνῶμαι: many of the connecting particles they contain belong to later sources. In or perhaps shortly after Heraclitus’s lifetime a collection of these sayings was made, conceivably by a pupil. This was the ‘book’: originally Heraclitus’s utterances had been oral, and so were put into easily memorable form.” But this remains pure conjecture.

¹¹ G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, in *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge: CUP, 1957/1983 (2nd edition), reprinted 1990, p. 184. Charles Kahn claims that this fragmentary nature of Herakleitos’ work has been perpetuated by Diels’ atomistic arrangement of what fragments we possess of this important philosopher. However, in his view, Herakleitos’ original work was not lacking in literary structure and had a conscious artistic design, especially if we bear in mind that he had a didactic intent, which was to convey his insight that “all things are one” (the affirmation of unity of reality): “Heraclitus’ discourse as a whole was as carefully and artistically composed as are the preserved parts, and [that] the formal ordering of the whole was as much an element in its total meaning as in the case of any lyric poem from the same period. The true parallel for an understanding of Heraclitus’ style is [...] Pindar and Aeschylus. The extant fragments reveal a command of word order, imagery, and studied ambiguity as effective as that to be found in any work of these two poets.” *Ibid.*, p. 7. Thus, he was “a master of his medium and could impose an artistic shape upon it if he chose” (p. 8).

¹² W.K.C. Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 413. Guthrie says that the boldness and subtlety of his thought was such that “he was struggling, against the limitations of his language, to express something new and different”. *Ibid.*, p. 441.

¹³ G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *ibid.*, p. 186.

¹⁴ Guy Davenport translates the original Greek fragment as follows: “A dry psyche is most skilled in intelligence and brightest in virtue” (fragment 46). See *7 Greeks. Translations by Guy Davenport*, New York: New Directions, 1995 (5th printing), p. 163.

“it comes from, and turns into, moisture, total absorption by which is death for it.”¹⁵ Also, he claims that the soul-fire is closely related to the world-fire, or unifying logos governing reality. Whereas the Milesian philosopher Anaximenes, following the Homeric view, envisaged the human soul as breath, Herakleitos abandoned this idea in favour of the conception of the soul as being made of *fiery aither*.¹⁶ What follows the translation of Herakleitos’ original words in Bringhurst’s opening stanza is almost a meta-literary kind of reflection on the tatters fragments of wisdom the poet intends to salvage from antiquity for the benefit of the reader. The thought occurs that if Herakleitos had the opportunity to read these lines, he might like the idea of salvaging his “bright tatters of wisdom” for the enlightenment of contemporary men and women, for though intelligence is common to all mortals, humans seem to be unable to perceive the underlying logos in the cosmos. That Bringhurst’s poetry is rich in sharp edges is by now out of the question and so is the fact that it is a poetry firmly grounded in the physical world where real things happen. At the heart of these lines is the potent dichotomy between knowledge (associated to light) and ignorance (associated to darkness). The poet appears to suggest that Herakleitos’ words as preserved in the extant fragments we possess of him might shed light on the ultimate nature of reality (“*yield / a few visions and reflections, a little light / cutting crosswise like a fin*”), thus illuminating what has hitherto passed unnoticed to us. Once again, Bringhurst takes us back to an elemental world of air, sky, light and sea, and he suggests that Herakleitos’ wisdom brings order into the reigning chaos that a words like ‘welter’ is expressive of. Light traverses the sea surface as if it were a fin, a sharp-edged knife of intellectual precision, pervades the very waters of the sea in its entirety, or trembles valiantly on the wave crest. Notice the marked enjambment of these lines, a musical and elegant expression of Herakleitos’ original view of the world-order:

Herakleitos is undeniably
right in these matters. These
bright tatters of wisdom, cast
over grey welter and spume should at any rate yield
a few visions and reflections, a little light
cutting crosswise like a fin,
splayed against the sea’s grain
or annealed on the wave crest.

And in the second stanza Bringhurst elaborates on the notion of the dry soul as being best and wisest. The soul in its true and effective state is made of fire and so is representative of the cosmic fire, which is of vast extent. The soul within the chest of human beings has then a physical affinity with the cosmic fire outside. Of the fiery nature of the soul Herakleitos must have been convinced by the simple fact that “warmth is associated with the living body and that the dead, soulless body is cold.”¹⁷ Therefore, foolishness and death are connected with cold and dampness. Death itself is a turning of the soul to water (fr. 36). A dry soul he compares to what could possibly be a dry loaf of bread cooked in an oven (“*kilm-dried*”), to a piece of wood used as fuel for the fireplace at home and to a bottle of old wine (“*cured like good lumber or old Bordeaux*”), to cured meat such as “*salt-pork and pemmican*” (i.e., food made from crushed dried meat, originally made by Native Americans), and to “*sunlight / and sea salt arrayed in the grain*” (notice the eloquent alliteration of /s/ here). The “*meat of the soul / under the chokecherry*” has a physical reality behind it; it is not ethereal but tangible instead.

¹⁵ G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *ibid.*, p. 203.

¹⁶ G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁷ G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *ibid.*, p. 204. “Virtuous souls do not become water on the death of the body, but survive to join, eventually the cosmic fire”, tells us Kirk (*ibid.*, p. 207).

Section 2 of “Herakleitos” could well be the first in the composition, for it deals with the *λόγος* and the notion of opposites, which are central to the philosopher’s thinking. What is simply astonishing about this eight-line part is that it embodies with utter concision and linguistic economy what Herakleitos thinks of the ultimate nature of the world. Two fragments are again the starting point for Bringhurst’s meditation, though on this particular occasion there is no literal rendering of the original Greek words: (1) fragment 54, Hippolytus *Ref.*, IX, 9, 5 (“An unapparent connexion is stronger than an apparent one”) and (2) fragment 51, Hippolytus *Ref.*, IX, 9, 1 (“They do not apprehend how being at variance it agrees with itself [*lit.* how being brought apart it is brought together with itself]: there is a back-stretched connexion, as in the bow and the lyre”).¹⁸ However, in these verse lines Bringhurst evokes above all the precious coherence and beauty implicit in Herakleitos’ thinking, while highlighting several notions which are central to his world-view. The philosopher was convinced that he was in possession of an absolute truth that he could only impart to his fellow human beings in “a prophetic rather than a dialectical mode of expression.”¹⁹ Bringhurst’s poem reads as follows:

Herakleitos says something of concord – not
like a carpenter’s clamp or lashed
logs, as in Homer.
Harmony with an arched back,
laminated ash upended like an unlaidd keel, the curl
of live flesh in the fire, flexed
like the soul between the muscle and the bone, like
the bow, like the lyre.

Guthrie says that some philosophic systems of the Presocratics are like circles structured around a single central idea, and so this very fact precludes a continuous exposition of their insights into a unified conception of the universe and of man as an integral part of it. However, for the sake of exposition in this context, it might be advisable to turn now to three crucial aspects of Heraclitean thought evoked by Bringhurst’s words quoted above with an astonishing mental agility and linguistic economy:

- (1) The idea of Herakleitos’ *λόγος*, that is, the element of arrangement common to all things, which, though plural and totally discrete, are united in a coherent complex of which human beings themselves are a part. So Herakleitos believed in the real existence of this *λόγος*, which “determines the course of all that comes to pass”²⁰ and stands for the unity behind

¹⁸ G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *ibid.*, p. 192. In Davenport’s translation, these two fragments read as follows: (1) fragment 116, “The unseen design of things is more harmonious than the seen,” and (2) fragment 117, “We do not notice how opposing forces agree. Look at the bow and the lyre.” See *7 Greeks. Translations by Guy Davenport*, p. 170.

¹⁹ W.K.C. Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 414. Guthrie adds: “Heraclitus’s language definitely puts him on the side of the inspired: poets, prophets and the teachers of mystery-religions, who like him spoke in symbols not to be understood by the *profani*. We cannot and should not expect such a man to have the rationalistic outlook of the Milesians”. (p. 415) He is much of a gigantic isolated thinker to a certain extent, a *rara avis*: a self-taught man delivering his own eternal truth, which he had found within himself, “from a pinnacle of self-sought isolation”. (p. 416) After all, Davenport translates fr. 101 (“I searched myself”, Guthrie, p. 417) as “I have looked diligently at my own mind.” (Davenport, *ibid.*, fr. 8, p. 159) Here was a man looking inside himself in search of a permanent truth.

²⁰ W.K.C. Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 419. For a detailed account of the subtle meanings embodied in the word *λόγος*, see Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 419-424. In the fifth century or earlier the word *λόγος* meant: (1) anything said or written; (2) esteem, reputation, worth, fame; (3) taking thought (weighing pros and cons); (4) cause, reason or argument, even pretext; (5) the truth of the matter; (6) measure, full or due measure; (7) correspondence, relation, proportion; (8) general principle or rule; (9) the faculty of reason; (10) definition or formula expressing the essential nature of anything; and (11) set expressions for which there is no adequate word-for-word English equivalent.

the flux and multiplicity of phenomena. Fragment 1²¹ of Herakleitos' book (quoted below in a footnote) begins precisely with a meditation on the λόγος. To him λόγος was "both human thought and the governing principle of the universe"²², the nearest he came to an *arche* like that of the Milesian philosophers. In one of the fragments preserved (fr. 50, Hippolytus *Ref.*, IX, 9, 1), Herakleitos affirms the ultimate unity of all things despite their seeming chaos or disparity: "Listening not to me but to the Logos it is wise to agree that all things are one."²³ That *all things are one* is the central insight in Herakleitos' thinking according to Charles Kahn. The two key words in Bringham's short composition are 'concord' and 'harmony': they somehow evoke the idea of *ordered, harmonious whole* that the word κόσμος (i.e., 'the natural world and the order in it') had in ancient Greek minds, but also the all-important idea that beneath the multifarious fleeting reality of sensible experience hides an ordering principle called λόγος. Thus, "the total plurality of things forms a single, coherent, determinable complex – what Heraclitus called 'unity'"²⁴, says Kirk. According to Herakleitos, the majority of human beings seem to fail to perceive this elemental truth,²⁵ even if it is common, that is, valid for all things and accessible to all men and women.²⁶ His sense of the worthlessness of human knowledge is self-evident from the outset: his emphasis is clearly laid on "men's failure to grasp the universal λόγος which he proclaims."²⁷ The point is that humans appear to pursue the wrong kind of knowledge, by merely collecting disparate, discrete or unrelated data about reality, failing to notice the

²¹ "Of the Logos which is as I describe it men always prove to be uncomprehending, both before they have heard it and when once they have heard it. For although all things happened according to this Logos men are like people of no experience, even when they experience such words and deeds as I explain, when I distinguish each thing according to its constitution and declare how it is; but the rest of men fail to notice what they do after they wake up just as they forget what they do when asleep." Fr. 1, Sextus *adv. math.* VII, 132, quoted by Kirk et al. *ibid.*, p. 187. In Davenport's brilliant rendering: "*The Logos is eternal / but men have not heard it / and men have heard it and not understood.*" // *Through the Logos all things are understood / yet men do not understand / as you shall see when you put acts and words to the test / I am going to propose: // One must talk about everything according to its nature, / how it comes to be and how it grows. / Men have talked about the world without paying attention / to the world or to their own minds, / as if they were asleep or absent-minded.*" See *7 Greeks. Translations by Guy Davenport*, p. 158. From these words we deduce that humans are aware of certain things through their senses, but cannot interpret them properly, correctly. On the other hand, fragment 123 focuses on the concealment of this ultimate kind of truth associated to the logos. It says "Nature loves concealment." (Guthrie, p. 441) or "The real constitution of things is accustomed to hide itself." (Kirk, *Heraclitus: the Cosmic Fragments*, p. 227), or in Davenport's rendering: "Nature loves to hide. [Becoming is a secret process]." (*ibid.*, p. 159) This is a recurrent notion, by the way, in Bringham's poetry: consider, for instance, certain passages of *New World Suite No. 3* (2005).

²² W.K.C. Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 428. Guthrie explores the nature of this λόγος in these enlightening terms: "Being universal and all-pervading, this Logos – the law by which the world is ordered, and which can be comprehended in human minds – is of course common to all." (p. 428) It is a "part-material, part-spiritual force which makes for rational order. In the language of the Presocratic thought it 'guides' or 'steers' all things." (p. 428)

²³ Davenport says in fragment 118: "Not I but the world says it: All is one." See *7 Greeks. Translations by Guy Davenport*, p. 170.

²⁴ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 191.

²⁵ Unlike Parmenides, Herakleitos does not condemn sense-perception radically, for the senses are "for human beings the primary channels of communication with the Logos outside, [...] the channels, through which, as well as by breathing, we draw in the Logos in a literal, physical sense." (Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 430). The problem seems to be that even if our sense organs bring us into contact with the universal logos, we still must draw the right conclusion from the data or raw information our senses provide us with. Herakleitos has nothing but a lively contempt for those who only amass data without the ability to perceive the logos beneath them. Thus, "accurate perception of phenomena is the necessary preliminary to the discovery of the Logos which underlies and explains them." See Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 429-430.

²⁶ In fragment 2, Sextus *adv. math.*, VII, 133, Kirk translates the original Greek as follows: "Therefore it is necessary to follow the common; but although the Logos is common the many live as though they had a private understanding." (Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 187.) In Davenport's rendering, fragment 2 reads like this: "Let us therefore notice that understanding is common to all men. Understanding is common to all, yet each man acts as if his intelligence were private and all his own." See *7 Greeks. Translations by Guy Davenport*, p. 158. Also, "All men think", says fr. 80 in Davenport's rendering. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

²⁷ Charles Kahn, *ibid.*, p. 8.

overall design beneath the surface – i.e., trying vainly to know many things instead of the one truth that really matters. Or, to put it differently, the problem is that humans are “blind to the inner significance both of their own nature and of everything around them.”²⁸ In this respect, Herakleitos stresses that mortals are completely different to gods, whose divine synthetic view of things contrasts clearly with humans’ chaotic view. Their superiority to men is made discernible in a saying like this, fr. 102, Porphyrius *in Iliadem* IV, 4: “To god all things are beautiful and good and just, but men have supposed some things to be unjust, others just.”²⁹ Thus, wisdom consists in understanding how the world works, and this involves understanding the divine λόγος, that is “the analogous structure common element of arrangement in things, embodying the μέτρον or measure which ensures that change does not produce disconnected, chaotic plurality.”³⁰ And the material embodiment of the λόγος is an ever-living fire³¹, rational and responsible for the government of the whole world. Turning now to Bringham’s poem, it is evident that section 2 deals primarily with Herakleitos’ notion of λόγος as the unifying principle underlying changing, fleeting reality. Beneath the surface plurality of things, there is a constant strife between opposites that maintain the harmony or balance of the world-order. Even if its ultimate essence is that of unremitting change, the world somehow remains the same. Thus, “*harmony with an arched back*” is possibly meant as a reference to the λόγος, responsible for the order implicit in the entire cosmos. That it should have “an arched back” is because it rests on the perennial strife of opposites in tension, striving hard to keep the balance. Unlike Homer, for whom the immortal gods and goddesses were held responsible for all human affairs and the whole cosmic order, Herakleitos’ original insight into the essence of things is that there is a universal principle underlying reality in its manifold manifestations. His pristine intuition has a beautiful harmony and concord about it, a precious coherence that Bringham celebrates in his poem. The references to fire, ash and soul (“*laminated ash upended like an unlaidd keel*”, “*the curl / of live flesh in the fire, flexed / like the soul between the muscle and the bone, / like the bow, like the lyre*”) in the closing lines of section 2 anticipate the following section, which is overtly concerned with fire as the very embodiment of the universal λόγος.

- (2) The idea of the essential unity beneath opposites in eternal strife maintaining the balance of reality (i.e., *harmony is of opposites*, as Guthrie puts it). For Herakleitos the equilibrium of the cosmos is maintained by a state of perennial and unending war³² between opposites. A

²⁸ W.K.C. Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 414.

²⁹ See Kirk et al. *ibid.*, p. 191, note 1. In Davenport’s rendering: “To God all is beautiful, good, and as it should be. Man must see things as either good or bad.” See *7 Greeks. Translations by Guy Davenport*, p. 169. Of humans’ inferiority and epistemological fallibility in this respect, Davenport says in fr. 55 “The stupid are deaf to truth: they hear, but think that the wisdom of perception always applies to someone else.” (p. 163), in fr. 57 “Many people learn nothing from what they see and experience, nor do they understand what they hear explained, but imagine that they have.” (p. 164), in fr. 62 “The mind of man exists in a logical universe but is not itself logical.” (p. 164), and in fr. 64 “Man, who is an organic continuity of the Logos, thinks he can sever that continuity and exist apart from it.” (p. 164).

³⁰ Kirk et al. *ibid.*, p. 203. Other relevant Davenport fragments in this respect are fr. 3, “Men who wish to know about the world must learn about it in its particular details.” (p. 158), fr. 5, “Our understanding of the greatest matters will never be complete.” (p. 158), fr. 119, “Wisdom alone is whole, and is both willing and unwilling to be named Zeus.” (p. 170), and fr. 120, “Wisdom is whole: the knowledge of how things are plotted in their courses by all other things.” (p. 170)

³¹ Of the logos-conception in Herakleitos Guthrie says: “it is first of all the everlasting truth to which he is giving verbal expression, but which is independent of his utterance of it [...]. Next, it is the subject of that truth, the One which is everlasting [...]. And this One is at the same time the divine, intelligent principle which surrounds us and causes the ordering of the cosmos, and that within us to which we owe whatever intelligence we possess. [...] At the same time it is fire, the hot and dry, and what corrupts it in us is its encounter with moisture and cold.” *Ibid.*, p. 434.

³² “Strife or war is Heraclitus’ favourite metaphor for the dominance of change in the world. It is obviously related to the reaction between opposites... [...] Heraclitus points out that if strife – that is, the action and reaction between opposed substances – were to cease, then the victor in very contest of extremes would establish a permanent domination, and the world as such would be destroyed.” Kirk et al. *ibid.*, p. 194.

significant manifestation of the *λόγος*, Herakleitos claimed, is the underlying connection between these opposites. In this respect, the unity of things lies beneath the surface and it depends on a balanced reaction between opposites, even if the internal tension is never actually resolved. For instance, health and disease define each other. Good and evil, hot and cold, and other opposites are similarly related. In addition, he noted that a single substance may be perceived in varied ways – seawater is both harmful (for human beings) and beneficial (for fish). His understanding of the relation of opposites to each other enabled him to overcome the chaotic and divergent nature of the world, and he asserted that the world exists as a coherent system in which a change in one direction is ultimately balanced by a corresponding change in another. Between all things there is a hidden connection, so that those that are apparently “tending apart” are actually “being brought together”. As Kirk puts it, there is a connection or means of joining “through opposite tensions, which ensures this coherence – just as the tension in the string of bow or lyre, being exactly balanced by the outward tension exerted by the arms of the instrument, produces a coherent, unified, stable and efficient complex.”³³ Hence Bringhurst’s allusion to the bow and the lyre in the closing lines of section 2 of “Herakleitos”, a clear reference to one of the philosopher’s most familiar fragments illustrating the notion of opposites: “*We do not notice how opposing forces agree. Look at the bow and the lyre*”, says Davenport in his fr. 117. W.K.C. says that “the functioning of both instruments, their very nature as a working bow or lyre, is dependent on this balance of forces, which is good [...] For Heraclitus bow and lyre symbolize the whole cosmos, which without such constant ‘warfare’ would disintegrate and perish.”³⁴ The Original Greek text speaks of *παλίντονος ἄρμονίη*, where *παλίντομος* means “counter-stretched” – i.e., tending equally in opposite directions, a tension in one direction automatically produces an equivalent tension in the other; if not, the system, collapses.”³⁵ Unlike gods, mortals are unable to perceive this unity implicit in the world, because to the gods the separateness implied by opposites does not really exist: day and night, dry and wet, hot and cold, good and evil are one and the same thing.

- (3) Herakleitos’ flux doctrine, i.e. the idea that reality is in a state of perpetual change, that everything is in continuous change and motion. Of course, the eternal strife of opposites is closely connected to Herakleitos’ flux doctrine, according to which everything is in perpetual flux like a river, and “the river-image illustrates the kind of unity that depends on the preservation of measure and balance in change.”³⁶ In the realm of appearances, even the apparently stable is subject to change all the time, and yet “a complex whole, like the world, might remain ‘the same’ while its constituent parts are for ever changing.”³⁷ One of

W.K.C. Guthrie says that in Herakleitos “any harmony between contrasting elements necessarily and always involved a tension or strife between the opposites of which it was composed. The tension is never resolved. Peace and war do not succeed each other in turn: always in the world there is both peace and war. Cessation of struggle would mean the disintegration of the cosmos.” *Ibid.*, p. 437. Furthermore, he identifies three essential aspects in the doctrine of the harmony of opposites: (1) everything is made of opposites, and therefore subject to internal tension; (2) opposites are identical (this was an intoxicating and exciting discovery for Herakleitos, for it meant that the whole apparently disparate collection of phenomena displayed to the discerning mind an essential unity); and (3) war is the ruling and creative force and a right and proper state of affairs (it is out of this law of strife, of simultaneous opposite tensions, that the world keeps on existing). See pp. 439-449 for a detailed discussion of all three aspects.

³³ Kirk et al. *ibid.*, p. 193.

³⁴ W.K.C. Guthrie, p. 440. Somewhere else, Guthrie explains that Heraclitus, to bring home his new idea about the workings of nature and the constitution of things, finds himself compelled to say: “Think of fire, of the structure of a bow or a lyre, of warfare, of a river, of a road (which is the same road whether it takes you from North to South or from South to North), of sea-water (a healthy element for fishes, death to men), of the track of a writer’s pencil, straight and crooked at the same time, of a surgeon who inflicts sharp pain to cure pain.” *Ibid.*, p. 438.

³⁵ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 193, note 2.

³⁶ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 196.

³⁷ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 197. Kirk adds: “the *unity* of the river as a whole is dependent upon the regularity [...] of the flux of its constituent waters. The river, then, may provide an image of the balance of constituents in the world.” (p. 197)

Herakleitos' most famous sayings is: "One cannot step twice into the same river, for the water into which you first stepped has flowed on." (fr. 21, Davenport's translation). He also said: 'Everything flows; nothing remains. [Everything moves; nothing is still. Everything passes away; nothing lasts.]' (fr. 20, Davenport), and 'The river we stepped into is not the river in which we stand.' (fr. 110, Davenport). Guthrie tells us that "the statement of the flux-doctrine which has become almost canonical in later ages, πάντα ῥεῖ, occurs in the ancient authorities only in Simplicius (*Phys.* 1313-11), and is unlikely to have been a saying of Heraclitus."³⁸ In *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Kirk, Raven and Schofield claim that "the river-image illustrates the kind of unity that depends on the preservation of measure and balance in change", and that the river-statement is found in at least two relevant fragments: "214 Fr. 12, Arius Didymus *ap.* Eusebium *P.E.* XV, 20, + fr. 91, Plutarch *de E* 18, 392B. [...] Upon those that step into the same rivers different and different waters flow... They scatter and... gather... come together and flow away... approach and depart. [...] According to the Platonic interpretation, accepted and expanded by Aristotle, Theophrastus and the doxographers, this river-image was cited by Heraclitus to emphasize the absolute continuity of change in every single thing: everything is in perpetual flux like a river. So 215 Plato *Cratylus* 402A... [...] *Heraclitus somewhere says that all things are in process and nothing stays still, and likening existing things to the stream of a river he says that you would not step twice into the same river.*"³⁹ So the river is the embodiment of the perpetual change inherent in reality. Everything is pure metamorphosis, nothing stays the same, and "Change alone is unchanging" (fr. 23, Davenport).

All three threads of Herakleitos' thinking are woven with perfect command and subtlety into the beautiful tapestry of section 2 in Bringhurst's poem. The closing lines of this section already prefigure the core meaning of section 3 of "Herakleitos", which is concerned with fire and Herakleitos' cosmology. Bringhurst's meditation on the nature of cosmic fire as the embodiment of world-order or λόγος reads as follows:

All things are exchangeable for
fire and fire for all things,
like gold for goods and goods for gold,
or so sings old

Herakleitos.

³⁸ W.K.C. Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 450, footnote 1. Footnote 3 informs us that Aristotle, in *Metaphysics* 987a32, explains how Cratylus "carried the views of Heraclitus to their logical extreme by correcting the sentence 'You can't step into the same river twice' to 'You can't step into it once'. Between the instant when your foot touched the surface and the instant when it reached the bottom the river at that point had already changed."

³⁹ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, pp. 194-195. Bringhurst's sequence *The Old in Their Knowing* opens with a quotation lifted from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 1010a: "*They saw moreover that the whole physical world was in motion, with nothing coming true from its continuous transformation, and they decided that nothing at all could be truthfully said about something that was always and everywhere changing. From these conclusions stem the more extreme views of some who claimed to out-Heraclitus Herakleitos. Take Cratylus for example. Finally he stopped talking altogether and only moved his finger. And he censured Herakleitos for saying one could not step twice into the same river. His own view was that one could not do so even once.*" Guthrie sheds light on these words in the following terms: "Cratylus, Aristotle tells us [...], carried the views of Heraclitus to their logical extreme by correcting the sentence 'You can't step into the same river twice' to 'You can't step into it once'. Between the instant when your foot touched the surface and the instant when it reached the bottom the river at that point had already changed. Cratylus was a Heraclitean heretic [...] who was so carried away by the idea of uninterrupted change that in the end he thought it best not to speak (presumably because to make a statement about anything would give a spurious impression of permanence: by the time the statement was out of his mouth its object would have changed), but only wagged his finger! Although the continuous motion and change of sensible things *was* a dogma of Heraclitus, it was not the whole story." (Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 450.) It is clear that Cratylus takes the Heraclitean doctrine of the everlasting flux of sensible things to absurd lengths: he out-Heraclitus Herakleitos himself, as Aristotle puts it in Bringhurst's rendering into English.

In Herakleitos' philosophic thinking, everlasting fire (world-fire and soul-fire) is the ultimate grounding reality of world-order. The essential fragment serving as literal starting point for Bringham's poem is fragment 90, Plutarch *de E.* 8, 388D, which Kirk translates as follows: "All things are an equal exchange for fire and fire for all things, as goods are for gold and gold for goods."⁴⁰ However, fragment 30, Clement, *Strom.* V, 104, 1 is also crucial in this context: "This world order [the same for all] did none of the gods or men make, but it always was and is and shall be: an ever-living fire, kindling in measures and going out in measures."⁴¹ The primordial fire at the heart of things is eternal and immortal, and it was never created either by divine or mortal agents. As Kirk explains, "Fire is the archetypal form of matter. The world-order as a whole can be described as a fire of which measures are being extinguished, corresponding measures being rekindled; not all of it is burning at the same time. It always has been, and always will be, in this condition."⁴² Thus, viewing fire as the essential principle uniting all things, Herakleitos wrote that the world order is an "ever-living fire kindling in measures and being extinguished in measures."⁴³ He extended the manifestations of fire to include not only fuel, flame, and smoke but also the ether in the upper atmosphere. Part of this air, or pure fire, "turns to" ocean, presumably as rain, and part of the ocean turns to earth. Kirk claims that, for Herakleitos, "the world is an ever-living fire, parts of which are always extinguished to form the two other main world-masses, sea and earth. Changes between fire, sea and earth balance each other; pure, or aetherial, fire has a directive capacity."⁴⁴ Simultaneously, equal masses of earth and sea everywhere are returning to the respective aspects of sea and fire.⁴⁵ The resulting dynamic equilibrium maintains an orderly balance in the world.⁴⁶ To convey this sense of dynamic equilibrium Herakleitos (and Bringham) deploys the trade-image of goods as being

⁴⁰ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 198. In Davenport's rendering, this is fragment 28: "Everything becomes fire, and from fire everything is born, as in the eternal exchange of money and merchandise." *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁴¹ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 198. In Davenport's rendering, this is fragment 29: "This world, which is always the same for all men, neither god nor man made: it has always been, it is, and always shall be: an everlasting fire rhythmically dying and flaring up again." *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁴² Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 198.

⁴³ Guthrie explains that the ever-living fire of the cosmos is being kindled and extinguished in measures in its present state: "First, in different parts of the world it is being alternately kindled (becoming fire in the popular sense, or an even hotter vapour) and extinguished (taking the form of water or earth), and all within fixed measures or limits which ensure the balance of opposites necessary to the maintenance of cosmic order. Secondly, it is maintained in the subtle way which Heraclitus found so difficult to express and which is his peculiar contribution to cosmological theory: by the simultaneous interaction of contrary forces rending in opposite directions, as in the structure of the bow or lyre, or the 'pain-curing pain' of the surgeon's knife." *Ibid.*, p. 459.

⁴⁴ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 197.

⁴⁵ The original Greek text on the metamorphosis of fire is found in fr. 31, Clement *Strom.* V, 104, 3: "Fire's turnings: first sea, and of sea the half is earth, the half 'burner' [i.e. lightning or fire]... <earth> is dispersed as sea, and is measured so as to form the same proportion as existed before it became earth." (Kirk, *ibid.*, p. 198). In Davenport's rendering, this is fr. 32: "The first metamorphosis of fire is to become the sea and half of the sea becomes the earth, half the flash of lightning." (*ibid.*, p. 161). Two more fragments as translated by Davenport, fr. 33 ("As much earth is washed into the sea as sea-stuff dries and becomes part of the shore.", p. 161) and fr. 34 ("The life of fire comes from the death of earth. The life of air comes from the death of fire. The life of water comes from the death of air. The life of earth comes from the death of water", p. 161) are also crucial in this particular context. On this fragment, Kirk says: "Regarded as a part of the cosmos, fire is on a par with sea (presumably representing water in general, as in Xenophanes) and earth, as one of the three obvious world-masses. The pure cosmic fire was probably identified by Heraclitus with [...] aither, the brilliant fiery stuff which fills the shining sky and surrounds the world; this aither was widely regarded both as divine and as place of souls. The idea that the soul may be fire or aither, not breath as Anaximenes had thought, must have helped to determine the choice of fire as the controlling form of matter." *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁴⁶ This persistence of unity despite change is illustrated by Herakleitos' famous analogy of reality to a river: "Upon those who step into the same rivers different and ever different waters flow down." It is known that Plato later took this doctrine to mean that all things are in constant flux, regardless of how they appear to the senses.

exchangeable for gold, and vice versa. W.K.C. Guthrie says that “in mercantile transactions the essential thing is parity of value: a certain quantity of gold will buy a certain quantity of goods.” But what Kirk has probably in mind is “the single homogeneous character of gold (fire) as opposed to the manifold kinds of goods (physical things) for which it can be exchanged.”⁴⁷ In any case, the world-order is and shall be an ever-living fire kindling and going out in measures (simultaneously, that is), which accounts for the simultaneous unity and plurality of the cosmos.⁴⁸

Fragment 62, Hippolytus *Ref.* IX, 10, 6, rendered into English by Kirk as “*Immortal mortals, mortal immortals [or mortal immortals, immortal mortals; or immortals are mortal, mortals are immortal; or immortals are mortals, mortals are immortals, etc.], living their death and dying their life.*”⁴⁹ is the starting point for Bringhurst’s version and meditation on the relations between gods and mortals at the heart of section 4 in “Herakleitos”. Kirk points out that this obscure fragment preserved by the Roman bishop Hippolytus “has some connexion with the doctrine of opposites, but also suggests the deification of some souls.”⁵⁰ As we shall try to demonstrate, there is much more than this implicit in this meditation on the way gods and humans related to one another. What is worth highlighting at any rate is that section 4 of “Herakleitos” is the one that has undergone more profound variations in subsequent textual incarnations. That it is a complex part of the poem, pregnant with ideas, and that it posed translation difficulties for Bringhurst himself is confirmed by the constant textual metamorphosis of the text itself. Throughout our critical analysis, we quote, however, from the last incarnation, that published in *The Calling* (1995), *The Old in Their Knowing* (2005) and *Selected Poems* (2009):

Dead men are gods; men are dead gods, said
Herakleitos. Immortals are mortal, mortals immortal.
The birth of the one is the death of the other;
the breath of the one is the death of the other,
the dying of one gives life to the other.

The living are dying. The dead live forever,
except when the living disturb them, and this
they must do. The gods die
when men live forever. Air, earth and fire
die too. Dying, we mother and sire

the other: our only and own
incarnation.⁵¹

⁴⁷ W.K.C. Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 461. He adds: Herakleitos “seems to be saying that although in the cosmos as he sees it fire has a definite primacy, grounded in its divinity and perpetual life, yet it is not a permanent substratum which, in Aristotle’s later formulation, remains essentially the same though changing in its modifications. Such a permanent *physis* would contradict the law of flux, and introduce rest and stability into a world from which he thought they should be banished. There was law in the universe, but it was not a law of permanence, only a law of change, [...] the law of the jungle, since everything comes into being ‘by way of strife’ and War is lord of all.” *Ibid.*, p. 461.

⁴⁸ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 200.

⁴⁹ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 208. This is Davenport’s version of the original Greek (fr. 66): “Gods become men; men become gods, the one living the death of the other, the other dying the life of the one.” *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁵⁰ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 208.

⁵¹ This is the text of the original 1975 *Eight Objects* version: “Herakleitos says something which cannot be put / into prose, though the Bishop Hippolytus quotes / it as though it were prose. Its essence is this: // mortal immortals are immortal mortals, / the breath of the one is the death of the other, / the dying of one is the life of the other: // mortals are deathless, the deathless are mortal, / living in the body the death of the other, / dying into air, earth and fire, siring // the other, the utter / incarnation.” And this is the 1975 *Bergschrund* and the 1982 *The Beauty of the Weapons* version of the text: “Dead

W.K.C. Guthrie says that fragment 62 has been traditionally interpreted, in ancient and modern times, as “implying the whole Pythagorean and Orphic doctrine of the soul as an immortal being for which this earthly life is a kind of death and the body a tomb, because it only enjoys full life when discarnate. Men may be described as mortal immortals, gods or *daimons* temporarily incarcerated in mortal bodies.”⁵² Along the same line of thought, Kirk et al. point out that “It is interesting that one of the bone tablets from Olbia, of the fifth century B.C.... had scratched on it ‘Dio(nysos)’, ‘Orphikoi’ and βίος θάνατος βίος. Heraclitus, therefore, may be giving a special interpretation of an alternation between life and death that was broadly accepted in exotic mystery-cults of Bacchic or Orphic flavour.”⁵³ However, Guthrie suggests yet another possible interpretation: he says that fragment 62 may refer to the continuous transformation of the various forms of matter of the cosmos into one another. This conception of change Herakleitos expresses by saying that each form of matter makes its appearance by the death of another, as we have seen above. Thus, the perennial metamorphosis of the physical bodies and of the soul is one and the same process.⁵⁴ On the other hand, in his general introduction to the art and thought of Herakleitos, Charles Kahn meditates on an essential assumption common to Greek thought as well as to the popular and scientific tradition emerging in Asia Minor in the sixth century BCE:

a basic antithesis between gods and men, between the divine and the human, and an interpretation of the human in the light of this contrast. Human nature for the Greeks is thus essentially characterized by mortality and fallibility: by the brevity of human life and by the weakness of our intellectual vision. [...] Where the two traditions diverge most sharply is in their conception of what is divine. For the poets of the popular tradition the gods have human form, even though they are vastly superior in strength, clairvoyance, ability of all sorts, and in their total freedom from the shadow of death. The clearest symptom (though not the original source) of the new world view is a radical break with this anthropomorphism. [...] This new conception of divinity as birthless and not merely deathless, as radically different from men in every respect, is essentially the conception of a *cosmic god*: a deity conceived not as the supreme patriarch of a quasi-human family but as the ruling principle of an orderly universe. And such a view presupposes the work of the scientists or natural philosophers whom Aristotle called the *physikoi*...⁵⁵

Upon closer inspection, there are other luminescent threads of meaning embedded in Bringham's words. The opening lines of the first stanza appear to affirm the elemental kinship of gods and humans, of mortals and immortals, as part of a complex mesh of living fire, as it were. The mutual dependence of the ones upon the others is made explicit through highly parallelistic structures: the birth of the one implies the death of the other, and the dying of the one means life-giving to the other. By contrast, the second stanza seems to highlight the contrast between the immortal gods (eternal, powerful, invulnerable, perfect) and mortal human beings (perishable, fallible, vulnerable, imperfect): whereas gods and goddesses live in a realm apart, free from illness and pain, humans are dying all the time. There is something paradoxical about the statement “*The dead live forever, / except when*

men are gods, men are dead gods, said / Herakleitos. And furthermore, / mortal immortals are immortal mortals, / the breath of the one is the death of the other, / the dying of one is the life of the other: / mortals are deathless, the deathless are mortal, / living in the body the death of the other, / dying into air, earth and fire, siring / / the other, the utter / incarnation.”

⁵² See W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. I, p. 464. Guthrie also draws our attention to the language of the fragment itself: “Undoubtedly the language is impressive, especially considering the equivalence of ‘immortal’ and ‘god’ in Greek usage...”

⁵³ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 208.

⁵⁴ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 464.

⁵⁵ Charles Kahn, *ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

the living disturb them, and this / they must do.” Gods are immortal, but mortals disturb them, offering them sacrifices to honour them and gain their favour, for instance. But they die when humans forget about them, which seems to be the case in our modern world, which does not believe in the presence of gods everywhere you turn to look. For the balance to keep on existing, we must die, for by dying *“we mother and sire / the other: our only and own incarnation.”* The same process is discernible in the world of physical elements – *“Air, earth and fire / die too”* –, where a circular path of becoming is discernible (fire changes to steam, then to water, then to earth, then back to fire through the same stages reversed), and this ensures the continuity of life. In much the same way fire, water, earth and air change into one another, thus paying the penalty of chronological succession, as Anaximander said, so humans must die to be born into a new form of existence as it were, for death does not mean total annihilation, but rather being born into a new state.

The five-part poem entitled “Herakleitos” closes with a section which is just one-line long, a simple declarative sentence consisting of subject plus verb plus direct object: *“Wind stirs his ashes.”* What is left of the 6th-century Presocratic philosopher born in Ephesos? Not much, we might think. Apart from these tattered fragments of wisdom that Bringhurst has threaded into the living fabric of his magnificent poem, only a handful of ashes stirred by the wind remains of a flesh-and-blood man who did not care much about the body, feared water and dampness, and preferred a dry soul to a wet soul. However, the extant fragments we do possess of Herakleitos are enough guarantee to ensure his immortality. That his insight into the essence of things should have survived in spite of the passing of time is no doubt a form of immortality. Herakleitos believed in the eternal value of the soul and he expressed the utmost contempt for the body in fragment 96, which says “Corpses are more fit to be cast out than dung” (Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 477) or “The dead body is useless even as manure”⁵⁶, says fragment 60 in Davenport’s rendering. Now fire, the cosmic principle, turns his body into ashes, but that is not the definitive state or final fate of Herakleitos. The wind blowing his ashes is about to turn them into something else as part of the cosmic metamorphosis. After all, the human soul is a portion or spark of the cosmic fire.

II · PARMENIDES

“Parmenides” was originally published in A.5 *Eight Objects* (1975), included in Bringhurst’s MFA Thesis *Carmina propria et opuscula translata* (1975), and reprinted with some minor textual revisions in A.6 *Bergschrund* (1975), A.14 *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), A.47 *The Calling* (1995), A.76 *The Old in Their Knowing* (2005), and A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009). However, Bringhurst’s life-long fascination with this Presocratic poet-philosopher was to fully bloom into an ambitious joint venture that brought together several talented men and women to produce *The Fragments of Parmenides* (2003), a beautiful art book that sets side by side the ancient Greek text (the 20 luminous fragments that have survived the passage of time), which is 2,500 years old, with Bringhurst’s mastery translation into English. It was followed by the publication of *Carving the Elements: A Companion to the Fragments of Parmenides* in 2004, to which Bringhurst contributed a magnificent introduction on the genesis of the book and two illuminating essays on Parmenides, the technology of writing and typography.⁵⁷ But

⁵⁶ Davenport, *ibid.*, p. 164.

⁵⁷ There were two different editions of *The Fragments* in fact, as well as the companion volume to which all the people involved in the project contributed an essay: (1) A.70 •• *The Fragments of Parmenides*. With wood engravings by Richard Wagener. Berkeley: Peter Koch. 2003. 64 p. 25 × 41 cm. Contents: Twenty fragments

whereas *The Fragments of Parmenides* offers the poet's superb translation of the poet-philosopher's extant hexameters (a total of 154 verse lines arranged into 20 fragments and three sections), "Parmenides", the second piece in the sequence *The Old in Their Knowing*, focuses instead on the life and thought of the Eleatic thinker, particularly on the spiritual commotion that his own intellectual discoveries about the ultimate nature of reality might have brought to his own body, mind and soul. In our critical analysis of this accomplished composition, we shall be drawing on the reflections of such classic scholars as Guthrie,⁵⁸ Kirk and Raven, as well as on Bringham's own translation of the extant fragments and essays⁵⁹ on the relevance of the thinking of this man who breathed under the sun so long ago. Like Herakleitos, Pythagoras or Empedokles, he was one of the pioneer minds of ancient Greece, at a moment when philosophy was being born as *the sheer love of wisdom*. What they all had in common is that they thought intensely and beautifully, and when this happens, poetry is born into the world.

Parmenides⁶⁰ was born in Elea in southern Italy c. 515 BCE, but "his parents were almost certainly refugees who had left their home in Phokaia, in the eastern Aegean, to escape the Persian invasion."⁶¹ Not much is known of his life, though he is said to have been a legislator in Elea, which owed him some of its laws. He was a poet, a pre-industrial scientist, and a naturalist who studied the entire natural world – he was a φυσικός in short. Raised in an oral tradition at its roots, he was content to write little, and so the remains of his writings are reduced to the 154 hexameters of his poem Περὶ φύσεως (*On Nature*), unevenly distributed: after a 32-line prologue rich with mythological allusions (in which the goddess addresses him directly as the recipient of her oracle) come two parts, dealing with the truth about reality and with seeming (the false opinions of mortals), respectively. Of the first part, which is by far the most important, it is estimated that almost nine-tenths have been preserved, whereas of the second part only small scraps amounting to perhaps one-tenth have survived the passing of time.⁶² Fragment DK B8 constitutes the palpating

in Greek with Bringham's English translation en face, "Afterword: The Poetry of Philosophy and the Survival of Pagan Thinking", "Concordance", and colophon. "120 copies were bound by Peggy Gotthold in quarter leather and Hahnemühle Bugra paper protected by a case that is covered in Japanese silk. Twenty-six copies, lettered A to Z, were bound in full leather by Daniel Kelm and enclosed in a dropback box." The fragments are grouped into three sections and were reprinted in A.83 *Everywhere Being Is Dancing. Twenty Pieces of Thinking*. (2) A.70a •• *The Fragments of Parmenides*. Berkeley: Peter Koch. 2003. 64 p. 25 × 41 cm. Same as A.70 except that this edition is bound in full leather and housed in a larger box along with a separate suite of ten signed wood engravings and broadside type specimens of the Diogenes and Parmenides Greek types. (3) *Carving the Elements: A Companion to the Fragments of Parmenides*. Berkeley: Editions Koch. 2004. 144 p. 15 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-88179-116-4.) Bringham's contributions: • Introduction (pp. 13–17), • "Finding the Form of an Ancient Text" (essay, pp. 91–99), and • "Raven's Wine Cup" (essay, pp. 123–138, rpt. in A.83). It includes several photos by and of Bringham, who also designed the book as a whole.

⁵⁸ Guthrie admires Parmenides, and makes this clear at several points of his impressive *A History of Greek Philosophy* where he praises the philosopher: (i) "The most original and profound of all Presocratic thinkers." (vol. I, p. 172); (ii) "We find Parmenides and Empedokles embodying highly complex intellectual systems in verse, as in the Roman world did Lucretius [the author of *De rerum natura*]." (vol. II, p. 361); (iii) "Parmenides brought about one of the most fundamental revolutions in philosophical thinking." (vol. II, p. 370).

⁵⁹ Among Bringham's essays are two pieces included in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing. Twenty Pieces of Thinking* – i.e., "The Fragments of Parmenides: The Poetry of Philosophy and the Fate of the University" (which brings together Bringham's translation of the extant 20 fragments and an essay originally published under a slightly different title as an afterword to *The Fragments of Parmenides* in 2003) and "Raven's Wine Cup" (originally published in *Carving the Elements* in 2004) – and the essays contributed to *Carving the Elements*: Introduction, "Finding the Form of an Ancient Text", and "Raven's Wine Cup".

⁶⁰ See the entry on 'Parmenides' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 22, p. 12803.

⁶¹ Bringham, "The Fragments of Parmenides: The Poetry of Philosophy and the Fate of the University", *Everywhere Being Is Dancing*, p. 136.

⁶² W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. II, *The Presocratic Tradition from Parmenides to Democritus*, CUP, 1965, pp. 3-4. We are very fortunate that Simplikios should have decided to preserve as much of the

heart of the poem: it is there that the poet unfolds the Way of Truth (up to line 49).⁶³ In his unique poem (a prodigious example of philosophical poetry or poetic philosophy), Parmenides claims the unity of *being*: he states that *what is* is and cannot not-be. Reality as such is a motionless, continuous, indivisible and eternal unity, and so any change in it is impossible. Opposites cannot exist, for plurality and change are inadmissible concepts. Also, being, language and thought are inseparable, and the world as perceived by the senses is truly unreal. Therefore, in their intellectual journey towards an irreducible core of meaning at the heart of reality, humans should not trust their senses, but reason only. In other words, Parmenides held that the multiplicity of existing things, their changing forms and motion, are but an appearance of a single eternal reality (*being* or *what is*), thus giving rise to the Parmenidean principle that *all is one*. From this concept of *being*, he went on to say that all claims of change or of *non-being* are illogical. Bringhurst celebrates the simple fact that these luminous fragments have been preserved thanks to the devotion of some lucid minds:

... among the more interesting remains there are nineteen or twenty authentic-looking fragments of a poem composed in southern Italy 2,500 years ago by the son of refugees from Ionian Greece. The author of this poem is Παρμενίδης Πύρητος Ἐλεάτης: Parmenides Pýretos Eleátes: Parmenides, son of Pyres, of Elea.

By the second century CE, Parmenides' poem was known under the title Περὶ φύσεως [*Peri phýseōs*], "On Nature." There is nothing to tell us whether Parmenides himself used this title or any title at all. The remaining fragments, however, are not the fruit of accidental breakage. They resemble tasty helpings of bread and meat more than bits of broken pottery or glass. The text has not been edited by insect larvae, water damage, or time. Every fragment we possess is a quotation, chosen many centuries ago and then recovered from the manuscripts of other people's books. These excerpts can be found – some repeatedly – in the surviving works of seventeen Greek authors, ranging from Plato and Aristotle in the fourth century BCE to Damaskios and Simplicios in the sixth century CE.⁶⁴

Parmenidean text as possible. In his *Physics* 144.26, he writes: "The lines of Parmenides on the One Being are not many, and I should like to append them to this commentary both as confirmation of what I say and because of the rarity of the book." Ibid., p. 3. According to Guthrie, the style of the poem is variable: the prologue is full of mythical imagery, whereas at some other points the reader can feel "the struggle to convey philosophical concepts for which the expression does not yet exist." Ibid., p. 4. Hence translating these Greek fragments into English is a complex and demanding undertaking. In 1990 Peter Koch published Guy Davenport's magnificent translation of the fragments of *Herakleitos*, which is an accomplishment Bringhurst himself admires. Hence translating Parmenides' fragments 13 years later was something of an intellectual and poetic challenge to the author.

⁶³ See Guthrie: "the first part of the poem deduces the nature of reality from premises asserted to be wholly true, and leads among other things to the conclusion that the world as perceived by the senses is unreal. At this point (fr. 8.50) the goddess solemnly declares that she ceases to speak the truth, and the remainder of the instruction will be 'deceitful.'" The second part of the poem consists of "a cosmology on traditional lines" and offers "a synthesis of what the ordinary man believed about the world" with a view to "show that even the most plausible account of the origin and nature of the sensible world is utterly false." Ibid., pp. 4-5.

⁶⁴ Bringhurst, "The Fragments of Parmenides", *ibid.*, pp. 129-130. Bringhurst provides us with a detailed history of the preservation of Parmenides' fragments: (1) "Simplikios is the last person we know of who read Parmenides' poem as a whole. Copies were then very scarce, he said, and for that reason he copied more than necessary into his own writings. He also quotes at length from Empedokles, Anaxagoras, and others whose works were evidently still intact, in Simplicios' library, a thousand years after they were written. Those works did not survive much longer. Since the sixth century CE, no one has quoted the Presocratics [...] except by recopying the bits already quoted by Simplicios and other, still earlier writers." (Ibid., p. 132.) (2) "The quotations were first gathered from the extant manuscripts a thousand years later by a master scholar, typographer, and printer: Henri Estienne the Younger. He printed his anthology of early Greek philosopher-poets in his own house in Geneva in 1573, under the title Ποιήσις φιλόσοφος: "Philosophic Poetry" or "Philosophic Making." This is the first printed edition of Parmenides and of half a dozen other Presocratics,

Unlike Herakleitos or Demokritos, who were *prose-poets* according to Bringhurst, Parmenides is a *metrical philosopher*, like Xenophanes and Empedokles, who also spoke or wrote in verse. They are very different kinds of thinkers though: “an agnostic elegist (Xenophanes) whose thought is now a rumor evoked by his few surviving lines, an egotistical but visionary biologist (Empedokles) whose work survives in bulk, and Parmenides the ecstatic metaphysician.”⁶⁵ Parmenides’ intellectual accomplishment is simply amazing, as we shall see below. He is difficult and abstract, an exacting metaphysician at home in the realm of ideas, but Bringhurst says that Parmenides is a *sensualist of thought*. “It isn’t the versification that makes his language into poetry; it’s the shapeliness and texture of his thinking.”⁶⁶ Now, Bringhurst’s poem, “Parmenides”, seeks to capture the thinking and singing of the Eleatic poet-philosopher. It consists of three distinct movements for the reader’s soul: the first movement (stanzas 1 and 2) offers elemental biographical details concerning the life of this sage in a most subtle manner; the second movement, or hard core of the poem (stanzas 3 to 9), dwells on the astonishing moment of revelation Parmenides experiences as he realizes that *what is* is an eternal, indivisible and motionless unity of utter perfection; the third movement (stanza 10) focuses on Parmenides’ facet as law-giver in Elea, his home town, where he “*wrote numerous statutes*,” according to Plutarch.

The first part of “Parmenides” concerns the fact that the poet-philosopher was the son of refugees, of parents who left their mother village of Phokaia in Asia Minor to escape the Persian invasion and settled in southern Italy, in Elea, where Parmenides was raised and eventually found his home. This is the opening of Bringhurst’s poem:

Parmenides was no fool. Parmenides
knew that the coast of Campania
wasn’t the Aegean’s east rim,
that it wasn’t Phokaia,
and the rich holes of Calabria,
regardless Pythagoras,
were dust-bins in comparison
to Miletos.
Larger, yes, to be sure.
The great frontier. The Tyrrhene waves were
strangely like Texas,

including two of the earliest prose-poets in the literature of Europe: Herakleitos and Demokritos.” (Ibid., p. 133.) (3) “Estienne had found ten fragments, roughly 70 lines, of Parmenides. Over the next decade or two, his friend Joseph Scaliger doubled the length of this corpus, chiefly by mining the works of Simplicios, which Estienne had never seen. But no one ever published Scaliger’s enlarged collection of the fragments. For over two hundred years, Estienne’s remained the only published version of the poem.” (Ibid., p. 133.) (4) “At the end of the eighteenth century, when archaeology of a kind was the height of fashion, learned readers took a greater interest in the Presocratic fragments. Editions of Parmenides have appeared fairly steadily since that time, posing a host of different problems.” (Ibid., p. 133.) (5) Nineteenth-century editors of the fragments made them “look and feel not like gatherings of fragments but like perforated wholes. The decision to see these works as constellations of fragments belongs to an analytical tradition now scarcely a century old. This new editorial procedure is followed in the modern successor to Estienne’s anthology, Hermann Diels’s *Poetarum philosophorum fragmenta* (Berlin, 1901). Here verse-poets and prose-poets are segregated as Neoclassical theory required, but the poem of Parmenides is presented as 19 discrete, numbered fragments rather than a fractured whole of some 150 lines. [...] Students of Greek [...] tend to cite the fragments by their “DK numbers” – which is to say the numbers they are assigned in recent editions of Hermann Diels’s *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, revised and updated by Walther Kranz. In that compendium, the surviving bits of Parmenides’ poetry are numbered from B1 to B19.” (Ibid., p. 134.) Bringhurst’s impressive translation of all the 20 extant fragments belongs among this long tradition.

⁶⁵ Bringhurst, “Raven’s Wine Cup”, *Everywhere Being Is Dancing*, p. 179.

⁶⁶ Bringhurst, “Raven’s Wine Cup”, *ibid.*, p. 167.

and the sheer
size of it all may have got to him.

The author gives us detailed information on Phokaia that might shed some light on all the geographical names scattered in the two opening stanzas of “Parmenides”:

Phokaia (Seal Town) is now the Turkish town of Foça, on the Gulf of Izmir. In the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, its inhabitants spoke Ionic Greek and had a reputation as adventurous sailors and traders. Eastward, their connections reached to the Black Sea and into Central and Southern Asia. Like the Phoenicians before them, they also founded trading posts throughout the Mediterranean, including the town of Massalia, now Marseilles. Another of their outposts was Elea, on the Golfo di Vallo, a hundred kilometers south of Salerno by the modern road. When the Persians frightened them from their homes about 540 BCE, many Phokaians took refuge in Elea. This raw but rich frontier town, swollen with new immigrants, is probably where Parmenides was born and raised. It is certainly where he later made his home. Like his elders Xenophanes and Pythagoras, Parmenides developed his views in a society of colonists and refugees, alert to but distant from the emerging glory of Athens, and acutely aware of the recent collapse and loss of the world that Homer’s poems idealize.⁶⁷

Parmenides finds himself in Elea, one of the colonies of Magna Grecia, on the fringes of the Greek empire, and far away from the glorious centre of Athenian splendour. He is well aware that the coast of Campania in southern Italy has nothing to do with “*the Aegean’s east rim*” (i.e., Asia Minor, where Phokaia was located), and that Calabria does not resemble in any way the city of Miletos – i.e., another lively trading post in Asia Minor where the Milesians (Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes) lived and thought of the *arche* or ultimate principle of reality. Like Xenophanes, Pythagoras also lived and thought beautifully in southern Italy. He was born on the island of Samos in the Aegean Sea as well and then he emigrated to Croton, another colony in Magna Grecia. Parmenides is the son of refugees, a colonist living next to “*the great frontier*” of the ancient Greek world, from where the Tyrrhene waves are discernible on the horizon. It is a curious anachronism that the poet should compare the sea waves to Texas. The sheer magnitude of the landscape must have been a source of inspiration to Parmenides, suggests the poetic voice. And yet he somehow turns to look with a certain nostalgia to his mother village, Phokaia, so far away in the distance. In his essays on the Elaetic thinker, Bringhurst tells us that not much has been preserved of Parmenides: nothing has been preserved of his body, except a portrait bust found in an excavation; only 20 fragments have been preserved of his mind, though not a single scrap of his handwriting. This body and this mind lived in frontier conditions and stumbled upon its great insight into reality with the utmost lucidness. That these tattered remnants of vision have been preserved in luminous fragments is truly a reason for us to be happy. 2,500 years ago a man had the enough mental stamina and intellectual bravery to think of being with astonishing lucidity, and he also had enough talent to write down what he found out about the ultimate essence of reality in the beautifully crafted hexameters of Homer and the epic poems. In writing his poem he was not alone; he had his own muse, a goddess who made him the recipient of revealed knowledge. But to this we shall turn presently.

The third stanza of Bringhurst’s poem is a smooth transition leading towards the second movement or part of the composition. “*Parmenides talked, / and Parmenides was capable of observing / that his voice drained off under the outsized rocks,*” tells us the poetic voice. The very

⁶⁷ Bringhurst, “The Fragments of Parmenides”, *ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

lexical repetition ('Parmenides' is repeated up to eight times throughout the entire poem) contributes to the musicality of the poem, which is written in a variable style: the almost conversational tone of the opening stanzas gives way to more complex language which reaches its apex in the sixth stanza, and then returns to the stylistic simplicity and transparency of the beginning. In the primordial encounter between self and world, Parmenides cannot avoid feeling dwarfed when measured against the sheer size of the landscape surrounding him. His voice is nothing when placed against the immensity of the rocks, the sublime beauty and mystery inherent in *what is*. He is truly capable of *speaking* or *talking* about things of concord (he is still steeped in an oral philosophical tradition, though he was the first to use the technology of writing) and he is *capable of observing*, transcending the realm of sheer appearance and reaching deeper into the essence of things. And yet he is also aware that "*his dreams were pale / like pyrites, or paler, like the gangue / milled away from Ionian metal.*" Three verse lines suffice to evoke the sharp contrast between pre-Parmenidean philosophy and the Eleatic thinker's metaphysics. Whereas the Ionian poet-philosophers or naturalists were interested in finding an ultimate principle or substratum (*arche*) out of which the world came into being, Parmenides' dreams are *paler* by comparison: for him reality is a motionless, continuous, indivisible, finished, complete and timeless round ball that does not come into being, knows nothing of time, and does not move within its limits. The myriad forms that populate the world are a hallucination and the false perception of the world stems from the unreliable data with which the senses provide humans with. Parmenides is the metaphysician *par excellence*, one who relies on *nous* as the only valid and reliable tool to apprehend *what is*, which is beneath the manifold plurality of things in reality. The Greek verb *voétv* denotes an act of immediate recognition, a *seeing with the mind*. He does not speak of any of the four classical elements (earth, water, air, fire) which other Presocratics posited as being the ultimate principle of reality; he is interested rather in the eternal and universal realm of *being* and *thought*, which he equates. In the archaic period of Greek philosophy, "word and thought, speech and its subject are one, and this is true in a special sense for Parmenides."⁶⁸

Plunged in the palpating heart of the poem, we encounter three terse verse lines at the beginning of the fourth stanza that, upon closer inspection, turn out to be an explicit reference to Parmenides' poem, *On Nature*: "*Thirty-odd years, and thirty lines wasted / on wagon axles, door hinges, horses, veils / and the sun's girls.*" There is no way of knowing how old Parmenides was when he wrote *On Nature* (he was "*thirty-odd years*"), but we do know for sure that he devoted 32 verse lines to a prologue to his ambitious poem (fragment DK B1) in which he relates a magical journey above the earth to acquire superhuman knowledge directly from a goddess. Parmenides is claiming a prophetic or apocalyptic authority for his teaching. In writing poetry in hexameters, he is not unaided at all, for he shares with his contemporaries the genuine belief in an inspiration "whereby the poet is granted deeper insight into the truth than other men."⁶⁹ Like other poets (Homer and Hesiod before him), he has his Muse, a goddess whom he meets after a magical journey and grants him inspiration. Thus, in the introductory lines of *On Nature*, he announces that "what he has to say was revealed to him by an unnamed goddess after a magical journey through the gates of Day and Night"⁷⁰ and so he is emulating the traditional poet's claim that his verses are prophetic in nature and are uttering a solemn truth. Guthrie provides us with an excellent summary of this spiritual journey with knowledge as its goal:

⁶⁸ These are Hermann Fränkel words in *Wege und Formen*, translated by Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 13, note 3.

⁶⁹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷⁰ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 7.

The essential features of the prologue are these. Parmenides is privileged above other mortals. Like a more fortunate Phaeton, he is borne through the sky in the sun-chariot with the Sun's daughters to drive him. The journey is not narrated stage by stage, but the key-points are brought out in an impressionistic manner. It is a journey from Night to Day. Where these meet is a formidable barrier, the importance of which is emphasized by dwelling on the details of its construction, a gate guarded by the figure of Justice. None may pass without her permission, that is, unless his passage is sanctioned by right and by divine consent.

Once through the gate, the road leads straight to the house of an unnamed goddess... [...] The goddess confirms his right to be there, and promises to teach him 'all things,' both the truth and what is falsely believed by mortals.⁷¹

Parmenides wastes no time on inessentials, and so does Bringhurst. With just a few brushstrokes and the utmost linguistic economy, he evokes through a careful metonymic enumeration the gist of the metaphysician's prologue: "*wagon-axles, door hinges, horses, veils / and the sun's girls.*"⁷² He mentions only indirectly the means of transport used for the journey across the sky (a chariot driven with horses), the immense gate separating Night from Day, the mystery surrounding the figure of Justice guarding the gate, and the charioteers themselves, who are the Sun's daughters. This short narrative placed at the beginning of *On Nature* gives clearly what follows the character of a divine revelation. By invoking a goddess as the ultimate source of this revealed knowledge (the truth and what seems true but is not), Parmenides is placing himself squarely in the old tradition of the epic writers who had their own Muse as well. The mythical elements and mythological imagery woven in the prologue stand in sharp contrast with the implacable logic which occupies the heart of the poem. In any case, the journey through the gates from Night (darkness) to Day (light) represents a progress from ignorance to the truth awaiting the philosopher on the other side, and it stands for the quest for knowledge. Bowra claims that this search for knowledge is akin to a mystical experience and resembles an allegory, as "Parmenides is not giving the literal record of a spiritual adventure but clothing his search for truth in allegorical dress."⁷³ The goddess will teach the philosopher both ways of inquiry: the path of truth and the path of seeming. Thus, the prologue closes with these illuminating words in Bringhurst's rendering:

And now you're here, I think the whole of it
will have to be explained –
the perfect stillness at the heart
of the round-dance of reality,
and how this differs from the visions of it
formed by human beings. Even though
those visions are delusions, there is a value in them too.
They can teach you how the facts can be
quite seamlessly and flawlessly disguised....⁷⁴

⁷¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

⁷² This is, by contrast, an excerpt from Bringhurst's magnificent translation of the prologue: "*That is where I was. I was pulled there / by thoroughbred mares. Girls / worked the reins to keep the wagon, / going flat out, from flying off the road. / the wheel-bushings screamed. The wagon-axle twirled / like a double-ended fire-drill / driven by the whirling of the wheels. / The drivers were the daughters of the sun. / As we crossed from the night into daylight, / their hands flew to their faces. / They tore off their headscarves.*" See "The Fragments of Parmenides: The Poetry of Philosophy and the Fate of the University", *ibid.*, p. 141.

⁷³ Quoted by Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷⁴ Bringhurst, "The Fragments of Parmenides: The Poetry of Philosophy and the Fate of the University", *ibid.*, p. 143. Just for the sake of contrast, consider Guthrie's prose rendering of exactly the same original Greek hexameters: "It is meet for thee to learn all things, both the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth and also what seems to mortals, in which is no true conviction. Nevertheless these things too shalt thou learn,

To the poetic voice speaking in “Parmenides”, the 32 lines of the prologue have been wasted on unnecessary preliminaries though, since the core of the revolutionary intellectual proposal of the metaphysician comes in the fragments that constitute the heart of *On Nature*. What we find in this ambitious poem is a hypothesis about the ultimate nature of reality: Parmenides thinks deeply and beautifully about *being*, thought and meaning and wonders in which ways they are connected to each other. In Bringhurst’s poem the transition to the Eleatic doctrine is marked by the structural hinge *then* – a one-word verse line that enacts the passage towards the mystical revelation Parmenides experiences at the geometrical centre of the poem. All of a sudden, the philosopher stumbles upon an idea, catches it in his teeth and bites into it as if it had a stubborn material consistency about it, and realizes that, beyond the multiplicity of all perceptible things (“*things which appear to be*”), there must be an immovable eternal reality that pervades everything (*Being*). As Bringhurst himself puts it, “what is is *everything that is*: a simple, seemingly trivial idea with some decidedly nontrivial and difficult results.” This is a rigorous attempt “to find the form of truth.”⁷⁵ This is the idea the thinker is biting and grinding down to its most profound implications. In “Parmenides”, the poet does not go much deeper into Parmenides’ metaphysics; he just evokes it indirectly, as it were, in a subtle way. He seems to be more interested in exploring the way Parmenides is astonished to see the immense potential inherent in the human mind, dumbfounded in the face of the profundity of the unique moment of revelation with the texture of transcendence in which he participates. But the eternal, motionless and indivisible Being is only subtly evoked. In Bringhurst’s words:

... and suddenly
then
Parmenides
hummed to himself, caught an idea clean
in his teeth and bit into it, singing:

*... things which appear to be,
even though they all exist, actually
have to be there
always. Everywhere.*

In the prologue, the goddess had promised Parmenides to teach him the two paths of inquiry: the way of truth and the way of seeming. In fragment DK B2 (fragment 3 in Bringhurst’s rendering), the goddess addresses the philosopher and tells him: “*I will tell you what I can about the paths – / the only paths – that thinking is capable of taking.*”⁷⁶ These two paths (one leading to truth and the other to false appearance) Parmenides calls *being* and *non-being*, *what is* and *what isn’t*:

Either this is WHAT IS, and it isn’t WHAT ISN’T
(Common Sense, Reality’s companion, walks this road) –
or it isn’t WHAT IS, and it must be WHAT ISN’T.
Let me tell you, though,
that no news ever comes from that road.
Nonknowledge – which you cannot pass along –

namely that what seems had assuredly to exist, being indeed everything.” Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 9. Whereas Guthrie’s is the translation of an erudite scholar and philologist, Bringhurst’s is the translation of a master scholar and a poet. The voice we get to hear in these fragments is distinctly his own; we get to hear Parmenides’ voice and to experience Parmenides’ mind through the unique prism of his own voice and his own mind.

⁷⁵ Bringhurst, “Raven’s Wine Cup”, *ibid.*, p. 179.

⁷⁶ Bringhurst, “The Fragments of Parmenides”, *ibid.*, p. 145.

is the only kind of knowledge
of nonbeing you can have.⁷⁷

Now, the goddess advises Parmenides not to take the path of seeming, *non-being* or *what isn't*: “*You needn't waste your mind / investigating that route.*” That is the road taken by the mass of mortals, who are confused by what their senses⁷⁸ tell them about the world (see DK B7, fragment 8 in Bringham's translation): “*You shouldn't let convention march you down / the beaten path, juggling / a sightless eye, a tuneless ear and tongue.*”⁷⁹ To the mind of common humans, “*To be and not to be seem both / the same and not the same to them, / and all of them go back the way they came.*”⁸⁰ (DK B6, fragment 7 in Bringham's translation). There are then two paths: the path of *what is*, based on the belief that something *is* or exists – and “the object of speech and thought must exist because *prima facie* it can exist”⁸¹ –, and the path of *what isn't*, based on the assertion that there is nothing, which stems from habit and results naturally from the use of unreliable senses (eyes, ears and other sense-organs give us false data about the world and so the source of our error is reliance on them). “In saying that something is, Parmenides undoubtedly had in mind what can be talked and thought about,”⁸² since he explicitly identifies being, thought and language. Now, the path of *what isn't* is dismissed as impossible to follow. On the contrary, *what is* is and cannot not-be, and that is the right path to follow. According to Parmenides, what is apprehended by the *nous* cannot not-be, it must be. Indeed for a Greek, for whom language and thought are inseparable, it was difficult to speak logically of what was not. The *nous* entails an act of immediate recognition, *a seeing with the mind*. As Guthrie puts it:

Its proper function is to grasp universal truths immediately and intuitively, as in the inductive leap, and so to assure the primary premises or principles on which deductive argument is based. It was, then, a general Greek belief that human powers of cognition included a faculty of immediate apprehension of the true nature of an object or situation, comparable to, but going deeper than, the immediate apprehension of superficial qualities by the senses. [...] It is this faculty that Parmenides names when he says that whatever is apprehended by it must be.⁸³

Once Parmenides affirms that *what is* is, then he is “debarred from saying that it was or will be, of attributing to it an origin or a dissolution in time, or any alteration or motion whatsoever.”⁸⁴ Thus, the philosopher denies the belief in any change, motion, becoming or perishing of *what is*. *What is* is and cannot ever not be. This conviction of Parmenides goes against the common belief that there is such a thing as *genesis* (the process of coming into being), which “demands that the same thing at one time is not and at another time is, and

⁷⁷ Bringham, “The Fragments of Parmenides”, *ibid.*, p. 145.

⁷⁸ According to Guthrie, “Parmenides denies outright that the senses can ever bring mankind into contact with reality.” *Ibid.*, p. 394.

⁷⁹ Bringham, “The Fragments of Parmenides”, *ibid.*, p. 149.

⁸⁰ Bringham, “The Fragments of Parmenides”, *ibid.*, p. 147.

⁸¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 22.

⁸² Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 15. In fact, in two relevant fragments the equation is posited openly. Thus, in DK B3 (fr. 4 in Bringham's translation), Parmenides says: “... *because / to be and to have meaning are the same.*...” (“The Fragments of Parmenides”, *ibid.*, p. 145). And in DK B6 (fr. 6 in Bringham's translation), the philosopher claims that “*Being speaks and means – it has no choice – / because WHAT IS exists and WHAT ISN'T doesn't. / These are things I believe you should ponder.*” (“The Fragments of Parmenides”, *ibid.*, p. 147). In Guthrie's translation, this fragment (DK B6) reads as follows: “What can be spoken and thought of must be, for it is possible for it to be, but impossible for nothing to be. This I bid thee consider, for this way of inquiry is the first from which I <hold thee back>.” *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁸³ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 19.

⁸⁴ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 15.

that it is at one time the same and at another not the same.”⁸⁵ Thus, if one admits that *what is* is and one gives this principle its full force, then one is precluded from saying that it suffers any process of becoming or perishing, change or movement. Now, this has been interpreted as being a criticism aimed partly or solely at Herakleitos,⁸⁶ to whom the whole world depended on a continuous process of change and struggle which represents the opposite pole of Parmenides’ notion of motionless being. However, it seems that the Eleatic philosopher applies the criticism to all ignorant mortals (the “dying” in Bringhamst’s translation of DK B6, fr. 7 in his rendering: “... *the path / on which the dying, seeing nothing, / stumble back and forth, all thumbs, / and turn perception sideways in their minds.*”).⁸⁷ Parmenides urges humans not to trust the senses, but to judge by reason alone. This is, according to Guthrie, a decisive moment in the history of European philosophy: “for the first time sense and reason are contrasted, and we are told that the senses deceive and that reason alone is to be trusted.”⁸⁸ There is, then, just one single reality, which is spherical, motionless, finished, indivisible, eternal, which humans are to apprehend through reason alone. Parmenides is “the first to draw a distinction between *aistheton* and *noeton* – between the data of eyes and ears on the one hand and of *logos* on the other – and to say that the latter was real and true and the former unreal.”⁸⁹

Fragment DK B8 constitutes the heart of the way of truth or of *what is*. It might be wise to quote the illuminating opening lines of this fragment as rendered into English by Bringhamst himself:

“There is one more story still to tell,
and that concerns WHAT IS.
The mileposts are plentiful
on this route. WHAT IS
is quite immune to both creation
and destruction. It is tight, one of a kind,
perfectly still and everlasting.
WHAT IS never WAS and never WILL BE, because
it IS right now; it is one; it all
fits together in the same place. Where
would you expect to find its pedigree?
From what to what could it evolve?
You needn’t try to fool me into thinking
that nonbeing is the origin of being.
Speech does not know how to say,
and thought does not know how to think,
WHAT ISN’T IS. (And anyway, supposing it were so –
what power could have drawn it out of what
before or after, germinating something
from the nothingness?) Being must turn out to be
forever or never be at all.”⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 25.

⁸⁶ Kranz has vigorously defended the view that the sole object of criticism is Herakleitos: “*Dieses bleiben die Ecksteine der Geschichte der Vorsokratiker: Heraklit zitiert und bekämpft Pythagoras, Xenophanes und Hekataios, nicht Parmenides: dieser aber zitiert und bekämpft Heraklit.*” Quoted by Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 23, note 2.

⁸⁷ Bringhamst, “The Fragments of Parmenides”, *ibid.*, p. 147.

⁸⁸ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 25.

⁸⁹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

⁹⁰ Bringhamst, “The Fragments of Parmenides”, *ibid.*, p. 149.

This is poetry dwelling on intellectual heights: poetry in which thinking and singing go hand in hand, poetry in which we witness the dance of the intellect among words. We get to see Parmenides struggling with words to express the inexpressible. Bringhurst tells us that “Parmenides puzzles, as we all do, over what it means to be. He also asks what *being*, *meaning*, and *thinking* have to do with one another, and wonders whether any of these three could be negated without annihilating them all.”⁹¹ He is not the first to have asked these questions, but he is the first hardcore metaphysician whose work it is still possible to read in a generous bulk of fragments. Parmenides is taking serious risks, though, like “trying to explain the unexplainable; like trying to grasp what Being is, and how we can believe that it continues, though our lives are full of holes and full of changes, and we know that death awaits. You need a steady voice to sing the Odyssey, a steady hand to write Parmenides’ poem. But not unlively.”⁹² He was also one of the first Greek thinkers technically equipped with the new technology of writing to record his questions. So Parmenides writes, but he does so in the hexameters of the epic poems of the Greek tradition, oral at its roots. He tried to “tell a story, think poetically, write in verse, and dwell on the nature of Being all at once,”⁹³ and this is no minor accomplishment. However, “Writing changes language,” Bringhurst reminds us:

It halts it in its tracks and lets us edit and dissect the words we speak. Though he writes within the older, oral frame, Parmenides interrogates the language he is writing. He questions its relation to reality in ways the Greek oral poets never do. He never quite falls down the funnel of words, like so many later writers, because his interest is never in language as such, but in something on the other side of language. Yet Parmenides, like Wittgenstein, will break his language like a marrow bone to see what it contains.⁹⁴

Let us now return to Parmenides’ hypothesis about the nature of reality, which his poem *On Nature* embodies. The core of fragment DK B8 dwells on the marks or characteristics of what is. Indeed the central theme of Parmenides’ doctrine is formed by the deductions drawn from the simple statement that *what is* exists. In the opening three lines of fragment 8 are listed the necessary characteristic of what is: it is eternal, unmoving, one and continuous, and past and future are meaningless for it.⁹⁵ These features are further explored one by one in the lines that follow. Let us now summarize the key aspects regarding the nature of *what is*:

- (1) *What is* is eternal – i.e., it neither comes into being nor perishes (fragment 8, lines 1-21). *What is* cannot have come into existence at some past time, nor can it cease to be in the future. *What is* did not come from *what is* because it already is; *what is* did not come from *what isn’t*, which can generate nothing but itself. Being can only be thought in the present. As Simplicios puts it in his *Physics* 78.24: “This he clearly demonstrates about true being, that it is not generated; neither from something existing, for no existing thing preceded it, nor from the non-existent, for the non-existent is nothing.”⁹⁶ In Bringhurst’s magnificent translation, these verse lines of Parmenides read as follows:

⁹¹ Bringhurst, “Raven’s Wine Cup”, *ibid.*, p. 166.

⁹² Bringhurst, “Raven’s Wine Cup”, *ibid.*, p. 177.

⁹³ Bringhurst, “Raven’s Wine Cup”, *ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

⁹⁴ Bringhurst, “Raven’s Wine Cup”, *ibid.*, p. 169.

⁹⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹⁶ Quoted by Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 29. This is, Guthrie tells us, a second major intellectual achievement on the part of Parmenides, “comparable to the distinction between sensible and intelligible”, i.e. the distinction between time and eternity: “To conceive of something as merely everlasting is to set it in time. One says that just as it is now, so it was thousands of years ago and will be in the future. But for the eternal ‘was’ and ‘will be’ have no meaning, and the time-sequence is abolished.” *Ibid.*, p. 29. Parmenides asserts the unity of reality

“Now, how could being be WHAT WILL TURN OUT TO BE?
 How could it be something that becomes?
 If anything has ever come to be, or is in some way
 yet to be, it cannot be WHAT IS.
 Birth is gone, then, and Death
 has also vanished from the scene.”⁹⁷

- (2) *What is* is continuous and indivisible (fragment 8, lines 22-25). Parmenides posits the indivisibility and continuity of reality, which is a single and continuous whole. There are no degrees in being: it must either fully be or else not be (fr. 8, line 11). If reality is a *plenum*, and all is equally full of *what is* in the form of an eternal undifferentiated continuum,⁹⁸ then any cosmogony of the Milesian type from a single *arche* is dismissed as impossible too. What is more, in Parmenides’ claim that *what is* is indivisible and continuous, with no interstices between separate bits of *being*, we have his denial of the void: empty space is then nonexistent.⁹⁹ Once again, in Bringhurst’s mastery translation, these lines read as follows:

“Neither can WHAT IS be sorted and arranged,
 because WHAT IS is all the same.
 It isn’t any better here or worse there
 or otherwise restrained from meshing anywhere.
 Being fills everything completely to the brim.
 Because of that, existence sticks together.
 WHAT IS is always flush against WHAT IS.”¹⁰⁰

- (3) *What is* is motionless and lies complete within its limits or boundaries (fragment 8, lines 26-33). Parmenides asserts that reality is totally immovable in the sense of staying in the same place. “If all that exists is a single continuous plenum, there is nowhere for it to move as a whole, nor has it any parts which could change places internally.”¹⁰¹ The impossibility of kinesis is the climax of Parmenides’ message: “The argument for confining all reality within *peirata* [i.e., limits or boundaries] seems to be this. What is *apeiron* is essentially unfinished, incomplete, never a perfect whole however much of it one may include. But reality cannot be incomplete.”¹⁰² Once more, the denial of motion and change renders all human experience as illusory and excludes the possibility of any cosmogony.¹⁰³ At this point of *On Nature*, the compelling grandeur of Parmenides’ language is simply astonishing. In Bringhurst’s rendering:

“It is motionless, too, in its strong moorings,
 with neither beginning nor end,
 while birth and death are driven out to sea
 by real understanding of the real.
 Remaining itself and in itself, it rides
 in place all by itself, perpetually
 poised and in position. Irresistible recursion
 holds it in its moorings that protect it all around.
 WHAT IS is unailing – this is the law –
 because WHAT IS is missing nothing.
 WHAT ISN’T – just supposing it were present –

and the imperishability of the one reality, which is eternal and one, unique. The multiplicity of existing things in which the ordinary unthinking human believes is palpably illusory then. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁹⁷ Bringhurst, “The Fragments of Parmenides”, *ibid.*, p. 151.

⁹⁸ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 33.

⁹⁹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁰⁰ Bringhurst, “The Fragments of Parmenides”, *ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁰¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁰² Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁰³ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 38.

would be lacking in absolutely everything.¹⁰⁴

- (4) *What is* has nothing to do with coming-into-being, locomotion or alteration, which are names without content (fragment 8, lines 34-41). This is a recapitulation of the main conclusions already reached about the nature of reality, though a new reflection is added. Coming into being and perishing, movement in space and change of quality are all unreal. These are mere empty words standing for nothing real.¹⁰⁵ All thought must have a real object, and this real object is unique, whole and unmoved. Parmenides identifies thought with *being*, and what thinks with *what is*.¹⁰⁶ Bringham captures Parmenides' subtle thinking in these words:

WHAT IS is thought itself,
as well as what is thought of.
You will not find thought apart from being,
to which it is betrothed.
In the same way, time
is not – and is not going to become –
something other than and separate from being.
Being's share of being
holds being motionless and whole.¹⁰⁷

- (5) *What is* is like a round ball or a perfect immovable sphere (fragment 8, lines 42-49). What is cannot be in greater or less degree in one direction or another. There are no intervals of not-being to separate portions of homogenous being.¹⁰⁸ This one true being does not occupy space but is rather purely conceptual. "It is grasped by intellectual insight, not by the senses. It is immutable and timeless, neither changing in quality nor moving in space. It is unique, completely homogeneous, and indivisible. [...] It is not a body filling space with its physical bulk... [...] Space has been abolished, as time was abolished by the denial of past and future."¹⁰⁹ In Bringham's rendering:

... being is complete one every side..
Like the body of a smoothly rolling ball,
it is the same from center to edge in every direction.
It isn't any bigger, and it isn't any smaller,
in one place of another. It can't be, because
WHAT ISN'T isn't there
to keep it from perfecting its identity. [...]
WHAT IS is entirely inviolate.
Equalling itself on every side,
it rides against its moorings uniformly.¹¹⁰

The remaining lines of fragment DK B8 concern the false world of seeming. Now the goddess will tell the philosopher of the world of appearances. Only the doctrine of one being contained the truth for Parmenides, and the physical world of plurality and change was simply false.¹¹¹ There is not a world containing a plurality of many different things arising from a single *arché*. One thing exists, namely *what is*, and nothing else. Aristotle understood from the outset that only the doctrine of one being contained the truth for

¹⁰⁴ Bringham, "The Fragments of Parmenides", *ibid.*, pp. 151, 153.

¹⁰⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

¹⁰⁶ Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

¹⁰⁷ Bringham, "The Fragments of Parmenides", *ibid.*, p. 153. It goes on like this: "Every conceivable name has been given to being, / bestowed by human beings, who believe / that generation and destruction, / absence and presence, and changes / of location and complexion constitute the real." *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁰⁸ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁰⁹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 45.

¹¹⁰ Bringham, "The Fragments of Parmenides", *ibid.*, pp. 153, 155.

¹¹¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 55.

Parmenides, and that the physical world of plurality subject to change was simply false, as can be seen from these excerpts from three different works of his:

- a) *Metaphysics* 986b 28: “Convinced that, beside what is, what is not is nothing, of necessity he supposed that one thing exists, namely what is, and nothing else.”
- b) *De caelo* 298b 14: “Some earlier philosophers, e.g. Melissus and Parmenides, flatly denied generation and destruction, maintaining that nothing which is either comes into being or perishes; it only seems to us as if this happens.”
- c) *Physics* 191a 27: “They say that no existing thing either comes into being or perishes because what comes into being must originate either from what exists or from what does not, and both are impossible: what is does not become (for it already is), and nothing could come to be from what is not.”¹¹²

Let us now return to “Parmenides” once again. Stanzas 6 and 7 of this complex composition concerns the astonishing moment of revelation Parmenides experiences as he realizes that *what is* is an eternal, indivisible and motionless unity of utter perfection, endowed with all the characteristics that have been outlined above. The poetic voice strives hard to record the purely physical or bodily reaction of the thinker in the face of this unique mystical experience: the focus is on his mind and on his heart in the first place, and then on a seemingly chaotic enumeration or catalogue of the multiplicity of things in this world that are reduced to one true *being*:

And Parmenides lay in the goat-dunged, heavy-stemmed
grass, imagining things and thinking
of all of them *there* in the inwoven ply, his mind flying
and gulping, trying for the whole cascade:
his brainlobes pumping like lungs, like a muscle,
the nervecords thundering in the bones’ coulisses,
and the heart’s whole cargo coming
tumbling up into him:
goddesses, girls, white water, olive trees,
sharks’ roe, the sea-haze,
the migrating eye of the flounder

... *have to be there*
always. Everywhere.

In “Finding the Form of an Ancient Text”, Bringhurst explores the kind of typographical challenge *The Fragments* posed to him. At some point, he reflects: “What I wanted to bring across is the intellectual sensuosity and passion I was hearing in the poem: a voice enraptured by ideas and probing for him, both at the same time.”¹¹³ The thought occurs that this is exactly what the poet is trying to convey in the stanzas just quoted above. Bringhurst’s language is muscular and has a purely physical texture that is simply impressive. The mind of the Eleatic thinker is trying to assimilate “*the whole cascade*” of the revelation the goddess is imparting to him. Submerged in a state of heightened awareness and intense intellectual activity, his brainlobes, his nervecords and his heart are all linked to bodily parts (lungs, muscle and bones) which are being strained to their fullest capacity. Then, *what is* is conceptualized as being not a perfect sphere or rolling ball, but as an “inwoven ply” where there is enough room for every single, conceivable thing in this

¹¹² Quoted by Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 55.

¹¹³ Bringhurst et al., “Finding the Form of an Ancient Text”, *Carving the Elements*, pp. 94-95.

world. One is inevitably reminded of Borges' *aleph*, a most curious object capable of embodying within its boundaries the universe in its entirety. But in the case of Parmenides' *being*, time and space seem to be abolished altogether, and the kaleidoscopic richness of the world is reduced to just one undifferentiated continuum or plenum where all things are fused into a whole. Immortals and mortals (*goddesses* and *girls*), as well as the primordial sea (as symbolized by *white water*, *sharks' roe*, *sea-baze* and *the migrating eye* of a fish called *flounder*) and earth (as symbolized by *olive trees*) have been there always as indistinguishable expressions of *what is*. It comes as no surprise at all that the whole revelation should have "*distressed and dumbfounded*" Parmenides, and yet he was courageous enough to keep on pursuing the intimation that "*what is is everything that is*" to unfathomable extremes, until he reaches the moment at which everything intermingles into "*the endless, full, / indivisible stillness: / the lock / on the safe of creation.*" That is to say, the eternal, finished, continuous, motionless being that is the core of reality, the "*safe of creation.*" One is inevitably reminded of fragment 20 (Cornford's) of Parmenides, which reads as follows: "*The name of the one thing that is utterly / untroubled is WHAT IS.*"¹¹⁴ At this point, the last stanza of Parmenides looks like an afterthought. After the composition of *On Nature*, after the mental and physical extenuation that it brought to the philosopher, he decided to take up law and provide his fellow citizens with a number of laws in Elea. They were enforced for a period of time in his city, according to the eminent historian Plutarch:

Parmenides then took up law
and wrote numerous statutes,
a very great number of statutes
which, Plutarch reports,
were enforced for some years in Elea.

Bringhurst has shared his fascination with the Presocratics with other eminent thinkers and poets – Plato, Aristotle, Simplikios, Henri Estienne, Joseph Scaliger, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Martin Heidegger, Jan Zwicky, Guy Davenport, Charles Kahn and Peter Koch, among others. At the age of 23, Hopkins wrote a four-page essay on Parmenides which Bringhurst particularly admires. He writes: "His great text, which he repeats with religious conviction, is that Being is and Not-being is not – which perhaps one can say, a little overdefining his meaning, means that all things are upheld by instress and are meaningless without it [...] To be and to know or Being and thought are the same."¹¹⁵ We are fortunate to have Bringhurst's translation of the 20 extant fragments of such a lucid mind as Parmenides'. In the Introduction to *Carving the Elements*, Bringhurst explains what the whole enterprise meant to him; it was above all "an exercise in carving thought – primarily by hand", and something else:

This is the story of making a book [...] Why tell the story at all if its actually incarnate in the artefact? Isn't he silent eloquence of the thing itself enough? It is, of course – but objects tell their stories only at first hand, to those who get to know them. Books made the way The Fragments of Parmenides was made are inevitably costly and inevitably scarce. They honor the text, but they restrict its circulation. Because of the craftsmanship they embody, they also honor the humanity of humans – yet only a few humans will ever be able to handle them long enough and look at them closely enough to soak that silent knowledge up again. So while the letterpress edition of *The Fragments* was very satisfying to make, it seemed

¹¹⁴ Bringhurst, "The Fragments of Parmenides", *ibid.*, p. 161.

¹¹⁵ Bringhurst, "The Fragments of Parmenides", *ibid.*, p. 135. The essay is published in *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Humphrey House & Graham Storey: Oxford University Press, 1979, 127-130.

to us – long before it was even completed – that after it was done we ought to take another step.

We wanted to share the text and translation more broadly first of all. We also wanted to share, insofar as possible, the physical sense of connexion we had developed – each in our own way – with the tradition of humanist learning that had made Parmenides’ poem a possibility and kept his name and thought afloat through a lot of turbulent, difficult times. This seemed to mean producing two more books: a more affordable and portable edition of the text and translation itself, and an equally affordable and portable account of what went on.¹¹⁶

We are among the few fortunate people to have had the opportunity to see, touch and read one copy (104/120) of the numbered limited edition of *The Fragments of Parmenides*, bound in quarter leather, under the call number B235. P23 F7 2003, at the Rare & Special Collections of the Library of the University of British Columbia in the summer of 2010 (July 23). The book is prefaced with DK B3 (fragment 4 in Bringham’s translation) in both Greek and English: “... because to be and to have meaning are the same.” The 20 fragments are grouped under three sections: part I comprises fragments 1-7; part II comprises fragment 8 (the heart of the poem); and part III consists of fragments 9-20. Then comes an essay, “Afterword: The Poetry of Philosophy and the Survival of Pagan Thinking”, followed by Notes, Concordance, and Colophon. While reading *The Fragments of Parmenides* at UBC library in the summer of 2010, we came across a manuscript note by Robert Bringham, dated 3 April 2004. What follows is a transcription of this unpublished manuscript text. I can think of no better way of expressing what I felt right then, there, reading *The Fragments of Parmenides*:

Thirty years ago, I first walked into the Rare Book reading room at UBC. I was new in town. I needed to get in touch with what belonged here. I also needed to stay in touch with the rest of time and space. Books are the best means yet invented for accomplishing these ends: simple, low-tech models of the world into which people weld their hearts and souls.

Books, like everything humans make, are subject to fashion, but getting in touch means what it says: touching, holding things in your mind and hand. And touching pierces fashion. Holding a 16th-century book in your hand, turning its pages, reading the paper and type as well as the text, can teach you things you cannot learn from any book *about* the 16th century.

Manuscript books were made in Greece 2500 years ago. None of them survive, but the letterforms, the language, and parts of the texts survive. This book, *The Fragments of Parmenides*, made in the first years of the 21st century, is an effort to reach back with one hand – 2500 years back – and forward to the present with the other, touching something at both ends. Books like this are rare because they cannot be anything else. But lucky for us, this is a place where you can touch them.

Robert Bringham · 4 April 2004

III · MILETOS & IV · A SHORT HISTORY

The first Presocratics were Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes, all of them citizens of Miletos, an Ionian Greek city on the west coast of Asia Minor and a centre radiating a tremendous commercial and intellectual energy in the beginning of the 6th century BCE. Guthrie says that “shipping, trade and industry combined to give this busy harbor-city a

¹¹⁶ Bringham et al., *Carving the Elements*, p. 13 and pp. 15-16.

leading position and wide connexions, extending to the Black Sea in the north, Mesopotamia in the east, Egypt in the south and the Greek cities of South Italy in the west. Its government was aristocratic, and its leading citizens lived in an atmosphere of luxury and of a culture which may be broadly described as humanistic and materialistic in tendency.”¹¹⁷ Plato and Aristotle said that leisure was the mother of philosophy, that disinterested intellectual activity only thrives in leisure, once the practical needs of life are satisfied. Needless to say, the Milesian philosophers had the prerequisite leisure and the stimulus for disinterested intellectual inquiry, which is the spring of philosophy. In that historical and social context, the ultimate source of philosophy is wonder or curiosity in the face of the mystery implicit in *what is*. It was certainly curiosity, and not “thought of mastering the forces of nature in the interests of human welfare or destruction, which led them to those first attempts at a grand simplification of natural phenomena.”¹¹⁸ This respectful attitude towards the real must have been an appealing motive for Bringham to pay attention and devote time to the study of the Presocratics: unlike the Egyptian and Mesopotamian peoples (interested in knowledge in so far as it served a practical purpose), the Greeks possessed “that love of truth and knowledge for their own sakes” which they embodied in their own word *philosophia*, literally ‘the love of wisdom’.¹¹⁹ And so the Presocratics started asking ultimate and universal questions concerning the genesis of exiting things, the substance of which they are made.

The change from a mythical or theological to a physical or natural view of the universe came with Thales of Miletos, who with his fellow-citizens Anaximander and Anaximenes formed what is now known as the Milesian School. A thread of continuity is in fact discernible in what we know of their doctrines as preserved in fragments in later authors, Aristotle chief among them. They asked the same questions: “Can this apparently confused and disordered world be reduced to simpler principles so that our reason can grasp what it is and how it works? What is it made of? How does change take place? Why do things spring and grow, then decline and die? How can one explain the alternation of day and night, summer and winter?”¹²⁰ And the answers they gave to these questions abandoned mythological solutions and embraced intellectual ones instead. They could no longer believe in a world ruled by the caprice of the anthropomorphic gods in whom their contemporaries believed. They were convinced that there was an inherent orderliness beneath the manifold phenomena of the world, and that the rational explanation of nature was to be sought within nature itself. The human mind was able to grasp the simpler and more orderly pattern hidden beneath the bewildering confusion of visible phenomena as perceived by the senses.

¹¹⁷ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, pp. 29-30.

¹¹⁸ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. pp. 30-31.

¹¹⁹ Guthrie dwells also on other key concepts, which are the Greeks’ interest in ultimate causes, their love of order, their discovery of form and their gift for abstraction: “The Greek asked ‘Why?’, and this interest in causes leads immediately to a further demand: the demand for generalization. [...] This advance to higher generalizations constitutes the essence of the new step taken by the Greeks.” (p. 36) This is closely connected to their discovery of form, which “marks the advance from percepts to concepts, from the individual examples perceived by sight or touch to the universal notion which we conceive in our minds” (p. 36). This conceptual attitude to form was more deeply ingrained in the Greeks than in the Egyptians or the Mesopotamians, for instance, for whom knowledge was valuable as long as it served practical purposes. In this respect, their gift for abstraction, “with its limitless possibilities and [...] its inherent danger, was the peculiar property of the Greeks.” (p. 37) This must have been an intoxicating experience for these early thinkers, says Guthrie.

¹²⁰ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 44.

Two pieces in *The Old in Their Knowing* concern the Milesian school of Asia Minor: “Miletos” and “A Short History”¹²¹, the third and fourth poems in the sequence. They are short, elusive and enigmatic compositions, in that they leave a tremendous amount of relevant information unsaid. Much is taken for granted, but we guess that nowadays there is a short supply of readers familiar with ancient Greek philosophy, at least to the level required by these poems if they are to be understood in their full complexity. Thales is at the heart of “Miletos”¹²², a short jewel-like poem in its brevity, endowed with the purity and perfection of crystal. It is therefore worth quoting in full:

One looked down and the other looked around
when Anaximander and Anaximenes
learned their master Thales
had been drowned.

Thales of Miletus (b. c. 624 BCE – d. 548-545 BCE, at the age of 78) was already a renowned philosopher in antiquity, counted as one of the legendary Seven Wise Men, or *sophoi*, and held in high honour among the Greeks as the ideal sage and scientist. A practical genius and a man of affairs, Thales had a reputation for practical statesmanship and for his skill in engineering, he engaged actively in trade and had a practical interest in navigation. He is also said to have put his geometrical knowledge to practical use in measuring the pyramids and calculating the distance of ships at sea. In mathematics, Thales was universally believed to have introduced geometry into Greece, and he was specifically credited with five theorems. No writings by Thales survive though, and no contemporary sources exist; thus, his achievements are difficult to assess. The only thing we have is fragments preserved in subsequent authors. Inclusion of his name in the canon of the legendary Seven Wise Men led to his idealization, and numerous acts and sayings, many of them no doubt spurious, were attributed to him, such “Know thyself” and “Nothing in excess.” As Guthrie suggests, “the temptation to fasten particular discoveries on to individuals with a general reputation for wisdom was strong in antiquity.”¹²³ However, he is remembered primarily for his cosmology based on water as the essence of all matter, with the Earth a flat disk floating on a vast sea. Water is the first cause, the *arche* of all things existing. In his *Metaphysics* (A, 983b 6ff), Aristotle gives us the passage in which he introduces the first principle of Thales:

Most of the earliest philosophers thought that the principles which were in the nature of matter were the only principles of all things: that of which all things that

¹²¹ This is the editorial history of both poems: (1) “Miletos” was first published in A.5 *Eight Objects* (1975) and then it was reprinted in A.6 *Bergsbrund*, A.14 *The Beauty of the Weapons*, A.47 *The Calling*, A.76 *The Old in Their Knowing*, and A.92 *Selected Poems*. (2) “A Short History” was first published in C.22 “Eight Poems and Translations”, in *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* (Boston) ns 1.4 (1973/1974): 561–575. Contents: [•] Excerpt from “The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods” (rev. from A.2); “Strophe from Sophocles” (trans. from Greek, rpt. from A.2); “Herakleitos” (rpt. from A.2); • “The Petelia Tablet” (trans. from Greek, incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.14, A.47, B.67, A.76, A.92), “Four Glyphs” (rpt. from A.2); [•] “Isthmian” (rev. from A.1); • “A Short History” (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.5, A.6, A.14, A.47); “Antistrophe from Leopardi” (trans. from Italian, rpt. from A.2). It was also included in *Carmina propria et opuscula translata* (1975), and reprinted in A.5 *Eight Objects*, A.6 *Bergsbrund*, A.14 *The Beauty of the Weapons*, A.47 *The Calling*, A.76 *The Old in Their Knowing*, and A.92 *Selected Poems*.

¹²² Miletos, Bringham tells us in his glossary at the end of *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), is “A city in Ionian Greece, the home of Thales and his famous pupils, Anaximander and Anaximenes, who together formed the “Milesian school” of Greek thought”. He also illuminates us on the identity of Hippolytus (c. 170-235): “A bishop at Rome, later exiled to Sardinia. His book, *Philosophoumena*, traces a number of Christian heresies to Presocratic roots, and in so doing unwittingly preserves otherwise unavailable fragments of the early Greek thinkers”.

¹²³ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 53.

are consist, and from which they first come to be and into which they are resolved as a final state (the substance remaining but changing in its modifications), this, they said, is the element and principle of all things, and therefore they think that nothing is either generated or destroyed, since this sort of entity is always preserved... [...] there is always some permanent substance, or nature (φύσις), either one or more, which is conserved in the generation of the rest from it.

On the number and nature of such principles they do not all agree. Thales, who led the way in this kind of philosophy, says that the principle is water, and for this reason, declared that the earth rests on water. His supposition may have arisen from the observation that the nourishment of all creatures is moist, and that warmth itself is generated from moisture and lives by it; and that from which all things come to be is their first principle. Besides this, another reason for his supposition would be that the semina of all things have a moist nature, and water is for moist things the origin of their nature.¹²⁴

So Thales was the first to suggest a single material substratum for the universe – namely, water, or moisture. For him, water is the ultimate *arche*, the underlying substance out of which all things are made. So all things were once water and are still water; water is the underlying substratum of all things: the starting-point or beginning and the originating cause as well. Water is life-giving and pervades the greater part of the earth's surface, it pervades every region of our atmosphere, and life as we know it is impossible without water. A likely consideration in Thales' choice was the seeming motion that water exhibits, as seen in its ability to become vapor; for what changes or moves itself was thought by the Greeks to be close to life itself, and to Thales the entire universe was a living organism, nourished by exhalations from water. In this respect, Guthrie speaks of the *animism of the pre-scientific mind* and claims that it is no coincidence that the Presocratics should have chosen as *arche* any of the elements except for earth, because “earth would not serve their purpose as the *arche*, for they needed something which should be not only the material of change, but also its potential author.” Elements to these early thinkers were alive in an age “before any distinction had been thought of between spirit (or life) and matter, animate and inanimate.”¹²⁵ To be the *arche* of the world, this substance must contain within itself the cause of motion and change, and to a Greek mind this meant that it must be of the nature of psyche, life- or soul-stuff. This condition Thales thought best satisfied by water, or more generally the element of moisture, which was both alive and everlasting,¹²⁶ and everlasting life is the mark of the divine, and of nothing else.

In any case, Thales' significance lies less in his choice of water as the essential substance than in his attempt to explain nature by the simplification of phenomena and in his search for causes within nature itself rather than in the caprices of anthropomorphic gods. Like his successors the philosophers Anaximander (610-546/545 BCE) and Anaximenes of Miletos (flourished *c.* 545 BCE), Thales is important in bridging the world of myth and reason. All three were the first natural philosophers, for they were “the first to attempt on a rational basis that simplification of reality which has been the quest of the human mind of all ages.”¹²⁷ There is a deep-rooted tendency in the human mind to seek what persists through change. Hence the Presocratics' search for an underlying principle, a persistent stuff, beneath the multiplicity of existing things in the world. And introducing “unity and tidiness into the world is something which appeals to man's aesthetic no less

¹²⁴ Quoted by Guthrie in *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 55.

¹²⁵ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 64.

¹²⁶ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 67.

¹²⁷ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 56.

than to his rational interests,”¹²⁸ says Guthrie. Indeed, “the search for a unity in the universe behind the multiplicity of phenomena is perennial and universal. It is a religious and aesthetic, a philosophic and a scientific need; and it appears at all periods of history.”¹²⁹

With this background information in mind, we should now turn to Bringham’s four-line composition. It is strongly ironic, if we bear in mind that the man for whom the first principle of all things was water (the sole fount of being) should have died by water itself, drowned. We do not know exactly the circumstances of Thales’ death, but Bringham very subtly evokes the whole doctrine of the Greek philosopher with astonishing economy and a wry sense of humour. The news that the master has drowned is imparted precisely to his two disciples, Anaximander and Anaximenes. But why should they react in the way they do?, one may ask. Why does Anaximander look down and why does Anaximenes look around? It might be worth while the effort to look if only briefly at their own philosophical models of the world.

Often called the father of astronomy, Anaximander is the first thinker to develop a cosmology or systematic philosophical view of the world. As pointed out above, he is thought to have been a pupil of Thales of Miletos. Evidence exists that he wrote treatises on geography, astronomy, and cosmology that survived for several centuries, and that he drew a map of the known world. As a rationalist he prized symmetry and introduced geometry and mathematical proportions into his efforts to map the heavens. Thus, his theories departed from earlier, more mystical conceptions of the universe and prefigured the achievements of later astronomers. A novel element in Anaximander’s theory was his rejection of the older notion that the Earth was somehow suspended or supported from elsewhere in the heavens; instead, he asserted that the Earth remained in its unsupported position at the centre of the universe because it had no reason to move in any direction and therefore was at rest. By the way, this may well account for the fact that in Bringham’s poem Anaximander looked down as he learnt of Thales’ death by water. For Thales the earth was floating on water; for him, it remained fixed in space, it did not move, and so he looked down to make sure than his feet were pressing firmly on the ground. For Anaximander the *arche* or first principle of reality was what he called the *apeiron* (boundless, unlimited), a non-perceptible substance from which the whole world derived. The best extant account of Anaximander’s *apeiron* is Simplicius’ (*Physics*, 24.13):

Anaximander named the *arche* [...] and element of existing things ‘the boundless’, being the first to introduce this name for the *arche*. He says that it is neither water nor any other of the so-called elements, but a different substance which is boundless, from which there come into being all the heavens and the worlds within them. Things perish into those things out of which they have their being, as is due; for they make just recompense to one another for their injustice according to the ordinance [or perhaps ‘assessment’] of time – so he puts it in somewhat poetical terms.

It is clear that when he observed how the four elements change into each other, he did not think it reasonable to conceive of one of these as underlying the rest, but posited something else. Moreover he does not account for genesis by a qualitative alteration of the element, but by a separation of the opposites caused by the eternal motion.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 57.

¹²⁹ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 70.

¹³⁰ Quoted by Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 76. According to Guthrie the notion of the non-perceptible was crucial in Anaximander’s model. He says: “There was no reason for regarding water, earth, fire or any such familiar, sensibly manifest phenomenon as prior to the rest. The original matrix of the

Anaximander subscribed to the philosophical view that unity could definitely be found behind all multiplicity, representing the primitive unity of all phenomena. Anaximander regarded the *apeiron* as an enormous mass surrounding the whole of our world, and it may have even presented itself to his mind as a vast sphere. Now, the *apeiron* (deathless and imperishable¹³¹) preceded the “separation” into contrasting qualities; the *apeiron* was an initial indeterminate fusion of all the opposites. After the formation of a world-order by the separation of the opposites into their proper stations, the next stage is the emergence of animal and human life: life arises in the moist element through the action on it of the sun’s warmth.¹³² These primary opposites were designated by Anaximander by article and adjective as the hot, the cold, the wet and the dry. In this respect, only one sentence of Anaximander’s writings survives; it has been included in Simplicius’ quote above: “things perish into those things out of which they have their being, according to necessity”. In Bringham’s poem “A Short History”, it is translated in italics at the very heart of the poem (stanzas 2 and 3):

What Anaximander in fact says is,
*The necessity is
 that things flare out into that out of which
 they came to be, because*

*they pay one another the penalty
 and compensation for
 the mutual injustice of their
 chronological order.*

That sentence of Anaximander describes the emergence of particular substances such as water or fire in metaphors drawn from human society, in which injustices are penalized. For example, neither hot nor cold prevails permanently, but each “pays reparations” in order to keep a balance between them. As Guthrie puts it:

Anaximander had noticed that it is the natural tendency of each of the elements to swallow its opposite. Fire and water must inevitably be in conflict. When they meet they struggle until one or the other prevails, and either the fire is put out and nothing but the water remains, or else the water is dried up and fire remains in sole possession of the field. Conversely this may be described, in Simplicius’s words, as the conversion of water into fire and *vice versa*. There is of course an intermediate stage, clearly visible to observation, of the conversion of water into steam or vapour, which for the Greeks are included in the term *aer*. In the world as a whole, complete and final victory is never granted to one or the other of the opposing forces [...]: the balance between them is always being restored or maintained. If one gains a local advantage, the other is encroaching elsewhere.¹³³

universe must be something more primitive and ultimate than any of them, of which they are all alike secondary manifestations or modifications, obtained by a process of ‘separating out.’” (p. 78)

¹³¹ Guthrie quotes Aristotle’s words (Physics, 203 b6) on the *apeiron* as being divine: “Everything either *is* an origin or *has* an origin: the unlimited has no origin, for that would be a limit of it. Moreover, being an origin [or source or principle: *arche*], it is ungenerated and imperishable.... Therefore, as I say, there is no origin for it, but it appears to be the origin of other things and to encompass all things and direct all things, as those philosophers say who do not posit besides the unlimited other causes such as Mind or Love; and this they say is the divine, for it is immortal and imperishable, as Anaximander and most of the writers on nature call it.” (pp. 87-88). Anaximander’s *apeiron* as *arche* serves the twofold purpose of including or surrounding all things and of being the directive force. It was eternally alive and eternally in self-caused motion.

¹³² Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 101.

¹³³ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 81.

These words suggest that the process of becoming and perishing is circular. “Perishing does not mean vanishing into nothingness, but changing into a different form of matter. This circularity, symbolized by Anaximander as the alternation of ‘injustice’ and ‘reparation’, seems to have been central to his thought.”¹³⁴ And yet Hippolytus¹³⁵ seems to have interpreted Anaximander’s only surviving words as a reference to time: “*And he talks of time,*” said Hippolytus, / *the fat-bearded presbyter,* / *of Anaximander, Milesian / sage, then nine centuries dead.*” He was wrong, Bringhurst demonstrates by going back to the original Greek text as preserved by Simplicius (*Physics*, 24.13) and translating it into English. Anaximander did speak of an infinite plurality of worlds, of an everlasting succession of single worlds in time. In that context, “his statement that things perish into that out of which they come, because they make just recompense to one another, seems rather to describe the cyclic, seasonal rhythm that goes to the maintenance of a single cosmos, not the reabsorption of the separated contents of a cosmos back into the primal *apeiron*.”¹³⁶

The last stanza in Bringhurst’s poem “A Short History” closes with these words: “*Anaximander does not talk of time. / He lays open the way for / Anaximenes’ love of the live air / as a bluer arcanum.*” The third philosopher of the Milesian school and younger contemporary of Anaximander, Anaximenes was his friend, pupil and successor. It seems that his writings survived into the Hellenistic Age, but they no longer exist except in passages in the works of later authors. Consequently, interpretations of his beliefs are frequently in conflict. Firmly set in the monist tradition, for him the only conceivable explanation of the nature of things was still one which showed how ‘all things proceed from one and are resolved into the same.’¹³⁷ Whereas Thales held that water is the basic building block of all matter and Anaximander chose to call the essential substance *apeiron* (boundless, unlimited), Anaximenes substituted *aer* (“mist”, “vapour”, “air”) for his predecessors’ choices as the *arche* or first principle of reality. Thus, he abandoned the almost nameless *apeiron* of Anaximander and chose a different *arche* for all things: air. Perhaps our best starting-point for a consideration of Anaximenes lies in these words from Simplicius (*Phys.*, 24.26, A5):

Anaximenes of Miletus, son of Eurystratus, the companion of Anaximander, also posits a single infinite underlying substance of things, not, however, indefinite in character like Anaximander’s but determinate, for he calls it air, and says that it differs in rarity and density according to the different substances. Rarefied, it becomes fire; condensed, it becomes first wind, then cloud, and when condensed still further water, then earth and stones. Everything else is made of these. He too postulated eternal motion, which is indeed the cause of the change.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, pp. 84-85.

¹³⁵ In the final notes in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982) and in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst gives us basic information regarding Hippolytus (c. 170–235): “A bishop at Rome, later exiled to Sardinia. His book, *Philosophoumena*, traces a number of Christian heresies to Presocratic roots, and in so doing unwittingly preserves otherwise unavailable fragments of the early Greek thinkers.”

¹³⁶ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, pp. 111-112.

¹³⁷ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 115.

¹³⁸ Quoted by Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 121. Consider also these words by Hippolytus (*Ref. I*, 7, I, A7) as quoted by Guthrie: “Anaximenes, another Milesian and the son of Eurystratus, says the *arche* is infinite air, out of which proceeds whatever comes to be or has done so in the past or will exist in the future, gods also and the divine. Everything else is made from its products. Now in form the air is like this: when it is most evenly distributed [...] it is invisible, but it is made visible by hot and cold and wet and movement. It is in constant movement, otherwise the things which change could not do so. It assumes different visible forms as it is rarefied or condensed. When dispersed more finely, it becomes fire. Winds on the other hand are air in process of condensation, and from air cloud is produced by concentration (lit. ‘felting’). The continuation of this process produces water, and still further condensation earth, while stones are the most condensed form of all. Thus the most important features in genesis are contraries, hot and cold.” (pp. 121-122).

So for Anaximenes the *arche* is air, that out of which all things had their being and into which they were all resolved again. His desire of knowledge prompted him to discover a natural explanation of the manifold variety of physical phenomena consistent with a monistic view of reality. This he thought he had detected in the processes of condensation and rarefaction. It is clear that he believed in degrees of condensation of moisture that corresponded to the densities of various types of matter. When “most evenly distributed”, *aer* is the common, invisible air of the atmosphere. By condensation it becomes visible, first as mist or cloud, then as water, and finally as solid matter such as earth or stones. If further rarefied, it turns to fire. Thus, hotness and dryness typify rarity, whereas coldness and wetness are related to denser matter. Guthrie claims that in Anaximenes’s philosophic system “the *arche* of the universe was not matter in that sense. It was eternal being, and because eternal and the *arche* of everything else, it was of necessity uncaused, or else self-caused. It was not only the matter or subject of motion, but itself the cause. [...] The *arche* was something alive, not only eternal [...] but immortal [...] and therefore divine.”¹³⁹ With characteristic intellectual boldness, Anaximenes saw that a single order underlies the chaos of our perceptions and that we are able to comprehend that order.

Like Anaximander, Anaximenes assumed that the original source and fount of being (that is, for him, the air), had been in motion for all time, and that this was what made its changes possible. For him, motion is everlasting and it makes change take place. Anaximenes’ assumption that *aer* is everlastingly in motion suggests that he thought it also possessed life. Because it was eternally alive, *aer* took on qualities of the divine and became the cause of other gods as well as of all matter. The same motion accounts for the shift from one physical state of the *aer* to another. There is evidence that he made the common analogy between the divine air that sustains the universe and the human “air”, or soul, that animates people.¹⁴⁰ Such a comparison between a macrocosm and a microcosm would also permit him to maintain a unity behind diversity as well as to reinforce the view of his contemporaries that there is an overarching principle regulating all life and behaviour. Anaximenes’ thought is typical of the transition from mythology to science. Yet his thought is not completely liberated from earlier mythological or mystical tendencies, as seen from his belief that the universe is hemispherical. Thus, his most important contribution lies in his suggestion that known natural processes (i.e., condensation and rarefaction) play a part in the making of a world.

The world for Anaximenes is a living and breathing creature, and this may well account for the fact that he looks around in Bringham’s poem “Miletos” as he learns of Thales’ death by water. He posited air as the *arche* of all existing things, and air was to be seen everywhere around him. As Aëtius puts it in another illuminating fragment quoted by Guthrie: “Anaximenes of Miletus, son of Eurystratus, declared that the origin of existing things was air, for out of it all things come to be and into it they are resolved again. “just as our soul,” he says, “which is air, holds us together, so breath and air surround the whole cosmos.” Air and breath are used synonymously.”¹⁴¹ In the closing stanza of “A Short

¹³⁹ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 118.

¹⁴⁰ Guthrie says that “In making air his selection, an air in perpetual motion, Anaximenes also was respecting an age-old and still flourishing popular belief which associated, and in fact identified, breath and life. That the air which we breathe should be the life itself which animates us is a common idea, and the breath-soul a world-wide conception. [...] The equation of air with soul or life [...] must have originated in the mists of early popular belief.” *Ibid.*, p. 128. Needless to say, life and death are bound up with the taking in and letting out of breath. Thus, Anaximenes looked upon the air as (a) the *arche* and divine, and (b) the stuff of the human soul. *Ibid.*, p. 132. In a context of animistic thinking, the world for Anaximenes is alive and breathing, it is a living and breathing creature.

¹⁴¹ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I, p. 131.

History” Anaximander is presented as paving the way for Anaximenes’ new philosophic system, in which *live air* is conceived as being a *bluer arcanum*, a mystery surrounding everything we know to exist with a halo of divinity. His love of air as the ultimate *arche* of reality is conveyed in beautiful, alliterative words in Bringham’s poem.

V · EMPEDOKLES: SEVEN FRAGMENTS & VI · EMPEDOKLES’ RECIPES

Robert Bringham devotes two poems in his sequence *The Old in Their Knowing* (i.e., “Empedokles: Seven Fragments” and “Empedokles’ Recipes”¹⁴²), to the fascinating figure of the Presocratic philosopher Empedokles, whom Bringham characterizes as being “one of the three canonical Presocratic thinkers who composed Greek hexameters rather than prose.”¹⁴³ The other sages who wrote hexameters were, of course, Herakleitos and Parmenides. Of the Eleatic philosopher Bringham produced a mastery translation into English, published in a deluxe edition by typographer Peter Koch in 2003. Of the three canonical philosophers Bringham says something of paramount importance, borrowing a handful of resonant words from Eliot’s well-known essay “The Metaphysical Poets”:

... these three Presocratics were notably men who incorporated their sensibility into their erudition: their mode of thought was directly and freshly altered by their feeling. In Parmenides especially there is a direct intellectual apprehension of sensation, or a recreation of feeling into thought, which is exactly what we find... well, in Heidegger, in Kierkegaard, in Wittgenstein, in Nietzsche, often in Pascal.¹⁴⁴

It is therefore only fair that Bringham should have devoted part of his time and attention to the Sicilian sage. In the extant fragments which have survived the wreck of time, there is powerful sense in which feeling and thought belong together, are fused into a “mutual indwelling” which Bringham says is the mark of all great poetry composed since Dante. In Empedokles’ surviving fragments “the poetry keeps slipping out of philosophy and not vice versa; the poetry is continually taking control.”¹⁴⁵ As he puts it somewhere else, “in his work, ideas dance and sing. That, if anything, ought to be what we mean by philosophical poetry”.¹⁴⁶ Thus, thinking and singing are one in the Empedoklean profound and reflective

¹⁴² This is the editorial history of the poems in brief: (1) “Empedokles: Seven Fragments” was first published as C.12 • “Empedokles: Six Fragments”, in *Prism International* (Vancouver) 13.3 (Spring 1974): 20-21. Translation from Greek, revised and enlarged as “Empedokles: Seven Fragments” in A.5 *Eight Objects*, A.6 *Bergschrund*, A.14 *The Beauty of the Weapons*, A.47 *The Calling*, A.76 *The Old in Their Knowing*, and A.92 *Selected Poems*, and in R.1. (2) “Empedokles’ Recipes” was published as C.24 [Two poems] in *The University of Windsor Review* 10.2 (Spring/Summer 1975): 39-43. Contents: “Empedokles’ Recipes”, which was included in R.1 and reprinted in A.5 *Eight Objects* and A.6 *Bergschrund*, and revised in A.14 *The Beauty of the Weapons*, A.47 *The Calling*, A.76 *The Old in Their Knowing*, and A.92 *Selected Poems*; “Deuteronomy” (rpt. from A.3). In addition, Robert Bringham has devoted two illuminating essays to Empedokles: (1) D.8 • “Postscript to a Translation of Empedocles”, published in *The Ohio Review* 16.3 (Spring 1975): 68-73. (2) B.79 In *Thinking and Singing: Poetry and the Practice of Philosophy*, edited by Tim Lilburn. Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2002: pp. 79-93, 155-172. Contributions: • “The Philosophy of Poetry and the Trashing of Doctor Empedokles” (essay, based in part on D.8; revised in A.83 *Everywhere Being Is Dancing*) and • “Poetry and Thinking”, essay based on a lecture delivered in January 2001 at Luther College, University of Regina (rev. in A.81 *The Tree of Meaning*).

¹⁴³ See Bringham’s essay “The Philosophy of Poetry and the Trashing of Doctor Empedokles”, included in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing*. *Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, p. 94.

¹⁴⁴ Bringham, “The Philosophy of Poetry and the Trashing of Doctor Empedokles”, *ibid.*, p. 96.

¹⁴⁵ Bringham, “The Philosophy of Poetry and the Trashing of Doctor Empedokles”, *ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁴⁶ Bringham, “The Philosophy of Poetry and the Trashing of Doctor Empedokles”, *ibid.*, p. 98.

philosophical poems. Borrowing Giordano's words as translated by Bringhurst himself, "True philosophy is also music, poetry, and painting; true painting, too, is music and philosophy; true poetry or music is a form of holy wisdom; so is painting."¹⁴⁷

The philosopher Empedokles of Acragas¹⁴⁸ (b. c. 490 BCE, Acragas, Sicily – d. 430, the Peloponnese, Greece), also a poet, physiologist, religious teacher, statesman, and self-styled god¹⁴⁹, came of a wealthy and aristocratic family and was a champion of democracy. According to legend only, Empedokles was a self-styled god who brought about his own death, as dramatized by the English poet Matthew Arnold in "Empedocles on Etna", by flinging himself into the volcanic crater atop Mount Etna to convince followers of his divinity. To his contemporaries he did indeed seem more than a mere mortal; Aristotle reputedly hailed him as the inventor of rhetoric (and he was thought to be indeed an outstanding orator), and Galen regarded him as the founder of Italian medicine. Lucretius admired his hexametric poetry. Like Parmenides or Herakleitos before him, he was both ποιητής (a poet) and φυσιόλογος (a naturalist), seeking in hexametric metre the common root of poetry, philosophy, and science, which is wonder in the face of *what is*. This was no minor intellectual accomplishment according to Bringhurst, who claims that "The moment we leave the conceptual jail where philosophy and poetry are confined to separate cells, we find ourselves in plenty of good as well as fresher air."¹⁵⁰ Although we possess more of the text of Empedokles than of any other Presocratic philosopher, of the original 5,000 lines to which his two poems amounted only 400 lines have survived from his poem *Peri phýseōs* (*On Nature*), offering an explanation of the natural world on scientific and rational grounds, and fewer than 100 verses from his poem *Katharmoi* (*Purifications*),¹⁵¹ religious in content and

¹⁴⁷ Bringhurst, "The Philosophy of Poetry and the Trashing of Doctor Empedokles", *ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁴⁸ See entry on 'Empedocles' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 9, p. 5241.

¹⁴⁹ Fragment 112 says: "Friends, who inhabit the great town that looks down on yellow Acragas, up on the heights of the citadel, intent on fine works, harbouring with honour the stranger, unacquainted with want, I bid you hail. I an immortal god, no longer a mortal, go about among you all, honoured as is meet, crowned with fillets and blooming garlands. When with these I come to flourishing cities, I am an object of reverence to men and women. They follow me in thousands, asking wither leads the way to profit, some desiring oracles, whereas others seek to hear the words of healing for every kind of disease, long time transfixed by sore anguish." Guthrie, *ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 246. The lofty arrogance and immense superiority of the philosopher to the common man are self-evident in these words.

¹⁵⁰ See Bringhurst's essay "The Philosophy of Poetry and the Trashing of Doctor Empedokles", included in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing. Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, p. 104.

¹⁵¹ On the fragmentary nature of Empedokles' work and on the way it has been preserved by the ancient doxographers, Bringhurst offers a beautiful meditation on the extant verses of the philosopher in "The Philosophy of Poetry and the Trashing of Doctor Empedokles", *ibid.*, pp. 102-103: "The scraps of literary gossip that survive tell us that Empedokles wrote at least two substantial works, *Peri phýseōs* and *Katharmoi*. Neither was anywhere near the size of the *Odyssey* or *Paradise Lost*, but both were book-length poems in the modern sense, approaching the length of, say, *A Draft of XXX Cantos*. In that case, they were works big enough to allow and demand a periodic flattening of tone. The fragments which survive are not passages chosen by Mathew Arnold as touchstones; they are bits picked to illustrate points in philosophy, theology, or natural science, some of them are quoted by admirers – Simplicios, for example. Others are quoted by antagonists such as Hippolytus of Rome, an early-third-century bishop who set himself the task of tracing Christian heresies to the teachings of pagan philosophers. Suppose, for comparison, that someone were to raid Pound's work, taking only the lines which invite reinsertion into a history of China or a study of monetary theory. What if nothing remained of St.-John Perse except extracts chosen to ornament a treatise on textiles or a textbook of geography?"

The Empedokles who composed the full texts of *Peri phýseōs* and *Katharmoi* is someone we can evidently never get to know. The Empedokles who spoke or wrote the extant fragments is a historical, or metahistorical, fiction, authored by the first Empedokles but edited by everybody else, with everybody else's ambiguous and changeable intentions. Few of these ex-officio editors are or have been interested in dealing with the text on its own terms. This accident fiction, the author of the fragments, is the only Empedokles we have. One thing that is true about him now was evidently not true in his time. He is – because, broken and

purpose, describing “the pilgrimage of the spirit, banished by its own fault from the realms of the blessed to which it properly belongs, and doomed to undergo a cycle of incarnations in all manner of forms of earthly life.”¹⁵² Few of the fragments can be assigned with certainty to one poem or another. Like Herakleitos, Empedokles recognized the limitations of human thought – he acknowledged the inadequacy of human faculties to fathom all the secrets of nature. He was no believer in the infallibility of the senses, feeble instruments (like the mind), and so humans can scarcely hope for epistemological certainty in their confrontation with reality. But unlike Parmenides, who condemned the senses straightaway, Empedokles acknowledged that the senses are aids to knowledge and none is to be preferred.¹⁵³

Though strongly influenced by Parmenides, who emphasized the ultimate unity of all things, Empedokles assumed instead that all matter was composed of four essential roots or ingredients – fire, air, water, and earth. He posited that an ultimate plurality¹⁵⁴ made the physical world possible, and that nothing either comes into being or is destroyed but that things are merely transformed, depending on the ratio of basic substances, to one another. Thus, he believed that *nothing can come out of nothing*, that *what exists cannot perish*, and that *the sum of being is constant*.¹⁵⁵ As Guthrie puts it, “What is real cannot come to be or perish, and it is everywhere, since to admit emptiness is to concede the reality of what is not. But from this Parmenides had deduced two further conclusions – that reality was a unity and that it was immovable – which Empedocles did not find so compelling.”¹⁵⁶ A plurality of ever-existing primary entities were the roots of everything, the spring of mortal things, and so say fragment 6 (“Hear first the four roots of all things: bright Zeus, life-bringing Hera, Aidoneus, and Nestis who with her tears makes springs well up for mortals.”) and fragment 17.18 (“Fire and water and earth and the immeasurable height of air.”).¹⁵⁷ According to Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 985a31), Empedokles was the first to speak of four material elements as the ultimate *archai*¹⁵⁸ of everything we know to exist, but “the conception of four primitive forms of matter was arrived at gradually rather than by a sudden inspiration. Its beginnings are in myth, and may be seen in the division of the universe in Homer (*Il.* 15.189 ff.) whereby the heavens fell to the lot of Zeus, the sea to Poseidon, and the misty darkness to Hades, while the earth was held by them all in common.”¹⁵⁹ Empedokles conceived of the four elements as immutable and indestructible: they are sentient, everlasting, immortal and divine. The philosopher carries the notion of the kinship of nature so far as to say that nothing is without sense. To Empedokles “the

smoothed in the river of history, he has *become* – the author of some oddly shaped and interesting short poems.”

¹⁵² See W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. II, p. 124.

¹⁵³ Guthrie cites fr. 3.9 in this respect: “Come now, observe with all thy powers how each thing is clear, neither holding sight in greater trust compared with hearing, nor noisy hearing above what the tongue makes plain, nor withhold trust from any of the other limbs [organs, parts of the body], by whatever way there is a channel to understanding, but grasp each thing in the way in which it is clear.” *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. II, p. 139.

¹⁵⁴ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁵⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁵⁶ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁵⁷ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 141.

¹⁵⁸ The four Empedoklean elements take “the rank of genuine *archai*: none is prior to any other, nor is there anything else more fundamental. Heraclitus may have mentioned them all, but he exalted the priority of fire; Thales and Anaximenes had promoted water and air respectively to be sole *arche* generating the rest; for Anaximander they came out of the *apeiron*, and for the Pythagoreans they were the final product of the One. All these rival claims had been made obsolete by the insistence of Parmenides that no unity can ever generate a plurality. Only by a plurality of equal and ultimate *archai* or elements can the phenomena be saved.” Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁵⁹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 141.

unity of all living organisms”¹⁶⁰ was a fact. All four elements combine to form all things in this world: “... by the mixture of water, earth, air and sun [fire] there came into being the shapes and colours of all mortal things that are now in being, put together by Aphrodite...” (fr. 71).¹⁶¹

Aphrodite stands for Love, one of the elemental movers in the Empedoklean conception of reality, for Empedokles believed that two everlasting forces, Love and Strife (the powers of attraction and repulsion), interact to bring together and to separate the four substances.¹⁶² By mingling with the ever-living elements Love and Strife inspire them “with the feelings which cause them either to come together in mutual embrace or to draw apart in cold exclusiveness each to itself”.¹⁶³ Strife makes each of these elements withdraw itself

¹⁶⁰ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁶¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 141. Guthrie gives us this enlightening reflection: “The notion of elements has now for the first time acquired a definite meaning as forms of matter which are (a) ungenerated and indestructible, (b) qualitatively unalterable, (c) homogeneous throughout (fr. 17.35). In all this they are, as it were, the Parmenidean One multiplied by four, but in other respects they depart from that norm. Although Empedocles accepted the Eleatic denial of empty space, he did not admit as a necessary consequence that local motion was impossible. Given four substances instead of one, they could take one another’s places, the last in a series of moving objects slipping into the place of the first, without needing empty space to move into. With motion permitted, his ‘beings’ take on two characteristics denied by Parmenides to his single Being, which make the genesis of a cosmos possible: they are (a) in motion and (b) divisible. [...] The divisibility and movement of the four ‘roots’ make it possible that ‘there is no birth or death of mortal things, but only mingling and separation of what is mingled’. Apparent change is only rearrangement.” Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

¹⁶² Fragment 17, telling of the four roots and of Love and Strife, is worth quoting in full: “I shall tell a twofold tale. At a certain time one alone grew out of many, and at another it grew apart to be many out of one. Double is the birth of mortal things and double their failing. The one race is born and dies through the coming together of all things, the other is nurtured and then vanishes as they scatter again. They never cease thus to alternate continually, now all coming together into one through Love, and now again each one drawing apart by Strife’s hatred. Thus in that they have learned to grow one from many, and as the one is divided turns into many again, in this way they suffer becoming and have no steadfast life; but in that they never cease from alternately coming together and separating, they are for ever, unshaken on their circular path.

But come, hear my discourse, for learning increases wisdom. As I said before in disclosing the limits of my discourse, I shall tell a twofold tale. At a certain time one alone grew out of many, and at another it grew apart to be many out of one: fire and water and earth and the immense height of air, and cursed Strife apart from these and equal in every respect, and Love among them, equal in length and breadth. Her must thou see with the mind, nor sit with eyes bemused: she it is who is acknowledged to be implanted in the limbs of mortals, whereby they think kindly thoughts and do peaceful works, calling her Joy by name and Aphrodite. No mortal man is aware of her as she circles round among these [i.e. the elements and Strife], but do thou listen to the unfolding of a discourse that is not deceitful. All these are equal and coeval, but each is master in a different province and each has its own character, and they prevail in turn as time circles round. And besides these nothing comes into being or ceases to be. If they were continually perishing, they would no longer be; and what could increase this All? Whence would it come? And how also could it perish, for nothing is empty of these things? No, there are just these, but running through one another they become now some things and now others and yet ever and always the same.” Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁶³ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 159. Two more fragments are worth quoting in this context: (1) Fr. 22: “For all of these – the shining sun, earth, sky and sea – are one with their own parts which are scattered far from them in mortal things; and in the same way all that are fitted rather for mixture are assimilated by Aphrodite and hold one another dear. But enemies are those that are farthest from each other in origin, composition and moulded form, in every way unaccustomed to unite and very grim by the bidding of Strife, because it has brought about their birth.” And (2) Fr. 21: “Come now, see this witness to my former words, should anything in them have been lacking in form: the sun white to see and hot all over, all the divine things which are bathed in heat (?) and the bright ray, and the rain in all things dark and cold; and from the earth spring things rooted and solid. In Anger all are diverse and sundered, but in Love they come together and are desired of each other. For out of these are born whatever was and is and will be – trees, men, women, beasts, birds and water-feeding fishes, yea and long-lived gods highest in honours. There are just these, but running through one another they alter their appearance: so far does mixture effect change.” Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 158.

from the others; Love makes them mingle together. The real world is at a stage in which neither force dominates. In the beginning, Love was dominant and all four substances were mixed together; during the formation of the cosmos, Strife entered to separate air, fire, earth, and water from one another. Subsequently, the four elements were again arranged in partial combinations in certain places; springs and volcanoes, for example, show the presence of both water and fire in the Earth. Thus, the Empedoklean cosmic cycle starts then with a state of unity, with an unlimited spherical mass¹⁶⁴ in which Love has completely mingled the four elements so completely that their separate natures are simply indistinguishable. Their natural tendency to seek their like is made possible by the intervention of Strife. Thus, attraction and repulsion, or liking and hatred, strive for mastery among the four roots, animating them to coalesce together or separate from one another. The cosmos is formed by a mixture of these immutable roots in different proportions, and the motion necessary to produce the mixture is caused not by the roots themselves but by two distinct forces (Love and Strife) working upon them. The whole process is cyclical.¹⁶⁵ As Guthrie explains it:

There is a period when Love rules unopposed, having fused all the elements into a unity. Then Strife enters the Sphere and begins to separate them until finally he has taken full possession and each element is isolated from the rest. After this Love reasserts itself, pervades the whole once more and gradually brings the separated elements together until once more they are completely united. A universe of 'mortal things', such as that in which we live, is a temporary stage intermediate between the supremacy of Love and Strife, a product of the tension and conflict between them. [...] There is not one cosmogony, but an endless succession of worlds.¹⁶⁶

The whole cosmic cycle is then governed by the two opposing forces counteracting each other. It has several stages: (1) the sphere of Love unites all four roots harmoniously into an indistinguishable whole so thoroughly blended or inextricably mingled that there is peace and rest, whereas Strife remains on the outer fringe or limits of the Sphere; (2) the advance of Strife: Strife enters the Sphere and disrupts the primordial harmony, so that the tendency of each element to seek its like asserts itself and they begin to draw apart toward the formation of the world (conceived of as a separation of the elements from a primal mixture into their cosmic arrangement and into living creatures); (3) the stage of Strife triumphant, which is probably "an instantaneous changeover from the completion of the separating process to the beginning of gradual reunion by Love"¹⁶⁷; and (4) the advance of Love: Love increases her power over the elements and Strife is gradually driven out beyond their confines, and so the elements gradually unite with one another to form another world containing mortal creatures like plants and animals.

The Empedoklean conception of reality outlined above is essential background information for a proper understanding of Bringham's poems concerned with this sage's

¹⁶⁴ Hippolytus (*Ref.* 7.2913, fr. 29) has preserved a description of the primordial state of unity: "Of the shape of the cosmos, what it was like when ordered by Love, he speaks like this: 'No twin branches spring from its back, there are no feet nor nimble knees, no parts of generation, but it was a Sphere and in all directions equal to itself.'" Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 168.

¹⁶⁵ Simplicius (*De caelo*, 293.18) describes the process in these terms: "Others maintain that the same cosmos comes to be and perishes alternately, and again arises and perishes, and that this succession goes on for ever. Thus Empedocles says that Love and Strife gain the ascendancy in turn: Love brings all things together into one, destroys the cosmos created by Strife and makes of it the Sphere, whereas Strife separates the elements again and creates a world like this." Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 168.

¹⁶⁶ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 167.

¹⁶⁷ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 178.

philosophy. Bringhurst's piece "Empedokles: Seven Fragments" brings together seven of the surviving fragments we possess of the Presocratic philosopher. Whereas fragments 1 to 5 appear to be lifted from *On Nature*, fragments 6 and 7 appear to be drawn from *Purifications*, though, as pointed above, there is no way of ascertaining which book fragments are to be assigned to with absolute certainty. Sections 1, 2 and 3 of Bringhurst's poem focus on the zoogony of living creatures on earth as conceived of by Empedokles. The starting point for each are the Empedoklean fragments 57, 61 and 62 respectively. It might be advisable to start from the very beginning then, by quoting Aëtius' summary of the evolution of animal life in Empedokles' philosophical system:

Empedocles says (i) the first generations of plants and animals were not entire, but divided, with parts not grown together; (ii) the second, in which the parts grew together, were like creatures of fantasy; (iii) the third was the generation of the whole-natured; (iv) the fourth was no longer engendered from the elements like earth and water but from each other, when for some their nourishment became thick and for other the beauty of women excited the seminal motion. The kinds of all living creatures were distributed according to the character of their mixture: some had a more natural inclination to water, as many as had a preponderance of fire flew up into the air, the heavier made for the earth, and those in whose composition the elements were equally balanced....¹⁶⁸

In the first stage, solitary limbs wander in search of mutual mixture. Fragment 57, Aristotle *de caelo* Γ2, 300b30 (line 1) and Simplicius *de caelo* 587, 1 (lines 2-3) – "On the earth many heads sprang up without necks, arms wandered bare, bereft of shoulders, and eyes strayed alone in need of foreheads."¹⁶⁹ – is the starting point for section 1 of Bringhurst's poem:

Maxillae went into motion without mandibles,
arms walked naked, unhinged from their shoulders,
eyeballs wandered without brows...

In his essay on Empedokles, Bringhurst says that "This is not philosophy; it is surrealism: one of the most ancient and widespread of all artistic modes."¹⁷⁰ Heads without necks, eyes lacking faces. This is the first stage of zoogony: fragmentary bodily parts emerge from the combination of the four Empedoklean roots – life originates in moistened earth (mixture of earth and water) under the action of heat (fire), which hardens the ingredients and fashions them into the living creatures. This is then the first or "the earliest stage of organic life in the period when Love is gaining and the process of evolution is from separation to combination".¹⁷¹ Under the rule of Love, first the parts of animals such as heads, hands and feet appeared here and there at random, then they came together to give rise to the monsters described in section 2 of Bringhurst's poem. The four surviving lines of Empedokles in fragment 61, Aelian *Nat. anim.* XVI, 29 – "Many were born with faces and breasts both front and back, oxen with the heads of men, and conversely there sprang up creatures in human form with the heads of oxen, and mixtures partly of men and partly of

¹⁶⁸ Guthrie, *ibid.*, 201.

¹⁶⁹ In Kirk & Raven's version, "Here sprang many faces without necks, arms wandered without shoulders, unattached, and eyes strayed alone, in need of foreheads." See *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 303.

¹⁷⁰ Bringhurst's essay "The Philosophy of Poetry and the Trashing of Doctor Empedokles", included in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing. Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, p. 100.

¹⁷¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 201.

women's nature, fitted with shadowed [private] parts."¹⁷² – are the starting point for Bringhurst's version:

A lot of them sprouted sternums and eyes on both sides.
Ungulates with human faces, also the opposite,
ox-headed bipeds, appeared. Other mixtures: creatures
part man and part woman, with umbrous, broadleaved limbs.

These lines present the enigmatic conception of isolated limbs combining at first haphazard into all sorts of strange creatures before they settle into the familiar species of a world like our own. These ox-men hybrids and monsters are reminiscent of certain mythological figures in ancient Greece, such the Minotaur, the Chimaera, centaurs and Hermaphroditos, and so Empedokles might have had them in mind when composing these lines,¹⁷³ populated by such strange creatures. At this stage it is almost inevitable to think of the Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest, even if no words of Empedokles have survived on this issue.¹⁷⁴ Monstrosities gave way to men, women and animals as we know them in the next stage. With the advance of Strife, 'whole-natured' (or growing as a whole) creatures emerge out of the primordial ingredients. Fragment 62 as preserved by Simplicius, *Phys.* 381, 31 – "Come now and hear this, how fire as it was separated raised up the nocturnal scions of men and pitiable women: it is no erring or ignorant tale. Whole-natured forms first sprang up from the earth, having a portion of both water and heat. These the fire sent up, wishing to come to its like. Not yet did they display the comely shape of limbs, nor voice nor the part proper to men."¹⁷⁵ – is the starting point for section 3 of Bringhurst's poem:

This is how the fire, as it separated, germinated
the night-flowering seedlings of human beings. Listen.¹⁷⁶
Crooked forms imprinted out of earth existed first. They
were partly water and partly opaque shape. Fire
desired to arrive at its own image, therefore fire
forced them into flower. They didn't yet have attractive limbs,
nor the hand and the lonely voice that fuse in a man.

We are confronted here with an account of the origin of the human race. Earth is depicted as being *terra matrix*, Mother Earth, out of which all forms of life originate. Earth is the

¹⁷² In Kirk & Raven's version: "Many creatures were born with faces and breasts on both sides, man-faced ox-progeny, while others again sprang forth as ox-headed offspring of man, creatures compounded partly of male, partly of the nature of female, and fitted with shadowy parts." See *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 304.

¹⁷³ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁷⁴ Simplicius (*Phys.* 371.33) says: "Empedocles says that during the rule of Love first of all there came into being at random parts of animals such as heads, hands and feet, and then there came together those 'oxen with the heads of men', 'and conversely there sprang up', naturally, 'men with the heads of oxen', that is, compounded of ox and man. As many of these parts as were fitted together in such a way as to ensure their preservation became animals and survived, because they fulfilled mutual needs – the teeth tearing and softening food, the stomach digesting it, and the liver converting it into blood. The human head, when it meets a human body, ensures the preservation of the whole, but being inappropriate to the ox-body it leads to its disappearance. All that did not come together according to the proper formula [*logos*] perished." Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁷⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 206. In Kirk & Raven's version: "Come now, hear how fire as it was separated raised up the nocturnal shoots of men and pitiable women: it is no erring nor ignorant tale. Whole-natured shapes first sprang up from the earth, having a portion of both water and heat. These fire sent up, wishing to come to its like: they did not yet display the desirable form of limbs nor voice, which is the part proper to men." Kirk et al., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 304.

¹⁷⁶ An extra line following this one appears in all earlier versions prior to the 1995 *The Calling* incarnation: "The lesson is relevant and full of information. Listen."

original mother of all living things alike. That the notion of humans, animals and plants stem from earth itself is an old universal found in cosmogonies around the world is out of the question. Let us think of *Gaia* and *Ouranos* in Hesiod's *Theogony*, for instance. Tales of the marriage of earth and sky are almost an anthropological universal and illustrate the need of water to make earth fertile.¹⁷⁷ "The first men and women originate from less differentiated forms of life, which in turn were constructed out of earth, water and fire as a result of fire struggling to rejoin its like."¹⁷⁸ Fire is presented as being the agent in the zoogony depicted in this fragment, which is reminiscent of fragment 73: "Love, the agent of mixture, mingles earth with water, fashions the living creatures in it, and hardens them by fire."¹⁷⁹ In the luminescent lines of this fragment the action of Strife at work is discernible in that fire, though mingled with the other fundamental elements, is being "separated and impelled to reach its like, the fire in the earth reaching outwards towards the large mass of fire at the circumference of the cosmos. In this process curious living forms arise compounded of earth mixed with water and fire, without limbs, organs or distinction of sex."¹⁸⁰ The living shapes are 'whole-natured' because, unlike previous creatures, they are "both complete beings (not mere fragments) and organic wholes (not adventitious collections of parts)."¹⁸¹ It is only the fourth stage of the advance of Strife in the Empedoklean doctrine, in which we now live, that further discrimination brings into being the world of self-reproducing male and female creatures, divided into land-animals, birds and fish.

The starting point for section 4 of Bringham's poem is fragment 105 as preserved by Porphyrius *ap. Stobaeum Anth.* I, 49, 53, where Empedokles says that the heart is "nurtured in the sea of pulsing blood, where especially is what men call thought: for the blood around the heart is thought."¹⁸² Blood is depicted as being the centre of humans' cognitive faculties, or, to put it differently, as the organ of thought.¹⁸³ In Bringham's hands Empedokles' fragment becomes a jewel-like short lyric:

... tumbling in the surf and undertow
of blood, where the thing called thought is. Thought
is, in fact, the blood around the beating¹⁸⁴ heart.

Of these lines the poet himself says: "That is an image which, after two and a half millennia, and after all the anatomical researches of Galen, Servetus, and William Harvey, still gets my attention."¹⁸⁵ The central notion at the heart of the poem is precisely that *human beings think with the blood*.¹⁸⁶ Thought is corporeal and is affected by bodily alterations.

¹⁷⁷ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 207.

¹⁷⁸ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁷⁹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 200.

¹⁸⁰ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 207.

¹⁸¹ Kirk et al., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 305.

¹⁸² Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 229. In Kirk's version: "... [The heart] dwelling in the sea of blood which surges back and forth, where especially is what is called thought by men; for the blood around men's hearts is their thought." Kirk et al., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 311.

¹⁸³ Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 227-228.

¹⁸⁴ 'Human' instead of 'beating in *Eight Objects* (1975) and *Bergschrund* (1975).

¹⁸⁵ Bringham's essay "The Philosophy of Poetry and the Trashing of Doctor Empedokles", included in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing. Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, p. 99.

¹⁸⁶ As Guthrie says, "Men think with the blood, and sensation also is a purely physical process. That is why Aristotle says that for Empedocles and other early thinkers 'sensation and thought were the same'. He means that 'they all assume thought to be corporeal like sensation, and that like is both perceived and thought of by like.'" *Ibid.*, p. 228. He quotes Theophrastus (*De sensu*, 10-11, A86): "Men think mainly with the blood, for here the elements of the body are most thoroughly mingled. Those then in whom the mixture is equal or nearly so, with the elements neither too far apart nor too small nor too large, are wisest and keenest of

Blood and heart are, by the way, recurrent words in Bringhurst's poems, where physics is inextricably linked to metaphysics, where bodily and mental functions go hand in hand (as in "The Flowers of the Body" or "Sutra of the Heart"), and body, mind and speech constitute a fascinating complex vortex (as in the section "Body, Speech, Mind" of *Tzubalem's Mountain*). Also, in its concision and linguistic economy, section 4 of "Empedokles: Seven Fragments" is strongly reminiscent of such early short masterpieces as the lyrics entitled "A Quadratic Equation" or "Poem About Crystal". As if it were a boat, the heart is tumbling in the sea of blood, where the mixture of the fundamental ingredients out of which the universe is made is balanced – the ratio is perfect. And thought, that most quintessentially human of all faculties, pervades the liquid blood surrounding the beating heart.

Section 5, a short composition of only two verse lines, is inspired by fragment 24 of Empedokles:

... sighting in on the peaks, one after the other, and not just
talking one straight trail through the understory words.

These enigmatic lines are purely fragmentary, and so the meaning remains utterly vague and imprecise. They contain no complete grammatical sentence in full. And yet, two pivotal words – the opening word, *sighting*, and the last word, *words* – appear to suggest that this is a meditation on perception (and knowledge) and on language. The perceiving *I* is placed somewhere above, probably on a mountain top, or even further above, contemplating the panoramic view below. That the perceiving self should be beyond the human realm remains truly enigmatic. The peaks of the mountain are below and the perceiving *I* is coming to terms with what is being perceived from such a height. There is not one simple *straight trail* or easy way of apprehending what surrounds the perceiving self, and language proves to be an inadequate tool of knowledge. This is pure conjecture, though. The fragment seems to evoke the limitations of human knowledge, the impossibility of understanding any simple thing in all its manifold complexity for good.

Sections 6 and 7 of "Empedokles: Seven Fragments" are lifted from fragments 115 and 127 respectively, both of them thought to be included in Empedokles' *Katharmoi*¹⁸⁷ (*Purifications*), which concerns practical precepts for purification and the pilgrimage of the soul in the wheel of reincarnations (the cycle of incarnation) in successive mortal lives till it reaches a state of final bliss or apotheosis. Beneath both fragments is Empedokles' conception of man as an exiled god, as the philosopher thinks of man as a fallen god or divine spirit in search of blissful peace for eternity. He believed in the possibility of transmigration from one form of existence to another, from lower to higher forms. Fragment 115, Hippolytus *Ref.* VII, 29, 14 (ll. 1-2, 4-14) and Plutarch *de exilio* 17, 607C (lines 1, 3, 5, 6, 13), provides the starting point for Bringhurst's version of the

perception, and so, in proportion, are those who come nearest to them; whereas those in the opposite state are almost witless." (p. 228)

¹⁸⁷ According to Guthrie, the title of this poem by Empedokles "signifies means of purification, either by lustration, libation, sacrifice and other forms of ritual, or by obedience to certain precepts of restraint. Such purification was necessary when, whether wittingly or unwittingly, a man had made himself unclean by offending against some divine ordinance. The causes of this *miasma* or *mysos* might range from homicide to accidental trespass in a sacred grove. [...] Practical precepts in the extant fragments of the *Katharmoi* of Empedocles include, besides the rite of purification by water, abstention from meat and beans and from laying hands on the bay: according to Hippolytus they also included sexual continence. The rest of the poem puts these precepts in their cosmic setting and explains their necessity, by telling of the fate of the souls of all living creatures." *Ibid.*, pp. 244-245.

Empedoklean poem, the longest of the extant fragments the poet chooses to translate into the living fabric of his seven-part composition. In Guthrie's version, it reads like this:

There is an oracle of Necessity, an ancient decree of the gods, eternal, sealed with broad oaths: when any errs and pollutes his own limbs with the blood of slaughter, or following Strife (?) swears a false oath – the spirits whose portion is length of life – they must wander for three ten thousand seasons away from the blessed ones, being born through time in all manner of forms of mortal creatures which tread in turn the troublous paths of life. The mighty heavens pursue them to the sea, the sea spews them out on the floor of the earth, earth to the rays of the shining sun, and he casts them into the circling heavens. One receives them from another and all abhor them. Of these I too am now one, an exile from the gods and a wanderer, having put my trust in raving Strife.¹⁸⁸

In Bringhurst's rendering of Empedokles' hexameters, the fragment becomes an impressive poem of astonishing beauty and perfection:

There is an instrument of mandamus, an edict issued
long ago by the gods. It does not expire. It is sealed
edge to edge with promises. It says that whenever
one of the demons who are doomed to immortality hexes
his hands, commits a murder or perjury, he is to be
banished for three hundred centuries. He is to be born
into mortal bodies, exiled from happiness, inhabiting
one incarnation of pain after another. The high air
hounds him into the sea, and the sea deposits him
in the dirt, which heaves him into the sunlight, and the sunlight
drives him back into the undertow of air. Each takes him
from the other, but none of them offers him shelter.
I am one of these, a vagrant, a refugee from gods.
Me. I believe in a drunken brawl.

Bringhurst's version shows divine souls caught in the wheel of incarnation, being tossed from one life of torment to another by the dismissing elements of the universe. The cyclic wandering of the migrating *daimon*, of the individual soul that has sinned, is depicted with dexterity and consummate skill. The edict issued by the gods so long ago ordains a series of incarnations as the consequence of sin. The misery of incarnation is self-evident. The transmigration of souls and the cycle of births offer an image of the soul as helpless wanderer, seeking the warmth and protection of the elements and finding no consolation anywhere. What we are witnessing here is a most dramatic description of the guilty spirit's journey through the four elements, and their indignant rejection of it. According to Guthrie, fragment 115 brings together several threads of Empedokles' thinking on transmigration – “bloodshed as the cardinal sin, the cycle of reincarnation” –, but this impressive fragment “develops the idea that the souls which go the round of mortal bodies are in themselves divine spirits: the divinity to which they ultimately attain is a return to

¹⁸⁸ See Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 251-252. In Kirk & Raven's version, fragment 115 reads as follows: “There is an oracle of Necessity, ancient decree of the gods, eternal, sealed with broad oaths: when anyone sins and pollutes his own limbs with bloodshed, who by his error makes false the oath he swore – spirits whose portion is long life – for thrice ten thousand years he wanders apart from the blessed, being born throughout that time in all manner of forms of mortal things, exchanging one hard path of life for another. The force of the air [*lit.* aither] pursues him into the sea, the sea spews him out onto the floor of the earth, the earth casts him into the rays of the blazing sun, and the sun into the eddies of the air; one takes him from the other, but all abhor him. Of these I too am now one, an exile from the gods and a wanderer, having put my trust in raving Strife”. *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 315.

their original and proper state.”¹⁸⁹ Apparently a firm believer in the transmigration of souls, Empedokles declared that those who have sinned must wander for 30,000 seasons through many mortal bodies and be tossed from one of the four elements to another. Escape from such punishment requires purification, particularly abstention from the flesh of animals, whose souls may once have inhabited human bodies. As a matter of fact, Empedokles believes that the souls of all living creatures are “immortal *daimones* whose home is with the blessed, but who have been seduced by Strife into sin and are now exiled by an inexorable decree and condemned to be tossed in torment from one element to another of the sublunary world. Only by strict adherence to the rules of purity, and by gaining an understanding of the divine nature, will they escape from the round of incarnation in separate animal bodies and regain the company of the gods”.¹⁹⁰ The ruler of the age of blessedness is Aphrodite, or Love, but that state of innocence ends with bloodshed – i.e., the killing and eating of animals. Of course, the basis of the Empedoklean doctrine is the firm belief in the transmigration of the soul: eating an animal, a person may be eating a dead relative of their own. The soul may live in plants and in animals, and though there is a hierarchy of lives – humans being a higher form of existence than animals, animals a higher form of existence than plants – all souls form part of the living mesh of things, the universal kinships of existence. Empedokles himself says in fragment 117, Diogenes Laertius VIII, 77, that, like other divine spirits, he has been condemned to mortality and has gone through several mortal lives: “Before this have I been a boy and a girl, a bush and a bird and a dumb fish of the sea.”¹⁹¹ Now he is “a fugitive and a wanderer from the gods”¹⁹², but divinity is attainable after the painful cycle of incarnations.

The seventh section in Bringhurst’s poem is inspired by fragment 127, Aelian *Nat. anim.* XII, 7: “Among beasts they are born as lions with lairs in the hills and beds on the ground, and as laurels among fair-tressed trees.”¹⁹³ Kirk suggests that these lines explain “how in each successive life a *daimon* might ascend through ever higher realms of creation (plants, beasts, man), undergo the best form of incarnation possible within each, and finally regain his original status as a god.”¹⁹⁴ In Bringhurst’s version these two hexameters become a short lyric poem:

They come among the animals as mountain cats
and among the broadleaf trees in the forms of laurels.

¹⁸⁹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 251.

¹⁹⁰ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 245. Guthrie also suggests that “The notion of gods undergoing a fixed period of exile from heaven for wrongdoing, and specifically for perjury, is taken by Empedocles from Hesiod’s *Theogony*, lines 793-804. The most binding oath that the gods can swear is by the waters of Styx, says Hesiod, and continues: “Whoever of the gods who dwell on the summits of snowy Olympus pours out this water in swearing falsely, he lies a full year without breath. Nor does he touch the nourishment of ambrosia and nectar, but he lies breathless and voiceless on a strewn couch, enveloped in cruel torpor. When this sickness is over, at the end of a great year, one trial after another, each more difficult, awaits him. Nine years is he kept from the ever-living gods, for nine whole years having no share in their councils or their banquets; but in the tenth he rejoins the assembly of the immortals who dwell in Olympus.” *Ibid.*, p. 252. To this Homeric belief in the fate of the god who engages in quarrel and strife and then forswears the oath to desist, Empedokles added the Pythagorean doctrine of the transmigration of souls and the cycle of births.

¹⁹¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 250. In Kirk and Raven’s version: “For I have already been once a boy and a girl, a bush and a bird and a leaping journeying fish”. *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 319.

¹⁹² Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 246.

¹⁹³ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 317.

¹⁹⁴ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 317. He quotes fragments 146 and 147, Clement *Strom.* IV, 150, I and V, 122, 3: “But at the end they come among men on earth as prophets, bards, doctors and princes; and thence they arise as gods highest in honour, sharing with the other immortals their hearth and their table, without part in human sorrows or weariness”. (*Ibid.*, p. 317)

Empedokles is mentioning here *mountain cats* and *laurels* as incarnations of the journeying soul into higher forms of existence in the realms of animals and plants respectively. The repetition of /m/ is used to wonderful sonorous effect in these euphonic lines. The generic ‘they’ is meant as a reference to the migrating souls in search of blessedness, in their attempt to return to divinity in the company of the immortal gods. The motion is from lower to higher forms of existence, more refined and perfect in a way. The fragment has a rare and precious unity and simplicity. Without the background doctrine of the transmigration of soul, the lines remain mysterious and enigmatic. But read against the Empedoklean belief in the cycle of lives the soul undergoes, they do make perfect sense.



“Empedokles’ Recipes” tessellates three extant fragments of Empedokles into a unique composition concerning the philosopher’s notion of the proportionate mixture in the composition of organic tissues. Hence the reference to the ‘recipes’ in the title of the poem. In all, three recipes are given throughout the whole piece: one for the composition of blood and muscle (in the first stanza), another for bone (second stanza), and yet another for the mind (stanzas 3 and 4). Let us return to the first recipe. Among Empedokles’ extant fragments are some on blood and flesh and on bones, which are to be interpreted in the context of the generation of the isolated parts of animals. Fragment 98 (Simplicius in *Phys.* 32, 6) in particular is the starting point for Bringhurst’s meditation on the composition of flesh: “Earth chanced in about equal quantity upon these, Hephaestus, water, and shining *aither*, anchored in the perfect harbours of Cypris, either a little more or a little less among more of them. From these arose blood and the various forms of flesh.”¹⁹⁵ In Bringhurst’s hands, this fragment becomes this stanza:

Blood and muscle: roughly equal
quantities of storm, earth,
fire, and the high clear air
spilling together into lagoons.¹⁹⁶

Blood is presented as if it were a form of flesh itself, since the same recipe is given for both of them. In this, as in the next recipe, the poet deploys a simple strategy reminiscent of “A Quadratic Equation”: the first term of the definition, *A* (blood and muscle), is followed by *B* without any explicit verbal link (the copulative verb *be*). *A* equals *B*; this is the simple formula beneath the stanza. All four elemental roots or ingredients posited by Empedokles as being the *archai* of all existing things take part in the formation of blood and muscle. We have several basic ingredients then: water (for *storm* stands for water), earth, fire and air. All of them coalesce in the right proportion to form lagoons, which are probably meant to evoke the flowing and liquid nature of blood. There is only one verbal form, an *-ing* form (*spilling*) suggesting some kind of motion implicit in the whole genesis process. The remaining words are mostly nouns in their majority, which reminds us that we are back in a primordial time of cosmogony, as it were.

In the second recipe, Bringhurst resorts to fragment 96 (Simplicius, in *Phys.* 300, 21), on the composition of bones, in search of inspiration for his second stanza: “And

¹⁹⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 213. In Kirk’s version: “And earth chanced in about equal quantity upon these, Hephaestus [i.e. fire], rain and gleaming air [*lit.* aither], anchored in the perfect harbours of Cypris [*i.e.* Love], either a little more of it or less of it among more of them. From these arose blood and the various forms of flesh”. *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 302.

¹⁹⁶ This line reads “as they came together in lagoons” in the *Eight Objects*, *Bergschrund* and *The Beauty of the Weapons* versions of the poem.

kindly earth received in its broad melting-pots two parts of the glitter of Nestis out of eight, and four of Hephaestus; and they became white bones, marvellously joined by the gluing of Harmonia.”¹⁹⁷ Bones are also made of elements combined not in any haphazard combination, but according to a certain proportion and harmony. Thus, bones consist of four parts of fire, two of water, and two of earth that make up the total of eight. In Bringham’s rendering, this recipe becomes a three-line stanza of utter precision and beauty: “*Bone: made in caverns out of / two parts earth and two parts luminous / hunger trapped with four parts starving fire.*”¹⁹⁸ Guthrie explains that Empedokles believed all natural substances – metals and minerals as well as organic tissues – to be differentiated from one another by a different proportion of the four elemental roots or ingredients out of which the whole universe is made. His belief in the kinship of all nature “makes it improbable that he regarded inanimate objects as composed of an entirely different basis from animate. The difference would be one of degree...”¹⁹⁹ Blood is the organ of rational thought because the proportionate mixture of all four elements is perfectly balanced and resembles that of the divine sphere. In the case of the bone, a central organic substance in the human body, the ratio of mixture brings together into perfect harmony earth, water and fire. That bone should be made somewhere underground, in caverns, comes as no surprise, for Mother Earth is conceptualized as being the origin of all things in many cosmogonies around the world. In those hidden caverns earth combines with “*luminous hunger*” (which we learn is water in the third stanza) and with fire, which is starving because it seeks to reunite itself with the divine fire of higher spheres.

In the two closing stanzas, the poet dwells on exegetical details of interpretation as gathered in the doxographical body of literature originating from Empedokles’ surviving fragments. This is made explicit in the two verse lines “*The commentators say that Empedokles’ / hunger is nothing but water.*” The ‘*luminous hunger*’ mentioned in the second stanza is meant as a reference to water. Of greater interest is the second interpretation of Empedokles’ words or recipe for bones: some commentators say that it is in fact a formula for the composition of the mind:

mind: made in volcanoes
out of cauterized eyes and vaporized
muscle, blood and bone.

In the 19th century Matthew Arnold produced an eloquent poem on Empedokles flinging himself into the crater of the Etna to impress all those present with the fact that he was in fact a deity, an immortal god. Volcanoes were important in the very physical setting with which the philosopher was familiar in his lifetime. Empedokles lived in a land of intense volcanic activity, and so it is only natural that the mind would be thought to have been made in volcanoes. Inside the fiery heat of volcanoes, cauterized eyes (the *wandering eyeballs* of the first fragment in “Empedokles: Seven Fragments”) and vaporized muscle, blood and bone combine to form the mind. The circle is now complete: Empedokles’ last recipe thus brings together the blood and muscle of the first stanza with the bone of the second stanza into a unique synthesis.

¹⁹⁷ Kirk et al., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 302.

¹⁹⁸ This stanza reads differently in the *Eight Objects*, *Bergschrund*, and *The Beauty of the Weapons* versions: “Bone: made in caverns out of / two parts earth, two parts gleaming / hunger, and four parts fire.”

¹⁹⁹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 215.

VII· PHEREKYDES

“Pherekydes”²⁰⁰, the seventh poem in the sequence *The Old in Their Knowing*, is devoted to another early Greek philosopher. It is a unique poem in that it combines original Greek fragments as rendered into English by Bringham himself with an original meditation on the gist of Pherekydes’ peculiar cosmogony. Thus, the resulting composition is of a rare beauty and perfection again, of an elegant simplicity that salvages what little is extant of the mind of another ancient sage. Indeed, Pherekydes is not a negligible figure in the history of Greek cosmological speculation. Whatever surviving fragments we do possess of him tell us of a fascinating creation-myth that makes him one of the essential forerunners of philosophical cosmogony. The reputed teacher of Pythagoras and contemporary of Thales and Anaximander in Asia Minor, Pherekydes of Syros²⁰¹ (fl. c. 550 BCE) was an important Greek mythographer and cosmogonist who lived in the sixth century BCE, at a time of lively philosophical speculation. He was traditionally associated with the Seven Wise Men of Greece, especially Thales of Miletos. In *Metaphysics* (1091b8) Pherekydes was characterized by Aristotle as a theologian who mixed philosophy and myth. As a matter of fact, he was moving across the fascinating frontier between myth and philosophy, and so he is an important witness to early Greek thought at a decisive moment in the beginnings of Western philosophy. In this respect, he is a sort of bridge between mythic and pre-Socratic thought. Pherekydes is credited with originating metempsychosis, the doctrine that holds the human soul to be immortal, passing into another body, either human or animal, after death. Also, he is known as the author of *Heptamychos*,²⁰² one of the first attested prose works in Greek literature, extant in fragments only, describing the origin of the cosmos and the birth of the gods. This is a mythopoeic account rich in colourful narratives of a divine marriage and a battle of gods. The order of the events in Pherekydes’ book Kirk et al. summarize as follows: “(a) the three pre-existing deities; (b) the making by Chronos out of his own seed of things disposed in five recesses, which produce other generations of gods; (c) the making of cloth by Zas, the depiction on it of Earth and Ogenos, the wedding of Zas and Chthonie, and the presentation of the cloth, followed (?) by the spreading of it over the winged oak; (d) the battle between Kronos and Ophioneus; (e) the assignment of portions to different deities...”²⁰³

Bringham’s poem consists of two clearly distinguishable parts: whereas the first part constitutes a rendering into English of two of the surviving original Greek fragments telling of Pherekydes’ creation-myth, the second concerns a sort of exegetical meditation on what remains of the philosopher’s mind nowadays, almost 2,500 years later. It might be wise to start by invoking the first of the two original fragments beneath the first part of

²⁰⁰ “Pherekydes” was originally published as C.25 [Two poems], in *Prism International* 14.2 (Summer 1975): 14–15. Contents: “Pherekydes” (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.5, A.6, A.14, A.47, A.76, A.92); “An Augury” (rpt. from C.21). It was also included in R.1 *Carmina propria et opuscula translata* (1975) and reprinted in A.5 *Eight Objects*, A.6 *Bergschrund*, A.14 *The Beauty of the Weapons*, A.47 *The Calling*, A.76 *The Old in Their Knowing*, and A.92 *Selected Poems*.

²⁰¹ See the entry on ‘Pherekydes’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume, 22, p. 13080.

²⁰² On the existence of his book there are three surviving fragments worth quoting in full: (1) Diogenes Laertius I, 119: “There is preserved of the man of Syros the book which he wrote of which the beginning is: ‘Zas and Chronos always existed and Chthonie...’” (2) Suda s.v. Pherekydes: “Everything he wrote is as follows: Seven Recesses or Divine Mingling or Theogony. (And there is a Theology in ten books containing the birth and succession of the gods.)” (3) Diogenes Laertius I, 116: “This man is said to be by Theopompus to have been the first to write on nature and the gods. – Some relate that he was the first to bring out a book in prose.” See Kirk et al., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 51. As Kirk makes clear, “What Theopompus (fourth century BC) must actually have said is that Pherekydes first wrote about the gods *in prose*, as opposed to e.g. Hesiod.” *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁰³ Kirk et al., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 69.

“Pherekydes”: according to Diogenes Laertius I, 119 (fr. 1), “There is preserved of the man of Syros the book which he wrote of which the beginning is: ‘Zas and Chronos always existed and Chthonie; and Chthonie got the name of Ge, since Zas gave her Ge as a present [*or prerogative*].”²⁰⁴ This fragment enunciates the three primeval and eternal deities present at the moment of the creation of the *kosmos*. Not much is said in these few words, but they appear to be pregnant with subtle layers of meaning, for we learn (1) that there were three fundamental deities at the beginning of time; (2) that these three deities were eternal, for they “always existed”; and (3) that Chthonie undergoes a change of name to Ge as she gets a present from Zas, which is a marriage gift, as we shall see below. In Bringham’s hands, this handful of words become two simple verse lines: “Pherekydes, in summary, thus: *In the beginning / were time, earth, and the god.*” Another extant fragment sheds light on that preserved by Diogenes Laertius. Damascius, *de principiis* 124 bis, says: “Pherecydes of Syros said that Zas always existed, and Chronos and Chthonie, as the three first principles... and Chronos made out of his own seed fire and wind [*or breath*] and water... from which, when they were disposed in five recesses, were composed numerous other offspring of gods, what is called ‘of the five recesses’, which is perhaps the same as saying ‘of five worlds’...”.²⁰⁵ This fragment speaks of the primeval deities (Zas, Chronos and Chthonie²⁰⁶), of the initial creation of fundamental elements by Chronos, and the recesses where the god put his seed²⁰⁷ out of which a host of gods came into being. Bringham calls them by their simple, common names: time (Chronos), earth (Chthonie) and the god (Zas). These three basic principles of the *kosmos* always existed.²⁰⁸

So at the beginning of time there were three everlasting divine principles: time, earth and the god. Chronos’ seed was placed in the five recesses and gave birth to other innumerable offsprings of gods. Out of the union of earth and the god through marriage comes everything we know to exist into being. And so Bringham continues the retelling of Pherekydes’ creation-myth in these terms:

²⁰⁴ Kirk et al., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 56.

²⁰⁵ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁰⁶ “The names are unusual. Ζάς (accusative Ζάντα) is obviously an etymological form of Ζεός, and is perhaps intended to stress the element -ζα (an intensive prefix), as in ζάθεος, ζαής. Χθονίη, from Χθών, is presumably intended to represent Earth in a primitive role, perhaps as the abode of chthonic daimons, and at all events with stress on its under-parts. As for Χρόνος, it has been argued, notably by Wilamowitz, that the true reading must be Κρόνος: Kronos played an important role in Pherecydes’ theogony according to one extant fragment, 57, and ‘Time’ is a sophisticated cosmological concept for the sixth century B.C. But Χρόνος, which is widely supported in the sources, is almost certainly correct; the other two figures are etymologizing variants of well-known theogonical figures, and we naturally anticipate a similar case with the third. The substitution of Χρόνος for Κρόνος is just what we should expect here. It appears likely that by the later stages of the theogony the primeval trio assumed their familiar form as Zeus, Kronos and Hera.” Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁰⁷ “Damascius is following Eudemus. Chronos makes fire, wind and water out of his own seed, and this is implied to take place at an early stage. [...] The idea that the human seed is creative, and therefore that a primary deity’s seed is cosmologically creative, is neither surprising nor illogical. What is surprising here, however, is the things which are thus created...[...] It seems probable that the three unexpected products of Chronos’ seed – fire, wind and water – are an intrusive later interpretation of the nature of the seed itself, and that originally it was Chronos’ semen that was placed in the recesses. As for these, the seven in the title as given by the Suda might be obtained by adding to the five recesses connected with Chronos in 50 the other two pre-existing deities Zas and Chthonie, the latter of which, certainly, had a local and indeed a recess-like connotation.” Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁰⁸ “Zas and Chronos and Chthonie ‘always existed’: this resolves the difficulty of creation *ex nihilo*. An analogous declaration is seen, some two generations later, in Heraclitus’ world-order, which no god or man made, but always was, and is, and shall be... [...] It is surprising to see this concept stated so explicitly, at this relatively early date. Yet the gods who always existed are probably conceived as original forms (by etymology) of conventional figures from the traditional theogony; and one of them is ‘Time’, which might naturally be felt, without any deep abstract reflexion, to have been unborn.” See Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 56.

And the tissue of being

*was woven by the god and given as a marriage gift
on the marriage of the underground and the god:
the embroidered surface of the world*

*thrown over the tree roots' wingspread, over the nakedness
of gods; and the thread-ends
swept out and forgotten.*

The two complex images intertwined into the living fabric of these verse lines are, on the one hand, the marriage of Zas and Chthonie (the god and mother earth) and, on the other hand, the giving of a wedding gift (a cloth representing Ge and Ogenos, i.e. earth and ocean) to Chthonie on the part of the god. First of all, Zas marries Chthonie, and on the third day of the wedding ceremony the god makes a great cloth as a wedding gift for the bride. He decorates it with Ge (earth) and Ogenos (Pherekydes' name for the ocean, Okeanos), and then he gives it as a present to his wife. The gigantic embroidered cloth represents the earth's surface in the broad sense. As Chthonie receives the gift from the god, she gets the name of Ge²⁰⁹ (earth). Though she initially might be thought to represent *the solid structure of earth*, then she comes to embody *the variegated surface of the earth*, combining both Ge and Ogenos. Kirk suggests that "the weaving or embroidering of earth and Okeanos is an allegory of an actual creation-act."²¹⁰ In this sense, the act of creation itself is described mytho-poetically as Zas making a beautiful cloth decorated with the earth and the sea that he presents to Chthonie as a wedding gift. The relevant fragment beneath Bringhurst's poem is fragment 53, Grenfell and Hunt, *Greek Papyri*, series II, no. 11, p. 23, III century AD (DK 7B2):

His halls they make for him, many and vast. And when they had accomplished all these, and the furniture and manservants and maidservants and everything else necessary, when everything was ready, they hold the wedding. And on the third day of the wedding Zas makes a great and fair cloth and on it he decorates Ge and Ogenos and the halls of Ogenos 'for wishing [*or some such word*] marriages to be yours, I honour you with this. Hail to you, and be my consort.' And this they say was the first Anacalypteria: from this the custom arose both for gods and men. And she replies, receiving from him the cloth...²¹¹

In the second place, the gigantic embroidered cloth is then laid on a winged oak. Fragment 55 as preserved by Isidorus (the Gnostic, 1st-2nd century AD) ap. Clement. Al. *Strom.* VI, 53, 5 (DK 7B2) speaks of this cloth placed on the tree: "... that they may learn what is the winged oak and the decorated cloth upon it, all that Pherecydes said in allegory about the gods, taking his idea from the prophecy of Ham."²¹² Though Bringhurst does not mention the winged oak explicitly, he refers to "*the embroidered surface of the world / thrown over the tree roots' wingspread, over the nakedness / of the gods.*" Kirk et al. give a most illuminating explanation of what the oak stands for which is worth quoting in full:

²⁰⁹ "Chthonie gets the name of Ge, Earth, at a subsequent stage, presumably when Zas presents her with the cloth embroidered with earth in 53. But at that point she apparently takes over the control and guardianship of marriages; this was Hera's prerogative [...] According to the general view, and in so far as Chthonie·Ge is the wife of Zas-Zeus she is also thought of as becoming Hera. Hera was probably not an earth-goddess in origin, but there are other isolated cases where she replaces Gaia..." Kirk et al., *ibid.*, pp. 57-58, note 2.

²¹⁰ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 57.

²¹¹ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 61.

²¹² Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 63.

The oak represents the solidly fixed substructure and foundations of the earth. [...] Its trunk and branches are the support and roots of the earth. That the earth has roots is part of the popular world-picture [...], and a tree's branches, in winter, appear as large inverted roots. That the roots of earth *and* sea were sometimes conceived as being above Tartarus, and that Tartarus itself could be imagined as a narrower pit beneath, is clearly shown by the important description at *Theogony* 726ff. [...] The throat or neck that is Tartarus (or a part of it) corresponds with the trunk of the oak-tree, the roots which are above it correspond with the branches. The oak is 'winged' partly, at least, because of the spreading, wing-like appearance of these same branches. On them Zas has laid the cloth embroidered with Earth and Ogenos; these represent the earth's surface, flat or slightly convex, rather, as indeed it appears to be. We cannot say whether Ogenos is conceived as a surrounding river or as the sea. The oak is specified because it is associated more than any other tree with Zeus [...], and because of its notable strength and the great spread of its branches. Thus according to the interpretation offered here Zas must have chosen, or magically grown, a broad oak as the foundation of the earth... [...] Zas then weaves a cloth, decorating it with earth and Okeanos, and lays the embroidered cloth on the outspread branches of the oak to form the earth's surface.²¹³

Before the world is ordered for good, a cosmic battle takes place between Chronos and Ophioneus. But Bringhurst makes no explicit mention of this episode in Pherekydes' story. Thus, the first part of the poem finishes with three simple lines that remind the reader of the genesis of all living things out of Mother Earth: "*All things thereafter have been born / in the belly of the earth, in the seven / valleys, out of the seven inland streams.*" And what follows these lines is the second part of the composition, a meditation or exegetical act of interpretation on the part of the poetic voice about what Pherekydes relates in his creation-myth. At the very core of the meditation is a summary of the creation myth: "*a god put a veil on the ugly mud / and married it*", which is a reference to Zas (the god) marrying Chthonie (conceived as the ugly underground). Upon his death, "*Pherekydes' dust, when he was buried, sifted home.*" That all living things should go back to the womb of Mother Earth when they die comes as no surprise at all. Pherekydes himself was no exception to the rule. What remained of him in the form of dust "*sifted home*" – i.e., it went back to earth itself. His dust is one and the same thing with earth itself now, and so what remains of him after 2,500 years is nothing more than the variegated surface of Earth in its manifold manifestations:

There remains of the mind of Pherekydes:
the esker and the glacial milk,
the high spring runoff in the gorge,

and the waterfalls hammered out of cloud
against the mid cliff,
vanishing in the hungry Himalayan air.

Bringhurst is absolutely precise about the use of geological terms in the closing lines of his poem. Thus, (1) an *esker* is a long narrow area of small stones and earth that has been left by a large mass of ice that has melted, or, to put it differently, a long winding ridge of stratified sand and gravel; (2) *glacial milk* consists of fine-grained, silt-sized particles of rock, generated by mechanical grinding of bedrock by glacial erosion, and when it becomes suspended in river water, it makes the water appear cloudy; (3) *runoff* is rain, water or other liquid that runs off land into streams and rivers; (4) a *gorge* is a deep narrow valley with steep sides; and (5) a *waterfall* is the place where a stream or river falls from a high place, for

²¹³ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

example over a cliff or rock. All five geological terms bring together earth and water into a complex and fascinating image at the heart of these two stanzas. Of Pherekydes' mind this is what remains: bits and pieces of earth eroded by the action of ice, as well as water flowing freely to find its way down a cliff "*vanishing in the hungry Himalayan air.*" Of the four roots or ingredients (earth, water, fire and air), only fire appears to be missing here. That Bringham's 12-part sequence of poems in *The Old in Their Knowing* is tightly woven is demonstrated by a simple fact: "Pherekydes" ends with a reference to what has survived the passing of time (his ashes being incorporated into the natural rotation of the elements on earth), in much the same way "Herakleitos" ends with a section and verse line that tells of what is left of him – "*Wind stirs his ashes*" – and "Pythagoras" begins its first section with a reference to what is left of the philosopher's mind: "*the mind of Pythagoras stands on two columns of words.*"

VIII · PYTHAGORAS

The eighth poem in *The Old in Their Knowing* sequence is "Pythagoras", a complex composition whose genesis must be traced back to 1974.²¹⁴ Unlike the two pieces devoted to Empedokles ("Empedokles: Seven Fragments" and "Empedokles' Recipes") or even certain sections in "Herakleitos", "A Short History" or "Pherekydes", "Pythagoras" does not contain exact translations from original Greek fragments dealing with the philosopher's life or doctrine. However, in the 2005 *The Old in Their Knowing* incarnation of the text, the poet does give us three fragments (by Plutarch, Porphyry and Aristotle, respectively) as the starting point or inspiration for his composition on this influential philosopher and mystic. Essentially, this five-part poem is an original meditation on what remains of this sage after 2,500 years, and so the emphasis is laid from the start on the fragmentary nature – *the shattered tatters of wisdom* and *luminescent remnants* – of the Pythagorean thinking and singing. In philosophy, as in great poetry, ideas sing and dance, according to Bringham. And Pythagoras' ideas do sing and dance in a poem which turns out to be central to the poet's entire corpus. That it saw the light of day as early as 1974 and that it should have been preserved up to the 2009 edition of the author's *Selected Poems* testifies to its relevance and invaluable position in the author's oeuvre. Pythagoras' intellectual stature deserves no less than this. Plato's own metaphysics is imbued with ideas that are recognizably Pythagorean in origin, and the influence of Plato (and so of Pythagoras) on subsequent Western philosophy is simply far-reaching and vast.

Pythagoras of Samos,²¹⁵ Πυθαγόρας in classical Greek, (b. c. 570 BCE, Samos, Ionia [now in Greece] – d. c. 500, Metapontum, Lucania [now in Italy]), is a Greek philosopher, mathematician, and founder of the Pythagorean school or brotherhood that, although

²¹⁴ "Pythagoras" was originally published as A.4 • *Pythagoras*. Kanchenjunga Broadsheet No. 2. San Francisco & Vancouver: Kanchenjunga Press, 1974. Broadsheet, 22 × 56 cm, 500 copies. Contents: A poem. It was also included in R.1 *Carmina propria et opuscula translata* (1975) and reprinted in A.5 *Eight Objects*, A.6 *Bergsbrund*, A.14 *The Beauty of the Weapons*, A.47 *The Calling*, A.76 *The Old in Their Knowing*, and A.92 *Selected Poems*. It was also published as B.7, in the bilingual anthology (English and Portuguese) *Quingumbo: Nova Poesia Norte-Americana*, organização de Kerry Shawn Keys. São Paulo: Editora e Livraria Escrita, 1980: pp. 277-299. Contributions: "Anecdote of the Squid", "Essay on Adam", "Poem about Crystal", "A Quadratic Equation", "Genesis Frozen", "Scholium", "An Augury", "Song of the Summit", "The Beauty of the Weapons", "Some Ciphers", "Pythagoras" (all rpt. from A.6, except "The Beauty of the Weapons", rpt. from A.1). With Portuguese translations by several hands.

²¹⁵ See the entries on 'Pythagoras' and 'Pythagoreanism' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 23, p. 13780 and p. 13781 respectively.

religious in nature, formulated principles that influenced the thought of Plato and Aristotle and contributed decisively to the development of mathematics and Western rational philosophy. He was said to be the first man to call himself a *philosopher*, or *lover of wisdom*, and Pythagorean ideas exercised a marked influence on Plato, and through him, on all of Western philosophy. Born on the island of Samos in the eastern Aegean, he was the son of a gem-engraver called Mnesarchus,²¹⁶ and he might have travelled widely in his youth, visiting Egypt, Babylonia and other places in search of enlightenment and knowledge. The value of learning was deeply rooted in Greek consciousness, and Pythagoras was regarded as an outstanding exemplar of wisdom. Thus, several surviving fragments claim that Pythagoras was a man of extensive learning. For instance, in fr. 129 (Diogenes Laertius, VIII, 6) Herakleitos says “Pythagoras son of Mnesarchus practiced inquiry most of all men, and having made a selection of these writings contrived a wisdom of his own, a polymathy, a worthless artifice.”²¹⁷ Ion of Chios in fr. 4 (Diogenes Laertius, I, 120) speaks of Pythagoras as being “wise in all things,”²¹⁸ whereas Empedokles says in his fragment 129 (Porphyrius, *Life of Pythagoras* 30): “There was among them a man of surpassing knowledge, who possessed vast wealth of understanding, capable of all kinds of cunning acts; for when he exerted himself with all his understanding, easily did he see every one of all the things that are, in ten and even twenty human lives.”²¹⁹

About 532 BCE, Pythagoras left his home island in the reign of Polycrates, at the age of 40,²²⁰ and he migrated to Croton, the leading Greek colony in southern Italy (Magna Grecia), apparently to escape Samos’s tyrannical rule, and established his ethico-political academy there. To a philosophical genius and a preacher of the ascetic life like Pythagoras, the need to escape a life of luxury and dissipation under Polycrates’ tyranny must have been decisive. In Croton he settled soon and attained a position of authority and influence in the city.²²¹ There he set up a philosophical school or religious sect called Pythagoreanism, where all members took strict vows of secrecy, and all new mathematical results for several centuries were attributed to his name. Indeed, Pythagoreanism originated as a religious brotherhood or an association for the moral reformation of society; brothers were sworn to strict loyalty and secrecy. His followers pursued the religious rites and practices developed by Pythagoras, and studied his philosophical theories. The brotherhood had much in common with the Orphic communities, which sought by rites and abstinence to purify the believer’s soul and enable it to escape from the “wheel of birth”. Pythagoreanism held that reality, at its deepest level, is mathematical, that philosophy (*philosophia*, i.e. ‘love of wisdom’) can be used for spiritual purification, that the soul can rise to union with the divine, and that certain symbols (like the *tetractys*) have mystical significance. It was the first important Western system of thought to advocate abstention from flesh (i.e. vegetarianism). The society took an active role in the politics of Croton and other neighbouring cities, where Pythagoreans occupied the leading positions. Real power was in

²¹⁶ Kirk et al., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 222: Aristoxenus in fr. 11A Wehrli, Diogenes Laertius I, 118, (DK 14, 8), “Pythagoras, son of Mnersarchus the gem-engraver, and a Samian (as Hermippus says) or (as Aristoxenus says) a Tyrrhenian from one of the islands which the Athenians held after expelling the Tyrrhenians”.

²¹⁷ Quoted by Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 157.

²¹⁸ Quoted by Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 158. Diogenes Laertius, VIII, 8, Ion, fr. 4 DK.

²¹⁹ Quoted by Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 161.

²²⁰ Kirk et al., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 222: Aristoxenus in fr. 16, Porphyrius, *Life of Pythagoras* 9 (DK 14, 8), “Aristoxenus says that at the age of forty, seeing that the tyranny of Polycrates was too intense for it to be becoming for a free man to endure such domination and despotism, he made his departure for Italy for that reason.”

²²¹ Guthrie tells us that his motive in acquiring power was “not personal ambition but a zeal for reforming society according to his own moral ideas.” *Ibid.*, p. 175.

their hands, but this eventually led to their downfall. The Pythagorean meeting-places were burned, and Pythagoras was forced to flee the city. He is said to have ended his days in Metapontum, where he was forced to take refuge in a temple of the Muses and starved to death.²²² Thus, the school became extinct during the fourth century BCE.

It is difficult to distinguish Pythagoras's teachings from those of his disciples.²²³ None of his writings have survived,²²⁴ and most of the information about Pythagoras was written down centuries after he lived, so very little reliable information is known about him. Furthermore, Pythagoreans invariably supported their doctrines by indiscriminately citing their master's authority: the master was revered as a great mathematician, scientist and mystic, as the ultimate source of their doctrine and discoveries. Ancient Pythagoreans usually quoted their master's doctrines with the phrase *autos ephe* ("he himself said"), thus emphasizing the essentially oral nature of his teaching. In practice, many of the accomplishments credited to Pythagoras may actually have been accomplishments of his colleagues and successors. Pythagoras, however, is generally credited with the theory of the functional significance of numbers in the objective world and in music: numbers were the ultimate reality, the principles of mathematics were the principles of all things. Other discoveries often attributed to him (e.g., the incommensurability of the side and diagonal of a square, and the Pythagorean theorem for right triangles) were probably developed only later by the Pythagorean school. The bulk of the intellectual tradition associated to Pythagoras and his disciples bring together both mystical wisdom and scientific scholarship, that is, their philosophy was intended to be in the service of an ascetic lifestyle of austerity and moderation in accordance with the divine.

²²² Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 179.

²²³ Pythagoras, Guthrie tells us in *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. I, was as much a philosopher as a religious and a political leader for Pythagoreans. This had several inevitable consequences: (1) The legends gathered round the figure of the founder: "In a society which is a religious sect rather than a philosophical school, the name of the founder is held in particular veneration. He tends to be, if not actually deified, at least heroized or canonized, and in consequence his memory gets surrounded by a haze of legend". (*Ibid.*, p. 148) This accounts for the fact that he was identified with the Hyperborean Apollo, a fundamental deity to the sect, and that he was credited with supernatural powers such as ubiquity, a golden thigh and prophesying. (2) The tendency to trace back to Pythagoras all their doctrines and discoveries: "In a religious school there is a particularly strong temptation, not only to venerate the founder, but to attribute all its doctrine to him personally. It is 'the word of the Master'. This is not simply due to a pious desire to honour his memory, but is bound up with the religious view of truth which the Pythagoreans shared with adherents of the mystery-religions. They were indeed philosophers, and made scientific discoveries; but these they regarded in much the same light as the revelations which were an essential part of initiation into the mysteries. Many of their most important discoveries were mathematical, and there was always in the Greek mind a close connexion between mathematical, astronomical and religious speculation". *Ibid.*, p. 149. (3) The secrecy with which some of their teaching was surrounded: "An obvious difficulty for the historian [of philosophy] is constituted by the secrecy" of the school. Philosophical researches were undertaken by the Pythagoreans with the conscious purpose of making them the basis for religion, and mathematics was a holy occupation. Pythagoreanism had its secrets, and "not everything was to be divulged to all men." Certain doctrines were to be held in awe, "coupled with a feeling that they should not be spoken of." There is more evidence supporting the jealous guarding of mathematical secrets than teachings about the gods, the soul or the doctrine of transmigration. This feeling against open discussion of Pythagorean doctrine must have led to "omissions and distortions in ancient writings on the subject; for where the truth is not freely communicated, its place is naturally filled by baseless rumour." *Ibid.*, pp. 150-153.

²²⁴ See Kirk et al., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 216: "Pythagoras wrote nothing. Hence a void was created which was to become filled by a huge body of literature, much of it worthless as historical evidence of Pythagoras' own teachings. It included accounts of Pythagorean physics, ethics and political theory as well as metaphysics; biographies of Pythagoras; and several dozen treatises (many still extant) whose authorship was ascribed to early Pythagoras."

The fundamental difficulty one is inevitably confronted with when dealing with Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans is twofold. On the one hand, the chief difficulty is the scantiness of contemporary sources of information²²⁵, as most of the early records have perished and so we must rely on later sources that offer but a fragmentary view of the Pythagorean philosophic system. Thus, Plato mentions Pythagoras once (*Republic*, 600B) and the Pythagoreans once (*Republic*, 530D); Aristotle, the earliest author to give any detailed information about the Pythagoreans, refers to Pythagoras once in his *Metaphysics* A, 986a30 (but the authenticity of the passage is doubtful) and in his *Rhetoric* B 1398b14; and the most abundant part of our information originates with the revival of Pythagoreanism about the time of Cicero and the rise of Neoplatonic philosophy in the third century CE (Porphyry and Iamblichus chief among them). On the other hand, the nature of the school itself, advocating secrecy within the brotherhood and attributing all the discoveries to the founder, makes its teachings particularly impenetrable, especially at this distance of time. There is no way of attributing with certainty fundamental ideas or teachings to Pythagoras himself. Philosophy in the Pythagoreans' hands becomes something completely different from what it had meant to the Ionian philosophers in Asia Minor: whereas for Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes and Herakleitos the motive for philosophy had been essentially curiosity and technical improvement, for the Pythagoreans the chief motive was "the search for a way of life whereby a right relationship might be established between the philosopher and the universe."²²⁶ Given the secrecy inherent in the brotherhood, when the school disappeared in the 4th century BCE, many of their teachings went to the graves with the last Pythagoreans. At this point, the most fundamental aspects of Pythagoreanism can be best summarized as follows, borrowing Guthrie's illuminating words: Pythagoras himself taught the transmigration of souls and posthumous rewards for the meritorious; Pythagoras was a man of science and a religious teacher, a polymath, a man of prodigious learning; the veneration of Pythagoras by his disciples exalted him to legendary status, regarding him as a man endowed with astonishing capacities and crediting him with miracles; the Pythagoreans formed a society of their own, practicing a distinctive and extraordinary way of life marked by silence and secrecy, asceticism and moderation, abstaining from bloodshed and flesh and beans while complying with other superstitious taboos; and they were acknowledged experts in astronomy, harmonics and the science of number.²²⁷



A poem of outstanding beauty and remarkable complexity, "Pythagoras" opens with a Latin epigraph, "*lemuribus vertebratis, ossibus inter tenebras*", which Bringhurst himself translates as "for the vertebrate ghosts, for the bones among the darkneses" in his glossary on odd terms at the end of *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982). These Latin words appear to

²²⁵ W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. I, pp. 157-171, provides a detailed analysis of the sources available to the historian of philosophy for the rigorous study of Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans. He groups them under three distinct categories: (1) Sources of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE: Xenophanes of Colophon as quoted by Diogenes Laertius (VIII, 36, Xenoph. Fr. 7 DK); Herakleitos as quoted by Diogenes Laertius (IX, 1, Heracl. fr. 40 and fr. 129 DK); Ion of Chios as quoted by Diogenes Laertius (VIII, 8, Ion, fr. 1, fr. 2 and Fr. 4 DK); Herodotus (especially book IV, chapters 93-94); and Empedokles (fr. 129). (2) Fourth-century sources excluding Aristotle and his pupils: Plato (in the seventh book of his *Republic*, 600B and 530D); Isocrates (ch. 28 of *Busiris*); Heraclides of Pontus as quoted by Porphyry (*De Abst.* I, 26). (3) Post-Platonic sources: two pupils of Aristotle, Aristoxenus and Dicaearchus; the Sicilian historian Timaeus from Taormina; and the Neoplatonic lives of Pythagoras by Porphyry and Iamblichus, two compilers whose material exhibits two related faults – a love of the marvellous and a religious and superstitious character which accounts for their singular lack of any critical faculty in compiling their fragments.

²²⁶ W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. I, p. 148.

²²⁷ Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 166-167.

suggest that the poet is invoking the presence of the Greek sage, now almost 2,500 years dead, asking him to emerge from out of the mists of time and make himself visible. What we are witnessing here is Bringhurst's attempt at salvaging invaluable fragments of wisdom that still have something to teach us. Section 1 of Bringhurst's poem is thus concerned with the surviving fragments that contain a wealth of information about the Presocratic thinker, or rather, it is a meditation on the legacy of Pythagoras as preserved in the extant remnants that have survived in spite of the passage of time. Two distinct parts are discernible in the design of this short poem: whereas the first part is a catalogue of the Pythagorean remnants, the second one is an apt depiction of Pythagoras' thinking as a building of which not much is left standing. This the exhaustive catalogue of what is left of the sage's remnants:

Remnants: the 39 rules, a sundial
untied like a shoelace, a theory of number
dismembered and scattered like dice. And the third-hand
chatter over the transmigration of souls.
And a story: Pythagoras wouldn't eat meat

and his legs buckled under him.

Pythagoras left no writings of his own; his wisdom was firmly steeped in orality. Here, with an astonishing economy, Bringhurst manages to embody in just six lines a handful of essential tenets of Pythagoreanism:

- (1) The Pythagorean belief that the soul is immortal²²⁸ and commonly reborn in a different body is evoked in the words "*the third-hand / chatter over the transmigration of souls.*" Pythagoras was a believer of metempsychosis and believed in transmigration²²⁹, that is, the reincarnation of the soul again and again into the bodies of humans, animals, or vegetables until it became immortal. Conformity with the divine was possible if one followed the path towards salvation offered by philosophy; that was the legitimate final aim of human lives according to Pythagoras.²³⁰ In this respect, in one of the extant fragments of his *Life of Pythagoras* (19, DK, 14.8a), Porphyry writes as follows on the immortality of the soul and the transmigration doctrine: "What he said to his disciples no man can tell for certain, since they preserved such an exceptional silence. However, the following facts in particular

²²⁸ Guthrie explains how the immortality of the soul means much more than mere survival. In Homer the *psyche* survived after death, but it was "the merest simulacrum of the man, lacking strength and wits, both of which it owed to its association with the body. It is compared to a shadow, an image, a dream, to smoke, to a twittering bat. [...] The real self was the body. Death meant separation from the body, and hence from life... [...] Indeed to speak of the human soul as immortal was blasphemy. Only the gods were immortal, and they were exceedingly jealous of their immortality. It would go ill with a mortal who claimed it for himself, for that would be to set himself up against Zeus and the Olympians." *Ibid.*, p. 196. This conception of the relations between gods and humans was firmly ingrained in the Greek consciousness and so the great writers of the period (Herodotus, Pindar, the great tragedians) insisted on the necessity to remember one's mortality. However, the Pythagoreans, like the Orphics, believed in "the idea of assimilation to the divine as the legitimate and essential aim of human life." *Ibid.*, p. 199. Somewhere else, Guthrie says that "between mortals and immortals, gods and men, a barrier was fixed, and it was *hybris* to cross it. Nothing too much, observe the limit; and immortality and divinity were unquestionably beyond the limit appointed for man." *Ibid.*, p. 206.

²²⁹ As for reincarnation, in fragment 7 (Diogenes Laertius VIII, 36), Xenophanes claimed that he believed in the transmigration of souls as he mentions the story of his interceding on behalf of a dog that was being beaten, professing to recognize in its cries the voice of a departed friend: "Once they say that he was passing by when a puppy was being shipped, and he took pity and said: "Stop, do not beat it; for it is the soul of a friend that I recognized when I heard it giving tongue." See Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 219. Pythagoras himself is supposed to have claimed that he had been Euphorbus, the son of Panthus, in the Trojan War, as well as various other characters, a tradesman, a courtesan, etc.

²³⁰ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 199.

became universally known: first that he held the soul to be immortal, next that it migrates into other kinds of animal, further that past events repeat themselves in a cyclic process and nothing is new in an absolute sense, and finally that one must regard all living things as kindred. These are the beliefs which Pythagoras is said to have been the first to introduce into Greece.”²³¹ (This is, by the way, one of the fragments beneath Bringham’s own poem and he quotes it in the original Greek in the 2005 *The Old in Their Knowing* incarnation of his poem.) It is a fundamental passage indeed for it contains several important ideas central to Pythagoreanism: the immortality of the soul, metempsychosis (the migration of the soul to other animal bodies) as a cyclical process, and the doctrine of the kinship of all animate nature (all souls belong to a gigantic universal family), which makes the transmigration of the souls possible and explains why Pythagoras preached the abstention from animal life. For the Pythagoreans the notion of the kinship of all life was of paramount importance: the universe as whole was “a living and breathing creature.” Guthrie explains this with astonishing beauty and clarity in a paragraph worth quoting in full:

If the world was a living, eternal and divine creature, and lived by breathing in air or breath from the infinite around it; and if man too got his life by breathing (which was evidence that the human soul itself was air); then the natural kinship between man and the universe, microcosm and macrocosm, must be close. The universe was one, eternal and divine. Men were many and divided, and they were mortal. But the essential part of man, his soul, was not mortal, and it owed its immortality to this circumstance, that it was neither more nor less than a small fragment or spark of the divine and universal soul, cut off and imprisoned in a perishable body.²³²

For Pythagoras and his disciples the path to salvation, towards the purification of the soul and reunion with the divine, lay in philosophy (*philosophia*), which meant “using the powers of reason and observation in order to gain understanding.”²³³ This also partly accounts for the sect’s worship of Apollo, the most Hellenic of gods, the epitome of reason, limit, moderation and order, and also for the Pythagoreans’ passion for the study of the *kosmos* as the embodiment of beauty, perfection and order. Thus, assimilation with the divine in the *kosmos* was the ultimate, legitimate goal of life for Pythagoras: “(a) the world is a *kosmos* – that untranslatable word which unites [...] the notion of order, arrangement or structural perfection with that of beauty. (b) All nature is akin, therefore the soul of man is intimately related to the living and divine universe. (c) Like is known by like, that is, the better one knows something the more one is assimilated to it. Hence (d) to seek through philosophy for a better understanding of the structure of the divine *kosmos* is to realize and cultivate the divine element in oneself.”²³⁴ By studying the beauty and order on a grand scale in the *kosmos*, humans become “*kosmoi* in miniature, organic structures composed of the same stuff and reproducing the same principles of order.”²³⁵

²³¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 186.

²³² Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 201. The notion of the kinship of all life gave the Pythagoreans an aim in life: “to cultivate the soul, shake off the taint of the body, and rejoin the universal soul of which their individual souls were in essence parts. So long as the soul was condemned to remain in the wheel of transmigration [...] so long as it still impure. By living the best and highest type of human life it might ultimately shake off the body altogether, escape from the wheel of rebirth, and attain the final bliss of losing itself in the universal, eternal and divine soul to which by its own nature it belonged.” *Ibid.*, pp. 202-203.

²³³ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 205.

²³⁴ Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 206-207. For a detailed analysis of the evolution of the Greek word *kosmos* see Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 208, note 1. To put it very briefly, the meaning of the word evolved gradually through these stages: (a) order or arrangement of anything, (b) order in the world, (c) the world *as* an order, (d) the world in general, with no special reference to its ordered structure. That the world exhibited a rationally comprehensible order was a decisive discovery. It meant a break with current religious beliefs and marked the dividing line between religion and philosophy.

²³⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 211.

- (2) The “*sundial / untied like a shoelace*” is meant as a reference to the acknowledged expertise of the Pythagoreans in astronomy. They combined with perfect naturalness adherence to a set of religious and superstitious beliefs with the rational pursuit of mathematical science and cosmic speculation.²³⁶ Plato mentions the Pythagoreans only once in his *Republic* (530D), where he has Socrates say about the course of study to be laid down for the philosophical Guardians of the republic: “I think we may say that, just as our eyes are made for astronomy, so our ears are made for harmony, and that the two are, as the Pythagoreans say, and as we should agree, sister sciences.”²³⁷ Astronomy is of paramount importance because its study is not to be limited to the stars and their visible motions. Reaching beyond them, the philosopher will gain an insight into the mathematical principles and laws of motion underlying them. By applying itself to the study of the perfection of the cosmos, for only like knows like, the philosopher’s soul will come to be imbued with its beauty and order. Thus, to study the visible cosmos in its regular and ordered dimension will emphasize the soul’s kinship with the divine.
- (3) The “*39 rules*” are probably intended as a reference to the so-called *acusmata* or *symbola*²³⁸, i.e. the rules by which the members of the Pythagorean brotherhood abide. These rules²³⁹ are either straightforward moral precepts or have a Pythagorean oracular meaning to be deciphered in accord with their moral and political ideas. There were ascetic practices (many of which had, perhaps, a symbolic meaning) in the way of life of the sect. On the basis of metempsychosis, Pythagoras preached the abstention from flesh, and so he is said to have had a plant-based diet. This was one of the elemental tenets of Pythagoreanism from the outset. Some represent Pythagoras as forbidding all animal food, advocating a plant-based diet, and prohibiting consumption of beans. Other authorities contradict the statement and limited the abstention to certain species. There is a similar discrepancy as to the prohibition of fish and beans. But temperance of all kinds seems to have been urged. Bringham says that he “*wouldn’t eat meat / and his legs buckled under him,*” because he had no proteins (and not much energy) in his organism. The killing and eating of animals was entirely against their principles, and so they abstained from animal food, ate vegetables and bread, and drank nothing but water, on the ground that animals share with humans “the right to a soul” (Diogenes Laertius, VIII, 12).²⁴⁰ Abstention from flesh was essential then because to eat it was a form of cannibalism given the universal kinship of all life, and so the Pythagoreans were life-long vegetarians.²⁴¹ In fragment 137 DK, Empedokles himself would reason that by eating animal flesh, one may be unwittingly devouring their own son or father in altered shape, just because of the transmigration of souls.
- (4) For the Pythagoreans the ultimate element of reality was number, and indeed they were responsible for important advances in the science of mathematics. The Egyptians and the Babylonians had already done much in the field of mathematics, and even if the Ionian

²³⁶ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 181. Guthrie reminds us that “Philosophy for Pythagoras and his followers had to be first and foremost the basis for a way of life: more than that, for a way of eternal salvation. When the study of man and the cosmos is undertaken as a means of help and guidance in right living, the resulting system of nature must be one that will afford such help. To the Pythagoreans the most important part of philosophy was that which taught of man, of the nature of the human soul and its relations with other forms of life and with the whole.” *Ibid.*, p. 182.

²³⁷ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 162.

²³⁸ Guthrie gives a few examples of these precepts which are certainly older than Pythagoras: To abstain from beans. Not to pick up what has fallen from the table. Not to stir the fire with a knife. To roll up one’s bedclothes on rising and smooth out the imprint of the body. To touch the earth when it thunders. Etc. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

²³⁹ According to Kirk et al., “Various late authors preserve collections of maxims which they represent as parts of Pythagorean teaching. They were evidently transmitted by word of mouth, as the name *acusmata* (‘things heard’) indicates. The Pythagorean initiate was presumably required to commit them to memory, as containing a catechism of doctrine and practice.” *Ibid.*, p. 229.

²⁴⁰ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 190.

²⁴¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 195.

philosophers (Thales among them, with his geometrical theorems) had a keen interest in number and geometry, it was the Pythagoreans that laid the foundations of Greek mathematics. The Greeks did not invent mathematical science, but they accomplished much in its systematization by putting it on an exact and universal basis.²⁴² Hence, Bringhurst speaks of “*a theory of number / dismembered and scattered like dice.*” Thus, in *De Caelo* (286a10), Aristotle illustrates the Pythagoreans’ reverence for numerical philosophy with these words: “As the Pythagoreans say, the whole word and all things in it are summed up in the number three; for end, middle and beginning give the number of the whole, and their number is the triad. Hence we have taken this number from nature, as it were one of her laws, and make use of it for the worship of the gods.”²⁴³ If, in his journey towards purification and salvation of the soul, the proper object of study of the philosopher is the *kosmos*, then he must look into things with open eyes to identify the underlying mathematical principles governing the universe in its entirety. Another belief attributed to Pythagoras was that of the doctrine of the “harmony of the spheres”, which posited that the planets and stars moved according to mathematical equations, which corresponded to musical notes and thus produced a symphony. To this notion and to the centrality of number to Pythagorean doctrine we shall presently come back below.

It is now due time we turned to the second part of the first section of “Pythagoras”. These verse lines are built around a metaphor simple enough: Pythagorean thinking is a gigantic fallen house or a building whose blocks are now nothing more than debris – “*Rubble / of picked-over thought, shattered²⁴⁴ pediments, cracked / roof tiles laid up with mortar now gone in the rain.*” The notion of fragmentation is present in the poem from the very opening line, so that a subtle semantic constellation is being built around the words *remnants, dismembered, scattered, rubble, shattered* and *cracked*. That is the subterranean train of thought pervading the whole section from beginning to end. But of all fragments in the world these are the least dispensable of all, or at least that is the message the poetic voice appears to be delivering by the end of poem. Solitary seabirds fly over the remnants of Pythagorean thinking, surrounded by uncared-for high grass that has taken over and gained dominion over space. There is “*nothing erect / except these pillars: / the mind of Pythagoras stands on two columns of words.*” The pillars are nothing more than the table of opposites preserved by Aristotle in an eloquent passage in his *Metaphysics* (986a22), which is the second source of inspiration for Bringhurst’s poem. It is the heart beating subtly and beautifully at the core of the third section of the poem, as we shall see below. On them stands Pythagoras’ immortal mind, even if they look like a simple enumeration of ten basic principles upon which reality rests. They are primitive, fundamental, and therefore absolutely dispensable. But the pillars are also the beautiful columns illustrating the cover of *The Old in Their Knowing* in one of its two material incarnations in 2005, for which Peter Koch et al. were responsible.



Pythagoras’ philosophy of number is at the heart of the second section of Bringhurst’s poem. Consisting of only two three-line stanzas, this jewel-like composition resembles other short lyric poems so characteristic of the author’s literary output – “Poem About Crystal” in particular comes to one’s mind immediately. For the Pythagoreans the world was alive with mysterious forces that their mind was capable of perceiving. Number was the ultimate substratum or *arche* for them. In this sense, their approach to the *kosmos* was essentially formal, which means that phenomena were not relevant in themselves but only as the expression of number. “Number was responsible for ‘harmony’, the divine principle

²⁴² Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 218.

²⁴³ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 193.

²⁴⁴ ‘Broken’ in *Pythagoras* (1974), *Eight Objects* (1975), *Bergschrund* (1975) and *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982).

that governed the structure of the whole world. Numbers not only explained the physical world, but also symbolized or stood for [...] moral qualities and abstractions.”²⁴⁵ Their view of mathematics was metaphysical, so that the acquisition of knowledge and the discovery of underlying mathematical principles beneath the order and perfection of the *kosmos* was like a religious initiation, rather than mere intellectual speculation for its own sake. In *Metaphysics* 985b23, Aristotle speaks of their explanation of the world in terms of numbers: “Contemporary with *and before* these men, the Pythagoreans (as they are called), who were the earliest to apply themselves to mathematics, at the same time were making advances in this subject and, because of their absorption in it, assumed the principles of mathematics to be the principles of everything.”²⁴⁶ Numbers had a mystical significance that the Pythagoreans had in their mind all the time. Bringhurst’s poem is worth quoting in full before we proceed to a detailed critical analysis:

Not the calculus. Numbers. Integers
tethered into crystal structures: copper, antimony...
Integers driven like nails into inflexible void.

Dull-eyed disciples, centuries later, sitting
down to count the catalog,
mumbling over multipliers.

It is necessary to have a numerical mind to be able to perceive numbers and integers in *crystal structures*, in *copper* or *antimony*. Whenever they turned to look, the Pythagoreans found numerical relationships in the physical, audible world. The numerical explanation of the world made it possible for them to claim that all things in the universe were numbers. They were somehow inescapable, all-pervasive, as Bringhurst’s metaphor whereby he equates them with *nails driven into the inflexible void* suggests. At this point, it might be wise to quote several relevant fragments from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* on numbers as being the ultimate element of reality. From these three quotations, we deduce that the philosopher refers to the Pythagorean number-doctrine in three ways: *things are numbers*, *things imitate or represent numbers*, and *the elements of numbers are the elements of things*. Here are the relevant passages:

- (1) *Metaph.*, 987b28: “They say that things themselves are numbers.” And *Metaph.*, book N, 1090b20: “The Pythagoreans, because they saw many of the attributes belonging to sensible bodies, assumed existing things to be numbers – not separately existing numbers, but that things are actually composed of numbers. Their reason was that numerical properties were inherent in the musical scale, in the heavens, and in many other things.”
- (2) *Metaph.*, 987b11: “The Pythagoreans say that existing things owe their being to imitation (*mimesis*) of numbers.”
- (3) *Metaph.*, 985b32: “Since the nature of everything else seemed to be entirely assimilated to numbers, and numbers to be primary throughout the world of nature, they assumed the elements of numbers to be the elements of all that exists, and the whole universe to be a *harmonia* and a number.”²⁴⁷

One of the key words in these passages is *harmonia*, which, according to Guthrie, was fundamental for the Pythagoreans and it meant primarily ‘the joining or fitting of things together’, then ‘the stringing of an instrument with strings of different tautness’, and so ‘a musical scale’. That the word *harmonia* should have this musical connotation is made clear by Aristotle’s words on the harmony of the spheres in *De Caelo* (290b12): the whole

²⁴⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 213.

²⁴⁶ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 232.

²⁴⁷ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 229.

universe produced a beautiful kind of music thanks to the very motions of the celestial bodies floating in space.²⁴⁸ Though Aristotle did admit the fact that they constructed the whole universe out of numbers “not as existing apart from sensible things”²⁴⁹ (*Metaphysics*, 1080b16), his chief complaint against the Pythagoreans is that they confused formal and material causes as they claimed that “things consist of number, in the literal sense that physical bodies themselves are made of numbers”,²⁵⁰ as if number were the actual stuff or matter of which all things are composed. In his opinion, that was their terrible mistake: they imagined physical bodies to be constructed out of what were in fact intangible abstractions, for numbers had neither weight nor sensible existence. From a different point of view, in saying that things are numbers they failed to recognize the abstract nature of numbers.²⁵¹



Aristotle’s words might be a good starting point again for our analysis of the third section of “Pythagoras”, which concerns the ultimate essence of the *kosmos* according to the Pythagoreans. In *Metaphysics* 987a13, he says: “The Pythagoreans similarly posit two principles, but add something peculiar to themselves, namely that the finite and the infinite are not attributes of other natural substances like fire or earth or something similar. Rather they hold that the infinite itself and unity itself are the substance of that of which they are predicated, and this is why they say that number is the substance of all things.”²⁵² This means that the Pythagoreans regarded unity and limit as substances forming the basic element of everything else. Hence Bringhurst’s poem opens with these illuminating words on the cosmogony of everything that exists: “*Unity is a substance, not a property. Light / is finite and motionless. Darkness / is the everlasting verb.*” In the beginning was the number, not the word (the verb), as the Bible says in the Book of Genesis. From limit (light, order) and unlimited (darkness, chaos) emerge numbers, odd and even; from numbers emerge geometrical figures; from geometrical figures (solid bodies built up of surfaces, surfaces of planes, planes of lines and lines of points) emerge all physical objects.²⁵³ Out of chaos emerged the order of life, which has a numerical basis. The generation of things from numbers goes through three distinct stages:

- (1) *Generation of numbers from their elements.* These elements that make up numbers are for the Pythagoreans, ultimately, the limited and the unlimited, and secondarily the odd and the even and the unit. Aristotle says: “The elements are the even and the odd, and of these the latter is limited and the former unlimited. The One is composed of both of these (for it is both even and odd) and number springs from the One; and numbers, as I have said, constitute the whole universe.” (*Metaph.* 986a17) In this context, the limited, the unlimited and the One are the actual substances of things.²⁵⁴ The limited and the unlimited combine to give rise to the unit, which is regarded as “standing outside the number-series of which it is the principle or *arche*”,²⁵⁵ and as being odd and even at the same time, for zero was

²⁴⁸ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 220.

²⁴⁹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 234.

²⁵⁰ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 236. In *Metaphysics* 1090a30, Aristotle complains that when they “construct physical bodies out of number – things which possess lightness and weight out of elements which possess neither – they appear to be talking about some other universe and other bodies, not those that we perceive.” Quoted by Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 235.

²⁵¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 241-242.

²⁵² Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 235.

²⁵³ Guthrie, p. 239 and p. 259.

²⁵⁴ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 235.

²⁵⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 244.

unknown to the Greeks. The unit is then the ultimate principle of all things because it is the immediate principle of number and all things are made of number.

- (2) *Generation of geometrical figures from numbers*. As Guthrie puts it, “from the monad combining with the unlimited spring numbers, from numbers points, from points lines, from lines plane figures, from plane figures solids; and finally, from solid figures are made sensible bodies.”²⁵⁶
- (3) *Generation of physical bodies from geometrical figures (cosmogony)*. Aëtius (based on Theophrastus) says: “There being five solid figures, called the mathematical solids, Pythagoras says that earth is made from the cube, fire from the pyramid, air from the octahedron, and water from the eicosahedron, and from the dodecahedron is made the sphere of the whole.”²⁵⁷ Observation of their occurrence in nature in the form of mineral crystals might have prompted the Pythagoreans to offer this explanation.²⁵⁸

Now, Bringhurst’s poem flows on into a series of seemingly enigmatic statements, verging on gnomic revelation, that make perfect sense as soon as they are set against Aristotle’s words below regarding an elemental table of contraries or opposites. “Without contraries there is no progression”, said William Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* at the end of the 18th century, which confirms our intimation that elemental things come in pairs. Bringhurst deploys simple, declarative sentences where the recurrent verb is *to be*. After all, we are back in an elemental world of primordial elements; we are witnessing the beginning of the universe, *der Ursprung des Kosmos*, as it were:

Strangeness is four-square.
Plurality curves,
and the darkness is plural,
and only the left hand moves.

And the darkness... this... *these*
darknesses are everywhere.

The sundial’s tooth is the token,
like a carpenter’s rule. The sharpened
darkness is simply the index.
Light
does not move, but²⁵⁹ light is the tool.

The illuminating fragment from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (986a22) hidden beneath Bringhurst’s poem offers a table of essential opposites out of which the universe in its entirety is made:

Others of this same school say that there are ten principles, which they arrange in twin columns, namely:

²⁵⁶ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 256.

²⁵⁷ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 267.

²⁵⁸ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 269.

²⁵⁹ “And” in all earlier versions of the poem in *Pythagoras, Eight Objects, Bergschrund* and *The Beauty of the Weapons*.

limit	unlimited
odd	even
one	plurality
right	left
male	female
at rest	moving
straight	crooked
light	darkness
good	bad
square	oblong

... How these principles may be brought into line with the cause we have mentioned [...] is not clearly explained by them; but they appear to class the elements [...] as matter, for they say that substance consists of and is formed from them as from internal constituents.²⁶⁰

These are the pillars, *the two columns of words on which the mind of Pythagoras stands*, as Bringham points out in section 1 of “Pythagoras”. There are two elemental opposites or ultimate principles, limit and the unlimited, from which all other principles appear to be different manifestations. It is curious to note that in this table of contraries “unity, limit, etc. appear on the same side as goodness because they are good, whereas plurality and the unlimited are bad. [...] limit and unity are to be equated with the male, the unlimited and plurality with the female element in nature.”²⁶¹ Key words from these columns occur in Bringham’s poem: *plurality, darkness, left, light*. These are the ingredients of a cosmogony, of that crucial moment when the *kosmos* as an ordered and structured design of precious beauty comes into being. Darkness pervades everything but light is *the tool* that imposes order, shape and limit upon what is chaotic, formless and unlimited. Outside the sphere where all the process is going on is void, “into which and out of which the cosmos breathes.”²⁶² That “*darkness, or darknesses, are everywhere*” possibly meant as a reference to the infinite, for the Pythagoreans say that “what is outside the heaven is infinite” and they “place the infinite among perceptible things.” (Aristotle, *Physics*, 203a6)²⁶³ The growth of the cosmos proceeded from the centre outwards, and, once in being, it is probably believed to be everlasting.²⁶⁴



The fourth section of “Pythagoras” is a subtly complex composition. The poetic voice elaborates on the notion of light as *the unmoving tool* (“*Light / does not move, but light is the tool*”) present at the moment of creation of the *kosmos*. As in Pound’s *The Pisan Cantos*, light (and transparency) is of the essence and at stake here. Light is knowledge, the final or definitive grasping of the mechanisms at work beneath the world of appearances. It is understanding, the understanding that number is a form of transparency that accounts for the principle of all things in the *kosmos*. Two movements are discernible in the design of the piece. First, once the universal principle of transparency (conceived as both the perfect harmony of the real and as knowledge of its workings) is announced, the speaking voice comes to dwell on different manifestations of transparency in the second stanza. Second, the third stanza, in italics, brings together a handful of words that the poet explicitly

²⁶⁰ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 245.

²⁶¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 246.

²⁶² Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 277. Aëtius, II, 9, 1 (*Dox.* 338).

²⁶³ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 276.

²⁶⁴ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 281.

attributes to Pythagoras, but are a poetic rendering of some of the key ideas in his philosophical thinking. These words spoken by what looks like a poetic persona of Pythagoras are a good example of what Bringhurst means when he refers to the precious comingling of thinking and singing – ideas dance and sing in these words as uttered by Pythagoras reincarnated in the poet for a while. Turning back to the first movement for the soul in this composition, it might be wise to remember that Bringhurst’s poems are rich in abundant references to sharp-edged objects, to clarity, stone, speech, silence and subtle motion, all of which somehow coalesce into the complex image or vortex depicted in these lines:

Shaving the obsidian
to the clarity of the clean talon;
leaving no furrow or footprint or stripped stem,
no trace of rest between two intervals of motion;
the tongue to cast no shadow
on the word, the hand no shadow on the stone.

In search of enlightenment for the mind (in an attempt to gain an insight into the essence of the world), the poetic voice embarks on an epistemological process whereby the real is stripped of all that is superfluous ornament and dispensable attributes. Confronted with a world of which number is the ultimate substratum, the Pythagorean mind seeks to reduce everything down to the most elemental clarity. To explain the world in numerical terms means that form is more important than matter, that phenomena are not interesting in themselves but rather as the embodiment or expression of universal principles ultimately reducible to number, to mathematical equations or theorems of universal validity. And the mind remains intact in its dealings with the things of this world: the obsidian is shaved to the clarity of the clean talon of the prey bird that kills with a kind of amoral beauty and flies away with a tremendous naturalness; the mind leaves no trace behind (no furrow, no footprint, no stripped stem), while the tongue (speech) leaves no shadow on the word and the hand, endowed with a natural capacity for destruction, leaves no shadow on the stone either. A precious and beautiful transparency is achieved in the culmination of the process. It points to the harmony of the *kosmos* and, at the same time, at the harmony the mind attains deep inside in trying to get to know its like (for *like knows like*).

The second part or movement of the poem consists of a tessellation of gnomic statements that have the texture of transcendence. The reader is inevitably reminded of the sense of secrecy that must have surrounded the Pythagorean brotherhood and their teachings, passed within the sect with extreme caution and with a sense of awe-inspiring devotion or mysticism. To the Pythagoreans, intellectual discoveries of universal principles at work beneath the realm of appearances were tantamount to undergoing a religious experience. At this distance of time, the poet makes a tremendous effort to salvage the flesh and the spirit of whatever words rich in cryptic meaning Pythagoras must have uttered to convey his oral teachings to his disciples – those still “*mumbling over multipliers*” (section 2 of “Pythagoras”) centuries later after the death of their revered master in the temple in Metapontum. Seemingly, there appears to be no connection at all between these statements, which have in common an intense lyricism conveyed through elegantly simple words:

*Darkness arcs over the head, said Pythagoras.
Forget the head. Paint portraits of the mind.
Darkness flows between closed fingers.
Draw me the god without the body. Only*

*the intangible tangency, sculpture like the plucked string,
speech on the model of inaudible singing.
The plane is tuned by tightening the line.*

The density of meaning (or semantic density) of these lines is simply astonishing and inexhaustible. No synthesis or rephrasing can pin down all the subtle nuances of meaning that Bringhurst manages to convey in these lines with such impressive dexterity and linguistic economy. However, beneath these statements are a handful of essential aspects closely connected to Pythagoreanism that can be briefly summarized as follows: (a) the firm belief in the power of the mind to unveil universal principles (i.e., number) as the basis of all things in this world; (b) curiosity in the face of the awe-inspiring grandeur of the *kosmos* (a structured whole of beauty and perfection), which is the proper object of study of the immortal human soul, inclined by nature to seek the perfection of its like and return to the divine through the path of *philosophia*; and, closely related to the two previous aspects, (c) the fundamental dichotomy of individual and universal soul, microcosm and macrocosm, which are brought together in the Pythagorean theory of ‘the harmony of the spheres’. The Pythagoreans posited number as the principle on which heaven and the whole universe depended. Beneath this doctrine lay an “attempt to explain the whole vast cosmic plan by reference to the basic discovery of the founder: the all-pervading influence of, and intimate connexion between, the laws of mathematics and of music.”²⁶⁵ The notion of ‘the harmony of the spheres’ is therefore a tremendous mathematical-musical-cosmological synthesis. Their extraordinary theory of the ‘harmony of the spheres’ held a tremendous fascination for later generations of the ancient world, as well as for the humanists of the Renaissance and the Elizabethan writers. In one of the extant fragments, the Roman bishop Hippolytus (*Ref.* 1, 2, 2, *Dox.* p. 55) puts it succinctly: “In this way Pythagoras showed the monad to be god, and having made a profound study of the nature of number he asserted that the cosmos sings and is harmoniously constructed, and he was the first to reduce the motion of the seven planets to rhythm and melody.”²⁶⁶ The notes are sounded simultaneously as the heavenly bodies are revolving all the time, and the combined effect is musical and pleasant if we could hear it.²⁶⁷

In his poem, Bringhurst evokes all these ideas only indirectly, tangentially as it were. *Darkness* is meant to evoke the incommensurability of the *kosmos*, the mystery inherent in it, and the sense of awe-inspiring grandeur that surrounds it to the eyes of the Pythagoreans. That “*darkness flows between closed fingers*” means that the infinite is everywhere and possibly that there is no way of knowing anything at all once and for all. The truth is elusive; it loves

²⁶⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 295. Plato agreed with this theory and incorporated the notion of the melody of the stars in his own myth at the end of the *Republic*, by saying that “the sounds were produced not by the moving stars themselves, but by the voice of a Siren stationed on the circle of each.” *Ibid.*, p. 295.

²⁶⁶ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 298.

²⁶⁷ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 299. Aristotle had some objections to make to the Pythagoreans’ doctrine of the harmony of the spheres. But in so doing, he provides an excellent account of the whole theory in *De Caelo* (291a8) says: “It follows that the theory that music is produced by their movements [*sc.* the movements of the planets and the outer heaven], because the sounds they make are harmonious, although ingeniously and brilliantly formulated by its authors, does not contain the truth. It seems to some that bodies so great must inevitably produce a sound by their movement: even bodies on the earth do so, although they are neither so great in bulk nor moving at so high a speed, and as for the sun and moon, and the stars, so many in number and enormous in size, all moving at a tremendous speed, it is incredible that they should fail to produce a noise of surpassing loudness. Taking this as their hypothesis, and also that the speeds of the stars, judged by their distances, are in the ratios of the musical consonances, they affirm that the sound of the stars as they revolved is concordant. To meet the difficulty that none of us is aware of this sound, they account for it by saying that the sound is with us right from birth and has thus no contrasting silence to show it up; for voice and silence are perceived by contrast with each other, and so all mankind is undergoing an experience like that of a coppersmith, who becomes by long habit indifferent to the din around him.” *Ibid.*, p. 296.

to hide, as Herakleitos puts it in one of the surviving fragments. “*Forget the head. Paint portraits of the mind.*” is a two-fold injunction that invites the star-gazer to forget about his own narcissistic self and to pay attention to *what is*, to what the mind makes of what the senses perceive in the form of eternal and elemental mathematical truths. “*The god without the body*” is possibly number, the ordering principle at the basis of *what is*, and “*The plane is tuned by tightening the line*” is intended as a reference to the Pythagoreans’ notion that point evolves into line, line into plane, and plane into the solid bodies that make up the sensible objects of the world (this is the so-called ‘fluxion theory’). Also, “*the plucked string*” and “*inaudible singing*” refer to the celestial music of the spheres, produced by the subtle motion of the heavenly bodies up above in the sky. The whole theory rests on the metaphor of the *kosmos* as a musical instrument of gigantic proportions as it were. A speech based on this inaudible singing is posited as the best option possible: it would certainly have the texture of transparency and intellectual precision, as well as the beauty and order of the *kosmos* out there.



The fifth and closing section of “Pythagoras” concerns music, silence and darkness, but also the immortality of the soul, which is one of the most fundamental tenets of Pythagoreanism. “*Do not drink the darkness,*” Pythagoras is made to say in this poem, and the words are strongly reminiscent of Dylan Thomas’ “Do not go gentle into that good night”. But we do know that the soul is immortal for the Pythagoreans, who believed in metempsychosis. The soul travels incessantly from one body into another through the cycle of rebirths (the wheel of reincarnation) until it reunites itself with the divine, for the human soul is but a little spark of the universal soul that pervades the *kosmos*, which dances and sings endlessly, forever. In this sense, the discovery that the world of nature was constructed on a mathematical plan was essential to the Pythagoreans. It is no exaggeration to say that the discovery of an independent numerical order inherent in the nature of things must have been an intoxicating experience to them. Leaving aside the possibility of any material *arche* (forgetting about matter or physical stuff like water or air or fire or the *apeiron*, which the Milesians and Ionian philosophers posited as the ultimate principle of reality), they attempted to defined things in terms of form.²⁶⁸ Numbers were the essential basis of everything, and so Pythagoras looked for numerical relationships in physical, audible sound too. In all probability the discovery of mathematics doing its subtle work in the formation of the musical scale prompted them, “by an audacious stroke of generalization, to explain the whole of reality in mathematical terms.”²⁶⁹ Nowadays, we know that everything in the physical world is described in terms of numerical equations. What we perceive as physical qualities (colour, light, heat or masses) is replaced by numbers and mathematical formulae, and so Pythagoras and his disciples were right to affirm that “things are numbers.”²⁷⁰ In number lay the key not only to musical sounds but to the whole of nature. There was a mathematics of nature that they could easily read in the book of the *kosmos* with astonishing dexterity. After all, it must be remembered that the Pythagoreans were not concerned with finding the basic material stuff of the universe, nor with explaining the physical changes by which it had come into being, but with the explanation of order and beauty and fitness.²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ As Guthrie puts it, the “genius of Pythagoras lay in his dismissal of the physical and individual in favour of the formal element as real and permanent.” *Ibid.*, p. 317.

²⁶⁹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 237.

²⁷⁰ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 238.

²⁷¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 226.

Bringham's short poem, consisting of only seven lines, looks like one of those surviving fragments of pre-Socratic philosophy preserved in an ancient papyrus. It conveys something of the quiet deep amazement the Pythagoreans must have felt in the face of the inner order of nature, as they discovered "the independent existence of a numerical scheme behind the musical scale. The existence of an inherent order, a numerical organization within the nature of sound itself."²⁷² To the Pythagoreans everything was an embodiment of number, including such abstractions as justice, mixture or opportunity. In this context, the fundamental discovery of Pythagoras was "the numerical ratios that determined the concordant intervals: he found numerical laws for the relations of the notes of the octave."²⁷³ The idea of the musical relations in the octave represented by simple numerical ratios is beneath Bringham's words on the music of silence pervading the *kosmos*:

Octaves of silence
do not exist and do not echo. Intervals
of darkness disassemble
endlessly. *Do not drink
the darkness*, said Pythagoras.
The soul cannot become pure darkness.
Possibly. Possibly.

These lines are, of course, also reminiscent of the theory of the harmony of the spheres, of the celestial music produced by the motion of the heavenly bodies. To the Pythagoreans mathematics, music and the universe were inextricably linked to one another. Guthrie explains this elemental aspects in these illuminating words:

[The Pythagoreans were] acknowledged experts in astronomy, harmonics and the science of number. They regarded all these studies as closely allied, because in their view the key to the understanding both of the movements of the stars and of the notes in the musical scale lay in the establishment of a numerical relation. We may allow ourselves to note that the actual union of astronomy and harmonics in the remarkable theory of the 'harmony of the spheres', adopted by Plato, is described and attested as Pythagorean in the same century by Aristotle. This is the view that physical objects moving as rapidly as the heavenly bodies must necessarily produce a sound; that the intervals between the several planets and the sphere of the fixed stars correspond mathematically to the intervals between the notes of the octave, and that therefore the sound which they produce has a definite musical character.²⁷⁴

There is a music of silence in the universe which humans do not appear to hear any more, probably because we desperately need to cleanse our senses first so as to be able to return

²⁷² Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 225.

²⁷³ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 221. Guthrie says that "The discovery of Pythagoras, that the basic intervals of Greek music could be represented by the ratios 1:2, 3:2, 4:3, made it appear that the *kosmos* – order and beauty – was imposed on the chaotic range of sound by means of the first four integers 1, 2, 3 and 4. These add up to 10, which provided striking confirmation, if it was not the actual ground, of the Pythagorean belief that the number 10 'was something perfect, and contained in itself the whole nature of number' (Arist. *Metaph.* 986a8). This number they represented graphically by the figure known as tetractys, which became a sacred symbol for them." *Ibid.*, pp. 224-225. And somewhere else, Guthrie adds: "In calling certain intervals concordant, therefore, the contemporaries of Pythagoras referred to melodic progression. The essential point, however, is that the three intervals of octave, fourth and fifth were regarded as primary, as the elements out of which any musical scale or composition was built. To Pythagoras went the credit of perceiving that this basic framework depended on fixed numerical ratios 1:2 (octave), 3:2 (fifth), 4:3 (fourth). These numbers, of course, represent the rate of vibration of a string, or of the column of air in a pipe." *Ibid.*, p. 223.

²⁷⁴ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 167.

to a primeval state of sensitive alertness to the world, to the real. To the Pythagoreans, the *kosmos* is singing all the time, even if we do not care to listen to what it has to say. “*Octaves of silence / do not exist and do not echo*”, not for us 21st-century citizens of the world that have forgotten that there was a time when humankind raised their eyes to the sky above and saw “portraits of the mind” of everlasting value and truth. To the Pythagoreans, however, there was a music to be heard in the heavens, in the unfathomable darkness of the everlasting *kosmos*, and they made it their legitimate goal in life to learn its beauty and perfection to purify their souls. And indeed Bringhurst’s poem ends with a beautiful meditation on the soul. The two faces of Pythagoreanism – the philosophical and scientific, on the one hand, and the religious and ethical, on the other hand – are inseparable till the end. Pythagoras taught the doctrine of the transmigration of the soul, which was immortal. It owed “its immortality to its essential kinship with the divine, universal soul, and so it may hope to return to its divine source when purified.”²⁷⁵ But, the soul is a *harmonia* too. “The immortality of the soul depended on its being a harmony, but a harmony in the sense in which the cosmos was a harmony. That is, a harmony not ultimately of physical opposites but of numbers.”²⁷⁶ That “*the soul cannot become pure darkness*” possibly means that the soul is immortal, that death is no extinction of the soul, as it lives on in a disembodied state in the world until its next incarnation.²⁷⁷ From a different standpoint, Bringhurst’s words might be interpreted as meaning that possibly the human soul is incapable of achieving such beauty and such perfection as is discernible in the “pure darkness” of the universe. This is just a reminder that we should try to make of our life (*Lebenslauf*) an authentic or meaningful *Gestalt* that is imbued with the unsurpassed beauty and order and perfection of the world at large, of which we are but a tiny part.

IX · DEMOKRITOS

“Demokritos”²⁷⁸, the ninth composition of *The Old in Their Knowing*, is a complex eight-part poem and a moving meditation on the atomic theory as propounded by the materialism of Demokritos, another essential pre-Socratic thinker who breathed and thought intensely and beautifully almost 25 centuries ago. In Bringhurst’s poem all eight parts are tessellated into a perfect *Gestalt* that makes sense as each single part flows into the next without abrupt transitions. However, the way the eight sections that make up “Demokritos” have been arranged does not follow the lineal unfolding or progression of the philosopher’s thinking. Thus, whereas sections 2 and 6 concern the fundamentals of Demokritos’ physical doctrine

²⁷⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 306.

²⁷⁶ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 315.

²⁷⁷ Several relevant fragments are worth quoting in this respect: (1) Clem. Alex. *Strom.* III, 17 (DK, 44B14): “The words of Philolaus are also worth quoting. This Pythagorean says: ‘The ancient theological writers and prophets also bear witness that the soul is yoked to the body as a punishment, and buried in it as in a tomb.’” (2) Claudianus Mamertus, *De Statu Animae*, II, 3 (DK, 44B22): “Concerning the human soul he [Philolaus] says this: the soul is set in the body by means of number and an immortal and incorporeal harmony. And a little later: the soul loves the body, because without it can make no use of the senses. But when separated from it by death, it leads a disembodied life in the world.” (3) Macrobius, *Somm. Scip.* I, 14, 19 (DK, 44A23): “Pythagoras and Philolaus called the soul a harmony.” Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 311.

²⁷⁸ “Demokritos” was first published as C.34 • “Demokritos.” *Pearl* (Odense, Denmark) 7 (Summer 1979): 10-11. It was reprinted in A.14 *The Beauty of the Weapons*, A.47 *The Calling*, A.76 *The Old in Their Knowing*, and A.92 *Selected Poems*. It was also reprinted as (1) B.18 *The New Canadian Poets, 1970–1985*, edited by Dennis Lee. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985: pp. 26-39. Contributions: “These Poems, She Said”, “Deuteronomy”, “Demokritos”, “Leda and the Swan”, “The Stonecutter’s Horses” (all rpt. from A.14), “Sarah” (rpt. from A.23); and as (2) C.64 [Three Poems] *In Forma di Parole* (Bologna) terza serie 2.1 (1994): 176-186. Contents: “Song of the Summit”, “Demokritos”, “The Song of Ptahhotep” (all rpt. from A.14).

about the constitution of the *kosmos* (structured around such fundamental concepts as atoms, motion, being and void), sections 3 and 4 are a meditation on his theory of knowledge and on perception as explained by the sage's materialistic theory, sections 1 and 5 are concerned with ethical issues, and sections 7 and 8 are mysterious compositions that speak of the earth, the mind and the eagle's bones in the form of an illuminating afterthought or coda. These four pairs of sections embody the complex, kaleidoscopic thinking of this unique man who had a tremendous impact on subsequent Western philosophy. Whereas the Milesian thinkers posited one single *arche* as the ultimate principle of all existing things, Demokritos postulated the existence of a plurality of *archai* (the so-called *atoms*) that resembled the Parmenidean One in all respects as the essential substratum of reality, which also had room for the void. We might start at the beginning, though, asking ourselves about the essential facts of Demokritos' life, writings and philosophical thinking.

Knowledge of the Greek sage's life is only fragmentary and largely limited to untrustworthy tradition. Demokritos²⁷⁹ (b. c. 460 BCE – d. c. 370) remains a central figure in the development of the atomic theory of the universe. It seems that he was a wealthy citizen of Abdera, in Thrace; that his curiosity and love of knowledge prompted him to undertake voyages of study and to travel widely in the East²⁸⁰ (Egypt, Persia and Babylon, and maybe Ethiopia and India too) in search of wisdom; and that he reached an advanced old age (probably over a hundred).²⁸¹ His undoubted teacher was the philosopher Leucippus, but the pupil was a much more prolific author and displayed a keen interest not only in the ultimate constitution of reality but also in ethical matters.²⁸² He was something of an encyclopaedic writer,²⁸³ producing an output only comparable in volume and range of interests to that of Aristotle. According to Diogenes Laertius, his works numbered over 60 (ethical, physical, mathematical, musical, technical and unclassified), but, unfortunately, only a few hundred fragments have survived, mostly from his treatises on ethics. The overall impression one gathers from the extant fragments is one of “serenity, good humour and fortitude”,²⁸⁴ which is in accordance with his surviving ethical precepts. Indeed, his ethical system, founded on a practical basis, posited an ultimate good which consisted in a sort of ataraxia or undisturbed peace of mind – a state in which the soul lives peacefully and tranquilly, unaffected by fear or superstition or any other negative feeling. And yet, Demokritos' major contribution is the so-called atomic theory. “Atomism,” claims Guthrie, “is the final, and most successful, attempt to rescue the reality of the physical world from the fatal effects of Eleatic logic by means of a pluralistic theory.”²⁸⁵ Whereas Eleatic philosophy held that *what is* must be *one and immovable* (for there is no such thing as void

²⁷⁹ See the entry on ‘Democritus’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 8, pp. 4496-4497.

²⁸⁰ Fragment 246 reads: “Foreign travel teaches the self-sufficient life: barley bread and straw to lie on are the best cures for hunger and weariness.” It seems Demokritos spoke these words from his own experience. See W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. II, p. 387.

²⁸¹ Diogenes Laertius, 9.41 and 34, according to Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 386.

²⁸² Guthrie explains that Demokritos had “more universal interests” and that he “wrote a large number of published works which were carefully edited and highly praised for their purely literary merits.” See *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. II, p. 383.

²⁸³ Guthrie says that “the total is impressive both in amount and in scope. [...] It includes treatises on theory of substance (*physis*), cosmology, astronomy, geography, physiology, medicine, sensation, epistemology, mathematics, magnetism, botany, musical theory, linguistics, agriculture, painting [...] and other topics. Pronouncements from many of these works are cited by later writers, but the works themselves have not survived, in spite of Cicero's eulogies of their style.” [Cicero, *De or.* 1.11.49.] *Ibid.*, p. 388.

²⁸⁴ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 387. Guthrie adds that “his sobriquet of the Laughing Philosopher, moved to mirth by the follies of mankind as Heraclitus to tears, is first alluded to by Cicero and best known from Horace.” [Cicero, *De or.* 2.58.235 and Horace, *Ep.* 2.1.194.]

²⁸⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 389.

and so without a void separate from it reality cannot move) and that things can be no more than one if there is nothing to keep them apart, Leucippus and Demokritos' atomic theory posits the existence of a plurality of beings (atoms) moving in the void, which accounts for the existence of an infinite number of worlds. As Aristotle puts it:

But such being, he [Leucippus] claimed, is not a unity. It consists of a plurality of things infinite in number and too small to be seen. They move in the void (for there is void), and their combination causes coming-to-be, their separation dissolution. They act and are acted upon as they happen to touch (for in this way they are not one) and generate by coming together and interlocking. A true unity can never give rise to multiplicity, nor a true plurality produce unity. That is impossible, but as Empedocles and others say that things are acted upon by means of pores, so he claimed that alteration and every form of being-acted-on takes place in this way: dissolution and destruction occur by means of the void, as also does growth when solid bodies slip in [*s.c.* to fill empty spaces].²⁸⁶

Now, Demokritos' physical and cosmological doctrines were an elaborated and systematized version of those of his teacher, Leucippus, as explained in the quote above by Aristotle himself. The ultimate principles of reality are atoms and the void, which accounts for the world's changing phenomena. Demokritos asserted that the void had an equal right with reality, or being, to be considered existent. And the admission of void brought with it the possibility of plurality and motion. He conceived of the void as a vacuum, an infinite space in which an infinite number of atoms that make up being (i.e., the physical world) moved. The Parmenidean Being is thus replaced with multiple beings that satisfy the Eleatic conditions of being: "what is must be a plenum", "generation and destruction in a literal sense are impossible", and "what is one cannot become many, nor many things one."²⁸⁷ Atoms, these most elementary of realities, are the basis of the first European theory of the atomic structure of matter.²⁸⁸ These atoms are eternal and invisible; absolutely small, so small that their size cannot be diminished (hence the name *atomon*, or "indivisible"); absolutely full and incompressible, as they are without pores and entirely fill the space they occupy; and homogeneous, differing only in shape, arrangement, position, and magnitude. But, while atoms thus differ in quantity, differences of quality are only apparent, owing to the impressions caused on our senses by different configurations and combinations of atoms. Because all phenomena are composed of the same eternal atoms, it may be said that *nothing comes into being or perishes* in the absolute sense of the words, although the compounds made out of the atoms are liable to increase and decrease, explaining a thing's appearance and disappearance, or "birth" and "death". Furthermore, Demokritos devoted considerable attention to perception and knowledge. He asserted that sensations are changes produced in the soul by atoms emitted from other objects that impinge on it; the atoms of the soul can be affected only by the contact of other atoms. We shall turn to this below.



As pointed out above, Bringham's poem in eight parts focuses primarily on Demokritos' atomic theory of reality, on his theory of knowledge (and perception), on ethical precepts, and on other seemingly unclassified concerns of the ancient sage. *Philosophia* is literally *love of wisdom*, and so it is only natural that such a man imbued with a intense zeal for knowledge should have directed his attention to those fundamental

²⁸⁶ Aristotle (*GC*, 325a23), quoted by Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 390.

²⁸⁷ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 390.

²⁸⁸ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 392.

questions that have occurred time and again throughout the history of Western philosophy: What is the essence of the real? To what extent are the senses reliable and knowledge of the world possible? How should human beings conduct their lives to make them meaningful works of art and achieve happiness? It might be wise to turn to the philosopher's meditation on *physis* (sections 2 and 6 of "Demokritos") in the first place. The principles of his materialistic atomism are condensed with intense lyricism in section 2 of Bringhurst's poem. The main starting point for this magnificent section of Bringhurst's poem is a fragment lifted from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* A4, 985b4 (DK 67A6), which W.K.C. Guthrie renders into English as follows:

Leucippus and his associate Democritus name plenum and void as elements, calling them 'being' and 'not-being': the full and solid is being, the empty and rare is not-being. Hence they say that being exists no more than not being, because void exists no less than body. These are the material causes of things, and just as those who posit a single underlying substance generate everything else by its affections, so they too say that the differences [*sc.* in the atoms] are responsible for everything else. These according to them are three: shape, arrangement and position, for they say that they differ in 'rhythm', 'touching', and 'turning'. 'Rhythm' is shape, 'touching' is arrangement, and 'turning', position. For instance, A differs from N in shape, AN from NA in arrangement, Z from N in position.²⁸⁹

In Bringhurst's hands this fragment becomes a precious short lyric poem where the line separating poetry and philosophy is completely blurred; in a sense this is philosophical poetry, but in another sense it is always the poetry that takes control. To borrow Bringhurst's words, here ideas sing and dance beautifully to the rhythm of *what is* and *what isn't*. This is a supreme example of *melopoeia* and, particularly, of *logopoeia*, the dancing of the intellect among words:

What is is no more than what isn't;
the is, no advance on the isn't. Is
is isn't with rhythm.
Touching and turning the isn't is is.
Not being is basic. As silence is,
isn't is – during, before, and after the sound.
Isn't is everywhere. In you. Outside.
Presence is absence keeping time.

Though the language might sound paradoxical or enigmatic, this section enunciates the two basic principles of reality with utmost clarity: *what is* (being or atoms that make up the physical world) and *what isn't* (the void). The void has the same right to existence as atoms themselves; they are in fact the only ultimate existing things in this universe. On the general nature of atoms, Guthrie explains that "What exists must still be ungenerated and imperishable, unchangeable, incapable of being added to or subtracted from,

²⁸⁹ See Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 392-393. Kirk et al. render this fragment from the original Greek into English slightly differently: "Leucippus and his associate Democritus hold that the elements are the full and the void; they call them what is and what is not respectively. What is is full and solid, what is not is void and rare. Since the void exists no less than body, it follows that what is not exists no less than what is. The two together are the material causes of existing things. And just as those who make the underlying substance one generate other things by its modifications, and postulate rarefaction and condensation as the origin of such modifications, in the same way these men too say that the differences [*sc.* in their elements] are the causes of other things. They hold that these differences are three – shape, arrangement and position; being, they say, differs only in 'rhythm, touching and turning', of which 'rhythm' is shape, 'touching' is arrangement and 'turning' is position; for A differs from N in shape, AN from NA in arrangement, and Z from N in position." See Kirk et al., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 414.

homogeneous, finite and a plenum, continuous and indivisible. ‘What is’ may have void outside it, but none (and hence no movement) within.’²⁹⁰ Being the underlying matter of all things, atoms have no qualities in themselves and their essential characteristic is precisely indivisibility²⁹¹ (hence the name *atom*). They are infinite in number and in shape, so that they do represent an infinite variety of form. Being invisible, so small as to escape our senses altogether, they are the basis of all visible and sensible objects.²⁹² The whole sensible world is accounted for “on the supposition that there are millions of such solid, imperishable entities of microscopic size, surging in infinite space.”²⁹³ Their motion is eternal and inherent in the atoms themselves, and so “*Is / is isn’t with rhythm*”, which emphasizes the dynamic aspect and ceaseless movement of atoms moving in all directions in the void. On this shifting of atoms in relation to each other depends the whole nature of the phenomenal world. “*Touching and turning the isn’t is is*”, that is to say, atoms collide and combine with one another amid the void. *Rhythm*, *touching* and *turning* are three key words in this context, for they refer to shape, arrangement and position of the atoms themselves, as they interact with one another amid the void. These are, in fact, the only differences between atoms without sensible qualities whose ultimate substance is one and the same. In addition, that “*Not being is basic*” means that the void is as fundamental as atoms are. Here the poet makes use of an eloquent simile: *not being* is to silence what *being* is to sound. Or, to put it differently, in much the same way silence surrounds or punctuates sound (during, before and after it occurs), *not being* (the void) is ubiquitous and it surrounds *being* all the time – “*Isn’t is everywhere. In you. Outside.*” The void is inescapable and it makes plurality of eternal beings and their motion possible. The verse line “*Presence [being] is absence [the void] keeping time*” concludes the section. No more extra words are needed to convey the sense that atoms and the void are the two elements needed to make a *kosmos*. Void and being are then eternally coexistent, simultaneous and ubiquitous.

“*The uncountable rhythms uncountable / worlds – more in some places than others.*” These are the opening words of section 6 of “Demokritos”, another jewel-like composition of rare beauty and perfection dealing with an infinite number of microscopic atoms let loose in finite empty space. The word *rhythm*²⁹⁴ is the word Demokritos used to refer to the shapes of the atoms. Atoms are thus infinite in number and in form. Being infinite, the number of worlds must have also been infinite. Indeed, this little poem concerns essentially the notion of infinite atoms and the plurality of worlds, as well as the nature of their motion, even if Aristotle complained that Leucippus and Demokritos left the cause and nature of this motion unexplained.²⁹⁵ Just as the atoms are uncaused and eternal, so too, according to

²⁹⁰ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 392.

²⁹¹ Guthrie claims that indivisibility “followed from their faithfulness to the pattern of the One of Parmenides, its homogeneity and fullness. [...] Leucippus proved the indivisibility of the atoms thus: each of the things that is, *is* in the proper sense. In what is there is nothing that is not, hence no void. Division cannot occur without void, therefore it is impossible for them to be divided...” *Ibid.*, pp. 395-396. In this sense, “each atom was to be a reproduction of the One” of Parmenides. *Ibid.*, p. 396. And somewhere else, Guthrie claims that the primary condition that atoms had to satisfy were the Eleatic canons of unity: “What is one must be free from any possibility of change, not susceptible to addition or subtraction, a plenum, continuous and indivisible. It is a single whole, without parts, on the primitive logical ground that one and many are contradictory attributes which cannot apply to the same thing. [...] The infinite divisibility of matter was inconceivable.” *Ibid.*, p. 503.

²⁹² Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 394.

²⁹³ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 392.

²⁹⁴ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 458, note 2.

²⁹⁵ Aristotle says in *Metaphysics* A4, 985b19: “But the question of movement, whence or how it belongs to things, they too, like the others, carelessly neglected.” And in *De caelo*, 300b8 he says: “Leucippus and Democritus, who say that the primary bodies are always in motion in the infinite void, ought to tell us what sort of motion and what is their natural motion.” And in *Metaphysics* 1071b31, Leucippus is coupled with

Demokritos, is motion, and so it is idle to look for its cause. It remains clear that it is void that makes the motion of the atoms possible, but this motion has no temporal beginning and there is not a first active agent of motion.²⁹⁶ On the exact nature of motion, Bringhurst says in his poem: “*Motion, on closer inspection, appears / to be limited to reverberation and falling.*” Guthrie explains that there have been two contending views regarding the nature of motion as postulated by Demokritos: “one, that it was a confused and aimless motion in all directions, the other, that it was a downward fall, or rain, of atoms due to weight.”²⁹⁷ It seems that the first view is the correct and generally accepted one. The origin of the universe is as follows. The original motion of the atoms was in all directions – it was a sort of “vibration”; hence there resulted collisions and, in particular, a whirling movement, whereby similar atoms were brought together and united to form larger bodies and worlds.²⁹⁸ Thus, in their eternal jostling some of the atoms are fused together, become entangled and generate perceptible bodies.²⁹⁹ This happened not as the result of any purpose or design but rather merely as the result of “necessity” – i.e., it is the normal manifestation of the nature of the atoms themselves. Atoms and void being infinite in number and extent, and motion having always existed, there must always have been an infinite number of worlds, all consisting of similar atoms in various stages of growth and decay.

Let us now dwell on the notion of innumerable worlds for a while. Bringhurst speaks of “*uncountable / worlds – more in some places than others*” in his poem. And there is an extant fragment preserved by Hippolytus (Ref. 1.13.2, A40) worth quoting in this particular context which might have been the source of inspiration for the poet’s meditation on the plurality of universes. Demokritos said that

there are innumerable worlds of different sizes. In some there is neither sun nor moon, in others they are larger than in ours and others have more than one. These worlds are at irregular distances, *more in one direction and less in another*, and some are flourishing, others declining. Here they come into being, there they die, and they

Plato and presented as saying that motion is everlasting, “but from what cause, or what kind it is, they do not say, nor the reason why it is in this direction or in that.” Quoted by Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 396-397.

²⁹⁶ Guthrie claims that “Pre-Parmenidean Ionians had also said that motion was eternal, but for them this conception was inevitably linked with that of life. What owed its motion to no cause outside itself was alive; if its motion was eternal, as that of the *arché* must be, it was not only alive but divine. The materialism of Leucippus and Democritus has restored the idea of motion as natural to matter and hence belonging to it from all time, but from this conception they have removed the last traces of animism. The motion is purely lifeless and mechanical. It happened ‘automatically’ or ‘of necessity’.” This was made possible by one thing only: the conscious postulation of an absolute void. Thus, in rejecting a first active agent of motion, they were closer than Aristotle to modern European scientists since Galileo and Descartes. *Ibid.*, p. 399.

²⁹⁷ Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 300-301.

²⁹⁸ Guthrie explains it in these terms: “Accounts of the cosmogony of Leucippus start from the picture of countless atoms of various shapes and sizes in motion in empty space. They jostle, collide and become entangled, and here and there a complex of them sets up the kind of vortex-like motion which was believed necessary to create a world. The formation of the cosmos is then explained as flowing from the action of the vortex and its effect on the subsequent motion of the atoms.” *Ibid.*, p. 400. And again: “Leucippus and Democritus saw no reason to offer a positive cause for the motion of the atoms save the fact that they were free in infinite void... [...] Motion was to be accepted as an inherent and eternal characteristic of matter when unimpeded by any obstacle. It was a confused and irregular motion in all directions...” *Ibid.*, p. 404.

²⁹⁹ Consider this relevant fragment by Simplicius (*Cael.* 242.21, 67A14): “These atoms, separate one from the other in the void which is infinite, and differing in shape, size, position and order, are in motion in the void, overtake one another and collide. Some rebound at hazard, other become entangled when their shapes, sizes, positions and order are favourable, and thus it happens that they bring about the generation of composite things.” Quoted by Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 405.

are destroyed by collision with one another. Some of the worlds have no animals or vegetable life nor any water.³⁰⁰ [*Italics ours*]

To Demokritos' mind (fr. 34), man was a miniature cosmos (or microcosm³⁰¹) that resembled the world at large (or macrocosm). At their hearts was the same ultimate substratum of indivisible atoms dancing for eternity. As there is no limit to the atoms (or to their unceasing motion and jostling) and no limit to the void where they float and collide in all directions, it is natural to think that innumerable systems or worlds have formed. Our universe is only one of an infinite series of worlds that have been created and then have perished over time, endlessly. Worlds grow towards maturity and then they decline and eventually die, as if they were living organisms. And yet there is no trace of animistic or teleological explanation in this materialistic explanation of reality: beneath this *infinite variety of cosmic systems*³⁰² there are only infinite atoms colliding in infinite void forever. "From all eternity there is an infinite number of atoms of different shapes moving in infinite space with an irregular and aimless motion, and so at irregular distances. Where a large interval of space happens to be empty of them, a whole lot of atoms pours in and for a reason not stated sets up a circular eddy. [...] Only when it takes this circular form does a cosmos result."³⁰³ As they tumble over one another, atoms are attracted to one another, like is drawn to like (a cardinal law of atomism) and worlds come into being.³⁰⁴ However, there is no trace of a cyclical return in any form: "Worlds come into being and pass away, but there is no repetition of *this* world. As the infinite millions of atoms jostle in infinite space

³⁰⁰ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 405.

³⁰¹ Guthrie dwells on this fundamental idea: "It is usually accepted that Democritus was the first known Greek to apply to man the term *microcosm* (*micros kosmos*, i.e. little world-order; the word *kosmos* has by now undoubtedly acquired the meaning 'world', while still emphasizing the element of system and order which distinguishes it from pre-cosmic chaos). [...] Man and world are built out of the same elements, atoms and void, following the same laws. Even the soul-atoms exist outside the human organism, and are breathed in along the air. This however serves only to remind us that even if Democritus coined the phrase, the idea of an intimate relationship between macrocosm and microcosm was far older. The breathing-in of soul from the universe, the kinship of organic and inorganic nature, the association of human goodness and natural bounty in myths of the Golden Age, the emphasis on the identity of elements in ourselves and the universe, the ordering of the whole world on psychological principles of desire and aversion – some or all of these ideas can be traced in Hesiod, in Anaximenes, in the Pythagoreans, in Empedocles or Diogenes of Apollonia." *Ibid.*, pp. 471-472.

³⁰² Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 405.

³⁰³ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 408.

³⁰⁴ Diogenes Laertius has preserved an exhaustive account of the origin of the cosmos according to Leucippus which is worth quoting in full: "The whole is infinite, as aforesaid. Part of it is full and part empty, and these he calls elements. Worlds unlimited in number are formed from these and dissolved into them. The manner of their formation is this. Many bodies [atoms] of all sorts of shapes are cut off from the infinite and stream into a great void, and these when collected in a mass produce a single vortex, following the motion of which they collide and revolve in all sorts of ways and begin to be sorted out, like to like. But when owing to their numbers they can no longer be carried round in equilibrium, the small atoms pass to the void without, as if through a strainer. The rest hold together, become entangled and move in conjunction with one another, so forming a first spherical complex. From this complex a kind of membrane becomes detached, containing within itself bodies of every kind. These whirl round in proportion to the resistance of the centre, and the membrane becomes thin as the contiguous bodies continually flow together by contact in the vortex. In this way the earth was formed, by the cohesion of the bodies which had moved to the centre. The enclosing membrane in turn is augmented by the influx of atoms from outside; and as it whirls around, it adds to itself those that come into contact with it. Some of these become interlocked and form a complex that is wet and muddy at first, but drying out as they are carried round in the universal vortex they finally catch fire and form the substance of the stars.... All the stars are ignited by the speed of their motion.... Just as a cosmos is born, so also it grows, declines and perishes by some sort of necessity, the nature of which he does not specify." Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 406-407.

through infinite time, all sorts of formations will occur. Some may even be identical, but if that happens it is purely by chance.”³⁰⁵

Section 6 closes with an enigmatic three-fold command on the part of the poetic voice. After dwelling on the motion of infinite atoms afloat amid the void, bringing about perceptible things and innumerable worlds for eternity, the speaking voice in the poem addresses a generic ‘you’ to give him/her what looks like three universal pieces of moral advice: “*Never look down without turning. / Never live with your back to the mountains. / Never mend net with your back to the sea.*”³⁰⁶ The mysterious halo surrounding these statements might well evoke the moral precepts (the so-called *acusmata* or *symbola*) of the Pythagoreans themselves, who would comply with a set of rules concerning the abstention from flesh and beans, awkward norms related to the transmigration of souls and metempsychosis, or the sacred mysticism of number, among other aspects. The order not to look down without turning is truly obscure: Does it evoke the eternal motion of atoms, turning in space or falling down? Is it a reminder that everything existing in the cosmos shares an ultimate substratum (or *physis*) made up of atoms dancing in the void? Possibly. The two following pieces of advice do remind readers of the need for them to live in harmony with the surrounding world, as embodied by the mountains (earth) and the sea (water). To acknowledge that mountains and the sea are ultimately made of the same stuff as humans is the noble, moving expression of humility and gratitude in the face of *what is*. *What is* is larger than ourselves and comprises both animate and inanimate things, both human and non-human elements in the cosmos. A certain peace of mind and an ascetic form of living may well lie precisely in this elemental acknowledgement that everything falls into place in this world. *Facing the mountains, be a mountain yourself; mending a net looking at the sea, be the sea yourself*. This is then the final piece of advice: bear in mind that you are a tiny part in the grander scheme of things and that you belong with it.



Sections 3 and 4 of “Demokritos” tackle the matter of perception and the theory of knowledge in the context of atomic materialism. As a matter of fact, Demokritos devoted considerable attention to perception and knowledge. Though he was primarily concerned with investigating the nature of being (ontology), he did not neglect another fundamental question: how and to what extent we humans can know the truth about the world around us. He asserted that sensations are changes produced in the soul by atoms emitted from other objects that impinge on it; the atoms of the soul can be affected only by the contact of other atoms. Section 3 opens with these words: “*That which splits off from the edgeless has edges. / It dries into light, it ignites into fire.*” They are reminiscent of Leucippus’ cosmology as preserved in the fragment by Diogenes Laertius quoted in a footnote above. It is as if atoms were split off from an infinite whole with no edges and they started revolving, gyrating in an infinite variety of movements until like began to search like to fuse into the sensible bodies of the cosmos, with precise contours and shapes. Atoms colliding with one another sometimes “become interlocked and form a complex that is wet and muddy at first, but drying out as they are carried round in the universal vortex they finally catch fire and form the substance of the stars.... All the stars are ignited by the speed of their

³⁰⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 429.

³⁰⁶ These words inevitably bring to one’s mind the closing lines of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986): “Facing the water, be music. / Be still facing fire. / Be laughter. / Facing the earth, be darkness. / Facing the sky, be quiet, wide, and blue.” In these lines all four elemental constituents of reality are brought together: water, fire, earth and sky (air). What these words encourage the reader/hearer to do is to seek to achieve a full communion with the world, of which humans are just a tiny part in the living fabric of things.

motion....” (See note on Diogenes Laertius’ fragment above.) Stars are then made of atoms that catch fire owing to the sheer speed of their motion, to the very rapidity of their rotation. In Leucippus’ cosmology, Guthrie says that “What is wet and earthy is composed of large atoms, whereas fire is a body consisting of spherical atoms of the smallest size. [...] The bulk of fire in the universe is located in its outer regions.”³⁰⁷ Bringhurst’s words in section 3 do make sense now:

Fire and mind I believe to be
round, though knowledge is always
lopsided, like elm leaves.

As atoms collide or get entangled with one another, they produce sensible bodies and compounds. The result is fire, water, an animal, a plant, or a human being. As Guthrie puts it, “large and heavy atoms form the earth, specially light and mobile ones fly outward and become fire, and the atoms of the intermediate bodies water and air must be of correspondingly intermediate size. Only of fire, so far as we know, did Democritus specify a shape, namely round and smooth, and even then it must be remembered that the atoms of the soul [...] are also round.”³⁰⁸ To the other three elements (water, earth and air) Demokritos did not assign a definite shape. We do know for sure that he supposed fire and mind to be made of spherical, tiny atoms. Aristotle (*De anima*, 403b31) says: “Democritus says the soul is fire, and hot, for of the infinite shapes and atoms existing he says the spherical are fire and soul.... Similarly Leucippus.... The round ones are soul, because shapes of this kind are best able to slip through anything and to move other things by their own movement.”³⁰⁹ Hence this they have at least in common: fire and soul consist of spherical atoms of the smallest size possible. The soul has a fiery nature, as it were. With their spherical perfection sharply contrasts knowledge, which is “*always / lopsided, like elm leaves.*” Knowledge of the real on the part of humans is no straight line, no elemental circle of utter simplicity, for coming to terms with the universe in an attempt to make sense of it is no easy task at all. To Demokritos’ mind, motion is the primary characteristic of life,³¹⁰ but life is also associated with heat. “For thought to take place, the soul must be rightly tempered; and this means that if we become *too hot or too cold*, the mind wanders (Theophr. *Sens.* 58).”³¹¹ So human knowledge is *lopsided* indeed: first we must rely on the first-hand data provided by the senses, which might not be altogether reliable. Then the mind must operate with those basic, raw data to make sense of them and impose order upon the seeming chaos of the real.

Demokritos paid considerable attention to sensation, which is the basis of his theory of knowledge. Both perception and knowledge constitute the irreducible core of meaning in sections 3 and 4 of Bringhurst’s poem. A quotation lifted from Aristotle’s *De sensu*, 4, 442a 29, is the starting point for Bringhurst’s mediation on touch as the ultimate basis of all sensation: “Democritus and the majority of natural philosophers who discuss perception are guilty of a great absurdity; for they represent all perception as being

³⁰⁷ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 411. Guthrie claims that as atoms collide and unite to form sensible bodies, there is a “tendency of larger and heavier bodies to seek the centre of the vortex and smaller and lighter ones to be squeezed outwards” (*ibid.*, p. 413), which is the reason why the bulk of fire is thought to be located in the outer regions of the universe.

³⁰⁸ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 414.

³⁰⁹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 430.

³¹⁰ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 431.

³¹¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 432. Guthrie adds: “Soul has the finest texture and smallest atoms of all, being neither visible nor even perceptible as heat at all.” *Ibid.*, p. 432.

touch.”³¹² The closing lines of the third section already anticipate the theory of knowledge which is at the heart of the fourth section:

Nose, eyes, ears, tongue
and fingers are fingers – all fingers
groping for imprints in the intermittent air.

All five sense organs are explicitly mentioned in a sort of metonymic series (where the nose stands for smell, eyes for vision, ears for hearing, tongue for taste and fingers for touch), and all of them are reduced to fingers, that is to say, to touch. Why should Bringhurst affirm that all sense organs are ultimately fingers?, we might ask ourselves. The answer to this question must be sought in Demokritos’ conception of sensation. As Guthrie claims, “sensation is the result of an alteration in our own bodies, or parts of them, caused by the impact of atoms from without. [...] Every act of sensation must involve actual physical contact, so that all sensation becomes a form of touch.”³¹³ Thus, sensation is not just determined by the atomic composition of the things perceived, but also by an interaction of the things perceived with the body of the perceiving subject. Demokritos postulates the existence of certain passages (*poroi*) in the perceiver’s body which must be of the right size for the things perceived to fit them.³¹⁴ The senses are not completely reliable and provide only ‘bastard knowledge or cognition’ of the world (as opposed to the ‘legitimate cognition’ by reason), for the only existing things in reality are atoms and the void. In this respect, Sextus (*Math.* 7.135-6; fr. 9 of Demokritos) says: “In reality we grasp nothing precisely, but as it shifts according to the disposition both of our body and of the things that enter into and press upon it.”³¹⁵ This means that the truth is elusive, eel-slippery, and so it cannot be pinned down for good. Or, to put it differently, it seems that absolutely precise or complete knowledge of any thing in the world is an impossible battle to win, for it is simply unattainable, out of human reach. Pythagoras is thought to have been the first one to have called himself *philosophos* (*a lover of wisdom*), precisely because he believed that only immortal gods were capable of truly knowing anything for sure and of attaining invaluable, precious wisdom.

In any case, sensible objects are constantly “giving off films of atoms which retain the approximate form of their surfaces and so constitute ‘images’ of them. These actually enter the eye, where they appear as the reflexion of the object, and stimulate the sensation.”³¹⁶ These images emanating from the objects themselves enter the beholder’s eye, and this is how vision occurs. The same happens in the case of the other sense organs: they receive the myriad impressions or emanations emitted by the objects themselves in all directions. They traverse the air and reach their destination: our sense organs. Therefore, Bringhurst speaks of “*fingers / groping for imprints in the intermittent air*” at the close of section 3 to refer to these emanations from physical objects. And section 4 opens with these words: “*Such giants we are, and so hardly / here, mere shapes in the dust, and our / deaf hands yelling so loud, / the diaphanous blood, the diaphanous / bone...*” Humans are conceived as being “giants” (complex combinations of atoms) but also as being nothing more than “shapes in the dust”, with our “deaf hands” (i.e., all sense organs) in search of reliable information about the ultimate truth inherent in the real. Only the blood running through our veins and the

³¹² Kirk et al., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 428.

³¹³ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 438. According to Guthrie, an illuminating fragment from Lucretius (2.434) on sensation as a form of touch is worth quoting here: “Tactus enim, tactus, pro divom numina sancta, / corporis est sensus.”

³¹⁴ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 439.

³¹⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 440.

³¹⁶ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 442.

bones in our skeleton seem to be *diaphanous* or crystal-clear amid such an incessant rain of atoms in the world out there, emitting imprints left lingering just mid-air for our sense organs to catch them rapidly before they vanish into utter nothingness. But sensation, the basis of knowledge, is *lopsided* too. Things leave subtle traces or images floating in an unstable substance such as air is. Guthrie explains this in detail:

... just as a single atom is below the level of perception, so also is a single film or 'image', which is probably only one atom thick. The films are, however, thrown off from their objects in rapid succession, and they (or the air bearing their imprints), entering the eye without interruption, give an effect of continuity. Otherwise there would be no continuity in sensation or unity in the object perceived, any more than in an object whose individual atoms could be perceived singly. It follows that there is not only a threshold of size below which bodies are imperceptible, but also a lower limit of perception in time.³¹⁷

This explanation concerns sight, but the same process applies to the other senses. For instance, hearing is "caused by air entering the empty hollow of the ear. [...] Once the sound has entered, the ear (like the eye in sight) acts only as a channel through which it is dispensed all over the body. In both sight and hearing, we perceive (as Plato later put it) not *with* but *through* the sense-organs: the sensitive soul is ubiquitous in the body."³¹⁸ The mind is the thinking portion of the soul located in the head, whereas soul-atoms alternate with body-atoms throughout the whole body.³¹⁹ In Bringham's own meditation, the myriad impressions gotten from the world outside through the sense organs pervade the whole body, including "the intestine", for the truth is so small (atoms are invisible and indivisible elements) that it dissolves into our living organism as it were:

... and the truth so small as it crumbles it swims
in and out of the intestine,
floats through the ear's net, the eye's net,
the sieve of the palm.

In some of the surviving fragments on the theory of knowledge, Demokritos draws a distinction between the *genuine cognition* of reason and the *bastard cognition* of the senses.³²⁰ In his materialistic conception of the universe, both thought and sensation had to rely on a purely physical mechanism. Thus, Aëtius (4.8.5 and 10, 67 A 30) says: "Leucippus, and Democritus say that sensations and thoughts are alterations of the body. Leucippus, Democritus and Epicurus say that sensation and thought take place by the impact of

³¹⁷ Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 444-445.

³¹⁸ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 447. Thus, sound-particles, emitted by the sources of sound, impinge on the hearer's ear. They first strike the intervening air and conform it to their own likeness. So it is not the actual effluence from the object, but an 'image' of it 'stamped upon' the air, which enters the organ of the perceiver. *Ibid.*, p. 447.

³¹⁹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 433.

³²⁰ In this context, Guthrie dwells on the meaning of the word *sophos* in classical Greek, as well as on the differences between gods and mortals when it comes to cognition of the real. There were five senses (plus a sixth one, common sense, according to Aristotle), but the gods might possess senses lacking to ordinary mortal human beings. It is interesting to notice how the word *sophoi* was used to refer to poets, prophets and religious teachers – extraordinary humans endowed with access to superhuman sources of cognition. To arrogate to oneself the title of *sophos* was to lay claim to divine powers, almost an act of *hybris*. Pythagoras would call himself only *philosophos* (i.e., lover of wisdom), for he believed that "no one is wise save God". "Demokritos believed that poets wrote "under divine inspiration and by a holy spirit", and that prophetic dreams, voices and visions were a reality... Neither poets nor prophets were thinking things out intellectually..." See Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 450.

images from outside. Neither occurs to anyone without the impact of an image.”³²¹ In this context, thought is a form of sensation and so it results from a disturbance of the soul-atoms by atomic complexes from the world outside. In some sense, thought is derived from sensation, for it receives its data from the senses, which are therefore not negligible or dispensable at all. The truth is ultimately in *what appears* to the sense organs and affects the soul of the perceiving subject.³²² And yet the truth is hard to discover (for “it loves to hide”, as old Herakleitos said). Guthrie summarizes Demokritos’ theory of knowledge as preserved in the extant fragments with astonishing economy:³²³

- (1) *What appears to the senses is true.* A few relevant fragments are worth quoting here: (i) Aristotle, *De anima* 404a27: “For Democritus soul and mind were simply identical, for what is true is the phenomenon (or ‘that which appears’). (ii) Aristotle, *GC*, 315b9: “But since they [Leucippus and Democritus] held that truth was in appearance, and the phenomena were infinitely numerous, they made the atomic shapes infinite, so that by changes in the compound the same thing makes a contrary impression on different people...” (iii) Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1009b12: “... in short, because they [pre-Platonic thinkers] identify thought with sensation and that with bodily alteration, they necessarily say that what appears in sensation is true...”
- (2) *What appears to the senses must be rejected.* Sextus in three relevant passages says: (i) *Math.* 7.369 (DK, A110): “Some have abolished all phenomena, like Democritus.” (ii) *Math.* 8.6 (DK, A59): “Plato and Democritus considered that only the objects of thought exist: but Democritus’ reason was that nothing perceptible by sense existed in nature, whereas Plato’s was that sensible things were always becoming but never being.” (iii) *Math.* 8.56 (not included in DK): “Democritus and Plato throw things into confusion by rejecting the senses, annihilating their objects, and holding only to the intelligible.”
- (3) *Sensible phenomena lead to knowledge indirectly.* The mind may attain knowledge through the media of the senses, as is attested by some surviving fragments: (i) Galen, *De medic. empir. fr.* Schöne, 1259, 8 (DK, fr. 125): “Wretched mind, do you take your evidence from us and then throw us down? That throw is your overthrow.” (ii) Theophrastus, *Sens.* 69: “[Democritus said that] things appear different to people in different condition, and again that no one person attains the truth more than any other. This is unreasonable, for it is likely that the better man would see it more clearly than the worse, and the healthy than the sick, for his condition is closer to nature.”
- (4) *Knowledge is altogether impossible.* On the impossibility of absolute knowledge about reality and on the relativity of sensations, Sextus gives voice to a complete pessimism as to the possibility of human knowledge. He says: (i) *Math.* 7.135 (DK, fr. 9): “Democritus in some

³²¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 451. He claims that the term ‘image’ is a technical one meaning “a purely material film of atoms thrown off by an object and travelling to the perceiving subject.” Bringhurst uses the word ‘imprints’ to refer to this in section 3 of “Demokritos”.

³²² Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 452-453. Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 1010a1) criticized the materialism of Leucippus and Demokritos on the ground that “They sought the truth about reality, but on the assumption that the only real things were the sensible.” To Aristotle’s more sophisticated mind, reality was divided into sensible (corporeal) and intelligible (incorporeal), and Demokritos (and all the pre-Socratic philosophers except for Parmenides) had accounted for knowledge in purely materialistic terms. However, Guthrie claims that we tend to overlook a simple fact: that epistemology occupied a humble place in the minds of pre-Socratic philosophers, who were ultimately concerned with *the search for being* (ontology). Thus, their essential interest was investigating being, not the faculties with which humans attempt to grasp being. After Parmenides’ conviction that the objective world in no way corresponds to the unreal, shifting and contradictory world of sense-perception, a lot of intellectual stamina, scientific passion and unshakable faith was required of Demokritos to rescue the purely physical dimension of reality as the basis of knowledge. In the face of the Eleatic challenge, Demokritos sought to affirm the existence of a sensible world where a plurality of elemental atoms in motion was real. *Ibid.*, pp. 454-455.

³²³ Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 456-461.

places abolishes the things that appear to the senses and asserts that none of them appears according to truth but only according to opinion: the truth in things that exist is that there are atoms and void.” (ii) *Math.* 7.136: “And in his *Confirmations*, although he had promised to assign the power of conviction to the senses, he is none the less found condemning them, for he says, ‘In reality we know nothing for certain, but what shifts according to the condition of the body and of the things which enter it and press upon it.’” (iii) *Math.* 7.137: Sextus quotes Demokritos’ own words: “And again he says (fr. 10): ‘That we do not comprehend what is or is not the true character of each thing has often been made clear’; and in the work *On Forms* (fr. 6): ‘Man must learn on this principle that he is separated from reality.’, and again (fr. 7), ‘This argument too shows that we know nothing truly about anything, but each man’s opinion is a reshaping.’, and further (fr. 8), ‘Yet it will be clear that it is impracticable to get to know the true character of each thing.’” Other relevant fragments are these: (i) Demokritos, fr. 117 (Diogenes Laertius 9.72): “In reality we know nothing, for truth is in the depths.” (ii) Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1009b2ff: “Democritus says that either truth does not exist or else it is hidden from us.”

- (5) *Complete skepticism about the possibility of knowledge is unjustified.* Demokritos offered a way out of a pessimistic disbelief in the possibility of knowledge. Though truth is not in sense-impressions themselves, through them the mind might ultimately be led to it. (i) Sextus (*Math.* 7.138-139) says: “But in his *Canons* he says that there are two kinds of cognition, one through the senses and the other through the intellect. Of these he calls that through the intellect ‘legitimate’, and attests its trustworthiness for the judgment of truth, and that through the senses ‘bastard’, denying that it is free from error in the discernment of truth. To quote his actual words: ‘There are two forms of cognition, one legitimate, one bastard. To the bastard belong all these: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch. The other is legitimate, and separate from these.’ Then in preferring the legitimate to the bastard he adds: ‘When the bastard cognition cannot see any further in the direction of smallness, or hear or smell or taste or perceive by touch, but [we advance?] to the more minute....’” Guthrie says that the sentence breaks off at this point, but the meaning is clear: “the senses give us our impressions of the macroscopic world, but when it is a question of understanding the microscopic (where alone reality is to be grasped), the intellect takes over.”³²⁴

The truth is hard to discover, but not impossible to reach. In section 4 of his poem, Bringham speaks of “*the truth so small as it crumbles it swims / in and out of the intestine*”, which is possibly meant as a reference to the tiny size of atoms and also to the soul-atoms pervading the whole body of the perceiving subject. To this, the poet adds a most enlightening afterthought: “[*the truth*] *floats through the ear’s net, the eye’s net, / the sieve of the palm.*” Hearing, sight and touch are all invoked in these lines to indicate that senses provide us but with a tentative approach to the invisible realities of the truth, which is eel-slippery and elusive, hard to catch. Hard as they may try to catch the truth for good, the truth always manages to flee away. Indeed, the sharp-minded Demokritos was convinced that “the truth must lie somewhere beyond sense-perception.”³²⁵ According to the pre-Socratic thinker, no one attains the truth by sense-perception alone, for senses cannot reveal things for what they are – i.e., aggregates of atoms and void. Truth is indeed in the depths, and so we should not stop at the surface of things. Though the senses might look like a barrier separating humans from things and their ultimate essence, in fact they can lead us ultimately to the truth. Hence, knowledge is not impossible of attainment. It is through sensation that we receive our first awareness of sensible reality and of the basic properties of perceptible things. From sense impressions it is then possible to reach the truth beneath actual phenomena, which are windows wide open on the unseen. So long as we do not stop

³²⁴ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 459, note 1.

³²⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 462.

at the surface of things, we can reach an understanding of the nature of invisible realities, which is hidden from the senses.



Unlike Leucippus, Demokritos had also a keen interest in ethics, and so numerous moral precepts have been preserved in the form of luminescent fragments. Sections 1 and 5 of “Demokritos” are an eloquent illustration of the sage’s profound concern with ethics, of his ethical thought. The extant fragments do not suggest though that Demokritos offered a systematic exposition of ethical theory. From a gathering of these fragments it is easy to detect that “the prevailing effect is one of homespun practical wisdom, with a distinct leaning towards prudence and safety first.”³²⁶ The starting point or source of inspiration for the first half of section 1 is fragment 276, which contains an advice against having children. The upbringing of one’s children is treacherous, and “even if it is successful it is full of struggle and care, and its failure exceeds all other anguish (fr. 275). Hence it is best to have none”.³²⁷

Bearing children is even more dangerous,
said Demokritos, than buying a mirror,
yet this wealth strangely easy to come by –
a bed and two books,
bread and fruit and a strong pair of shoes.

These lines are strongly reminiscent of the Thoreau of *Walden* who spent two years living in solitude in the woods near Concord. For Demokritos, the supreme good lies in ascetic living, one that demands nothing more than such simple necessities as sound sleeping, enough reading matter, plain food, and good shoes for walking in the open air. “The right state of the body leads to that spiritual serenity and happiness the attainment of which is man’s chief end,” explains Guthrie.³²⁸ The Greek word *euthymia*, translated as ‘cheerfulness’ or ‘contentment’, defines the goal of living in Demokritos’ ethical thought. In the only extant doxographic fragment on this subject, Diogenes Laertius makes the concept clear: “The *telos*, he holds, is contentment. It is not the same thing as pleasure, as some have erroneously taken it to be. Rather it is that by which the life of the soul is made calm and stable, undisturbed by fear, superstition or any other emotion. He calls it also well-being, and by many other names”.³²⁹ This is also called *ataraxia* or *athambia* – i.e., freedom from disturbance or imperturbability. The legitimate aim of human life is then to avoid any kind of emotional or mental disturbance. Biased in favour of prudence and the safe middle way, Demokritos would advise humans to observe moderation and measure, to keep disturbance to a minimum, to embrace a balanced life and moderation in enjoyment, to practise self-control, and to take the least possible action in public affairs or political activities.³³⁰ To sum up, “moderate pleasures and a balanced life are thought to be necessary for contentment because excess or defect of pleasure ‘causes change and brings about great movements in the soul, and souls that are moved over long intervals are neither stable or contended.’”³³¹ This instability is clearly prejudicial to peace of mind, as explored in the second half of section 1 of “Demokritos”, for which Bringhurst has used another extant fragment as his starting point:

³²⁶ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 491.

³²⁷ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 492.

³²⁸ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 470.

³²⁹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 492-493.

³³⁰ Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 493-494.

³³¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 497.

In spite of bad government there was good weather,
but after the heart the first thing
to sour is always the water.
The demon's summerhouse is the soul.

Bad government does not matter much as long as the weather is good. For good weather is enough for an ascetic person who does not need much apart from strong shoes to walk outdoors. The superior dignity of the soul is out of the question. However, the sage reminds us that the human soul is easily corruptible; the demon likes to spend his summer time in the soul, the poetic voice tells us. The tone of these lines is therefore admonitory. Be careful, seems to say the speaking voice in the poem, lest the demon should decide to stay in your soul and turn it sour, as if it were fresh water.

Section 5 of Bringhurst's poem concerns the theme of death. Demokritos encourages human beings to face death with courage and determination, as it is an inevitable part of life after all: "*A man must be ready for death / always, as sound must always be ready / for silence.*" As Guthrie says, "for Democritus, as later for Epicurus, the individual soul is dispersed at death, and its component particles scattered throughout the universe: 'Democritus and Epicurus say that the soul is mortal, and perishes along the body.' [Aëtius 2.7.4 (68 A 109)] Consequently no man needs make himself miserable by fears of torments and punishments after death."³³² This appears to be the core meaning at the heart of the opening lines of Bringhurst's poem: death and life go hand in hand, in much the same way sound and silence belong together. Here there is a subtle intertextual connection with the sound and silence of section 2 of "Demokritos", where the former stands for *being* (atoms) and the latter for *non-being* (the void). Fear of death is human though, and inevitable, for it means the cessation of life, the abandoning of this precious world of ours, the annihilation of the self with all the baggage of experiences it has treasured throughout a whole lifetime. Hence, the poetic voice adds this final comment at the end of the piece:

There are of course contrary yearnings,
called information and music, but call it
laughter or call it beatitude,
a good joke is the most you can ask.

"Contrary yearnings" are meant as a reference to *eros* or desire, to the unappeasable or unquenchable thirst for life shared by all humans of all times and places. That everybody wants to live seems to be a truism; it is a universal anthropological compulsion inherent in human nature. Other names the poetic voice uses to name this vital instinct, this desire for life, are *information* and *music* – concepts that entail some form of presence, as they are on the side of life and being. In any case, whichever the term one might use to refer to this yearning after life, only "a good joke" is all you can expect to receive from life, says Demokritos. After all, he was the Laughing Philosopher, "moved to mirth by the follies of mankind as Heraclitus to tears."³³³



Sections 7 and 8 of "Demokritos" deal with two more of the universal interests of the sage from Abdera: the very nature of the Earth itself and the physiological constitution of such an emblematic animal as the eagle. As for the shape of the Earth, unlike Leucippus,

³³² Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 434-435.

³³³ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 387.

who believed it to be flat and round, Demokritos had the original idea that it was “elongated, of length one and a half times its breadth.”³³⁴ None conceived of it as being a sphere, but it was possibly a revolving earth for both of them. Aëtius (3.12.2, A96) preserves a curious fragment on the fact that the earth is tilted: “Because the southerly part of the surrounding [atmosphere] is weaker, the earth as it grew tilted in that direction; for the northerly parts are intemperate, the southern temperate, hence it grew heavier in the latter quarter where it is abundant in fruits and produce.”³³⁵ This may well account for the opening verse line of section 7 of “Demokritos”: “*Thus the earth goes south each summer.*” The remaining verse lines of the composition are built round an astonishing image in which the mind resembles a widgeon that spends the winter cold in the north (the northern intemperate) and then rises to a new form of life in autumn to ride the currents of wind and sea waves amid a gale:

The mind moults in the north like a widgeon
and rises, hunting or grazing, in autumn,
riding the gale,
the stain of the voice like a handprint at intervals
in the unravelling rigging.

There is also room in these lines for speech, as evoked by the metaphor “*the stain of the voice.*” Mind, body and speech belong together in Bringhurst’s poetry. In our intellectual confrontation with the world, it is not just the mind that does the whole work of apprehending the invisible realities. Speech also plays a crucial role, and so *the stain of the voice* is said to be discernible like *a handprint in the unraveling rigging*. Mind and speech, like the senses and all sensation, are a form of touch too (they are fingers too). This seems to be the implication at stake here. In much the same way knowledge of reality does not depend solely on sense-impressions, and so we must transcend the raw data our sense organs provide us with, the voice (i.e., speech) also manages somehow to go beyond the surfaces in our attempt to grasp the invisible.

Let us now turn to section 8 of “Demokritos”. The biological work of Demokritos must have “rivalled Aristotle’s in comprehensiveness and attention to detail,”³³⁶ tells us Guthrie. From this we gather that he was a man endowed with an omnivorous curiosity; wherever he turned to look, he would find something worth paying attention to. *Breathing through the feet*, to borrow Bringhurst’s words from a seminal essay in his entire corpus – it seems to us that this is what the pre-Socratics knew how to do best of all. Paying attention to the world in its manifold manifestations and subtle nuances was an expression of their reverence towards the real, the embodiment of their gratitude to *what is* and *what isn’t*. We, 21st-century citizens of the world, appear to have forgotten this most elementary of lessons. This is a good reason to turn back to the surviving fragments of these philosophers, in search of illumination, to cleanse our senses and start to look at the world anew, from an altogether fresh perspective. The closing section of Bringhurst’s “Demokritos” may well look like a carefully wrought afterthought, a sort of coda to the whole eight-part composition. The way the eight sections have been arranged is of course deliberate, and so everything falls exactly into place. Whereas the opening section of “Demokritos” dwells on a sort of moral precept on the convenience of not bearing

³³⁴ This is fragment 15, quoted by Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 422.

³³⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 423. Guthrie claims that “the warmth rarefies the air [...] and makes it less able to support half of the earth, which accordingly sinks. This confirms Aristotle’s statement that for Democritus, as for Anaximenes and Anaxagoras, the earth owed its support in the centre of the cosmos to the air, in which, owing to its flatness, it ‘settled like a lid’”. *Ibid.*, pp. 423-424.

³³⁶ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 465.

children of one's own, the closing section directs the reader's attention to the realm of the non-human:

Incidentally you may notice,
said Demokritos,
the eagle has black bones.

As if in passing, the sage tells us that the eagle has black bones. A short three-line stanza of haiku resonances is enough to convey the sense of wonder in the face of this simple fact. Why should have Demokritos told us that this majestic bird has black bones, unlike humans for instance? It does not matter much whether he got the physiological detail right. What is truly important is the love of detail of Demokritos, as well as the sense of reverence and the scientific passion of the poet-philosopher that these words appear to express. The sage who said that nothing in reality existed except for atoms and the void was a true lover of detail, and love of detail is expressive of the philosopher's love of intellectual rigour and precision. This is no negligible virtue at all.

X · XENOPHANES

"Xenophanes"³³⁷, the tenth piece in *The Old in Their Knowing*, is a moving meditation in three parts on another essential Pre-Socratic sage who lived in ancient Greece in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. His intellectual vigour and his capacity to reflect on a wide range of issues of interest make him an indispensable figure in the history of Greek thought. Xenophanes (b. c. 560 BCE, Colophon, Ionia – d. c. 478) was both a philosopher and a religious thinker, a poet and a rhapsode,³³⁸ and also a reputed precursor of the Eleatic school of philosophy, which stressed unity rather than diversity and viewed the separate existences of material things as apparent rather than real.³³⁹ Born in the Ionian city of Colophon, he was probably exiled from Greece by the Persians who conquered his native land about 546. His was a wandering life: after living in Sicily (in Messana and Catana) for a time and wandering elsewhere in the Mediterranean, he settled at Elea in southern Italy, where he is said to have founded the Eleatic school. Late in his life he spent some time in the court of Hieron at Syracuse. He enjoyed an exceptionally long life; he would have been at least 92 at his death. Xenophanes embraced an ideal of moderation and the enjoyment of the good things of life without the ostentatious display of wealth. His was also a beautifully ascetic mind, in love with virtue and harmony of the soul.

³³⁷ "Xenophanes" was first published in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), and then it was reprinted as (1) B.17 *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse*, edited by Ralph Gustafson. 4th rev. ed. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1984: pp. 340-342. Contributions: "Xenophanes" (rpt. from A.14); "Essay on Adam" (rpt. from A.6); "Poem about Crystal" (rpt. from A.6); and as (2) B.27 *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Two*, edited by Gary Geddes. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988: pp 490-505. Contributions: "The Beauty of the Weapons", "The Sun and Moon", "Poem about Crystal", "Anecdote of the Squid", "Xenophanes", "The Stonecutter's Horses", "The Song of Ptahhotep" (all rpt. from A.14), "For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985" (rpt. from A.32). It was revised in A.47 *The Calling*, A.76 *The Old in Their Knowing* and A.92 *Selected Poems*.

³³⁸ See the entry on 'Xenophanes' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 30, p. 18018.

³³⁹ According to W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. II, p. 361, Xenophanes had "the reputation of being the founder of the Eleatic school, to which we owe the first attempt to base an ontology on strict deductive logic."

Xenophanes' poems survive only in fragments, and yet he is the first Greek philosopher of whose undisputed writings we can still read an appreciable quantity which amounts to 118 lines.³⁴⁰ Parmenides (fl. c. 450 BCE) is considered as the founder of the Eleatic school, but Xenophanes' philosophy probably anticipated his views. It is unfortunate that Aristotle did not devote much attention to Xenophanes, whom he dismissed as not being a serious enough student of the physical world.³⁴¹ As a result, it has been claimed that Xenophanes was less a philosopher of nature in the manner of Parmenides, who looked for abstract principles underlying natural change, than a poet and religious reformer who applied generally philosophical and scientific notions to popular conceptions. His thinking appears to be primitive in comparison with later Eleaticism, which developed its philosophy of appearance and reality into a much more sophisticated system. Thus, Xenophanes' philosophy found expression primarily in the poetry that he recited in the course of his travels. In his elegiac fragments he ridicules the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, condemns the luxuries introduced from the nearby colony of Lydia into Colophon, and advocates wisdom and the reasonable enjoyment of social pleasure in the face of prevalent excess. But he is best known for his trenchant attacks on the immorality and anthropomorphism ascribed to the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece by Homer and Hesiod. To this we shall return below.

Robert Bringhurst devotes a three-part poem to the thinking and singing of Xenophanes. The structure of the composition is crystal-clear, for Bringhurst is a poet who aims at being understood and enjoyed by the reader. When brought together into a single *Gestalt*, all three parts fall into place as if they were constituent parts of a perfect circle. In the first place, the poet focuses on the philosopher's physical ideas concerning the ultimate substance of reality and the existence of fossils, and, secondly, he proceeds to a myth-like meditation on Xenophanes' ideas about heavenly bodies and his lively criticism of the anthropomorphic depiction of Olympian gods and goddesses by Homer and Hesiod. The closing lines of the second section and the third section in its entirety take the reader back to the opening lines of the poem and remind him of the alternation of wet and dry ages in Xenophanes' cyclical view of reality, in which water and earth are immersed in a struggle of almost cosmic dimensions all the time. Nothing but earth remains as the ultimate substance of which the whole cosmos is made. First thing is facts, and so part 1 of "Xenophanes" opens with straightforward statements on the ultimate composition of reality:

Earth is the ultimate substance.
 What is, is made out of earth. We
 who climb free of it,
 milkthistles, mallards and men,
 are made out of earth that is driven by water.

³⁴⁰ W.K.C. Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 362. Guthrie explains that Xenophanes wrote his poems in hexameters, elegiacs and iambs. "He is credited with epics on the foundation of Colophon and Elea, which if true makes him the earliest Greek poet to treat of contemporary and recent history. [...] He was also famous for his *Silloi*, a title [...] indicating poems of mockery and parody." *Ibid.*, p. 365.

³⁴¹ In *Metaphysics* (986b 10ff.), Aristotle speaks of the Eleatic philosophers who denied movement and taught that reality is one in a different sense from the Milesians: "Yet so much it is relevant to note at present. Parmenides seems to be concerned with logical unity, Melissus with material. That is why the former says it is finite, the latter infinite. But Xenophanes, the first of these unifiers, whose disciple Parmenides is said to have been, in no way made himself clear, neither does he seem to have had a grasp of either of these conceptions. He simply considered the whole world and said that the one exists, namely the god. These men therefore, as I said, may be omitted from our present inquiry, two of them – Xenophanes and Melissus – altogether, as being somewhat primitive, though Parmenides indeed speaks with more insight." See Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 368-369.

There is a certain lack of precision in Xenophanes' description of the physical world, and yet he manages to convey the fundamental tenets of his own view of reality in the surviving fragments of his work available to us. The immediate source of inspiration for Bringhurst's meditation on the philosopher's conviction that all creatures are born from earth is fragment 27 (of dubious authenticity, though preserved by Aëtius), "From earth come all things, all things end in earth", which might be interpreted as meaning that earth was an *arche* in the Milesian sense,³⁴² and fragment 29 (Simplicius, *in Phys.* 189, 1), "All that is born and grows is earth and water."³⁴³ However, fragment 33 (Sextus, *adv. math.* X, 34) is also particularly relevant in this context: "For we are all born out of earth and water."³⁴⁴ As Guthrie claims, all three fragments "describe the same thing, namely the origin of organic life from the earth, which, in order to produce it, had to be moist. The *arche* of the cosmos is not in question because, being everlasting, it has no *arche*."³⁴⁵ Now, the idea that everything is composed of and originates from water and earth might seem a rudimentary physical theory, but the belief that all living things were originally born from the earth was very common among ancient Greeks. For earth to be able to bear all living things, it had to be made fertile, and the vehicle of such fertility was moisture. It was a simple fact of observation for the Greeks that rain or water in general made dry and barren soils fruitful, and so it was natural for them to presume that all things came into being out of earth itself under the influence of water. Thus, all living things are made of these two essential substances. There were also mythological accounts available, close at hand:

For those who preferred religious or mythological explanations, the earth was a person, the goddess Gaia, the Great Mother, and her fertilization took the form of marriage with the sky-god, Ouranos, Aither, or Zeus. He by his rain became the father of men and animals as well as plants, and the Earth was their mother, who brought them to birth when she had received the fertilizing drops.

It was natural and right for those who held this belief to say that all things are born from Earth, the common mother, and so they frequently did. But it was equally correct to say that they are born from earth and water, since assuredly the earth will not be fecund when dry.³⁴⁶

That all living creatures come from earth and water is made clear by Bringhurst's words in the opening lines of "Xenophanes". The declarative sentence "*Earth is the ultimate substance*" announces in simple terms what the gist of the first section of the poem is all about: everything we know to exist can be reduced ultimately to earth, the *materia prima*. That the poet should mention *milkthistles* (standing for plants in general), *mallards* (animals) and *men* (human beings) is no random choice at all. All three elemental categories embody the whole of reality in its entirety. Furthermore, all three nouns are subtly united by sound itself through alliteration (the /m/ phoneme is repeated in all three words), thus pointing to the existence of an ultimate substratum beneath the multifarious plurality of reality. Plants, animals and humans emerge from the entrails or womb of earth itself into the day of light, as if they were set free from bondage in the innermost recesses of mother earth.

³⁴² In this respect, Guthrie reminds us that "Aristotle himself, reviewing earlier philosophers in his *Metaphysics* (989a5), says that 'none of those who posit a unity makes earth the element', and in *De anima* he repeats (405b8) that all the other elements had been chosen save earth. Of course he is thinking primarily of the Milesians, and might be supposed to exclude Xenophanes for that reason, since he distinguishes him from them. But his reason for making the distinction was that Xenophanes believed the cosmos to be eternal, and so could not have believed in any *arche* at all as the Milesians understood it." *Ibid.*, p. 385.

³⁴³ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 383 and p. 385. Kirk et al. provide a different translation of fr. 29: "All things that come-to-be and grow are earth and water." *Ibid.*, p. 176.

³⁴⁴ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 385. See Kirk et al.: "For we all came forth from earth and water." *Ibid.*, p. 176.

³⁴⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 386.

³⁴⁶ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 386.

However, water does play an important part in the whole process as well, and so the emphasis is laid on the alternation of dry and wet stages in the second stanza of section 1, which dwells on Xenophanes' remarks on fossils and on his belief in the struggle of earth and water. Doxographers said that Xenophanes believed that "the earth was subject to alternate encroachments of land on sea and sea on land."³⁴⁷ An impressive description of fossils preserved by Hippolytus (*Ref.* 1, 14, 5-6) serves as the source of inspiration for Bringhurst's accomplished meditation on fossils:

Xenophanes thinks that a mingling of earth with sea takes place and that in course of time it is dissolved by the wet element, claiming as proofs that shells are found in the midst of the land and on mountains; and in the quarries at Syracuse, he says, the impressions of a fish and of seaweed have been found, on Paros the impression of a bay-leaf in the depth of the stone, and on Malta flattened shapes of all sea-creatures. These, he says, were formed when everything, long ago, was covered in mud, and the impression dried out of the mud. All men are destroyed when the earth is carried down to the sea and turns to mud, then a new generation begins. Such is the foundation of all the worlds.³⁴⁸

Fossils are "evidence that the sea once covered what is now dry land, and that the solid rock was once soft mud"³⁴⁹ and, at the same time, Xenophanes appears to suggest that the sea is *in retreat* in what is a cyclical process.³⁵⁰ That these notions should have caught Bringhurst's omnivorous attention comes as no surprise at all. Being a poet in love with the sheer physicality of the world and the author of *Bergschrund*, an early poetry collection rich in geological references, Bringhurst speaks of Xenophanes' ideas on fossils in these terms: "I have found chiton shells high / in the mountains, the fingerprints of fish / in the stonecutter's stone", and these are words that are strongly reminiscent of Hippolytus' in the quote above, even if they are no literal translation. In their incessant struggle with each other, water and earth seek to achieve dominance over one another, they "*lurch, wrestle and twist in their purposeless / war, of which we / are a consequence, not an answer.*" Beneath these lines is possibly fragment 34 (Sextus, *adv. math.* VII, 49), on the limitations of human knowledge: "No man knows, or ever will know, the truth about the gods and about everything I speak of..."³⁵¹ This is the second fragment invoked by Bringhurst himself as a source of inspiration for the second stanza of section 1 of "Xenophanes" in his 2005 edition of the Pre-Socratics sequence. Like the rest of creatures, we humans are the result, the consequence, of the eternal struggle of water and earth, "*not an answer*". Which teaches us an elemental lesson of

³⁴⁷ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 387.

³⁴⁸ Guthrie, *ibid.*, pp. 387-388. Kirk et al. offer a slightly different translation: "Xenophanes thinks that a mixture of the earth with the sea is going on, and that in time the earth is dissolved by the moist. He says that he has demonstrations of the following kind: shells are found inland and in the mountains, and in the quarries in Syracuse he says that an impression of a fish and of seaweed has been found, while an impression of a bay-leaf was found in Paros in the depth of the rock, and in Malta flat shapes of all marine objects. These, he says, were produced when everything was long ago covered with mud, and the impression was dried in the mud. All mankind is destroyed whenever the earth is carried down into the sea and becomes mud; then there is another beginning of coming-to-be, and this foundation happens for all the worlds." *Ibid.*, p. 177. Kirk et al. suggest that "Xenophanes may have been the first to draw attention to the real significance of fossils. The conjecture that the earth's surface had once been mud or slime was again not new; this was a Milesian theory possibly originating with Thales and certainly held by Anaximander, who believed that life started from mud." *Ibid.*, p. 177.

³⁴⁹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 388.

³⁵⁰ Guthrie claims that "Xenophanes is not speaking of the origin or destruction of the cosmos. The cyclical process which he describes is confined to the earth, and even that is never destroyed. We have no details, but it is clear that when the sea has advanced sufficiently to eliminate life and turn the earth to mud, it retreats to allow the reemergence of dry land and life." *Ibid.*, p. 389.

³⁵¹ Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 179.

humility and the need for gratitude in the presence of *what is*: being vulnerable and limited as we are, humans can never get to know anything for good, with absolute certainty.



The second section of Bringhurst's "Xenophanes" consists of three clearly distinct parts: the first part concerns the philosopher's physical ideas on heavenly bodies; the second one deals with the relations between immortal gods and mortal humans and, more specifically, with Xenophanes' attack on the anthropomorphic depiction of the gods in conventional religion; and the third part subtly evokes the alternation of wet and dry ages in his conception of the physical world in just two verse lines of utter precision and beauty. Now, the sun and the earth are recurrent elements in Bringhurst's poetry, and the two opening stanzas of section 2 explore the daily renewal and setting of the sun. The starting point for these lines is a fragment from Hippolytus (*Ref.* 1, 14, 3) that is worth quoting in full: "The sun comes into being each day from little pieces of fire that are collected, and the earth is infinite and enclosed neither by air nor by the heaven. There are innumerable suns and moons, and all things are made of earth."³⁵² In Bringhurst's hands, this fragment becomes an impeccable stanza of myth-like resonances:

The earth gives birth to the sun
each morning, and washes herself in the water,
and slits the sun's throat every night
with a splintered stone, and washes
herself once again in the water.

Mother Earth is the ultimate substance underlying everything in this world, and so the sun is conceptualized as coming into being from earth itself every morning with the sunrise. And the sun is born only to die out at night with the sunset. As if she were a human mother, earth bathes herself in water after giving birth to the sun and after sacrificing it every night, to get rid of the blood on her hands. In its diurnal revolutions, the sun is born out of the earth and goes back to her quite reluctantly so as to fulfil a sort of sacrificial offering in which the mother slits the throat of the victim. This sacrifice is of a cosmic nature, as it ensures the smooth revolutions of the sun around the earth. To the naked eye, the shivering light rays of the sun seem to suggest that he is scared to death of its own setting: some days it looks like "*a fattening goose*", crossing the skies *in ignorant stupor*; other days it looks like "*a shuddering rabbit caught in the snare.*" It does not matter much, the poetic voice tells us, as "*One way / or the other, his death is the same.*" To sum up, the whole world is alive with a divine presence, for god is one and the same with the universe; life and death follows each other in a cyclical process here symbolized by the sun's renewal and death every day.

Let us now turn to the second part of section 2 of "Xenophanes", which concerns the anthropomorphism of the ancient gods of Greece. Surviving fragments of Xenophanes reflect his contempt for contemporary anthropomorphism and for the widespread popular acceptance of Homeric mythology.³⁵³ Indeed, Homer and Hesiod were the two men held

³⁵² Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 173.

³⁵³ As Guthrie puts it, he "was chiefly known to the ancient world as a writer of satirical criticism and denunciation, and the extant verses provide ample evidence that such was indeed his attitude to poets, philosophers, and the ordinary run of men. [...] But the fullest weight of his displeasure was reserved for Homer and Hesiod, the two poets who as Herodotus said had determined for the Greeks the nature of their gods." *Ibid.*, pp. 370-371. It is out of the question that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are enjoyed as marvellous poems and exciting tales of warfare and travel showing great insight into human nature, but they truly laid the

responsible for the creation of a theogony for the Greeks, since they “gave the gods their names, distributed their privileges and skills, and described their appearance”, as Herodotus points out.³⁵⁴ The gods play a prominent part in Homer and Hesiod, and so Xenophanes launches his attack on religious grounds. Hence, he brings three charges against the poets: (1) that they portray the Olympian gods and goddesses as immoral, which accounts for his trenchant attacks on the immorality ascribed to them; (2) that they cast them in human shape – i.e., in anthropomorphic terms; and (3) that deity must be self-sufficient and there can be no hierarchy within it, and so each god or goddess is their own master and lacks nothing in any respect. The starting point for Bringhurst’s meditation on the nature of the gods and goddesses of the ancient Greeks are two eloquent fragments which he quotes in the original Greek in the 2005 edition of *The Old in Their Knowing*: (1) fragment 24 (Sextus *adv. math.* IX, 144): “He sees as a whole, perceives as a whole, hears as whole.” and (2) fragment 15 (Clement *Strom.* V, 109, 3): “But if oxen and horses or lions had hands, or could draw and fashion works as men do, horses would draw the gods shaped like horses and lions like lions, making the bodies of the gods resemble their own forms.”³⁵⁵ This condemnation of the poets for ascribing a human shape to the immortals (as well as immoral acts and unworthy sufferings) is at the core of Bringhurst’s poem. However, the poet appears to lay the emphasis precisely on Xenophanes’ criticism of anthropomorphic divine beings. His verse lines embody three little movements for the reader’s soul which are worth analyzing in depth. There appear to exist three crucial aspects inherent in the nature of the gods and goddesses that we humans are in desperate need of understanding. All three are formulated in the negative, which is no happy coincidence:

- (1) “*We must learn to be thought / by the gods, not to think them,*” says Bringhurst. It is an act of *hybris* on the part of human beings to dare think the gods (their own physical appearance and character), instead of letting them think us. Gods are omnipotent and so, in their infinite wisdom, they are in a position to think humans, to shape us in one way or another. Only these powerful deities can truly achieve the truth and wisdom concerning all sorts of matters, including the nature of mere mortals. Xenophanes was convinced that the blame was to be put on the poets, who were responsible for describing the gods in purely human terms. In this respect, fragment 11 (Sextus *adv. math.* IX, 193) is quite informative in affirming: “Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all deeds that among men are a reproach and a disgrace: thieving, adultery, and mutual deception.”³⁵⁶
- (2) “*Not to think gods have two eyes and ten fingers, / thirty-two teeth and two / asymmetrical footprints.*” It seems only natural that humans should ascribe their own physiological shape, states of mind and deeds to the gods in an act of self-projection. Hence we tend to think that the gods are born and die, just like humans, as fragment 14 (Clement, *Strom.* V, 109, 2) makes clear: “Men suppose that gods are brought to birth, and have clothes and voice and shape like our own.”³⁵⁷ What is more, every human community shapes their gods in their likeness, as fragment 16 (Clement, *Strom.* VII, 22, 1) suggests: “Ethiopians imagine their

foundations of the religious, moral and literary education of the Greeks. In fact, Xenophanes (fr. 10) says: “What all men learn is shaped by Homer from the beginning.” Quoted by Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 371.

³⁵⁴ Quoted by Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 371.

³⁵⁵ See Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 371 and p. 374. Translated slightly differently by Kirk et al. in *The Presocratic Philosophers*: (1) fragment 24, Sextus *adv. math.* IX, 144: “All of him sees, all thinks, and all hears.” (p. 170) and (2) fragment 15, Clement *Strom.* V, 109, 3: “But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw with their hands and do the works that men can do, horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves.” (p. 169)

³⁵⁶ See a different translation by Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 168: “Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything that is a shame and reproach among men, stealing and committing adultery and deceiving each other.”

³⁵⁷ See Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 169: “But mortals consider that the gods are born, and that they have clothes and speech and bodies like their own.”

gods as black and snub-nosed, Thracians as blue-eyed and red-haired.”³⁵⁸ Fragment 1 (quoted above), the original source of inspiration for Bringhurst’s reflection on anthropomorphism, suggests that even animals would shape their gods after themselves if they had just hands to draw the deities in forms that would resemble their own bodies. What is so powerful about Bringhurst’s statement on anthropomorphism is precisely the simplicity and transparency of his language: he speaks of eyes, fingers, 32 teeth and two asymmetrical footprints. These are the essential brushstrokes that define the body of any recognizably human being: humans have two eyes, ten fingers (five per hand), 32 teeth that allow them to masticate their food, and two feet to stand on and walk (they are bipeds), which leaves their hands free to accomplish many other things. But gods and goddesses are not like this; they do not resemble humans in any straightforward manner.

- (3) “*Not to think / here in the unstoppered bowls / of our skulls we hold luminous / godbreath.*” Guthrie explains that “if Xenophanes believed in a god at all, this divinity must be non-anthropomorphic, morally good, everlasting, completely self-sufficient and independent.”³⁵⁹ Xenophanes described the nature of this god in some of the extant fragments: (i) Fragment 23 (Clement, *Strom.* V, 109, 1): “God is one, greatest among gods and men, in no way like mortals either in body or in mind.” (ii) Fragment 24 (Sextus *adv. math.* IX, 144): “He sees as a whole, perceives as whole, hears as a whole.” (iii) Fragments 26 + 25 (Simplicius, *in Phys.* 23, 11 + 23, 20): “Always he remains in the same place, not moving at all, nor indeed does it befit him to go here and there at different times; but without toil he makes all things shiver by the impulse of his mind.”³⁶⁰ Thus, Homer and Hesiod were wrong to assume that gods are born and die, wear human clothes to cover their human bodies, have human voices, and behave as thieves and adulterers. God is essentially one and resembles man in no way, and yet the god is “not incorporeal, but has body of his own, only not of human shape”,³⁶¹ possibly spherical, finite and identical with the universe.³⁶² Xenophanes was convinced that god is one, unmoved, identical with the universe, ungenerated³⁶³ and so he is not in any way like human beings. After his proclamation of the eternity and unity of god, he also insists on his omniscience: he needs no sense organs of perception to penetrate reality or attain the truth. Humans, by comparison, are fallible and vulnerable,³⁶⁴ even if we dare think that “*in the unstoppered bowls of ours skulls*” (notice the impressive metaphor here) there is a spark of “*luminous godbreath*”. Humans are not divine in any way whatsoever, the poet tells us emphatically. And so the closing lines of this movement for the soul insist on the fact that there is nothing special about the very matter which our skulls hold: a sort of mush made of “*rocksalt and silt*” (for

³⁵⁸ See Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 169: “The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair.”

³⁵⁹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 373.

³⁶⁰ Kirk et al., *ibid.*: (i) Fragment 23: “One god, greatest among gods and men, in no way similar to mortals either in body or in thought.” (ii) Fragment 24: “All of him sees, all thinks, and all hears.” (iii) Fragments 26 + 25: “Always he remains in the same place, moving not at all; nor is it fitting for him to go to different places at different times, but without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind.” *Ibid.*, pp. 169-170.

³⁶¹ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 376.

³⁶² In *Metaphysics* (986b 10ff.), Aristotle speaks of the Eleatic philosophers and concludes that Xenophanes considered the whole world / heaven (*ouranos*) and said that the one exists, namely the god. This idea suggests, according to Guthrie, “a rather magnificent picture of the philosopher-poet standing alone in a wide empty landscape on a clear night, flinging out his arms in an all-embracing gesture and crying, ‘The One exists, and it is God’; that is, looking up at the heavens and declaring that the world was one and divine. [...] Aristotle is saying that by fixing his attention on the nature of the universe Xenophanes came to the conclusion that the One was God.” *Ibid.*, p. 380. To the extent that Xenophanes identified God and the world, he may be called a pantheist. *Ibid.*, p. 381.

³⁶³ Guthrie concludes that “for Xenophanes the cosmos was a spherical body, living, conscious, and divine, the cause of its own internal movements and change. [...] the cosmos itself was a divinity and therefore had no beginning or dissolution but was everlasting.” *Ibid.*, pp. 382-383.

³⁶⁴ Consider, for instance, these two fragments: (1) fr. 34: “No man knows or will know the plain truth about the gods and about all that I speak of.” and (2) fr. 18: “The gods did not reveal to men all things in the beginning, but in course of time, by searching, they find out better.” Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 376.

earth is the ultimate substance), just “*like our toenails*”. Whereas toenails are “*matted / like felt*”, the grey matter of the brain is “*swollen / like hope*”. Notice the syntactic parallelism, which highlights the ultimate substance of which everything is made.

The two closing lines of section 2 of “Xenophanes” evoke once again the alternation of wet and dry ages in the philosopher’s conception of the incessant war being waged by water and earth: “*What is, is earth. What dies / is earth driven by water.*” Beneath these lines is fragment 33 (Sextus, *adv. math.* X, 34), quoted above and translated as “For we are all born out of earth and water” (Guthrie) and as “For we all came forth from earth and water” (Kirk et al.).³⁶⁵ In their concision and gnomic dimension, these words recall many of the declarative statements found in the Oriental sages sequence of *The Book of Silences*, another sequence central to Bringhurst’s *oeuvre* that has been a work in progress for a long time. In any case, they remind the reader of what to Xenophanes was a fact: that everything that exists is ultimately earth, and that water is always struggling with earth in a cyclic process whereby the surface of the earth is covered with the sea, just to give way to another stage at which the sea is in retreat. These lines take the reader back to the first section of the poem, where the physical theory of Xenophanes was set forth in detail. Thus, the circle drawn by the poem is almost full and complete.



Section 3 of “Xenophanes” is another jewel-like short lyric of utter concision and perfection that belongs among the best of Bringhurst’s compositions of its kind. It is based on the original Greek fragment 28 (Achilles, *Isag.* 4, p. 34, 11 Maass): “At our feet / We see this upper limit of the earth / Coterminous with air, but underneath / It stretches without limit.”³⁶⁶ These lines are a description of a flat-topped, not a spherical earth, afloat amid an immensity of pure air. Bringhurst metamorphoses these four verse lines into a unique piece of music in which ideas sing and dance at the same time, and as a result thinking and singing go hand in hand:

The earth has one end. It is under
our feet. You may think
differently; I am convinced
there is no other.

Not only is earth the ultimate substance out of which all living things are made, as the opening line of “Xenophanes” announced from the very outset, but also the firm ground on which our feet stand to keep us erect or upright. Thus, the earth itself is the limit from a purely physical standpoint. It does not allow us to forget that we humans are also earth in the end, and so we do belong with the grander scheme of things. Firmly pressing against the ground are the feet, and breathing through the feet was of the essence to Bringhurst, for whom hands are more damaging and less respectful than feet are. There is something moving about the conviction with which the poetic voice speaks its mind in the closing section of Bringhurst’s poem: there is no room for doubt or hesitation as to earth being the ultimate substance or substratum and the ultimate limit.

³⁶⁵ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 385, and Kirk et al., *ibid.*, p. 176.

³⁶⁶ Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 394. See Kirk et al.: “Of earth this is the upper limit which we see by our feet, in contact with air; but is underneath continues indefinitely.” *Ibid.*, p. 175.

XI · OF THE SNARING OF BIRDS

“Of the Snaring of Birds” was originally published in *Cadastre* (1973) under the title “Strophe from Sophocles”³⁶⁷, which was a translation of the first stanza in a chorus from the ancient Greek playwright’s well-known tragedy entitled *Antigone*. Later, this original translation of the first strophe was expanded to include the whole chorus from *Antigone* (lines 332-375) in a poem re-titled “Of the Snaring of Birds”³⁶⁸, one of the 12 compositions that constitute *The Old in Their Knowing*. Sophocles must have truly been a source of inspiration for Bringham for a number of reasons, and not just because he is one of the giants of the Western canon. Sophocles evolved for his plays a plain style that was very different from the magniloquence of his senior contemporary Aeschylus; this simplicity and elegance of language, along with an astonishing profundity of thought must have been certainly appealing to the poet. Once more, Ezra Pound, or the acknowledged master, may have put Bringham on the right trail. Pound himself gave thought to Sophocles as well: he translated the Greek playwright’s play *Women of Trachis* into English. What is more, Pound uses the expression “Sophoclean light” in his poem “Ité”³⁶⁹ to criticize the misty derivativeness of English poetry since the 1890s up to his day (1915, the year of publication of *Lustra*, where “Ité” is included). Sophocles is thus presented as symbolizing a hard kind of poetry, as opposed to soft, sentimental, abstract poetry. Yet the early version of the classical Greek text we find in “Strophe from Sophocles” in *Cadastre* was but the beginning of a long process in which Bringham tries to come to terms with the original. As pointed out above, “Strophe from Sophocles” was to be subsequently modified and expanded into the poem entitled “Of the Snaring of Birds”, included for the first time in his twelve-poem sequence called “The Old in their Knowing”³⁷⁰ in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982),

³⁶⁷ “Strophe from Sophocles” was later published as C.22 in *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* (Boston) ns 1.4 (1973/1974): 561-575, in a sequence entitled “Eight Poems and Translations” (a revised excerpt from “The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods”, “Strophe from Sophocles”, “Herakleitos”, “The Petelia Tablet”, “Four Glyphs”, “Isthmian”, “A Short History”, and “Antistrophe from Leopardi”). Afterwards, it was also published as C.36 [Two poems], *American Poetry Review* (Philadelphia) 9.6 (Nov./Dec. 1980): 34, along with “The Greenland Stone” (also included in *Cadastre*, 1973). Both poems, delivered to *APR* editors by William Arrowsmith, are erroneously attributed to William Bringham.

³⁶⁸ “Of the Snaring of Birds” was as such published for the first time in A.14 *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982). Afterwards, it was reprinted in (i) B.40 *The Burning Words*, by Gaoyuan Wei. Cambridge, England: privately printed, 1992: pp. 29-30. Contribution: “Of the Snaring of Birds” (rpt. from A.14), with Wei’s Chinese translation (T.Ch.3) on pp. 10-11; and in (ii) C.54 [Five poems]. *Crab Creek Review* (Seattle) 4.1 (Fall/Winter 1986): 6-8 (see also p 2). Contents: “Poem About Crystal”; “A Quadratic Equation”; “Of the Snaring of Birds”; “The Beauty of the Weapons”; “Study for an Ecumenical Window”, all rpt. from A.26 (US edition of *The Beauty of the Weapons*). Later, it was revised in A.47 *The Calling* (1995), further revised in A.76 *The Old in Their Knowing* (2005) and slightly revised again in *Selected Poems* (2009).

³⁶⁹ “Ité” (the Latin ‘ite’ means *go*) reads as follows: “Go, my songs, seek your praise from the young and from the intolerant, / Move among the lovers of perfection alone. / Seek ever to stand in the bard Sophoclean light / And take your wounds from it gladly.” The phrase ‘Sophoclean light’ may derive from ‘lumen siccum’ (dry light), of the medieval scholastics, we are told in *A Guide to Ezra Pound’s Personae* (1926).

³⁷⁰ It might be advisable to remember once more that “The Old in Their Knowing” sequence was born in 1974 with the publication of the broadside *Pythagoras*, which was later incorporated into the chapbook *Eight Objects* (1975), a sequence of eight poems concerning the primordial lessons of the Presocratics’ philosophy. They were later collected in *Bergschrund* (1975) and expanded into the 12-piece sequence entitled “The Old in Their Knowing” in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), pp. 67-68. In his second groundbreaking anthology, *The Calling* (1995), Bringham recuperated the same sequence with minor changes. 2005 saw the publication of the beautiful book entitled *The Old in Their Knowing*, printed by Peter Koch, in Berkeley (California). [A note in this 2005 edition of the poems reads as follows: “This sequence has appeared in three earlier versions: in *Eight Objects* (Kanchenjunga Press, 1975), in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (McClelland & Stewart, 1982; Copper Canyon Press, 1985) and in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (McClelland & Stewart, 1995). This edition includes the author’s latest emendations.”] More recently, *Selected Poems* (2009) includes again such a central sequence in Bringham’s poetic career. These poems are therefore *a work in progress*, the work of a lifetime, the

which is a magnificent recreation of Sophocles' chorus in its entirety. In the Notations at the end of *Cadastre*, Bringhurst informs us that

The Sophocles doesn't derive from Heidegger's reading of the passage, but neither does it seem to replace Heidegger's reading. (Similarly, Morrison's drawing of Poseidon in his Armor isn't, so far as I know, based on Leonardo's Neptune with his Horses; but the two can be looked at together nevertheless to achieve a degree of stereoscopy.)

With these words, the poet seems to suggest that we should bear in mind Heidegger's exegetical study of the poem in his *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (*Introduction to Metaphysics*, chapter IV, section 3)³⁷¹ in the hope that some sort of stereoscopy might be achieved if his translation is read in conjunction with the original Greek text and the German philosopher's lucid interpretation of Sophocles' words. If Sophocles' chorus is an extended meditation on man's nature –on his virtues and omnipotent domination over all creatures on Earth–, the early “Strophe from Sophocles” is just a miniature meditation that focuses on human beings' relationship with two fundamental natural forces: the sea and Mother Earth. But let us turn first to the original text and the vital circumstances that accompanied the Greek man who composed such a masterpiece amid the splendour of classical Athens, at the heights of its creative powers.

Sophocles was born *ca.* 496 BCE at Colonus, a village outside the walls of Athens, and he died in 406 CE in Athens, the cultural centre of classical Greece. He is one of the classical Athens's three great tragic playwrights along with Aeschylus and Euripides. Few facts are known about his life though. Whatever details are known about his life on earth are worth recording: knowing the man will give us a clue to understand why Bringhurst should have decided to translate a *strophe* from one of his most accomplished plays. Sophocles came from a wealthy family, and he was highly educated, noted for his impressive beauty of physique, athletic prowess, and outstanding artistic talents. Endowed with a sense of social commitment, he participated actively in civic life affairs in the Greek polis. He won his first victory at the Dionysian dramatic festival in 468, defeating the great Aeschylus in the process and beginning a career of unparalleled success and longevity. In total, he wrote 123 dramas for the festivals, of which only seven have survived in their entirety, along with 400 lines of a satyr play, and numerous fragments of plays now lost. All seven of the complete plays that have survived are works of Sophocles' maturity: *Ajax* is generally regarded as the earliest of the extant plays; *Antigone* was first performed in 442 or 441 BCE; *Philoctetes* was first performed in 409, and *Oedipus at Colonus* was produced after his death by his grandson.

palpable expression of the poet's fascination about the Greek world and what it stands for – spiritual integrity, intellectual honesty, naturalness, a firm grasp of reality.

³⁷¹ In “Of the Snaring of Birds”, the linguistic threshold before the poem reads: “*from the Antigone of Sophocles, a version in memory of Martin Heidegger, 1889-1977*”. It is in fact a most eloquent version, not a faithful rendering, of the original text, conceived as a homage to Heidegger, a lover of all things ancient and Greek. As Charles Lillard puts it in a review of *Tzohalem's Mountain* and *The Beauty of the Weapons* published in *The Reader* 2.2 (Vancouver), June 1983: 1-4, “Fittingly, these lines, from a version of Sophocles's *Antigone*, are dedicated to the memory of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. “Fittingly” for in his *Poetry, Language, Thought* Heidegger suggests “The poet need not think; the thinker need not create poetry; but to be a poet of the first rank there is a thinking that the poet must accomplish, a thinking which has all the purity and thickness and solidity of poetry, and whose saying is poetry.” (p. 2) The German philosopher's influence on Bringhurst thinking and conception of poetry is crucial, and so it is only natural that “Of the Snaring of Birds”, a meditation on humankind inspired by Sophocles' original Greek text, should be a homage to this fundamental thinker.

Needless to say, Sophocles was a superb artist. His command of language and his mastery of form and diction respond flexibly to the dramatic needs of the moment. He has also been universally admired for the sympathy and vividness with which he delineates his characters, especially his tragic women, such as Antigone and Electra. Many of his plays are masterpieces of construction, particularly *Oedipus the King*, to which Aristotle makes constant references in the *Poetics*. He is indeed credited with some major and minor dramatic innovations, such as the introduction of a third actor in the dramatic performance onstage, which enabled him to increase the number of his characters and widen the variety of their interactions. The scope of the dramatic conflict was thereby extended, plots could be more fluid, and situations could be more complex. Thus, the typical Sophoclean drama presents a few characters, impressive in their determination and power, and possessing a few strongly drawn qualities or faults that combine with a particular set of circumstances to lead them inevitably to a tragic fate. With great economy, concentration, and dramatic effectiveness he develops his characters' inexorable rush to tragedy in what looks like a relentless manner. Usually the chief character does something involving grave error. This action or decision affects others, each of whom reacts in their own way, thereby causing the chief agent to take another inevitable step toward ruin – his own and that of others as well.

Apart from being a magnificent craftsman, this master playwright was an inquisitive spirit concerned with investigating the tragic dimension inherent in the human condition. To Sophocles, human beings live for the most part in dark ignorance because they are cut off from the gods – those permanent, unchanging forces and structures of reality. He presents truth in collision with ignorance, delusion, and folly. Ultimately, it is through pain, suffering, and endurance of tragic crisis that people get into contact with the universal order of things and gain some sort of knowledge of themselves. In this respect, *Antigone* is a play about the conflicting obligations of civic versus personal loyalties and religious mores. It marks one of the highest summits of classical Greek drama's formal achievements. The greatest moral dilemma at the heart of the play is that of human or personal liberty: the rights of the individual, who follows the dictates of her conscience, against all sorts of conventional rules and norms, intangible bondage and tyranny, as represented by Creon's edict that no one in the polis is to bury the body of Polinices, a traitor to the city and Antigone's brother. *Antigone* is thus one of the greatest tragedies produced by ancient Greece, one concerned with an important theme and one that explores the human condition. The chorus from *Antigone* (lines 332-375)³⁷² Bringhurst

³⁷² See Sophocles, *Antigone. The Women of Trachis. Philoctetes. Oedipus at Colonus*, edited and translated by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 35 and p. 37, for a prose English translation of the original Greek text: "Many things are formidable, and none more formidable than man! He crosses the gray sea beneath the Winter wind, passing beneath the surges that surround him; and he wears away the highest of the gods, Earth, immortal and unwearying, as his ploughs go back and forth from year to year, turning the soil with the aid of the breed of horses.

And he captures the tribe of thoughtless birds and the races of wild beasts and the watery brood of the sea, catching them in the woven coils of nets, man the skilful. And he contrives to overcome the beast that roams the mountain, and tames the shaggy-maned horse and the untiring mountain bull, putting a yoke about their necks.

And he has learned speech and wind-swift thought and the temper that rules cities, and how to escape the exposure of the inhospitable hills and the sharp arrows of the rain, all-resourceful; he metes nothing in the future without resource; only from Hades shall he apply no means of flight; and he has contrived escape from desperate maladies.

Skilful beyond hope is the contrivance of his art, and he advances sometimes to evil, at other times to good. When he applies the laws of the earth and the justice the gods have sworn to uphold he is high in the city; outcast from the city is he with whom the ignoble consorts for the sake of gain. May he who does such things never sit by my hearth or share my thoughts!"

chooses to translate is one of the summits or climatic moments in the unfolding of the tragedy itself. Also, Bringhurst's must have admired the clarity, the precision, the command of language on the part of the Greek master in what turns out to be the most moving meditation about human nature in the whole play. Here is the original miniature meditation published as "Strophe from Sophocles":

Strangeness is frequent enough but nothing
is stranger than man –
thus
and across
the grey-maned water,
heavy weather on the southwest quarter,
moves amid sea-thunder,
tacking through the bruise-blue waves.
And he rubs at the earth,
the eternal, the tireless
eldest of goddesses,
driving the plough in its circle year after year
with the offspring of horses.³⁷³

In its later textual incarnation in "Of the Snaring of Birds", consisting of four stanzas (or of two strophes and their corresponding antistrophes), this stanza is extensively revised and reads as follows:

Strangeness is frequent enough, but nothing
is ever as strange as a man is.
For instance,
out there,
riding the grey-maned water,
heavy weather on the southwest quarter,
jarred by the sea's thunder,
tacking through the bruise-blue waves.
Or he paws at the eldest of goddesses,
earth, as though she were made
out of gifts and forgiveness,
driving his plough in its circle year after year
with what used to be horses.

The starting point of Sophocles' meditation is straightforward enough: man is a strange or uncanny³⁷⁴ creature, stranger than any other creature on Earth. Endowed with intelligence and sagacity, he manages to control the implacable forces of Nature to his own satisfaction and benefit. In the Greek framework of perception, the world is a place pervaded by the presence of gods and goddesses, who more often than not interfere in human affairs. But the world is out there for man to conquer with all the strength, might and sagacity he is capable of. The *grey-named water*, which is the embodiment of Poseidon to the Greeks'

³⁷³ Verse lines 334-340 of the Χορός in the original Greek text *Ἀντιγόνη*, ed. Sir Richard Jebb, Cambridge, 1891: πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδ' ἐν ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον πέλει. / τοῦτο καὶ πολιοῦ πέραν πόντου χειμερίῳ νότῳ / χωρεῖ, περιβρυχίοισιν / περῶν ὑπ' οἴδμασιν. / θεῶν τε τὰν ὑπερτάταν, Γᾶν / ἄφθιτον, ἀκαμάταν, ἀποτρύεται / ἰλλομένων ἀρότρων ἔτος εἰς ἔτος / ἵππειῳ γένοι πολεύων.

³⁷⁴ According to Heidegger, "Dieses Wort, daß der Mensch τὸ δεινότατον, das Unheimlichste sei, will ihm nicht eine besondere Eigenschaft zusprechen, gleich als sei der Mensch sonst noch etwas anderes; vielmehr sagt das Wort: das Unheimlichste zu sein, ist der Grundzug des Menschenwesens, in den je und immer alle anderen Züge eingezeichnet werden müssen. Der Spruch: »der Mensch ist das Unheimlichste«, gibt die eigentliche griechische Definition des Menschen." *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Band 40 der Gesamtausgabe), Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983, p. 160.

mythopoeic mind, awakes humans' sense of grandeur in the face of the sublime and of the unknown. That human beings are vulnerable, devoid of warmth or protection when they arrive on Earth, is out of the question. That the ocean is stronger than all human beings is also out of the question, yet it remains a challenge for men to sail on it in vessels they have devised with their technical knowledge of tools and strategies (*technê*) that make the world manageable to a certain degree. Hence the sea with its vast expanses of water offers no obstacle at all in spite of bad weather conditions, as humans are reckless in their determination to ride the *bruise-blue waves* comfortably in the bosom of their vessels, aided by favourable winds or not.

The two primordial divine entities in Greek cosmogony (i.e. the mythic account of the origin of the universe) are Heaven (Uranus) and Mother Earth (Gea). Out of their marriage sprang everything – both living and non-living things – that comprises the cosmos. No mention is made here of Heaven, but rather of the Earth in its entirety, which is made of water and solid earth.³⁷⁵ Earth is “*the eldest of goddesses*”, the first mother of mothers. Out of a proverbial generosity, she has sustained innumerable generations of humans, has nourished them and given them all they need to lead a comfortable existence. And men make use of whatever available resources they have (the plough and the brute force of horses) to till it and cultivate it (almost mercilessly) so as to make it yield nourishment to appease their hunger and thirst. There is no respite for Mother Earth, we can read in between the lines; some sort of violence is being exerted on her time and again, and yet she still gives demanding humans generously whatever they demand of her. According to Martin Heidegger, Mother Earth is indeed a primordial goddess upon which man exerts a form of violence: “Beachten wir es wohl: die Erde heißt die höchste der Götter. Gewalt-tätig stört der Mensch die Ruhe des Wachstums, das Nähren und Austragen der Mühelosen.”³⁷⁶

In the stanzas that constitute the core of the chorus, what Sophocles does is to praise human ingenuity and perseverance as the true basis of the progressive achievements of humankind. Beneath the verbal surface of these verse lines is the notion that progress in the arts and sciences is ultimately a progress dependent on human effort and not on divine revelation. So by ascribing scientific and technical progress to human ingenuity alone, Sophocles is embracing a conception of knowledge as progressing steadily and gradually from small beginnings, through men's own powers of discovery and invention. At this point, it might be wise to remember that in ancient Greece two different views of human development were embraced:

Two conflicting views of human development were current in classical Greece. The first, that it represented a degeneration from an original ‘golden race’ in the distant past, was given its standard form by Hesiod (*Works*, 109 ff.). These early men were both good in themselves and happy in their circumstances, for nature produced its fruits in abundance with no toil on their part. According to the second, more realistic view the earliest men were ignorant and brutal in character, and at the mercy of wild beasts and all the forces of a hostile nature. Gradually learning by bitter experience, they improved both morally and in their conditions

³⁷⁵ Heidegger says: “Die erste Strophe nennt das Meer und die Erde, jedes ein Überwältigendes (*δεινόν*) in seiner Weise. Das Nennen von Meer und Erde meint die Genannten freilich nicht in der bloß geographischen und geologischen Bedeutung, nach de runs Heutigen diese Naturerscheinungen begegnen, um dann noch beiher mit einigen kleinen und flüchtigen Gefühlen übermalt zu werden. »Meer«, das ist hier zie zum ersten Mal gesagt und in den winterlichen Wogen genannt, darin es standing seine eigene Tiefe auf- und sich in sie hinabreißt.” *Ibid.*, p. 162.

³⁷⁶ Heidegger, *ibid.*, p. 163.

of life, as one by one the arts of building, weaving, domestication of animals, agriculture, and above all of combining in communities for mutual protection, were discovered and mastered. This less mythical version rapidly gained ground at the expense of the other during the fifth century.³⁷⁷

Thus, the second stanza³⁷⁸ of “Of the Snaring of Birds” presents a view of “man the tactician”. By his sly inventions, man manages to master the art of hunting and of the domestication of air, sea and land animals, in much the same way he manages to domesticate the land through cultivation. There is no living creature in this world that will not eventually fall prey to his nets and yokes, for man is a creative and resourceful being. The birds of the air, the fish of the deep sea, the goats of the mountain, horses and bulls³⁷⁹: all of them are at the mercy of ingenious man, who controls all living creatures from his position at the very top of creation. The texture of Bringhurst’s translation of the original Greek text can be best felt in verse lines of utter simplicity like these, in which the reader’s mind is invited to dance to the rhythm of *melopoeia* and *logopoeia*.

Birds’ minds climb the air, yet he snares them,
and creatures of the field.
These
and the flocks
of the deep sea. He unfurls
his folded nets for their funeral shrouds.

The third stanza³⁸⁰ of “Of the Snaring of Birds” is a moving meditation on several other accomplishments of human beings: speech, politics and architecture (or the art of building). This stanza is pregnant with a wealth of meaning that is worth analyzing in detail. Speech is what distinguishes human beings from all other beings in the world; the ability to convey to others through words what men and women think and feel is a recognizably human attribute. This does not mean, of course, that only humans have a monopoly on language or on meaning. Every single thing in this universe is endowed with meaning, seeks to *mean* something as it were, and speaks a language of its own. Thus, animals have their own systems of communication; they somehow manage to send messages to one another as well. Like humans, they do not live isolated in their own spheres, closed from the inside to everything without. And yet words are a purely human invention: the breath emanating

³⁷⁷ W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. II, pp. 399-400. An extant fragment by Xenophanes, by the way, gives the same idea in a nutshell: “Fragment 18 of Xenophanes (“The gods did not reveal to men all things in the beginning, but in course of time, by searching, they find out better.”), where the emphasis is on personal search, on the need for time, which makes this “the first statement in extant Greek literature of the idea of progress in the arts and sciences, a progress dependent on human effort and not –or at least not primarily– on divine revelation. It foreshadows the praise of human ingenuity and perseverance in Sophocles’ *Antigone* (332 ff.)” Ibid., pp. 399-400.

³⁷⁸ The original Greek text in *Αντιγόνη* reads as follows: κουφονόων τε φύλον ὀρνίθων ἀμφιβαλὼν ἄγει / καὶ θηρῶν ἀγρίων ἔθνη πόντου τ’ εἰναλίαν φύσιν / σπείρασι δικτυοκλώστοις, / περιφραδῆς ἀνὴρ· κρατεῖ δὲ μηχαναῖς ἀγραύλου / θηρὸς ὄρεσιβάτα, λασιάχενά θ’ / ἵππον ὀμάζεται ἀμφὶ λόφον ζυγῶν / οὔρειόν τ’ ἀκμῆτα ταῦρον.

³⁷⁹ As Heidegger puts it, “[Die Gegenstrophe] nennt den Vogelschwarm in den Lüften, das Getier im Wasser, Stier und Roß in den Bergen. Das Lebendige, das leichtträumend in sich und in seinem Umkreis schwingt, standing über sich hinwegströmend in immer neuen Gestalten sich erneuert und doch in seiner einen Bahn bleibt, kennt den Ort, wo es nächtigt und wandert. Als Lebendiges ist es dem Meeres und der Erde eingefügt. In dieses in sich rollende Leben, im eigenen Kreis und Gefüge und Grund ungewöhnlich, dahinein wirft der Mensch seine Schlingen und Netze, dieses reißt er aus seiner Ordnung und sperrt es in seine Gehege und Pferche ein und zwingt es unter die Joche. Dort: Ausbruch und Umbruch, hier: Einfang und Niederzwang.” Ibid., pp. 163-164.

³⁸⁰ This is the original Greek text in *Αντιγόνη*: καὶ φθέγμα καὶ ἀνεμόεν φρόνημα καὶ ἀστυνόμους / ὀργὰς ἐδιδάξατο καὶ δυσούλων / πάγων ὑπαίθρεια καὶ δύσομβρα φεύγειν βέλη / παντοπόρος· ἄπορος ἐπ’ οὐδὲν ἐρχεται / τὸ μέλλον· Ἄϊδα μόνον φεῦξιν οὐκ ἐπάξεται / νόσων δ’ ἀμηχάνων φυγὰς ζυμπέφρασταί.

from humans' lungs is endowed with a distinct meaning that is easily recognizable through convention by members belonging to the same speech community. In Bringhurst's rendering of Sophocles' original Greek, the emphasis is laid precisely on the oral dimension of speech with the utmost linguistic economy: "*And the sounds in his own throat / gather the breezes that rise in his mind.*" Words are literally *sounds* born in the throat that allow humans to give voice to the *breezes* (ideas and feelings) in their mind. These sounds are not unintelligible noises, but distinct combinations of sounds that are easily recognizable to the human ear, regardless of whether humans have devised up to 6,000 distinct languages with their own phonemic systems to convey infinite messages in a potentially infinite range of word combinations. This is simply astonishing if we think about it for a while: language (in singular) is the most ambitious creation of the human spirit and languages (in plural) are true repositories of human memory and human knowledge. Nothing is left behind en route, for nothing is truly lost. What makes the progress of humankind possible in the end is precisely language – the infinite treasure-house of all the words, thoughts, ideas and feelings (past, present and future) that humans shape in their minds. Language is still the most mysterious human artefact, and an inexorably creative power. Though mastered and mediated and mediated by every one of us, language belongs to no one. Nobody owns it; it is a boon that belongs to humankind. In our language we both express and share our common human spirit.

The ingenuity and perseverance of humans know of no limits. Humans have thus also mastered the art of living together in harmony, for man "*has learned how to sit on committees*" and devised codes of laws and rules to arbitrate the functioning of society. A long time ago Aristotle claimed that man is "a political animal", which means that man is bound to live with other men and women, otherwise he would lead a solitary and miserable existence away from all human company. Needless to say, in Sophocles' time, the polis was a notion central to the ancient Greeks' minds. It was a right and a duty to stand up to the circumstances of one's city-state, "to add beauty and strength" to the polis, to stand high in it just to honour oneself and fellow citizens. And in another more pragmatic realm, humans have also mastered the art of building "*houses and barns / against blizzards and gales.*" Amid a hostile world, men have learned to seek the warmth and protection of houses, so as not to be at the mercy of the elements and to protect their vulnerable bodies from excessive heat and cold. Now, the closing lines of the third stanza offer a brief though intense meditation on a simple fact: that humans have mastered speech as well as politics and the art of building houses is an inevitable part of the glory and splendour inherent in humankind, and yet misery is also somewhat inescapable. There is nothing humans cannot attain, not a goal out of their reach if they are determined to achieve it, such is their perseverance and their capacity to accomplish things. However, even if humans can touch the sky and build a heaven on earth, they are also capable of the worst things imaginable.

He manages all and yet manages
nothing. Nothing is closed
to the reach of his will,
and yet he has found no road out of hell.
His fate, we all know³⁸¹, is precisely
what he has never outwitted.

By *fate* Bringhurst means *death*. So there is only one thing that humans have not managed to outwit, and that is death. There is nothing they can do to avoid it or to prevent it from happening. In this respect, Heidegger says: "Nur an einem scheitert alle Gewalt-tätigkeit

³⁸¹ "Say" instead of "know" in the earlier version of the poem published in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982).

unmittelbar. Das ist der Tod. Er über-endet alle Vollendung, er über-grenzt alle Grenzen. Hierb gibt es nicht Ausbruch und Umbruch, nicht Einfang und Niederzwang.”³⁸² Death is also a mystery, possibly the greatest of all. The idea of an uncanny vacuum opening its arms wide open towards us when we leave this life on earth is simply scary. Death has accompanied humans since the beginning of their adventure on this planet; it is the inevitable shadow walking by one’s side from the very cradle to the very grave. And death is present in many of Bringham’s poems indeed: for instance, *Deuteronomy* (1974), *Jacob Singing* (1977) and *The Stonecutter’s Horses* (1979) are all concerned with men preparing to die. In the recreation of Petrarch’s last will and testament in *The Stonecutter’s Horses*, the first movement of the poem dwells on the need to think about death deeply: “*thinking of death can never be / wasted thinking*” for “*A man carries his death with him / everywhere, waiting, but seldom thinking / of waiting. Death is uncommonly like the soul.*” In general, in Bringham’s poems death is seen as a natural and inevitable part of life. It could not be otherwise when analyzed by a sage’s mind which is calm and serene, not scared in the face of what is ubiquitous and inescapable.

The fourth stanza³⁸³ of “Of the Snaring of Birds”, which has been extensively revised from one textual incarnation to the next, reads as follows in the 2005 edition of *The Old in Their Knowing*:

Wise, yes – or ingenious.
 More knowledge than hope in his hand,
 and evil comes out of it sometimes,
 and sometimes he creeps toward nobility.
 Warped on the earth’s loom
 and dyed in the thought of the gods,
 a man should add beauty and strength to this city.³⁸⁴
 But he is no citizen whatsoever
 if he is tied to the ugly
 by fear or by pride or by greed or by love
 of disorder or order.
 May no one who does not still wonder
 what he is and what he does
 come in and sit at my fireside.³⁸⁵

Two little movements for the soul are discernible in the pattern of these verse lines. In the first movement, man is described as being wise or ingenious, but we are well aware that wisdom is not exactly the same as ingenuity. True wisdom is hard to attain; it is not the same as knowledge or erudition. Sages of all times like the ones whose company Bringham has sought throughout his life (and whose thinking he has captured in his sequences on the Pre-Socratic poet-philosophers and on the Buddhist monk-thinkers) have a clarity of mind that is precious and rare to find among common human beings. If they become wise, it is because their sharp minds are able to go beyond the surface texture of things and to

³⁸² Heidegger, *ibid.*, p. 167.

³⁸³ The original Greek text in *Αντιγόνη* reads as follows: σοφόν τι τὸ μηχανόεν τέχνας ὑπὲρ ἐλπίδ’ ἔχων / τοτὲ μὲν κακόν, ἄλλοτ’ ἐπ’ ἐσθλὸν ἔρπει, / νόμους γεραίρων χθονὸς θεῶν τ’ ἔνορκον δίκαν, / ὑπίπολις ἄπολις ὅτω τὸ μὴ καλὸν / ζῖνεσσι τόλμας χάριν. μήτ’ ἐμοὶ παρέστιος / γένοιτο μήτ’ ἴσον φρονῶν ὃς τὰδ’ ἔρδει.

³⁸⁴ This verse line reads “A man should stand high in his city” in *The Beauty of the Weapons* version.

³⁸⁵ In *The Beauty of the Weapons* version the closing lines read as follows: “if he is tied to the ugly by love of adventure. / May no one who will not wonder what he is and does / suddenly arrive at my fireside.” In *The Calling*, they read thus: “if he is tied to the ugly by fear / or by greed or by love of disorder. May no one / who will not wonder what he is and what he does / suddenly arrive at my fireside.” The last verse line reads “suddenly arrive at my fireside” in the 2009 *Selected Poems* version of the poem.

penetrate a core of irreducible meaning in reality. The sudden revelation or epiphany concerning the ultimate essence of reality is not a gift given to all of human beings. It might be truly blinding. Truth is not what one looks for on purpose, but something that unveils itself when you least expect it. Truth happens or unveils itself to inquisitively quiet, sharply luminous and beautiful minds, which are also hard to find in this world. Furthermore, man is both good and evil. Holding more knowledge than hope in his hand, man is endowed with a natural tendency towards evil and nobility. This is one of the fundamental paradoxes inherent in the human condition: that humans should be able to accomplish the most sublime feats and that, at the same time, they should be capable of committing the most atrocious crimes as well is truly a mystery. In the second movement, the emphasis is on man as exemplary citizen of the polis. A man of honour does his best to stand high in his city and “adds beauty and strength” to his polis. If he happens to be on the side of ugliness for whatever reason, he ceases to be a citizen of any worth. At the end of the poem, the voice speaking these lines says that nobody is welcome to sit by his fireside if they do not still wonder what they are and what they do. A sense of wonder in the face of the mystery that oneself is is an essential prerequisite if they are to be admitted in his company, in his home, as symbolized by the hearth or fireside.

XII · THE PETELIA TABLET

“The Petelia Tablet”³⁸⁶, the closing composition in *The Old in Their Knowing* is a translation from a 4th-century BCE classical Greek text. Originally published in a literary periodical in 1974 and later included in Bringhurst’s MFA Thesis, *Carmina propria et opuscula translata* (1975), the poem found its way into the twelve-part sequence for the first time in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982). “The Petelia Tablet” is a strange message in a bottle only rescued from the turbulent waters of time in the 19th century, but also a curious fragment salvaged from the wisdom of ancient Greece: “Said to come from a grave in Petelia (modern Strongoli) 4th century BCE. The tablet was rolled up in a golden amulet case from the Imperial epoch. Bought c. 1830 from a local by Baron Millinger; now in the British Museum (inv. 3155). Rectangular tablet, damaged at the bottom because it was, in a secondary use, cut to fit into the amulet case. A final line runs along the right margin.”³⁸⁷ This is the literal rendering into English given by Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston:

You will find to the left of the house of Hades a spring
and standing by it a white cypress.
Do not even approach this spring!
You will find another, from the Lake of Memory,
cold water pouring forth; there are guards before it.

³⁸⁶ “The Petelia Tablet” was first published in C.22 “Eight Poems and Translations”, in *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* (Boston) ns 1.4 (1973/1974): 561–575. [Contents: [•] Excerpt from “The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods” (rev. from A.2); “Strophe from Sophocles” (trans. from Greek, rpt. from A.2); “Herakleitos” (rpt. from A.2); • “The Petelia Tablet” (trans. from Greek, incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.14 *The Beauty of the Weapons*, A.47 *The Calling*, B.67, A.76 *The Old in Their Knowing*, A.92 *Selected Poems*), “Four Glyphs” (rpt. from A.2); [•] “Isthmian” (rev. from A.1); • “A Short History” (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.5, A.6, A.14, A.47); “Antistrophe from Leopardi” (trans. from Italian, rpt. from A.2).] It was also reprinted in B.67, *World Poetry: An Anthology of Verse from Antiquity to Our Time*, edited by Katharine Washburn, John S. Major & Clifton Fadiman. New York: W.W. Norton & Book-of-the-Month Club, 1998: pp. 83, 284-290, 815-816. Contributions: “The Petelia Tablet” (trans. from Greek, rpt. from A.14); “The Ode of Imr el-Qais” (trans. from Arabic, rpt. from A.2); “Antistrophe” (trans. from the Italian of Leopardi, rpt. from A.2.)

³⁸⁷ See Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife. Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets*, London & New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 6.

perhaps 4th century BC”, the opening lines of the ancient text in classical Greek reads as follows in Bringhurst’s version:

You will come to a well on the left side of hell’s house.
A white cypress stands by it, luminous, pale.
Stay clear of this well at all cost. Don’t drink from this well.
You will come to another, where cold water flows
from the marshes of memory. Sentinels stand there.

The first obstacle for the deceased is to find her way in the underworld to the correct spring where the guardians (the powers of the underworld) wait. And so in Bringhurst’s rendering of the text of the Petelia tablet, the opening lines describe what the soul sees as it wanders in the underworld: a white cypress tree and a spring nearby. The soul is to find the path to the correct spring, and so the tablet text provides instructions to navigate through the darkness to find the spring from which the deceased must drink. The first spring is by the cypress and should be avoided, and the second spring is the correct one. “The solution provided by the tablets is to persist until reaching the second spring, with the result that the deceased obtains a drink from the water of Memory.”³⁹⁰ The white cypress seems to be a marker and a symbol of relief from “the fearsome darkness of the underworld, a sign that gives hope of salvation from the all-encompassing darkness of death.”³⁹¹ Whereas the first spring flows with the water of Forgetfulness, the second (correct) spring flows from the Lake of Mnemosyne, with the waters of Memory. Thus, whereas the former makes the soul forget, the latter makes it achieve memory rather than oblivion. As Edmonds explains, the soul that drinks of Forgetfulness “might wander witless and confused, knowing nothing of their past or future”, whereas the power of Mnemosyne provides “salvation for the individual in the world of the dead by her own recollection of herself” and “permits the deceased to remember her true origins and identity.”³⁹² This function of memory is also inextricably linked to the Orphic belief in metempsychosis and reincarnation, to the notion that the soul goes through a series of incarnations. The prominent role played by memory in the Petelia tablet and other gold tablets suggests that “some doctrine of metempsychosis underlies the religious beliefs of the tablets.”³⁹³ The Pythagoreans and Empedokleans, who had a strong influence precisely in the region around Petelia in southern Italy, claimed that humans went through a series of lives, not only human but also animal and vegetal as well.

At the centre of the narrative of the soul’s journey to the underworld is the description of its confrontation with the powers of the underworld. In the Petelia tablet the soul encounters nameless guardians that question the deceased as she approaches the waters of memory, parched with thirst. Thus, the thirsty soul of the deceased must get past the sentinels standing near the spring. They are not monstrous beasts, not Persephone or Hades himself, rulers of the land of the dead, but nameless, featureless chthonic powers. There is no threat of danger or violence implicit in this confrontation with the underworld powers. Also, these nameless guardians do not pose complex riddles but ask for a simple password of identity, for which no heroic strength or courage or cleverness is required. “In

³⁹⁰ R.G. Edmonds, *Myths of the Underworld Journey: Plato, Aristophanes, and the ‘Orphic’ Gold Tablets*, 2004, p. 35.

³⁹¹ R.G. Edmonds, *ibid.*, p. 49.

³⁹² R.G. Edmonds, *ibid.*, p. 53. He adds: “this focus, through memory, on the individual identity apart from the different lives places value on the self that exists outside of the mortal world, on an immortal part whose proper place lies outside the hierarchies and boundaries of the earthly, political, material world. [...] Memory serves to recall the individual from the mortal world and the normal order back to the world of the immortals.” To sum up, memory provides “a personal immortality through the recollection of the self.” *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³⁹³ R.G. Edmonds, *ibid.*, p. 54.

response to their questions, the deceased must proclaim her identity as a child of Earth and starry Heaven and beg the guardians for a drink.”³⁹⁴ This is the second movement in Bringhurst’s rendering of the original Greek:

Say: *I am earth’s and the starred sky’s child, but the sky’s
blood runs in my veins; you can see this yourselves.
Thirst withers me. Hurry, give me
the cold water flowing from the lake of memory.*

“I am earth’s and the starred sky’s child”: this is the key statement of identity for the deceased to complete successfully her journey into the land of the dead and thus obtain the crucial drink of water of Memory. Earth and sky (Ge and Ouranos) are primordial forces, the first parents of immortal things, and so the formula of self-identification evokes a time before the separation of mortals and immortals, connecting “the deceased with the divine community, evoking the primordial paradise when the gods and humans lived together in bliss.”³⁹⁵ Edmonds elaborates on this crucial idea further:

The deceased employs this mythic motif in a claim of descent that supplants the ties of the human, mundane, and civic *genos* with those of the divine, otherworldly, and primordial *genos*. Ge and Ouranos represent the primordial forces of the cosmos; to claim descent from them is not merely to lay claim to divine descent, but to link oneself to the primordial order, the ideal order from which the present mundane world has degenerated.³⁹⁶

This means that, by claiming to have become part of the race of immortals, the deceased sees herself as one with the original cosmogonic order, one that transcends the vicissitudes of mortal life. The qualification “*but the sky’s / blood runs in my veins; you can see this yourselves*” seems to suggest a more dualistic outlook that privileges the starry sky of the immortals over the material world of the earth. At this point, the deceased’s credentials as a child of the earth and the sky suffice for the sentinels to permit her to drink from the fountain of Memory to quench her unbearable thirst:

They will give you water from the sacred wellhead,
and you will be known heroes from then on.
. going to die
. this writing
. the darkness closing over.

The closing lines appear to suggest that the afterlife represents the beginning of a new form of existence. Death is not the end of the mortal progression, for a new life awaits the soul in the afterworld – either one more life in a series of reincarnations or the final life for the blessed initiate. However, the end of the text inscribed in the Petelia tablet is fragmentary: “Because it had to be trimmed before it could be stuffed into the amulet case in which it was discovered at Petelia, the lines describing the fate of the deceased suffer from lacunae in crucial places.”³⁹⁷ The end appears to promise that the deceased will do something among the heroes, but then the text comes to an end all of a sudden, with “*the darkness closing over*”. The tablet has fulfilled its function as a sort of magical object or amulet protecting the deceased after death.

³⁹⁴ R.G. Edmonds, *ibid.*, p. 61.
³⁹⁵ R.G. Edmonds, *ibid.*, p. 77.
³⁹⁶ R.G. Edmonds, *ibid.*, p. 78.
³⁹⁷ R.G. Edmonds, *ibid.*, p. 86.

The Book of Silences

The Unstoppable Stillness of Oriental Wisdom

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Silences is an impressive sequence of dramatic impersonations of Oriental sages central to Robert Bringham's poetic corpus. The poems in it are things of a supreme beauty. What poetry should be, that they are. It belongs with the sequence on the Presocratic philosophers entitled *The Old in Their Knowing* since both sequences concern the wisdom of admirable sages (Oriental and western) and seek to capture the philosophical thinking or poetic philosophizing of thinkers of all ages. These were men who lived in harmony with their surrounding world; they sought to understand the mystery inherent in *what is*, and so their work could be interpreted as being a bold hypothesis about the ultimate nature of reality. When all these pieces of meditation are brought together, they form a rich tapestry of cosmic dimensions that reminds us that *homo sapiens sapiens* has not changed that much, that the fundamental questions that preoccupy human beings and that these monk-scholars and poet-scientists asked such a long time ago remain the same. As humans and thinkers, they were *whole* and their mind was comprehensive and omnivorous. Thus, they did not bother to draw a clear-cut boundary between poetry, science or philosophy, or between being, thinking and singing. After all, poetry, science and philosophy represent different ways of approaching the world, different ways of responding to the grandeur of *what is*. To them the world was truly alive, and far from reducing it to deadened systems of thought, they strove hard to sympathize with the living texture of the mesh of things. The tattered fragments of wisdom that have been preserved of these authors testify to their relevance even today, in the early years of the third millennium, when we live in the ruins of what used to be a functioning and healthy whole. The thinking of these men still talks to us; their words and insights into reality remain absolutely meaningful to us. It comes as no surprise that Bringham, a humanist and polymath himself avid for the ideas of others, should admire in all of them their archaic sense of integrity, their moral, spiritual and intellectual integrity, their inquisitive curiosity, and their voracious (but healthy) appetite for understanding.¹ He also admired the intensity with which their beautiful and sharp minds thought about the world and could penetrate the real, as well as the lyricism and terse texture of their writings whenever these have been preserved.

The sequence first saw the light of day in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), where Bringham prefaced the poems with an untitled prefatory note that dwells on what both the Buddhist monk-thinkers and the Presocratic poet-philosophers have in common:

The Jain teacher Parśvanatha was, or may have been, a contemporary of Homer. The Zen master Hakuin, born in 1685, was three years older than Alexander Pope, though he sounds more like Herakleitos. This sequence of brief impersonations begins in India with the one and concludes in Japan with the other. The speakers between are the ghosts of other thinkers and singers, most of them from China, most of them students of the Tao and of the Buddhadharmas.

In the midst of an empire as arrogant, ethnocentric, greedy and corrupt as the North American empire at present, the sages of Tang Dynasty China practised and

¹ See Bringham's essay "Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation", *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, p. 109.

preached a tradition of freedom both from the pride of imperial service and from the anesthesia of complicity. Like the Presocratics, they reached toward the joints and roots of poetry and thinking. Most of them were wanderers, and most of them resettled, taking new names from the neighboring mountains. They are not just people who were places; they are people who *became* places – when everything encouraged them instead to become consumers and provisioners: bureaucrats or managers; trapped, coopted laborers or lords.²

Bringhurst wants “a poetry of knowledge and of thought, not of opinion – and not of belief, which is merely dead thought, severed from the thinking.”³ In this respect, the Oriental sages provided him with a wonderful opportunity (and also a challenge) to investigate the thinking of sages who had been able to produce a poetry of knowledge either in verse form or in prose in such diverse places as China, Japan or India. The life and work of all these Buddhist monks gave Bringhurst the *materia poetica* for his ambitious sequence of dramatic impersonations. This is ancient wisdom, rather cosmic. Reading these poems for the first time, it is as if we got to listen to the voices of the Oriental sages themselves. Though the sequence is entitled *The Book of Silences*, we do get to hear voices of these ancestors telling (or reminding) us of something elemental about the world we live in and about ourselves. In this respect, Bringhurst says that “Poetry is the musical density of being, but sometimes it is *silent*, and sometimes that silence is musically still.”⁴ There is sound and there is silence in these poems, but there is also an appealing music for the mind and the heart, enough nourishing food for thought, and an inexhaustible reservoir of nutriment for the avid reader. But silence is also the prerequisite for deep, intense thinking to happen, and when a mind is capable of thinking beautifully, poetry of lasting value (concerned with truth and beauty and eternity) comes into being. *The Book of Silences* is “a gorgeous embodiment of paradox and rest: the unity of diverse voices, silence in sound, the world and the voice interblooming.”⁵ There is no way of knowing for sure where the line dividing the sages’ thought and Bringhurst’s thought lies; it seems it does not matter much. The alchemy or symbiosis is simply perfect. It could be that these sages are speaking through the voice of Bringhurst himself, or the other way around: that Bringhurst is impersonating their thinking and singing with great dexterity. Poems rich with ideas, permeated by profundity of thought, written in simple language of utter transparency and musicality: this is the ultimate elegance Bringhurst attains in *The Book of Silences*. Once again, he might have been following the footsteps of the master, Ezra Pound (the author of *Cathay*, *Noh*, *The Chinese Character as a Medium for Poetry*, based on Ernest Fellonosa’s papers, and *Confucius*), for whom the Orient held an irresistible fascination as well.

Being a work in progress for a long time, the poems in the sequence *The Book of Silences* underwent revision and modification over a long period of time. The sequence has been revised and expanded time after time with each republication. Thus, the complex editorial history of the entire sequence can be best summarized as follows:

- (1) First textual incarnation: A.32 • *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986. With calligraphy by Yim Tse. 128 p. Paper, 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 0-7710-1661-1. (See also A.35, which is the US edition of *Pieces*.) The opening sequence of poems in the book is “The Book of Silences”, which consist of an untitled headnote and 17 poems: • “Parśvanatha” (rpt. in B.65, C.58, C.70, rev. in A.47, A.65, B.69); “Uddalaka

² Robert Bringhurst, *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, prefatory note to “The Book of Silences”, p. 10.

³ Bringhurst, *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, prefatory note to “The Book of Silences”, p. 10.

⁴ Bringhurst, *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, prefatory note to “The Book of Silences”, p. 10.

⁵ See Richard Silberg’s review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, published in *Poetry Flash* (Berkeley, Calif.) 175 (October 1987): 20.

- Aruni: A Song for the Weavers” (rpt. from C.50); • “Nagarjuna” (rev. in A.47, A.65, B.69); “Wáng Bì” (rpt. from C.50); • “Sengzhào” (rpt. in A.47, A.65, B.69, C.57, C.58); • “Bodhidharma” (rpt. in A.47, A.65, C.57); “Jízàng” (rpt. from C.50); “Saraha” (rpt. from A.23); • “Saraha’s Exercise for Beginners” (rpt. in A.47); • “Baizhàng Huaihai” (rpt. in A.47); “Hán Shan” (rpt. from C.48); “Línjì Yìxué” (rpt. from C.48); “Nánquán Puyuàn” (rpt. from C.50); “Danxiá Zìchún” (rpt. from C.48); • “Hóng Zìchéng” (rpt. in C.55, C.57); “Jakushitsu” (rpt. from C.43); • “Hakuin” (rev. in A.65).
- (2) Second textual incarnation: A.47 •• *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970–1995*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995. 256 p. Paper. 14 × 22 cm. ISBN 0-7710-1651-4. Here the sequence “The Book of Silences” consists of 22 poems: I: • “Short Upanishad” (rpt. in A.65), II: [•] “Parsvanatha” (rev. from A.32), III: [•] “Nagarjuna” (rev. from A.32), IV: “Bodhidharma” (rpt. from A.32), V: “Sengzhao” (rpt. from A.32), VI: [•] “Yongjia Xuanjue” (rev. from C.63), VII: “Saraha” (rpt. from A.32), VIII: “Saraha’s Exercise for Beginners” (rpt. from A.32), IX: “Baizhang Huaihai” (rpt. from A.32), X: • “Yunyan Tansheng” (rpt. in A.65), XI: “Han Shan” (rpt. from A.32), XII: [•] “Linji Yixuan” (rev. from A.32), XIII: [•] “Dongshan Liangjie” (rev. from C.63), XIV: [•] “Yunmen Wenyan” (rev. from C.62), XV: [•] “Fayan Wenyi” (rev. from C.62), XVI: [•] “Xuedou Zhongxian” (rev. from C.63), XVII: “Danxia Zichun” (rpt. from A.32), XVIII: • “Dahui Zonggao” (rpt. in A.65), XIX: “Tiantong Rujing” (rpt. from C.62), XX: [•] “Dogen” (rev. from C.63), XXI: “Jakushitsu” (rpt. from A.32), XXII: “Bankei” (rpt. from B.48, where it appears as Bankei Yōtaku in Los Angeles, dedicated to Leonard Cohen). The sequence is much enlarged from A.32, and the poems are numbered here for the first time. As in C.63, all titles are now printed without accents, apart from the *ś* in “Pārśvanatha”; but the names are spelled with full diacritics in the glossary at the back of the book.
- (3) Third textual incarnation: A.65 •• *The Book of Silences*. Los Angeles: Ninja Press. 2001. [48 + 8] p. Sewn in soft cover, loose in a hard folding case, 17 × 26 cm. With two platinum-print photographs by the designer/printer, Carolee Campbell. “One hundred signed & numbered copies with twelve lettered hors [de] commerce.” The sequence consists now of 29 poems: “Short Upanishad” (rpt. from A.47); “Parsvanatha” (rpt. from A.47); [•] “Nagarjuna” (rev. from A.47); [•] “Wang Bi” (rev. from A.32); “Bodhidharma” (rpt. from A.47); “Sengzhao” (rpt. from A.47); “Jizang” (rpt. from A.32); “Yongjia Xuanjue” (rpt. from A.47); • “Nanyang Huizhong”; “Saraha” (rpt. from A.47); “Baizhang Huaihai” (rpt. from A.47); “Nanquan Puyuan” (rpt. from A.32); “Han Shan” (rpt. from A.47); “Zhaozhou Congshen” (rev. from C.73); “Yunyan Tansheng” (rpt. from A.47); “Linji Yixuan” (rpt. from A.47); “Dongshan Liangjie” (rpt. from A.47); • “Xiangyan Zhixian”; “Yunmen Wenyan” (rpt. from A.47); [•] “Fayan Wenyi” (rev. from A.47); “Xuedou Zhongxian” (rpt. from A.47); “Danxia Zichun” (rpt. from A.47); “Dahui Zonggao” (rpt. from A.47); “Tiantong Rujing” (rpt. from A.47); [•] “Dogen Kigen” (rev. from A.47); • “Keizan Jokin”; “Jakushitsu Genko” (rpt. from A.47); “Bankei Yotaku” (rpt. from A.47); [•] “Hakuin Ekaku” (rev. from A.32). Separately bound section entitled • “Contents and Notes.”
- (4) Fourth textual incarnation: A.92 •• *Selected Poems*. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press. 2009. 272 p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-068-6. The Book of Silence is the seventh section in this collection and it comprises 28 poems: “Short Upanishad”, “Pārśvanātha”, “Uddālaka”, “Nāgārjuna”, “Bodhidharma”, “Sengzhào”, “Yongjiā Xuánjué”, “Sarāha”, “Sarāha’s Exercise for Beginners”, “Baizhang Huaihai”, “Nanquan Puyuan”, “Hán Shān”, “Yúnyán Tánshèng”, “Línjì Yìxué”, “Dòngshān Liángjiè”, “Xiāngyán Zhìxián”, “Yunmen Wenyan”, “Fayan Wenyi”, “Lianhua Fengxian”, “Xuedou Zhongxian”, “Danxia Zichun”, “Dahui Zonggao”, “Tiāntóng Rújìng”, “Dōgen”, “Keizan”, “Jakushitsu”, “Bankei Yōtaku”, “Hakuin”. Most of them are reprinted from A.47 or A.65 with minor textual variants.

For our critical analysis below we will be quoting from the latest textual incarnation of the poems, though. As can be gathered from the editorial history of the poems included in the sequence outlined above, some of the pieces published in earlier incarnations of *The Book of Silences* have not been reprinted in subsequent versions, and some new compositions have been added with each republication. Where textual variants are relevant, they are noted down in customary form in footnotes. At any rate, the poems seem to be arranged according to a chronological criterion depending on the historical period the different Buddhist sages lived in.

In *The Book of Silences*, Bringhurst impersonates a series of Eastern monks and religious teachers. When published for the first time in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringhurst's twelfth volume, the sequence of poems in *The Book of Silences* was enthusiastically praised by different literary critics. The book itself, *Pieces*, is a heterogeneous⁶ collection encompassing the dramatic impersonations of the Buddhist monk-thinkers; a handful of "mistranslations" from different modern and classical languages included in "The Lyell Island Variations"; five poems under the heading "Gift and Presences" concerned with bones and being; a long narrative poem entitled "Tending the Fire", which is a creation-myth steeped in the oral literatures of North America; *The Blue Roofs of Japan*, a jazz duet for two interpenetrating voices; and a section entitled "Thinking & Talking: a Prose Caboose", which includes an essay and an interview where the poet discusses his own poetics. Each poem in the Oriental sages sequence is devoted to the teaching of a given Zen or Taoist master and is set against a facing page of calligraphy (a short Chinese or Japanese calligraphy) that sheds light on the meaning of each composition. The visual dimension added by Yim Tse's Chinese calligraphy in the edition of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* adds strength to the sequence. According to Ronald Hatch, the volume adds to Bringhurst's "reputation as a seer", as the dramatic impersonations conjure up the names of ancient poet-philosophers and then "recreates their concepts in contemporary verse". This is poetry of pure vision. Through the stark simplicity of their language, they "open the reader to a new and wider sense of his place in the universe." One detects in the poems "an austere idealism which would like to flee the world of the senses

⁶ In a review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* published in *Wascana Review* (Regina) 22.1 (Spring 1987): 92-95, Ron Clark writes: "Robert Bringhurst's *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* is not a simple book, thematically, nor it is simply a book of poetry. In addition to poems of the conventional kind there are a jazz score for two voices, an autobiographical meditation, an interview with the author, and a number of didactic prose pieces that outline the philosophical concerns informing the book. Many of these ideas have certainly been heard before in the work of Gary Snyder, Jerome Rothenberg, and the Black Mountain poets, and Bringhurst is not remiss in acknowledging his "elders"." (p. 92) For his part, Steven Pugmire, in his review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* published in *Western American Literature* 23.1 (May 1988): 88-89, dwells on the amazing breadth of the collection, which he considers a multidimensional book made of disparate elements: "Even in an age of multi-media presentations, it is difficult to imagine a work with more dimensions than Robert Bringhurst's *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, a thin, seemingly conventional paperbound books of poems and essays. It shouldn't work. Imagine a shotgun blast of ideas and characters: Zen masters, Josef Mengele, poems with superscriptions in French, German, Spanish, and Polish, an origin tale, a jazz duet, an autobiographical essay, and an interview. Yet Bringhurst ties these disparate elements together in a display of dimensional virtuosity." See p. 88. And Glenn Sheldon, in a review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* published in *Small Press Review* (El Cerrito, California) 20:12 (December 1988): 12, writes of the range of the book in these terms: "What to make of Robert Bringhurst's twelfth book of poems will puzzle more than one reader. Bringhurst, a Canadian poet, finds material for his work from both the western and the eastern hemispheres, from Taoism [*sic*] to Zen Buddhism, from the Socratic discourse to the Hebrew prophetic tradition. Bringhurst was raised in Alberta, Montana, Utah, Wyoming and British Columbia (where he now lives, on Bowen Island). A blurb on the back cover of this book states that Bringhurst reads and translates from several ancient and modern languages. So it is no wonder that a reader of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* senses the whole, spinning, planet Earth within these works." See p. 12.

altogether.”⁷ In any case, the sequence of *The Book of Silences* shows the work of a passionate cultural historian and so we get to listen to a multitude of voices. As a true adventurer among past minds, “studying many wisdoms to find the one,” he gives us “Zen puzzles accompanied by their calligraphic equivalents that make the head spin and leave one grinning at what is literally the last word on everything.”⁸ What Bringhurst is after is a “humble and primitive music”⁹ in the form of impersonations of the thinking of Indian, Chinese and Japanese Buddhist sages of different ages, marked by cadences which are sure and hypnotic at the same time. These poems leave readers gasping as they hear the voice of these monk-thinkers of old speaking of the mind.

The Book of Silences is written in the language of wisdom and vision, Ron Clark suggests in an early review of *Pieces*. There is considerable beauty and craftsmanship in these poems, but also profundity of thought. Each of the poems in the sequence offers “a meditation upon the ineffable and paradoxical qualities of absolute being” and “attains a profound silence in the very heart of language, opening horizons of possibility and leaving us at the edge of mystery and wonder.”¹⁰ Bringhurst is interested in a poetry of knowledge and thought, and so “a deep sense of the encompassing oneness of being” pervades the dramatic impersonations where he explores the thinking of the Oriental sages. In his poems “thought and being fuse into a single undifferentiated consciousness, and there the reader is invited to discover that supraconceptual core at the core of everything.”¹¹ It is truly refreshing to find a poet in the postmodern world who is still interested in the archaic and primordial truths the Oriental sages explored so long ago, a poet concerned to awaken the reader’s sensibility to a new dimension, which is truer and deeper, amid the mediocrity inherent in the post-modern, post-capitalist, industrial societies where we happen to live. One finds peace of mind, tranquillity, beauty and knowledge in these poems, but also enlightening insights into being, for throughout the whole sequence, “gracefully, like a long, level sigh, runs the idea of being” and the poet “develops wonderful sleepy, circular rhythms that give the reader a real sense that “being” can take on many different, diaphanous shapes.”¹² Bringhurst’s poems breathe through their feet. Being firmly rooted in the stuff of life itself, these philosophical poems are marked by a flawless verbal expression that stems directly from the poet’s “passionate involvement with earth.”¹³ Indeed, his poems testify to “a profound understanding, ultimately instinctive, of how language works” so that his poems “fall on the ear with the illusion of perfect naturalness, as though each world could not possibly be anything else.”¹⁴ At the palpitating heart of the sequence is “the mind regarding the mind”, which is not a favourite subject of poetry nowadays. This subject is hard to tackle; it defies verbalism straightaway. And yet Bringhurst is convinced that poetry has nothing quintessentially to do with language:

⁷ See Ronald Hatch’s review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* entitled “Poems of a Modern Saint – or is It a Preacher?”, published in *The Vancouver Sun*, 25 October 1986: C12.

⁸ See Patricia Keeney Smith’s review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, “Poetry lighting up our dark corners to show the invisible”, published in *The Star* (Toronto), 29 November 1986: M4.

⁹ See Phil Hall’s review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, in *Books in Canada* 15.9 (December 1986): 26-27.

¹⁰ See Ron Clark’s review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, *Wascana Review* (Regina) 22.1 (Spring 1987), p. 92.

¹¹ Ron Clark’s review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, *Wascana Review* (Regina) 22.1 (Spring 1987), p. 94.

¹² See Frances Woods’ review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, in *Booklist* (Chicago) 83.2 (July 1987): 1644.

¹³ See G.V. Downes’ review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, “Breathing in Tune and Time”, published in *Event* (New Westminster, B.C.) 16.2 (Summer 1987): 115-117. “It becomes clear that even the abstract grammatical patterns of a few of the philosophical poems (English does not seem suited to the subject) are firmly rooted in the stuff of life itself, the physical breath which is also the animating spiritual principle in so many other cultures – Greek, Sanskrit, Hopi. This understanding of where rhythm comes from is strengthened by Bringhurst’s sure hand with visual and tactile imagery which is part of his passionate involvement with earth. He has walked all over Western North America.” See, in particular, pp. 115-116.

¹⁴ G.V. Downes, *ibid.*, p. 116.

“knowledge and technique are merely the handmaidens of vision itself” and “although he rightly avoids using the word ‘mysticism’, one recognizes exactly where he is speaking from, the old trail in a high country where silent prayer or meditation, and experiences arising out of them, are more valuable than the language which attempts to fix them in an outward form”¹⁵ for *being* exists beyond words and resists being caught. In any case, the monologues placed in the mouths of various Oriental sages, monks and wanderers are written in austere language “with a minimum of imagery (but the effectiveness of what images there are is unquestionable) and an elegance of presentation that one rarely finds in a sustained series.” Writing about being and nonbeing is a difficult poetic enterprise, for the poet runs the risk of being trapped in a “a desert of abstractions, a kind of verbal algebra”, but this is not the case with Bringhurst’s sequence: one turns to the inexhaustible beauty of the vividness, directness and lyricism of his limpid language.¹⁶ Following Pound’s pieces of advice, he strips his poems to the core, to an absolute nakedness that is strongly evocative of the Buddhist monks’ austerity and asceticism. What he achieves is an impressive compression of the thinking of these talismanic sages, opening the reader’s mind to the beauty of pure consciousness.

That *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (where *The Book of Silences* first saw the light of day) was a collection of wide-ranging scope and ambition is made abundantly clear by an enthusiastic review by literary critic Robert Solomon, who celebrates the purely visual aspects pertaining to the design of the book and focuses on the polyglot nature of the collection as well as on the influence of Oriental thinking on Bringhurst and other contemporary writers:

The map of this book, written by a man who has lived on both sides of the U.S.-Canadian border but always in the West when it was possible, is daunting, with reference to Ojibwa, Hindi, Sanskrit, Cree, Greek, French, German, as well as Chinese and Japanese. It has calligraphy by Yim Tse on a score or so of its pages, a giant circle (metaphor and guide, one imagines), an empty square and a literal map. Bringhurst’s playfulness is by design, a plan expressed by Paul Reps, another poet gone happily to Eastern sources, as using words to “poem” or “play” the reader, to make him ring the way an Aeolian harp vibrates in a correspondent breeze for Wordsworth. At the end, Bringhurst, who is in the Orientalist tradition of Gary Snyder and Reps, among others, supplies a glossary as *Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts, and Other Creatures.*” This is witty, intellectually stimulating poetry, more accessible than it seems when the opening section, “The Book of Silences” appears. Bringhurst, like John V. Hicks and Daryl Hine, draws an international audience and, like those Canadian poets, has a fine classical background, which complements his knowledge of Amerindian and Eastern ways. Ironically, this book about universal music and map demonstrates how far Canadian poetry has come, and how far some poets intend to go. The writing is rich writing with ties to other writers who turned to the Indian and Oriental cultures for inspiration, from Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Pound, Ginsburg [*sic*], and Merton to Reps and Snyder. The collection brings to a dozen the steps Bringhurst has taken on his published journey; it ought to be part of every contemporary poetry collection.¹⁷

It is no happy coincidence that Bringhurst should have entitled his poetry book *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*. The title itself suggests that the lyric territory the poet is mapping is wide and vast enough as to encompass innumerable literary traditions (both oral and

¹⁵ G.V. Downes, *ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁶ G.V. Downes, *ibid.*, p. 117.

¹⁷ See Robert Solomon’s review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, in *Small Press (The Magazine and Book Review of Independent Publishing)* (New York) 5.2 (December 1987): 48.

written, modern and ancient) and the voices of sages other than those of Western philosophy. This partly accounts for the use of epigraphs and linguistic thresholds¹⁸ throughout the collection; Bringhurst is in fact fond of using this kind of paratexts in his poetry books. He is a learned author, and so the breadth of his learning and his fascination with the world at large should find an echo in references and allusions to other literary traditions. Once the threshold is crossed, the reader is plunged into the realm of the mind, which is calm and serene, full of wisdom and light. Bringhurst revisits the world of Zen teaching and explores questions of *being* in short burst of language that puzzles the reader, so that the texture of the whole sequence is wise, compassionate and well-crafted, in any case.

I · SHORT UPANISHAD

The opening piece in *The Book of Silences* is entitled “Short Upanishad,”¹⁹ a short lyric poem of utter beauty and perfection, but also a masterpiece in miniature. The poems in Bringhurst’s sequence are not frozen bits and pieces of Oriental sages’ thinking: they are alive with the distinct voice of a sage speaking to us as if from beyond time. Far from being dry texts or tattered fragments of visions long past, each of the poems embodies a living voice and a sort of uninterrupted conversation which the reader is invited to join. Each poem provides an ineffable snapshot of a transcendent reality from its own point of view. When all these visions are put together, *The Book of Silences* as an organic *Gestalt* conveys the sense that wisdom is perennial, that humans have not changed that much since the dawn of time, and that the same fundamental questions have been asked time and again throughout the history of humankind – *What is reality? What is the mind? How do the senses grasp the world? Who am I? What is the purpose of life? How are humans to live to the fullest of their capacity?* Living wisely and thinking deeply is an adventure that requires much stamina, daring and skill. The Oriental sages spent their lifetime seeking answers to these questions with strength of will and determination that is simply moving to us. They were men endowed with a deep drive to know what reality is, what life is for and why we are here. A map of knowing and a map of reality and of the inner geography of the mind: this is what we find in Bringhurst’s poems once these fragments of vision are assembled into a coherent whole. They somehow provide us with a framework for understanding the world and ourselves. Like the great poet Bringhurst is, he takes these fragments of vision and lifts them to little masterpieces of spiritual instruction. He must have longed so ardently to communicate what he found in his walks with these old sages, that he must have strained the possibilities of language to the limit.

When I discovered Bringhurst’s sequence a long time ago, I was attracted by the beauty of its poetry and by the profundity of thought woven into the living fabric of each poem. At the heart of each composition, the dramatic impersonation of each sage spoke to me with astonishing serenity. Since then, I have turned to these poems time and again not

¹⁸ Roman Gadzo in his review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, published in *The Fessenden Review* (San Diego, Calif.) 11.4 (1988): 33-34, writes: “The sophisticated reader would immediately recognize the symbols in the dedication to be from the Cree or the Ojibwa. The linguist would be able to translate the phrase into English as “For my friends and brothers.” Other readers, not so high on the obscurantist air, would think the symbols a new form of product code. I regard the snippets of calligraphy, Greek and Cree that precede the text as a dharmic rite of passage to be endured before being allowed to read Bringhurst’s pieces.” See p. 33.

¹⁹ “Short Upanishad” was originally published in A.47 *The Calling* (1995). It was later reprinted in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001) and A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009).

just for literary beauty, but also for tranquillity, enlightenment and wisdom. My critical approach to these poems is therefore intensely personal, and I do not make any attempt to hide the passion with which I let the texts speak for themselves. What one finds in these poems is simple and moving: however intensely personal the exploration of each of these Oriental sages might be, their discoveries are universal. So it is not surprising to find that at the heart of each of the poems lies a bit of truth or wisdom. These poems are variations on age-old fundamental questions such as the ultimate essence of reality, the human condition, the nature of *what is* and *what isn't*, the relationship between body and mind, the potential of speech to grasp the truth of reality, the possibility of human knowledge, the meaning of life and the mystery of death, and the place of human beings in the grander scheme of things. Though they might have dwelled forever in the realm of silence, these poems have been put into words and so each strains language with the passion to communicate what cannot be expressed. Lyrical, profound, inspiring, tantalizing, the poems in *The Book of Silences* dwell in a place not far away from ourselves; this place is really no more distant than the heart and the mind. That is why they are relevant to us and speak to us with astonishing sincerity. They capture experiences, insights and experiences of enlightenment that are beyond words, and yet full of meaning. They are a superb constellation of the insights into reality of lucid human beings that lived at different moments of the history of humanity.

It is only natural that Bringhurst should have chosen “Short Upanishad” as the opening piece in his Oriental sages sequence. The poems in the sequence are arranged on the basis of a chronological criterion and the sacred texts of the *Upanishads*²⁰ are among the oldest texts humankind has ever produced and “the oldest body of wisdom literature in the world.”²¹ How old these texts are no one knows for sure, but they were transmitted by means of a meticulously faithful oral tradition. Memorized and passed from generation to generation for hundreds of years before they were written down, the *Upanishads* constitute one of the earliest chapters in the spiritual history of India. They embody much of their ancestral wisdom and so they “come to us like snapshots of a timeless landscape.”²² But, at the same time, given their antiquity, it is amazing that they should speak to us with such astonishing freshness. As Eknath Easwaran puts it, “the insights they give into the nature of the phenomenal world, the human mind, and the underlying reality called God are as dazzling today as ever. And the questions they pose never become dated. They are new for every human being, fresh for every generation, because they are questions that each of us has to answer for ourselves.”²³ What the *Upanishads* do is record experiences or direct encounters with “a land beyond change”, and, in fact, the Sanskrit word (*darshana*) means

²⁰ See the entry on ‘Upanishad’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 29, p. 17181: “Upanishad (“Connection”), Sanskrit Upanisad, any of the speculative texts of the Vedas that contain elaborations in prose and verse. The Upanishads, of which approximately 108 are known, record the views of a succession of Hindu teachers and sages who were active as early as 1000 BCE and who flourished about 600 BCE. The texts form the basis of much of later Indian philosophy. They represent the final stage in the tradition of the Vedas, so the teaching based on them is known as the Vedānta (Sanskrit: “Conclusion of the Veda”). The older Upanishads may be part of the Brāhmanas (commentaries) of their respective Vedas but are distinguished from them both by increased philosophical and mystical questioning and by their diminished concern with Vedic deities and sacrificial rites. The special philosophical concern of the Upanishads is with the nature of reality. There is a development toward the concept of a single supreme being, and knowledge is directed toward reunion with it. Some of the Upanishads equate *ātman* (the self) with *Brahman* (ultimate reality). The nature of mortality and of eternal life are discussed, as are such themes as the transmigration of souls and causality in creation.”

²¹ See Eknath Easwaran, *Wisdom of India: Essence of the Upanishads. A Key to Indian Spirituality*, Tomales, CA, USA: Nilgiri Press, 2009, p. 11.

²² Eknath Easwaran, *ibid.*, p. 7.

²³ Eknath Easwaran, *ibid.*, p. 11. Elsewhere, he claims that “The Upanishads are the earliest instance in history of perennial philosophy: the discovery that beneath the incessant change of the phenomenal world lies a changeless reality that can be discovered deep in consciousness by following disciplines that are essentially the same regardless of culture or religion.” *Ibid.*, p. 12.

“sightings”.²⁴ The *Upanishads* are ageless because they describe realities that do not change, or what could be called “the very bedrock of reality,”²⁵ in breathtaking words of moving purity and beauty. There is a world which is not easily visible that lies close at hand nevertheless. It lies within us, in regions of the consciousness we must learn to fathom. Entry into the inner realms of consciousness happens when the doors of perception in everyday experience are closed:

The world of everyday experience is the world of the senses: what we see, hear, taste, smell, and feel, together with the babbling brook of thoughts and feelings that we’re aware of, makes up what we mean by the “real world.” Only when we close the senses and learn to focus our attention on the contents of consciousness itself do we begin to see that there is much, much more to who we are.²⁶

The world we find inside ourselves is simply boundless, as infinite as outer space. Going deeper and deeper into the innermost of consciousness we find ourselves whole. But this immersion into the inner recesses of the self has an important implication. At the heart of the *Upanishads* there is a most potent equation: the core of personality, which is called *Atman* (the self) is the same as *Brahman* (i.e., pure being, the ultimate god underlying reality, the ultimate, deathless, irreducible ground of life, the essence of every single thing). Our immersion in unity teaches us that we and the universe we live in are one and the same. The self and the cosmos become whole, with no barrier dividing humans from the rest of creation.²⁷ Michael N. Nagler explains this tremendous equation of *Atman* and *Brahman* with great lucidity. If “*Brahman* is the irreducible ground of existence, the essence of every thing – of the earth and sun and all creatures, of gods, and human beings, of every power of life,” *Atman* is seen “to be one, the same in everyone.” This is something “experienced at the very center of one’s being, an inalienable fact.” Thus, “in all persons, in all creatures, the Self is the innermost essence. And it is identical with Brahman: our real Self is not different from the ultimate Reality called God.”²⁸

To a master of language like Bringham, to someone concerned with rescuing the best of what has been thought and said by our ancestors, the *Upanishads* must have been truly an undeniable source of inspiration. Hence “Short Upanishad” is his moving homage to this ancestral body of wisdom literature that is lost beyond the mists of time. The poem consists of only three three-line stanzas of perfect symmetry, woven with simple words that explode in the reader’s consciousness, throwing light around them like a flare. One is astonished to see how such a wealth of meaning can be possibly conveyed through so few words. Three little movements for the soul should suffice to communicate to the reader the mystery inherent in *what is*. With awe-inspiring words, scarcely understood but pregnant with promised meaning, the speaking voice manages to declare that *all of life is one*. The tremendous equation *Atman = Brahman* is palpating beneath these verse lines that celebrate the existence of gods and goddesses in forms and forces of the natural world. These Vedic deities are numinous beings, “aspects of a single underlying power called Brahman, which pervades creation yet transcends it completely.”²⁹ Or, to put it differently, one *supreme being* is being worshipped in different manifestations or expressions. But let us turn to the poem itself and see how meaning blooms into full flower.

²⁴ Eknath Easwaran, *ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁵ Eknath Easwaran, *ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁶ Eknath Easwaran, *ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁷ Eknath Easwaran, *ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁸ Michael N. Nagler, *Upanishads*, Tomales, CA, USA: Nilgiri Press, 2007, p. 38.

²⁹ Michael N. Nagler, *ibid.*, p. 21.

Give us places, said the gods.
She made a cow, a horse, a goose, a human being.
Wait, said the gods, we asked for places.

These are places, he replied.
The palm of the hand is a place.
So is the mouth; so is the eye; so is the mind.

Hunger and thirst said,
Where is our place?
She answered, Sit beside the gods.

Bringham's poem opens as if *in medias res*, and the reader is invited to join a conversation that seems to have been going on uninterrupted since immemorial times. One might think that what is at stake here is a sort of cosmogony: we are present at the moment of creation of the world. What is so peculiar about this cosmogony is that every single thing in this world is seen to be made of an ultimate substance that is of a divine nature. In haunting words, the first stanza declares that all living things in this world are places dwelled or populated by gods and goddesses. Animals and human beings are nothing other than the home to the Vedic deities. The implication that follows from this tremendous statement is that gods are pervasive, that their presence is ubiquitous in reality: no matter where one might turn to look, all our eyes get to see is gods and goddesses incarnated in animals' and humans' bodies. Are animals and humans then places within a larger place which is called *the world*? It seems so. And not only are living things places; the very bodily parts are also conceived as being places: the hand, the mouth, the eye and the mind (notice the parallelism that brings this verse line to the foreground of the spiritual landscape in Bringham's poem). Because they are places that the gods ask for as their home, the body is seen to be inhabited by the divine too. In Bringham's poetry *body*, *mind* and *speech* go hand in hand; they are a sort of tremendous equation too. Body and mind are inseparable, there is no barrier dividing them or setting them apart, even if one might think that the former is purely physical whereas the latter is not. Speech is what brings body and mind together; it is what strives to put the inexpressible into words.

The closing stanza of the poem, however, brings mortality, pain and limitation into the scene. Hunger and thirst demand that room be left for them inside the bodies of animals and humans. Thus, they sit next to the immortal gods and goddesses, because they are inescapable forces among all finite living creatures. It is undeniable that hunger and thirst also dwell in animals' and humans' bodies. They are purely physical, but are also figurative or metaphorical: humans' hunger and thirst for understanding cannot be easily appeased, unless we achieve reunion with our real Self, which is *Atman* and Brahman at the same time – our native state, one which is free, unbounded, infinite.³⁰ The *Upanishads*, and Bringham's short Upanishad, urge human beings to live in the world in full awareness of life's unity. *All of life is one*; gods and goddesses are present all around us, pervading our body and mind, for we are just a tiny part amid the grander scheme of things.

³⁰ This is one of the major discoveries at the centre of the *Upanishads* themselves, which Michael N. Nagler summarizes as follows: (1) There is in each of us an inalienable Self that is divine; (2) Love is the first and last commandment of this realization, for the same Self dwells in all; (3) There is a realm deep within ourselves which is our native state; (4) we are part of a compassionate universe, where nothing is "other" than ourselves, and so we are urged to treat that universe with reverence, for there is nothing in the world but God; (5) our native state is a realm where death cannot reach, attainable in this life by those willing to devote their lives to the necessary purification of consciousness. See Michael N. Nagler, *ibid.*, pp. 42-44.

II · PARŚVANĀTHA

“Pārśvanātha”³¹ seeks to capture the thinking of an Indian sage who lived about 27 centuries ago. In the original incarnation of the Oriental sages sequence in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), “Pārśvanātha” was the opening piece in this ambitious work in progress. Bringhamst has been working on for over 20 years. At that point in the evolution of the sequence, Pārśvanātha was the oldest of all the sages to whom he gave voice in his short dramatic impersonations. With the publication of “Short Upanishad” in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), “Pārśvanātha” became the second piece in the sequence, as the poems were ordered according to a chronological criterion. The *Upanishads* are the oldest extant texts of wisdom literature, and so it was only natural that “Short Upanishad” should become the opening piece. As is common practice with Bringhamst, he gives us essential background information to understand this piece. Thus, in the “Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures” at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, he informs us that Pārśvanātha (c. 820-776 BC?) was “A North Indian sage, traditionally counted the 23rd Patriarch of the Jains.” In the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling*, the poet tells us exactly the same. And in the 2001 edition of *The Book of Silences*, the entry devoted to this ancient sage is extremely brief: “Parsvanatha c. 820-776 BC? Northern India.” So in “Pārśvanātha” we have one of the earliest of the Oriental sages to whom Bringhamst turned naturally in search of wisdom and inspiration for his own poetry and literary enterprise. The result is a dramatic impersonation that offers snapshots of the thinking of a man who penetrated reality with a precious sharpness of mind and rare lucidity.

Not much is known for sure of this North Indian sage, except that he led the life of a nobleman for thirty years as the son of king Ashvasena and queen Vama of Varanasi, never married a woman and renounced the world to become a monk at the age of 30. He attained enlightenment (nirvana) after spending many days meditating atop Sammet Sikhar. Closely associated with compassion, Pārśvanātha is the most popular object of Jain devotion and truly beloved among Jains. He must have had a genial personality that made him charismatic to humans. Jainism teaches that each human beings have to help themselves to achieve salvation. Others might help in the process, but the search is intensely personal. Pārśvanātha is one who teaches the world the way to attain salvation. At any rate, in Bringhamst’s accomplished poem on this sage, we get to hear the voice of this man speaking his own mind with moving simplicity and almost transparent words. The

³¹ “Pārśvanātha” was originally published in A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986). Afterwards, it was reprinted in (i) B.65 *The Gift of Tongues: Twenty-Five Years of Poetry from Copper Canyon Press*, edited by Sam Hamill, Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, 1996: pp. 27-30. Contributions: “The Song of Ptahhotep” (rpt. from A.26); “Parśvanatha” (rpt. from A.35, the US edition of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*); (ii) C.58 [Two poems]. *Verse* (Oxford) 4.1 (March 1987): 14-15. Contents: Parśvanatha; Sengzhào, both rpt. from A.32. See also editorial comments by Mark Abley on pp. 8-9; (iii) C.70 “Parsvanatha.” *Verse* 12.2: *The Best Verse: Ten Years of Poetry* (1995): 26. Rpt. from C.58. “Pārśvanātha” was then revised in A.47 *The Calling* (1995), and reprinted from A.47 in (i) B.69 *A Matter of Spirit: The Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry*, edited by Susan McCaslin, Victoria, British Columbia: Ekstasis Editions, 1998: pp. 41-58. Contributions: Ten poems and a short prose piece. “Poem about Crystal”, “Deuteronomy”, “Herakleitos”, “Parśvanatha”, “Nagarjuna”, “Sengzhào”, “Hán Shan”, “Yúnmén Wényan”, “Thin Man Washing”, “Sunday Morning” (all rpt. from A.47); • brief essay, “In Praise of Vacant Lots.”; (ii) A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001); and (iii) A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009).

emphasis is not on morality or such humane values as compassion, but on something grander that goes beyond human egotism: the ultimate nature of reality. Metaphysics rather than ethics is thus at the palpitating heart of this composition. From a purely linguistic point of view, the poem is a masterpiece of perfect symmetry: it consists of three stanzas that correspond to a prelude to Pārśvanātha's piece of thinking, the body of the sage's meditation on mind and knowing, and a concluding remark on the all-important role of ancestors in the transmission of wisdom from one generation to another over time. Thus, the opening verse lines of the poem celebrate the ultimate unity of the whole of reality: "What is whole has no face. What / is apart from the whole has no body." The meaning is crystal-clear, or so it seems upon re-reading the poem innumerable times: *what is* is a *Gestalt*, an organic whole or unity where no isolated or distinct parts are discernible. Nothing exists apart from this whole, it has no body at all. This is not easy to understand, for the face of *what is* is not seen easily, in a conventional way, particularly through the limited senses humans are endowed with. Though sense organs provide us with first-hand raw materials and perceptions of the world, these data have to be further elaborated and transcended by the penetrating mind. At any rate, these two opening lines announce what the irreducible core of meaning at the heart of the poem is.

In the body of the poem, at its geographical centre, we find a profound meditation on the nature of *being*. Five little movements for the soul are discernible as the sage's thinking flowers into full bloom. Just for the sake of clarity in our exposition, we shall summarize these five steps for the thinking mind as follows:

- (1) *What is is and is not mansided at the same time.* At the heart of this first movement for the soul is the unity/plurality dichotomy. *Being* is one and yet many, for it finds expression in the myriad things of this world – in the trees, mountains, streams, birds, animals, stones, humans that populate Earth. The poet makes use of paradoxical statements, seemingly contradictory, that appear to cancel each other out, for what he is trying to communicate is inexpressible in words of the mouth. Beyond the power of words to capture or grasp the essence of *what is*, there is a firm belief floating somewhere mid-air that everything is subtly connected to everything else, and that the multiplicity of beings (the multiplicity of the perceptual world) can be reduced to the *one* – the indestructible or immortal ground of existence. This affirmation is steeped in the conviction that an invisible order pervades creation and is reflected somehow in each part. This is a oneness to which all diversity can be referred. Hence, the sage's voice says: "Yet somehow it is, and it is / mansided. Somehow it isn't / and is mansided. Somehow / it is mansided and isn't / and is."
- (2) *What is is inexpressible, ineffable, unspeakable.* *Being* is not 100% susceptible of being apprehended through the mind or through speech. Like the senses, the mind is not omnipotent either, and so it cannot truly apprehend the ultimate substance of *what is*. Words are not efficient or reliable tools in our epistemological confrontation with reality either; they will not capture the essence of *what is* because they are simply simulacra, shadows, far away removed from the heart of things. Hence, being "cannot be touched / by the mind or by language," says the sage. Thinking and talking are only humans' favourite paths that lead imperfectly towards *what is*. In spite of and beyond our thinking and talking the whole announced in the first stanza is and isn't at the same time. Or, to put it differently, *being* exists regardless of humans' existence or desperate attempt to understand it. This entails dismissing an anthropocentric view of reality in which man is at the very centre of creation. For Pārśvanātha, humans are not the centre at all. They are a tiny part of something that goes beyond the human realm. Now, in Bringhurst's poetry there is a potent triad that is repeated time and again: body, speech and mind. All three find a room for themselves at the heart of this poem as well. The body was announced in the second line of the poem and is evoked indirectly through the idea of touch and at the mention of *your hand* in the second stanza.

- (3) *A map of human knowledge is pervaded by humility and gratitude towards what is.* A cartography of the self is brought into relief here. We humans have a burning desire to know, to find central principles which make sense of the world we live in. But we have to learn to apprehend a reality beyond ordinary knowing. We spend our time seeking everywhere what lies closer at hand than we think, never guessing that there is a buried treasure within us. One needs not look further than one's mind. And yet we have to go beyond our own mind as well. Free from the conditioning of body and mind and speech in a world unbounded by the limitations of time, space and causality, the self might be in a position to find out *what is* and what the ultimate substratum underlying reality is. One has to leave all manacles and material attachments behind, and so the sage recommends us to forget about ownership: we do not own what we know; reality is sacred and larger than ourselves. Hence, "*This / is a map of our knowing. Own / nothing. Like breath in your lungs, / the truth passes through you.*" Truth was there from the start, from the very beginning of time, pervading the body and the mind, imbuing all living things with a sacred halo. We need make no effort at all then; truth will come of itself to us, uninvited as it were.
- (4) *Being is somewhere at the intersection of space, motion and rest.* Now the sage turns to the basic constituents of *what is*, as it were. Time is not mentioned here as one of the elemental axes that provide the universal framework in which human experience comes to take place. Perishable matter is no more than being "*tainted by death*" and action is the very essence of all living things, pervading living creatures' bones. The will to live to the fullest of one's capacity and to accomplish things in this world seems to be a universal principle; it cannot be easily appeased or satisfied for good. As the poetic voice puts it: "*Like water through cloth, / the unbroken plasma of action / drains through your bones.*"
- (5) *What a human being is (identity or personality) is to be found in whatever lies trapped in his or her hand.* If the mind and speech are not efficient tools to grasp *what is*, then what are humans left with? We have got only our bodies left. The emphasis seems to be laid now on the very stubborn physicality of reality: if what is there to know cannot be truly apprehended through the mind or conveyed to oneself and others through words, then maybe our hands (our senses) might be of help to us in our epistemological confrontation with the world. If being cannot be touched by mind or speech, then it might be touched by one's hands. Hands that are humble and respectful, not damaging, will catch a handful of reality, and that handful of *what is* will spell whatever we might possibly be. Hence, "*What you are will be spelled by whatever / lies trapped in your hand.*"

Bringham's poem closes with a short stanza only two verse lines long. It speaks of our ancestors, of these Oriental sages that are a constant source of inspiration for the poet himself. Longer than the rest of the lines that make up the poem, they offer a depiction of such men as Pārśvanātha himself, whose thinking has survived the passing of time and manages to speak to us with such a moving relevance. They do not make any conscious intellectual effort to grasp *being*; they are just thinking of nothing, not speaking, but singing instead. There is nothing else to do – truth comes when uninvited, when one forgets about one's egoic self and transcends all distinctions, including that one that divides world and self, apprehended and apprehender. Body, speech, mind and being might have a chance to become one and the same thing then:

On the fenceposts, the weathering heads of your brothers
are thinking of nothing. And speechless. And singing.³²

³² In the earlier version of the poem in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, these lines read as follow: "On the fenceposts the heads of your / hungerless brothers are singing."

III · UDDĀLAKA

That such an accomplished piece as “Uddālaka”³³ should have not been included in the Oriental sages sequence as published in the beautiful 2001 limited edition of *The Book of Silences* comes as an unexpected surprise to the attentive reader. Uddālaka is another essential Hindu sage that has invaluable lessons to teach to those human beings who might be willing to listen to what he has to say. In the “Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures” at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringhurst informs us that Uddālaka Aruni was “One of the legendary sages of India. He speaks at length in the Chandogya Upanishad.” Indeed the *Upanishads* in general and the *Chāndogya Upanishad* in particular give us most useful clues for a proper understanding of this poem of Bringhurst. When this piece was originally published as “Uddālaka Aruni: A Song for the Weavers” in *CutBank* in 1986, along with five more poems from the same sequence under the heading “Six Poems from the Book of Silences”, all six poems were preceded by an eloquent passage lifted from the *Aitareya Upanishad* dealing with the creation of bodily parts:

From the mouth came speech, from speech fire. A nose appeared; from the nose came breath, from breath air. The eyes appeared; from the eyes came sight, from sight the sun. The ears appeared; from the ears came hearing; the four quarters. The skin appeared; from the skin came hair, from hair vegetation. The heart appeared; from the heart came the mind, from the mind the moon.³⁴

The Upanishadic sage is mentioned in several *Upanishads*, but he figures prominently in chapter 6 of the *Chāndogya Upanishad*, which records an enlightening dialogue between Uddālaka and Śvetaketu. The teacher is Uddālaka and the student Śvetaketu, his son, engaged in a profound soul-education. The opening stanza of Bringhurst’s poem manages to convey with astonishing economy a part of the elemental lessons the sage is teaching his son, whom he addresses explicitly. The language and the profundity of thought of “Uddālaka” are characteristic of Bringhurst’s poetry, and recall certain passages from *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (also published in 1986) and even some of the pieces in the 12-part sequence of *The Old in Their Knowing*. Uddālaka is no pre-Socratic philosopher, but he is a sage nonetheless, also concerned with asking fundamental questions related to the nature of reality. Thus, the opening words of “Uddālaka” are reminiscent of the Ionian *physikoi*’s investigations into the *arché* and the ultimate substance the world is made of:

Earth is woven of water, as water
of air. The world is earth, and the earth
is all this. This is that. That is you,
Svetaketu, my son. The outer is inner.

Śvetaketu has spent a long time studying all the Vedas under other masters’ guidance and is now back at home at the age of 24, “swell-headed, thinking himself to be learned, and

³³ “Uddalaka” was originally published as “Uddalaka Aruni: A Song for the Weavers” in C.50, [Eleven poems], in *CutBank* (Missoula, Montana) 26 (Spring/Summer 1986): 37–58. It was then slightly revised in A.32, *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* and again reprinted in A.92, *Selected Poems*. It was not included in A.47, *The Calling* or in A.65, *The Book of Silences*. In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* the calligraphy accompanying this piece reads: rén shèng = *person holy*.

³⁴ See C.50, [Eleven poems], in *CutBank* (Missoula, Montana) 26 (Spring/Summer 1986): 38.

arrogant.” Uddālaka wishes to make sure his son is truly learned: “so you must have surely asked about the rule of substitution by which one hears what has not been heard of before, thinks of what has not been thought of before, and perceives what has not been perceived before?”³⁵ Śvetaketu has never been instructed by his illustrious teachers on what his father is telling him about and so he asks Uddālaka to teach him. At that point, Uddālaka explains to him the rule of substitution which makes known the unknown: “It’s just like this, son. By means of just one lump of clay one would perceive everything made of clay – the transformation is a verbal handle, a name – while the reality is just this: “It’s clay.”³⁶ Implicit in these words is a lack of reliance on words to effectively express reality. Insight into reality as it is is attained through self-realization, through one’s own efforts to understand the essential unity of *what is*. In the first stanza of his poem, Bringhamst conveys something of the essential unity that pervades reality (the existent) and this sense of the individual’s oneness with the world. In the living mesh of things, everything is subtly connected to everything else. Weaving is the central metaphor at the heart of the poem. Thus, earth is made (woven) of water and water is made of air. The world and everything in it is earth, but it is also water and air. And the world includes also Śvetaketu, who is earth, water and air too. “*That is you*”: this is what Uddālaka tells his son time and again throughout chapter 6 of the *Chāndogya Upanishad*. This is tantamount to saying *Do not forget that you too are the world*. That “*The outer is inner*” means that the world is part of the geographical landscapes of the self, that the perceiving subject is inextricably linked to everything lying out there that is being perceived.

The opening line of the second stanza might seem enigmatic or out of place at first sight: “*The sea has no end, in spite of its edges*.” While the first stanza is primarily concerned with earth, water and air, the second focuses on the sea surrounding the continental masses of earth. It is infinite, even if the existence of edges might suggest exactly the opposite. However, at the geometrical centre of the composition is a perfect meditation on the nature of trees. Empedokles was interested in trees as some of the most ancient creatures in this world, and trees occupy a central place in Bringhamst’s poetry and thinking too. The starting point for the second stanza of “Uddālaka” might well be found in chapter 6 of the *Chandogya Upanishad*, where we read the following words within the context of a larger meditation on the true nature of the self:

‘Now, take this huge tree here, son. If someone were to hack it at the bottom, its living sap would flow. Likewise, if someone were to hack it in the middle, its living sap would flow; and if someone were to hack it at the top, its living sap would flow. Pervaded by the living (*jīva*) essence (*ātman*), this tree stands here ceaselessly drinking water and flourishing. When, however, life (*jīva*) leaves one of its branches, that branch withers away. When it leaves a second branch, that likewise withers away, and when it leaves a third branch, that likewise withers away, and when it leaves a third branch, that also withers away. When it leaves the entire tree, the whole tree withers away.

‘In exactly the same way,’ he continued, ‘know that this, of course, dies when it is bereft of life (*jīva*); but life itself does not die.

‘The finest essence here – that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth; that is the self (*ātman*). And that’s how you are, Śvetaketu.’

‘Sir, teach me more.’

‘Very well, son.’³⁷

³⁵ *Upanisads*, a new translation by Patrick Olivelle, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996 (reissued 2008), p. 148.

³⁶ *Upanisads*, p. 148.

³⁷ *Upanisads*, pp. 153-154.

Given the unity of all things in the universe, Śvetaketu is also the tree his father is telling him about. Life (or the root of the existent) is indestructible and is to be found in every tiny part of this world. It is pervasive in all sentient beings, including trees. This well-wrought stanza embodies Bringhurst's brief and profound reflection on the ultimate nature of trees:

The seed is the tree's thought. The seed
is the speech of the tree. The seed is the tree
thinking and speaking its knowledge of trees.

Body, speech and mind are a powerful triad that is recurrent in Bringhurst's poetry. In fact, one of the central sections in *Tzūbalem's Mountain* (1982) is precisely entitled like this. The seed is conceptualized as being the irreducible core of the tree: it contains in a nutshell as it were the thought and the speech of all trees – present, past and future. In much the same way humans follow their own nature as they start speaking a recognizably human language, it is a part of trees' inevitable nature to grow their branches and leaves upwards in search of air and light, and to grow their roots downwards in search of water and minerals. Bringhurst reminds us that we humans are so self-centred and egoistical that we tend to think that we have the monopoly on speech and thinking, but trees do speak and think in their own way too. If trees speak any language at all, it has to be the tree language, one which is not made of words, but possibly of leaves whispering or rustling in the wind; and if they think at all, they must think tree nature. Thus, they treasure an ancestral form of knowledge that has been passed down from one tree generation to another, just like successive human civilizations have passed down what they consider invaluable wisdom for posterity. Trees know instinctively what it means to be a tree; humans know instinctively (or intuitively) that being human means acknowledging that we belong into the grander scheme of things, both living and non-living, animate and inanimate. "That is you," Śvetaketu is reminded by his father time and again.

The third stanza of "Uddālaka" deals with the nature of the mind. What is the place the mind occupies amid earth, water, air, sea and trees?, one might ask. The mind is shown to be inextricably linked to everything else in the world. Thus, it is "*the white of the eggs in its opening / shell*" and it is also "*the ripening / meat of the seed.*" Now, eggs and seeds have something in common: they hold a creature *in potentia* deep inside themselves. Both the bird in the egg and the plant in the seed strive to get outside, into the day of light. But there is no proper distinction to be drawn between *in* and *out*, between *inside* and *outside*, for "the outer is the inner", as announced in the first stanza. As pointed out above, weaving is the central metaphor at the heart of this poem: things in this world are woven of earth, water and air; and all things strive to become something else, i.e. they are in a perpetual state-of-becoming. "*What is / is the weaving,*" says the speaking voice (Uddālaka's) in the poem. This amounts to acknowledging that everything is in a state of flux somehow, as though everything were being constantly renewed from one moment in time to the next. And in this weaving process, all things are inextricably linked to one another. Even humans have a crucial role to play in all this process of life renewing itself all the time: "*We with our breathing / are working here, / carding and spinning the air.*"³⁸ Humans are the weavers mentioned in the original title of Bringhurst's poem as it was published in *CutBank* in 1986. And his poem is the song given as a gift to us humans to help as work to the accompaniment of ideas singing and dancing within the boundaries of this perfect artefact which is "Uddālaka" itself. But the words in this poem are seeking to find their way out there, and so that is why

³⁸ These two lines are slightly different in C.50, the first textual incarnation of this poem: "are sitting here carding and spinning the air" (only one verse line).

they are singing their song loud and clear, for everyone to listen. After all, what Bringhurst can do best of all is poems like this one that he intends to give his fellow human beings as gifts. This is his gift to the world.

IV · NAGARJUNA

“Nāgārjuna”³⁹ is one of the fundamental poems in *The Book of Silences*. Concerned with the supreme Buddhist ontologist Nāgārjuna, it captures the subtlety of the thinking of this Indian sage who lived in the early centuries of the common era. Insofar as Mahāyāna Buddhism is concerned, Nāgārjuna stands out as the giant among giants who laid the foundation of religious and philosophical quests. This Indian sage is almost the Oriental equivalent of Parmenides, the greatest Presocratic metaphysician who believed in the unity of a motionless, eternal and indivisible *Being* of utter circle-like perfection. Their modes of thinking differ in significant ways, though. In the “Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures” at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringhurst informs us that Nāgārjuna was “‘The Serpent Prince,’ a Buddhist metaphysician of the second or the third century AD, now honoured as the principal dialectician of the Madhyamika or ‘Middle Way’ school of Buddhist thought. He taught near Amaravati, on the Krishna River, in Andhra Pradesh.” And in the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst tells us very briefly this: “Nāgārjuna (2nd century AD?) ‘The White Serpent.’ A dialectical philosopher who taught near Amaravati, on the Krishna River, in Andhra Pradesh.” An even shorter entry in the 2001 edition of the Oriental sages sequence reads: “Nagarjuna c. 200 AD? South-central India.” It might be wise to start at the beginning: Who was Nāgārjuna? What was the originality of his philosophical thinking?

An Indian Buddhist monk-philosopher and the founder of the Mādhyamika school, Nāgārjuna⁴⁰ (b. c. 150 CE – d. c. 250 CE) is recognized as a patriarch by several later Buddhist schools.⁴¹ Precious little is known of his life or of the exact chronology of the works credited to him. The fact that various texts ascribe different religious qualities to Nāgārjuna and give dates for his life that range over 500 years suggest that the references may pertain to several persons and may include some imaginary accounts. Nonetheless, some elements of Nāgārjuna’s biographies are supported by historical materials. Scholarship now indicates that Nāgārjuna could have lived as early as 50 CE and as late as 280. His dates are usually given as 150-250. The earliest account of Nāgārjuna’s life is in Chinese, supplied about 405 CE by a renowned Buddhist translator, Kumārajīva. It agrees with later Chinese and Tibetan accounts that Nāgārjuna was born into an upper-caste Brahmin family, probably in the southern Adhra region of India. The stories of his boyhood indicate that he had an extraordinary intellectual capacity and underwent a spiritual conversion to Mahāyāna Buddhism. According to Kumārajīva’s account,

³⁹ “Nāgārjuna” was originally published in A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), revised in A.47 *The Calling* (1995), further revised in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001), and reprinted in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009). It was also reprinted from A.47 in B.69 *A Matter of Spirit: The Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry*, edited by Susan McCaslin, Victoria, British Columbia: Ekstasis Editions, 1998: pp. 41-58. Contributions: Ten poems and a short prose piece. “Poem about Crystal”, “Deuteronomy”, “Herakleitos”, “Parśvanatha”, “Nagarjuna”, “Sengzhào”, “Hán Shan”, “Yúnmén Wényan”, “Thin Man Washing”; “Sunday Morning” (all rpt. from A.47); • brief essay, “In Praise of Vacant Lots.” In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, the calligraphy accompanying this piece reads: banruò boluómíduo = Sanskrit prajñā pāramitā, ‘transcendent wisdom’.

⁴⁰ See the entry on ‘Nāgārjuna’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 20, pp. 11697-11698.

⁴¹ “He was, in short, considered to be the second Buddha and he always occupied the second position in the lineage of Buddhist patriarchs in the various sectarian developments of Tibet, China, and Japan.” See *Nāgārjuna. A Translation of his Mūlamādhyamikakārikā*, with an introductory essay by Kenneth K. Inada, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1993, p. 3.

Nāgārjuna mastered some Mahāyāna verses of great profundity in a short time and then propagated the truth (dharma) in India, successfully defeating many opponents in scholastic philosophical debates. Traditional accounts also suggest that he lived to an old age and then decided to end his life.

Something of the Mādhyamika philosopher's life and attitude can be gleaned from Nāgārjuna's writings. His critical analytic verses and his didactic treatises, letters, and hymns indicate his deep concern to practice "nonattachment" in engagement with people. There are innumerable influential texts attributed to this Indian sage, although most were probably written by later authors. Two basic works attributed to Nāgārjuna with great certainty are available at present in Sanskrit: *Mūlamādhyamikakārikā* (also known as *Mādhyamika Kārikā*, i.e., *Fundamentals of the Middle Way*) and *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (*Averting the Arguments*).⁴² They are both critical analyses of false views about how existence arises, the means of knowledge, and the nature of reality. Written in versified form, terse and abstract, *Mādhyamika Kārikā* sets forth his own interpretation of the fundamental thought of Buddhism viewed from the Mahāyāna standpoint. The ideas manifest at once simplicity and complexity, subtlety of thought and mastery of language. Through rigorous logical argumentation, as found in the *Mādhyamika Kārikā*, he criticized both Buddhist and Hindu views on existence. Most of his polemics, however, were directed towards the explanations of existence offered by the Buddhist schools of Sthaviravāda (Theravāda) and Sarvāstivāda. Nāgārjuna's position is closely allied to, and probably dependent on, that found in the early Mahāyāna literature known as the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* ("Perfection of Wisdom Verses"), in which the notion of *śūnyatā* is an important term for the wayfarer on the path to enlightenment and becomes the distinguishing term in Mādhyamika school. His philosophy calls into question certain philosophical assumptions such as the existence of stable substances, the linear and one-directional movement of causation, the atomic individuality of human beings, the belief in a fixed identity or selfhood. Nāgārjuna's primary contribution to Buddhist philosophy is precisely the concept of *śūnyatā*, whose clarification is regarded by Buddhists as an intellectual and spiritual achievement of the highest order. His innovative concept of 'emptiness' was to profoundly influence the character of Buddhist thought. The basic tenets of Nāgārjuna's thinking are then these: (1) that all things are empty of an absolute reality and exist only in relation to conditions; (2) that the nature of existence is relational – there is no soul, no single thing, no concept independent of its context; (3) that there is no eternal reality behind changing forms – even unconditioned nirvana (enlightenment) is not independent of the changing forms of existence, and so those beings who have perfected wisdom perceive nirvana and the changing flux of existence together.

Armed with this potent notion of emptiness, Nāgārjuna built his literary corpus embodying a subtle philosophy that can be seen as an attempt to deconstruct all systems of thought which analyzed the world in terms of fixed substances and essences. His method is that of the skeptical philosopher. He embraces not haphazard, but systematic or principled doubt. He calls into question the basic categorical presuppositions assumed to be axiomatic in the Indian philosophical tradition. That doubt should be methodical to penetrate the truth effectively was a revolutionary innovation for philosophy in India. According to

⁴² "Besides the verses of Mādhyamika analysis, there are a large number of Tantric and medical works attributed by Tibetan tradition to a "Nāgārjuna." There are also references in late Indian materials to a great Siddha, or sorcerer, by the name of Nāgārjuna, who acquired his magical power through Tantric practices. Closely allied stories tell of a powerful alchemist who, among other accomplishments, discovered the elixir of immortality. The reports of a great sorcerer, however, are generally not accepted outside the Tibetan tradition as applying to the 2nd-century philosopher." See the entry on 'Nāgārjuna' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 20, pp. 11697-11698.

traditional Brahminical thinking, certain and correct objective knowledge of the world was possible. While anything and everything could be doubted, every doubt could be ultimately resolved. But the early Buddhists were not so sure about the possibility of ultimate knowledge of the world. Given the impermanence of all things and the Buddhist rejection of a persistent personal identity, ultimate knowledge seemed to be out of reach, unattainable. By Nāgārjuna's time, the major schools of Buddhism had accepted that things in the world must be constituted by metaphysically fundamental elements which had their own fixed essence, for otherwise there would be no way to account for humans or natural phenomena. The apparently stable objects of our lived experience were seen as being compounds (aggregates) of elementary, irreducible substances with their own nature. If things and humans were nothing more than atoms in constant flux, how would it possible for a person to have an orderly experience of a world of apparent substances? If no enduring ego persisted through our experienced lives, how would it possible to relate experiences and cognition to a unitary self or subject? Without assuming that humans have fundamental fixed natures, nobody could say that any particular individual was undergoing suffering or said to attain enlightenment or wisdom to achieve nirvana. To put it differently, without some notion of essence, Buddhist claims could not make sense and could not effect a real change in the human character. Buddhism was also inconceivable without causality: the notion that all phenomena are causally interdependent, that all things and events which come to pass in the world arise out of a causal chain. Causes are regular and predictable, and their regularity is accounted for by the fact that things or phenomena have fixed natures of their own. That was the conviction of Nāgārjuna's contemporaries.

Nāgārjuna armed himself with the full battery of accepted rejoinders to fallacious arguments that the Brahminical logicians had long since authorized, such as infinite regress, circularity and vacuous principle to assail the metaphysical and epistemological positions he found problematic. He reminded his contemporaries that Buddha had rejected metaphysical and empirical substantialism through his teachings of no-soul and causal interdependence (i.e., all empirical phenomena arise out of interdependence) and so they should remain faithful to this non-substantialist stance by rejecting the notion of fixed substances. If objects had a stable or fixed essence, the changes brought about by cause would not be logically intelligible or materially possible. According to Nāgārjuna, not only sentient beings but also all phenomena are selfless, without a self-nature or underlying essence. In fact, things, concepts and persons lack essence, they have no fixed nature, and it is only because of this lack of essential or immutable being that change is possible, than one thing can transform into another. Each thing can only have its existence through its lack of inherent, eternal essence. It would be incoherent to assume that anything with a fixed nature or essence could change, for that change would violate empirically its fixed nature and so destroy the original premise. By not having a fixed essence, things and humans can be amenable to change, transformation and evolution. Change is only possible if entities and the way in which we conceptualize them are void or empty of any eternal, fixed, immutable essence. Also, we do not experience anything empirically which does not change, and so never know of fixed essences in the world about us. Furthermore, all things are empty of being independently existent, and this is so because all things always arise dependently. Emptiness in this context means 'the lack of autonomous existence'. It is not that things are in themselves nothing or that they possess a positive absence of essence. Change is possible because a radical indeterminacy permeates everything. Beings relate to one another because their interaction makes them susceptible to ongoing transformation. In a nutshell, all change in the world is possible because of interdependent causality and interdependent causality in turn is only possible because things, phenomena and humans lack any fixed nature and so are open to being transformed.

Now, Bringham's poem on this sage captures the essence of his thinking with utter mastery. There is a sense of harmony and structural symmetry inherent in "Nāgārjuna", which consists of 17 four-line stanzas and five movements for the reader's soul. It opens with a complex definition of *what is*:

What is is swollen like a ripe
fruit, hollow like a cave.
What you touch, hear, taste, see, smell
is the inner perfection of vision.

What reaches into our eyes and our ears
is what is, and that is the wordless, inaudible
song and the brooding, unmusical
speech of the world.

The opening lines of chapter III ("Examination of the Senses") of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamādhyamikakārikā* read thus: "*Seeing, hearing, smelling, / Tasting, touching, and mind / Are the six sense faculties. / Their spheres are the visible objects, etc....*"⁴³ Along with the five sense organs, the mind is considered to be another sense organ. Thus, Buddhism affirms the continuum of *being* and avoids the simple dichotomy of mind-body or subject-object relationship. In Bringham's initial definition of *what is*, *being* turns out to be a perfect fruit, empty of any essence ("*hollow like a cave*"). All five senses, evoked through action verbs (touch, hear, taste, see, smell), appear to offer a tentative approximation to that lack of essence at the heart of things. In any case, *what is* is uninterruptedly singing and speaking, or, to put it differently, the world has its own song and speech, inaudible and wordless to human ears. This is but one possible explanation of reality ("*just one more opinion*"). There might be others: "*What is is what lies / out of sight, thought and talking.*" *What is* is simply elusive, beyond the reach of the senses (*sight*), the mind (*thought*) and speech (*talking*). Now, body, speech and mind is a recurrent potent triad in Bringham's poems. To Nāgārjuna's mind, they represent "*three / fists clinging to the world*" that we must open if we are to capture what is. Hands might be closed or open, but fists are hands that seek to grasp something and capture it before it vanishes. In our primordial encounter with the world, humans seek to penetrate reality through our senses, the mind and speech, but these are but imperfect tools to apprehend what is simply empty of a fixed essence, as if in a state of perpetual Heraclitean metamorphosis. Only by not knowing can knowing come to happen in the form of effortless attention, seems to claim the poetic voice here. But this is again one more position, one more opinion we must get rid of, for "*All positions / are prisons. / No truth is true.*" These are statements an skeptic would naturally embrace. After all, Nāgārjuna embraces a philosophy of no position – i.e., non-adherence to any fixed dogma or view. If things, phenomena and humans are devoid of a fixed essence, then it does not make any sense to hold on to a fixed view. There seems to be no way of being certain of one's knowledge of the world.

The second part of "Nāgārjuna" dwells precisely on the possibility of definitive or reliable knowledge about the world. The sage's words to this effect are crystal-clear as he claims that "*No instruction is certain, no knowledge complete.*" This means that there is no way of knowing any thing for sure, that human knowledge will always be imperfect and incomplete – i.e., a partial or inaccurate apprehension of *what is*. The kind of doubt

⁴³ See *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way. Nāgārjuna's Mūlamādhyamikakārikā*, translation and commentary by Jay L. Garfield, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 10.

Nāgārjuna practices in his own philosophy is methodical and disciplined, one aimed at dismantling what is normally taken for granted as being axiomatic assumptions about the world. Therefore, he claims that it is possibly to assert (a) being, (b) not being, (c) both being and not being, and (d) neither being nor not being. How can one be certain of anything at all? Hence Nāgārjuna's persona affirms: "My position / is that I have no position." Lies and fictions are true also, intentions are positions, and dispositions are prisons. What kind of certainty is then one left with once truth, fictions, intentions and positions are reduced to a fallacious attempt at understanding reality which is bound to failure? Part 3 of "Nāgārjuna" celebrates *what is* and lists all its attributes:

What is has no essence.
 What is is interdependent and empty.
 What is is unsingle, undouble, unplural, unborn,
 unenduring, unbearing, undying;

what is has no past and no future, no shape
 and no nature, no being, no having been, going
 to be or becoming, no wholeness and no
 incompleteness, no fingers...

The ontological inclusiveness, excellence, purity and supremeness of *being* is celebrated in these verse lines of terse beauty and simplicity. At the heart of these two stanzas is the concept of *sūnyatā* or emptiness. According to Nāgārjuna, "All things lack entitibood, / Since change is perceived. / There is nothing without entity / Because all things are emptiness."⁴⁴ *What is* is empty or has no fixed essence, it is relational and interdependent, and it does not come into being or perish, for time is cancelled. "If time depends on an entity, / Then without an entity how could time exist? / There is no existent entity. / So how can time exist?"⁴⁵ Time is an unreal fallacy too. It seems that the sage is struggling with words to convey a rare, precious profundity of thought. Disciplined doubt requires great intellectual stamina of the inquirer confronted with reality. *A* and *B* can be affirmed and denied at the same time, and the philosophical mind appears to come to an impasse where the only certainty left is a radical form of doubt.

However, what the sage identifies at the palpitating heart of *what is* is hunger, and it seems to us that hunger is an astonishing expression of desire. Alongside language, hunger is indeed the main concern of the fourth part of Bringham's poem: "What causes *what is* is the hunger / to be and keep being. *What is* is on loan / from *what isn't* and is its reflection." *What is* comes to be because *being* is hungry and wishes to be and to keep being. At the same time, *what is* is inextricably linked to *what isn't*. *What is* either the reflection or the disguise of *what isn't*. In words reminiscent of Parmenides in *On Nature*, the dramatic persona of Nāgārjuna affirms that being is a sort of undistinguishable continuum where the centre or the periphery cannot be easily discerned: "There is no rock bottom. / No centre, no sides, no top and no bottom." In addition, language can never reach reality per se.⁴⁶ All language is metaphorical or figurative in the end: "There are no literal statements. / There is no unmetaphorical language." Words will not do when it comes to capturing *being* so as to communicate *what is* to others. Upon closer inspection, it seems that emptiness is all we are left with. The nothing that is is at the heart of the closing movement of "Nāgārjuna":

⁴⁴ *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way. Nāgārjuna's Mūlamādhyamikakārikā*, p. 35.

⁴⁵ *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way. Nāgārjuna's Mūlamādhyamikakārikā*, p. 51.

⁴⁶ "What language expresses is nonexistent. / The sphere of thought is nonexistent. / Unarisen and unceased, like nirvana / Is the nature of things. // Everything is real and is not real, / Both real and not read, / Neither real nor to real." *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way. Nāgārjuna's Mūlamādhyamikakārikā*, p. 49.

Nothing is not nothing. Nothing
is, and *is* is nothing. All that is
is nothing, yet there is
no nothing there that we can cling to.

Bringhurst is at his best when using gnomic language like this. It is no easy task to try to define the concept of nothing accurately. Nothing is possibly the lack of a fixed essence at the heart of things. Things in the world, phenomena, concepts and human beings are nothing, and nothing is the hunger of *being* wishing to keep on being. Hunger is the question and the answer is “*be pure wonder.*” So there is nothing the senses or the mind can cling to. Being is ultimately untouchable, ungraspable, a form of supreme beauty and perfection that eludes human understanding and human words. The abyss thus separating the perceived world and the perceiving subject is felt to be unfathomable. The hunger and thirst for knowledge inherent in *homo sapiens sapiens* is simply unappeasable and unquenchable, for the minimal tools we have at our disposal prove insufficient or inadequate or inefficient in our epistemological confrontation with the world. The hunger remains there all the time, and the only answer left for humans is to remain curious (to be pure wonder) in the face of the sublime, awe-inspiring grandeur of the world.

V · BODHIDHARMA

“Bodhidharma”⁴⁷ is Robert Bringhurst’s personal tribute to the legendary Indian monk who lived in the fifth or sixth century BCE and is credited with the establishment of the Ch’an (Zen) school of Buddhism that flourished in East Asia. Considered the 28th Indian successor (or Patriarch of Buddhism) in a direct line from the Buddha Gotama, Bodhidharma is recognized by the Chinese Ch’an schools as their first patriarch.⁴⁸ In the “Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures” at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringhurst informs us that Bodhidharma was “A Buddhist monk of the sixth century AD, born in southern India, who immigrated to China after his ordination. There, under his Chinese name, Dámó (‘Penetrating Finger’), he came to be revered as the father of the Zen tradition.” In addition, in the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst tells us that Bodhidharma (*fl. c.* 500 AD?) was “a bug-eye monk from southern India who immigrated to China, becoming the titular founder of Chinese Zen.” Somewhere else, in the 2001 edition of *The Book of Silences*, the poet gives us only elementary information regarding this Oriental sage: “Bodhidharma c. 450–c. 530? Traveled widely from south-eastern India to northeastern China.”⁴⁹ When all pieces are put together, we get an accurate picture of this remarkable man surrounded by a

⁴⁷ “Bodhidharma” was originally published in A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*. Afterwards, it was reprinted in A.47 *The Calling*, in A.65 *The Book of Silences*, and in A.92 *Selected Poems*. It was also reprinted as C.57 [Four poems], *Rubicon* (Montreal) 8 (Spring 1987): 103-107. Contents: “Hóng Zichéng”; “Bodhidharma”; “Sengzhào”; “from *The Lyell Island Variations*: V. The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer,” all rpt. from A.32, but with two stanzas missing from the first poem. In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, the calligraphy accompanying this piece reads: dāmó = *penetrating finger or intelligent touch*.

⁴⁸ See the entry on ‘Bodhidharma’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 4, p. 2004. Reading this entry, we also learn that “According to the East Asian tradition Bodhidharma was a native of Conjeeveram near Madras; in 520 he traveled to Kuang (modern Canton). It is said that he was granted an interview with the emperor Wu-ti, who was famous for his good works. To the emperor’s dismay, Bodhidharma stated that merit applying to salvation could not be accumulated through good deeds. For Bodhidharma meditation was the practice necessary to progress along the path to enlightenment.”

⁴⁹ Robert Bringhurst, *The Book of Silences*, Los Angeles: Ninja Press, 2001. See the separately bound section entitled “Contents & Notes” at the end (unpaged).

fascinating legendary halo. Few extant contemporary accounts of his biography have been preserved, and so the exact details of his life and work are lost in the mists of time. It seems that as a youth he converted to Buddhism and became a monk. His master was Prajnatarā, who changed his name from Bodhitāra to Bodhidharma and instructed him to go to China to spread the Buddhist teachings (*Dharma*) there.

Bringhurst's poem consists of three stanzas and of two distinct parts. Whereas the first one tells an enigmatic story, the second focuses on the practice of meditation explicitly. It is said that, upon failing to make a favourable impression in southern China, Bodhidharma spent nine years in a cave, facing a wall, not speaking to anyone for such a long time. In one version of this story, the sage is said to have fallen asleep seven years of this nine-year period of meditation. As a result, becoming angry with himself, he cut off his eyelids to prevent it from happening again. Legend has it that his falling eyelids hit the floor and became tea plants, a useful stimulant that helps Zen practitioners to keep awake during meditation. In another related legend, Bodhidharma refused to resume teaching until his would-be student, Dazu Huike, who had kept vigil for weeks in the deep snow outside of the monastery, cut off his own left arm to demonstrate sincerity. Both legends are tessellated into the first stanza of "Bodhidharma": "*I cut off my eyelids, / he cut off his arm. / He could not hold the cleaver / to cut off the other.*" Though the disciple's gesture could be interpreted as being a gesture of loyalty, Bodhidharma interprets it as a sign of humans' propensity to err. Errors are signs of our vulnerability and fallibility; they betray human limitation:

He could have kept both
had he noticed this sooner.
The scars of our errors
are taken for signs.

The second part of "Bodhidharma" evokes explicitly the practice of this sage's meditation known as "wall-gazing". This type of what might have been "sitting meditation" in front of a wall was attributed to Bodhidharma. It seeks to quiet the mind by emptying it of superfluous thoughts and contradicting ideas. The inner enlightenment comes about once the initiate manages to break through and attain penetration or sudden insight into reality as it is. Therefore, the poetic voice claims that even if there is apparently no other side to the wall he is facing during meditation, it does lead somewhere else: towards enlightenment, towards sudden insight into reality. Bodhidharma gives voice to this conviction with absolute certainty and hence the tone is that of a self-confident master:

There is no other side
to this wall, though the road
is so wide it leads through.
It leads through. That is all.

The legendary dialogue of Bodhidharma with Emperor Wu of southern China is revered in the Zen tradition exactly because it illustrates the primary concern of the Zen practitioner, which is the experience of the pure wisdom that sees reality as empty and serene:

The Emperor said, "Ever since I ascended the throne, I have built temples, copied sūtras, approved the ordination of more monks than I can count. What is the merit of having done all this?"

Bodhidharma said, "There is no merit."

The Emperor said, "Why is that so?"

Bodhidharma said. "These are minor achievements of humans and *devas*, which become the causes of desire. They are like shadows of forms and are not real."

The Emperor said, “What is real merit?”
 Bodhidharma said, “When pure wisdom is complete, the essence is empty and serene. Such merit cannot be attained through worldly actions.”
 The Emperor said, “What is the foremost sacred truth?”
 Bodhidharma said, “Vast emptiness, nothing sacred.”
 The Emperor said, “Who is it that faces me?”
 Bodhidharma said, “I don’t know.”
 The Emperor did not understand.⁵⁰

VI · SENGZHAO

“Sengzhào”⁵¹ is another accomplished poem of technical perfection that testifies to Bringhurst’s command of the English language. It concerns another fundamental Buddhist Chinese sage who thought deeply about being, mind and speech, about the relationship holding between perceiving subject and perceived object, and about the possibility of understanding the ultimate reality of things. In the “Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures” at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringhurst informs us that Sengzhào (Seng-chao, 384-414) was “A Buddhist metaphysician, born in Shaanxi. He went to Gansu, reputedly at the age of 14, to study with Kumarajiva. In 401, he returned with his teacher to Chang’an, where he studied and taught at the academy until his death at the age of 31.” In addition, in the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling. Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst gives us only essential information concerning this sage: “Sengzhào (Seng-chao, 384–414) A Buddhist philosopher born in Shaanxi. He studied at Chang’an with the captive translator Kumarajiva.” And a brief entry in the 2001 Ninja Press edition of *The Book of Silences* says: “Sengzhao (Seng-chao) 384-414 Chang’an, northern China.”

According to a traditional account of this sage’s life included in the *Gaoseng Zhuan (Biographies of Eminent Monks)*, Sengzhào⁵² was born to a poor family that lived in Jingzhao in 384 CE. Because of the economic difficulties his family had to cope with, Sengzhào had to work as a copyist to make a living, thus becoming efficient in writing and gaining a first-hand knowledge of such classics as the works of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Interested in the profound and in the subtle, he turned his attention to the *Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra* and relished its beauty and perfection with pleasure and happiness. As a result, and because of his inclination towards everything related to the realm of essences, he made up his mind to become a monk. He had a special talent for profound thinking and he read avidly the

⁵⁰ See *Enlightenment Unfolds. The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dōgen*, edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi, Boston & London: Shambhala, 1999, particularly p. xxxiv.

⁵¹ “Sengzhào” was originally published in A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986). It was then reprinted in A.47 *The Calling* (1995), in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001), in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009), as well as in (i) B.69 *A Matter of Spirit: The Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry*, edited by Susan McCaslin. Victoria, British Columbia: Ekstasis Editions, 1998: pp. 41-58. Contributions: Ten poems and a short prose piece. “Poem about Crystal”, “Deuteronomy”, “Herakleitos”, “Parśvanatha”, “Nagarjuna”, “Sengzhào”, “Hán Shan”, “Yúnmén Wényan”, “Thin Man Washing”; “Sunday Morning” (all rpt. from A.47); • brief essay, “In Praise of Vacant Lots.” (ii) C.57 [Four poems]. *Rubicon* (Montreal) 8 (Spring 1987): 103-107. Contents: “Hóng Zichéng”; “Bodhidharma”; “Sengzhào”; “from *The Lyell Island Variations: V. The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer*,” all rpt. from A.32, but with two stanzas missing from the first poem. (iii) C.58 [Two poems]. *Verse* (Oxford) 4.1 (March 1987): 14-15. Contents: Parśvanatha; Sengzhào, both rpt. from A.32. See also editorial comments by Mark Abley on pp. 8-9. In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, the calligraphy accompanying this piece reads: shèng xīn míng jí = *holy mind/heart dark silent*.

⁵² Much of this bio-bibliographical information has been lifted from the entry on Sengzhào by Jeffrey Dippman (Central Washington University) in the *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/sengzhao/>. Retrieved on 20 September 2011.

Vaipulya Sutra and the *Tripitaka*. He studied under the Indian Buddhist master Kumarajiva, who praised his disciple without limit. Sengzhào was ready to follow the master anywhere he chose to go, and so when he left Gecang and moved to Chang'an, the disciple followed him faithfully. Afterwards, he would assist his master in the translation of Buddhist treatises into Chinese. Sengzhào was thus the vital intermediary between his Indian master and the Chinese language: the master relied on his disciple's ability to render the original into stylistically acceptable Chinese. This exegetical enterprise increased Sengzhào's understanding of these texts and prompted him to write his own treatises: *Prajñ Is Without Dichotomizing Knowledge*, *Non-Absolute Emptiness*, *Things Do Not Shift* and *Nirvana Is Without Conceptualization*. They were highly admired and venerated in Sengzhào's own lifetime by other Buddhist masters and students for their profundity of thought and subtle meaning. Sengzhào is also credited with an annotated edition of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sutra*, an obituary of his master, an afterword to the *Saddhamapundrika Sutra* and several prefaces to other important Buddhist texts. Sengzhào died in Chang'an at the age of 31. Had he lived longer, he would have surely produced more invaluable works.

The four treatises already mentioned above are incorporated into Sengzhào's major extant work, which is the *Zhaolun* (*Treatises of Sengzhào*), which consists of a preface, an introduction, the four treatises and correspondence between Sengzhào and Liu Yimin, a lay monk from the nearby Lushan monastery. The *Zhaolun* is the most comprehensive compilation of treatises available to understand Mādhyamika Buddhism in China. Sengzhào's surviving texts are full-length logically coherent texts, characterized by a mastery use of paradox, a stylistic trait that made him a favourite among Chan (Zen) adepts. At the heart of his treatises, there are several fundamental ideas that are worth considering in detail. His primary concern is the mind's proclivity for naming and conceptualizing. To begin with, Sengzhào targets the natural disposition of the human mind towards conceptualization, a habit that fosters a false sense of duality between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. By giving things distinct names, we humans create a false dichotomy between self and other, between truth-seeker and world, or between apprehender and apprehended. In this respect, Sengzhào dwells on the mind's tendency to produce networks of mental constructions and on humans' compulsion to cling to these conceptual fabrications or constructs as real. These constructs arise from the mind's predilection for naming things so as to establish distinctions in the unstoppable flux of reality. By drawing artificial distinctions between things and assigning them a particular name, the mind deludes itself into thinking that it is apprehending the real. However, in its constant pursuit of the truth, the mind clings erroneously to what it mistakes for the real – to ephemeral appearances instead of to the immortal ground of existence or ultimate reality. The truth is right under our feet, in front of our eyes and yet we seem to be unaware of its existence and unable to apprehend reality.⁵³ Thus, things, concepts and words are connected to one another in far from simple ways. In the process of ordinary perception we assign a name to individual manifestations and then conceptualize the conjunction of thing and name into a distinct concept. At that point, we humans think that we do grasp the ultimate reality of the thing in hand. But this is just delusion. According to Sengzhào, who does not question the existence of the phenomenal world, the main problem is that humans rely on conceptualization and naming for their understanding and apprehension of the world. However, the multiplication of conceptual distinctions only

⁵³ Sengzhào insists precisely on this in his treatises. Thus, for instance, in *Things Do Not Shift*, he says: "Being near and yet unrecognized such is the nature of things" (p. 46); and "How sad that the notions of people are always erroneous, that in the very presence of the truth they do not awake to it!" (p. 47). See *Chao Lun. The Treatises of Seng-chao*, a translation with introduction, notes and appendices, by Walter Liebenthal, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1968, 2nd revised edition.

complicates the apprehension of the truth. In addition, we humans do not seem to notice that neither subject nor object exist independently: the mind depends upon the real and the real depends upon the mind, or, to put it differently, *what is* finds its genesis in the mind, and what originates in the mind arises from things.

Now, Bringhurst's homage to this Oriental sage is a beautiful poem consisting of four stanzas that correspond to four movements for the soul. The first stanza sets side by side the omnipotent minds of gods and the speechlessness of humans in the face of *what is*: "*The thought of the gods is dark water. The gods / have their destinies too as they move through the world. / Our speech does not reach them.*" The voice speaking these words is that of Sengzhào's dramatic persona addressing the reader directly. He speaks with the calm and serenity of many of those Oriental ancestors that were aware that humans have their own inescapable limitations and that they should learn an elemental lesson of humility and gratitude. But the irreducible core of meaning of this first movement is the notion that there is no way for humans to penetrate the mind of the gods, for their thought is "dark water", not easily decipherable. It is evident that the thoughts of the gods cannot be compared with what is thought by human beings. What is more, human speech is but an imperfect tool in our epistemological confrontation with the world and so it does not even touch gods' thinking. The rest of the stanza is a forceful meditation on the inadequacy of human speech to apprehend anything at all. If *what is* is inexpressible, "not easy and graceful to speak of", *What is the sense in making the effort to speak one's mind to others?*, one might ask. Kumarajiva, Sengzhào's Indian teacher, is the foreigner mentioned in the verse lines that follow. Though "*lame in the tongue / like a caged raven*", Kumarajiva was endowed with a sharp and lucid mind. He knew of the inadequacies of language, of the vagaries of words, and was convinced that true understanding lies outside or beyond speech and conceptualization. In the enlightened sage's non-dual apprehension of the world, all distinctions are transcended, motion and rest⁵⁴, perceiving self and observed object, mind and the world are seen to be one and the same thing. Sengzhào helped his master to translate certain Indian Buddhist treatises into Chinese, and so he refers here to the "*elegant phrase*" of his wording of the Buddhist concepts. In this sense, he was instrumental in rendering the original texts into stylistically acceptable Chinese, in words that were highly admired by his own contemporaries.

The second stanza is the geographical centre of Bringhurst's poem. At this point, we realize clearly that *the thought of the gods* mentioned in the very first opening line of the composition is meant as a reference to reality as a whole: it is as though the myriad forms that populate this world were the manifestations or incarnated expressions of the gods' thinking. Hence, the poetic voice proclaims that the gods' minds and their mindprints are one and the same thing. By contrast, the only trace humans leave behind is ephemeral footprints that vanish into nothingness. Whereas the gods' thoughts are the existent things of reality, humans' thoughts are nothing but evanescent ideas that arise from a dichotomizing way of thinking the world into conceptual fabrications and distinctions clinging to inadequate words. The stanza closes with a calm celebration of the unity of reality: yes and no (like motion and rest, dark and light, or earth and sky) are sides to the same coin, one and the same thing, in much the same way knower (perceiving self) and

⁵⁴ As Sengzhào himself puts it: "That birth and death alternate, that winter and summer succeed each other, that all things glide along and move is a generally accepted proposition. But to me this is not so." (p. 45) "There is rest with motion going on; therefore, though (things) move they are forever at rest." (p. 45) "Impermanence and permanence, though seemingly different, are ultimately the same." (p. 51) And "Then the four seasons, fleet as the wind, and the Great Bear, revolving with lightning speed; if you understand the least of what I have said, (you should realize) that these, rapid as they are, do not move." *Chao Lun. The Treatises of Seng-chao.*

known (*what is*) are also one and the same. Bringhurst manages to convey such profundity of thought with simple, transparent words that sing out loud on the page. In verse lines marked by strong enjambment, the poet sings of the fundamental unity of *what is*:

The gods' minds and their mindprints are one
and the same. With us it is different. Our footprints
fall off as we walk through the world. Our brilliant
assertions tack like October leaves
through the air before mouldering. Yes and no
are at home in each other, not elsewhere. What is
and who knows of its presence are one and the same.

Breathing through the feet, the title of an early essay published in the 1980s, is Bringhurst's way of saying that we humans need to pay attention to *what is*. If only we listened to the unstoppable discourse of *being* with open ears and if only we looked at the world with open eyes, we would realize all of a sudden that the truth is in front of us, right under our feet. The feet are therefore essential to the poet's philosophical thinking; they are also more respectful and less damaging than hands are. In the third movement for the reader's soul, the calm voice of Sengzhào dwells precisely on the various links that unite the human body (as embodiment of the self) with the world (as living incarnation of *what is*) at large. Feet are the most elemental of all links that Sengzhào explores in these verse lines: "*The feet are the link / between earth and the body. Begin there.*" The second link that brings humans and the world together is breath itself: "*The lungs are the link between body and air.*" By breathing in the world, humans are absorbing and internalizing what lies outside themselves. The human soul appears to be directly connected to the universal soul through mere breathing. The remaining sense organs are all invoked as being variations on feet. Thus, the hands are nothing more than "*uprooted feet*" through which we come to touch the living, rugged texture of things, and through which we make or create material things; and "*the eyes are the hands of the head; / its feet are the ears.*" The parallelism of these lines emphasizes the fact that body and world are one and the same thing in the end, for the bodily parts are nothing more than prolongations or extensions of the self that seek lovingly to understand or comprehend *what is*.

The fourth and last stanza of "Sengzhào" is once again a short meditation on being and speech. We humans are part of the living fabric of *being*, which is a pervasive presence everywhere. Hence, "*We are all of us here in the hidden / house of the unnamed.*" Naming the unnameable, expressing the inexpressible, trying to capture *what is* through words is a futile enterprise, the sage's voice tells us. Words will not do when it comes to grasping and communicating to others the ultimate essence of things. Any gesture towards conceptualization and verbalization is bound to fail. By naming things and turning them into abstract concepts, we are reducing the complexity of reality to bare essentials and establishing distinctions where there is only an unstoppable, undistinguishable flux. This leads to delusion, not to true enlightenment of the truth-seeker. In other words, language is not an infallible tool in our attempt at understanding reality. This is why the poetic voice says that those who insist that we must "*name it have ceased to be there.*" If *what is* is ineffable, words will inevitably fail time after time. Though humans feel we need to understand, Sengzhào is precisely urging us to forget about a conscious attempt at knowing. By unknowing, by forgetting about our need to know and to understand, true enlightenment might start to happen.

VII · YONGJIA XUANJUE

“Yongjiā Xuánjué”⁵⁵ concerns another essential Oriental sage that has something invaluable to say after so many centuries have elapsed. An entry in the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling. Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995) informs us that Yongjiā Xuánjué (Yung-chia Hsuan-chueh, 665–713) was “A poet and monk little interested in monastic life. He spent, it is said, only one day with his teacher Huineng, then returned to his home on the Zhejiang coast where he wrote the *Zhèndào Ge* or *Song of the Path of the Evidence*.” And this is the brief entry in the 2001 textual incarnation of *The Book of Silences*: “Yongjia Xuanjue (Yung-chia Hsuan-chueh) 665-713? Zhejiang coast, China.” Tradition says that only one night was enough for Yongjia Xuanjue to attain enlightenment.⁵⁶ This eighth-century Chinese sage who breathed so long ago is the object of attention of Bringham’s homage in a seven-stanza poem of moving beauty and technical perfection. The composition is a meditation on *what is*, that is to say, an attempt at verbalizing the inexpressible once more as in many of the other poems that constitute the Oriental sages sequence of *The Book of Silences*. These sages spent much of their time in the open air, studying the book of Nature with their own eyes, feet and hands. What they attained was first-hand knowledge that *being* is pervasive and ubiquitous, and that humans belong among this grander scheme of the living mesh of things, human and nonhuman alike. These ancient sages “traveled everywhere on foot along the great rivers of both south and north, crossing oceans and visiting famous mountains and large streams. In navigating oceans and scaling mountains, they tasted to the full the suffering involved in travel by land and sea.”⁵⁷ Their libraries were the woods where they walked in search of the truth; their books were the trees, stones, mountains and rivers they breathed in with their whole bodies, and their only master was the mind, a sharp-edged mind eager to attain enlightenment.

This partly accounts for the profundity of ideas at the heart of “Yongjiā Xuánjué”. No discernible parts are easily identified in the visible linguistic texture of this complex poem. Maybe it could be said to consist of two movements for the soul: whereas the first one (stanzas 1 to 4) dwells on *what is* and tries to define it figuratively, the second one (stanzas 5 to 7) looks like an obscure extended afterthought that defies straightforward interpretation on the part of the reader. The resulting linguistic artefact is exacting,

⁵⁵ “Yongjia Xuanjue” was originally published as C.63 [Four Poems]. *Canadian Literature* 140 (Spring 1994): 79-85. Contents: • “Dongshan Liangjie” (rpt. in A.47, A.65, A.92); • “Xuedou Zhongxian” (rpt. in B.58; rev. in A.47 and rpt. from A.47 in A.65, A.92, C.75); • “Yongjia Xuanjue” (rev. in A.47 and rpt. from A.47 in A.65 and A.92); • “Dogen” (excerpt rev. in B.72, C.71). It was later revised in A.47 *The Calling* (1995) and reprinted from A.47 in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001) and in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009). In its original textual incarnation in C.63, the poem consists of eight instead of seven stanzas. The first stanza of the poem reads as follows: “Not a river, a road. What flows without flowing. / The sentence we read and reread with our feet, / not the pages we write and rewrite / and rewrite and rewrite with our hands.” The extra stanza (the fourth one in the original) reads thus: “The truth has two sides and two faces, / two bellies, two [sic] backs, but the top of the truth / is the bottom. The truth is that simple; the truth / is that twisted; the truth is that thin.” And in the sixth stanza, verse line 4 reads “you are leaving” instead of “you are staying,” as in later versions of the poem.

⁵⁶ “Yongjia Xuanjue (665-713) was one of the great disciples of Huineng. He came from Benjun. Yongjia is often remembered by his nickname, the “Overnight Guest,” due to his legendary brief encounter with his teacher, Huineng. Yongjia was persuaded by Huineng to stay at Cao Xi only one night. During that night Huineng confirmed Yongjia’s enlightenment. [...] In the year 713 master Yongjia passed away peacefully while sitting in meditation.” See Andrew E. Ferguson, *Zen’s Chinese Heritage: The Masters and their Teachings*, Somerville (USA): Wisdom Publications, 2000, pp. 56-57.

⁵⁷ See *Song of Enlightenment, by Great Master Yung Chia of the T’ang Dynasty*. Commentary by Tripitaka Master Hua, translated into English by Dharma Realm Buddhist University, International Institute for the Translation of Buddhist Texts, Talmage, California, 1983, p. 26.

demanding close attention to specific details and to the overall *Gestalt* of the piece on the part of the reader. The first stanza plunges us straightaway into the outdoor space where this Chinese sage must have spent much of his time, even if, upon closer inspection, we learn that this is a sort of figurative landscape, a *stylization of the mind* to a certain extent as well:

Not a river, a road. What flows without flowing.
The sentence we read and reread
with our feet, not the pages we write
and rewrite and rewrite with our hands.

The poem starts *in medias res* at it were. *What is* is not a river, but a road instead. 2,500 years ago old Herakleitos embraced the flux doctrine that reality is in a state of perpetual change; to the Oriental sage, what matters above all seems to be what remains the same, so that the emphasis is on motion and on rest, on change and stasis as the two sides to the same coin. Hence *what is* is flowing and not flowing – i.e., it is in perpetual motion and yet it stands still at the same time. From here follows the complex metaphor at the geographical centre of this stanza: the road is a long sentence or a gigantic text that our feet read time and again as we walk along it; it has nothing to do with the pages of a book whose pages we write and turn with our own hands. Feet are always more respectful towards *what is* than hands in Bringham's thinking. Pressing firmly on the ground where we stay put, the feet constitute an elemental link between the body and the earth. Hands, on the contrary, serve the purpose of touching things, but in touching things we might be damaging them as well, and we humans are particularly good at damaging whatever we touch.

The second and third stanzas of “Yongjiā Xuánjué” elaborate further on *what is* in detail. They expand the metaphor that *being* is the road humans walk upon with their feet. It is no happy coincidence that the statement “*What is is wherever the living / are walking*” should be repeated twice. It does not matter much where the living (not just human beings but all living things in this world) go, they will stumble upon *what is* along their way, for *what is* is inescapable and pervasive everywhere. That *being* is ubiquitous is made clear in the verse lines following the initial statement, where it is conceptualized as a moving creature with a life of its own: “*It limps through the earth, / swims through the water, flies through the air.*” The parallelism of these verse lines highlights the presence of being everywhere one might turn to look: earth, water and air are the natural elements where it finds itself at home. Once again, the emphasis is laid on the fact that *what is* moves and does not move at the same time: “*and it runs the full distance without ever moving.*” The realm where *what is* limps, swims or flies is a realm of freedom; it is not “*where the dead have planted / their flags,*” which is possibly meant as a reference to humans’ impulse towards domination over what they do not own. And there is precisely enough room for *the dead*, *the unborn* and *the newborn* where the living walk and breathe and live. This first movement of Bringham's poem closes with a stanza that encapsulates a wealth of meaning. It is concerned with the elusive or eel-slippery nature of *what is* and of the truth,⁵⁸ which cannot be easily expressed through words, or touched with one's hands, or conveyed to others in an easy manner. What relation could our spiritual awakening have to words? However hard one might try to catch the truth, it manages to fly away; only when one does surrender and treads the path of *not knowing* (and *not owning*), does knowledge come to pass. If you search for the truth intentionally, you will

⁵⁸ Yongjiā Xuánjué expresses it thus in his *Song of Enlightenment*: “It cannot be slandered / and cannot be praised. / Its substance is like space; it has no shore. / It does not leave where it is; it is always clear. / If you search for it, know that you will not see it. / It cannot be grasped; / it cannot be rejected. / Just what can be obtained within the unobtainable?” See *Song of Enlightenment*, by Great Master Yung Chia of the T'ang Dynasty, p. 53.

not see it. You might go to the far corners of the world in search of it, but you will not see it unless you just let it overwhelm you. At that point, you become enlightened all of a sudden to the Buddha-nature within yourself. Hence, by placidly walking along the path, the truth comes to you of its own accord, unforced, naturally. But, at the same time, this stanza also celebrates the ubiquity of *being*, which blooms into full flower all around. Wherever living things turn to look they feel the benign embrace of *being*:

Your hand cannot hold it; your mind
cannot leave it behind. When you chase it,
it runs. When you walk, it comes toward you.
Wherever you stand, it sprouts all around.

Now, Bringham's poem has got the simplicity and perfection of a circle. In the second movement of "Yongjiā Xuánjué" we are plunged back into the outdoor natural world evoked in the first stanza. The fifth stanza is a spot of obscurity within the poem, but upon closer inspection it yields its meaning generously: *being* has got an inherent unity in it, and it finds its expression in the multiplicity or plurality of living things that make up the world. Hence, from *the face of being* emerge "*self-portraits and portraits*" every day, transient and ephemeral though they might be. One nature pervades all things; one root divides into the myriad things populating this world. Therefore, there is no way of ascertaining whether any of these living things has come, has already left or is staying, for everything flows without flowing. This many-sided nature of *what is* enters our own nature, with which it is united as one. "*Not a river, a road,*" says the sage's voice beneath these lines again, just to remind us that *being* is found embodied in the image of the road being travelled by these ancient monks that felt at home in the open air, under the vast sky, amid a forest or by a running stream. The stream is seen as keeping an uninterrupted dialogue alive with those walking by it: it "*speaks with each one / of their uninterchangeable voices.*" Which is a reminder that all humans are unique and irreplaceable. Mr Old, Mr Serious, Mr Nostril and Anonymous are possibly only a linguistic means to refer to different human types.

And in the closing stanza the speaking voice beneath these lines addresses all human relations possible to beg them to talk to him "*as the trees do, as the wind does, if you also / have something, as they do, to say.*" Nature speaks all the time, and the sage only has to pay attention to hear what it has to tell him. All the phenomena of the universe proclaim that *being* is, that the fundamental substance underlying all living and non-living things is forever still and undisturbed, and yet in motion at the same time. Though it is silent and has no words, it is singing all the time. It remains unclear whether humans have to tell relevant things all the time, or part of the time. The trees and the wind have got something of the utmost importance to say: they do sing of *being* as something that transcends tiny humans that think themselves the centre of the universe when they are not. That is why the trees and the wind are teaching this seventh-century Zen monk a lesson of humility and gratitude after all. A handful of centuries later, Bringham is rescuing his thinking and his singing from the mists of this distant past for us to learn this elemental lesson as well. Outside the transmission of wisdom found in books, there is the possibility to awaken to what is fundamental. Having awakened to one thing, one awakens to everything, for all is subtly connected to everything else. One needs to follow only one's mind. As Yongjiā Xuánjué himself puts it in a most accomplished text on the jewel-like power of the mind,

The mind-mirror is bright;
its reflections are unhindered.
Vast, lustrous, and shining,
it pervades worlds like sand-grains.

In it appear the images of the myriad phenomena;
a pearl of perfect light, neither within nor without.⁵⁹

VIII · SARAHA

“Sarāha”⁶⁰ is possibly the most accomplished of all the compositions making up the Oriental sages sequence. It is also the only poem in *The Book of Silences* that was originally published as a separate broadside in a limited edition of only 150 numbered copies. And it concerns a Buddhist poet-philosopher known as Sarāha, the only one to whom Bringhurst devotes two poems – this one and the poem entitled “Sarāha’s Exercise for Beginners”, which is the companion piece. Sarāha is the primordial spiritual poet, one capable of bringing together poetry and philosophy with perfect naturalness. This must have been appealing to Bringhurst from the start. In the “Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures” at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringhurst informs us that Saraha was “A Buddhist philosopher-poet living in Bengal and writing in Apabhramśa, perhaps in the eighth century AD.” And in the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst tells us of this sage in these terms: “Sarāha (8th century AD?) A philosopher-poet living in Bengal and writing in the Apabhramśa language.” Even briefer is the entry in the 2001 edition of *The Book of Silences*: “Saraha c. 750? Northeastern India.”⁶¹ In giving voice to Sarāha’s thinking in this accomplished poem, Bringhurst is installing himself in a tradition reaching back to the beginning of time. In emulating the voice of his spiritual master and literary ancestor, he is showing us the depth and breadth of the poetic lineage to which he considers himself heir. Needless to say, the immense creativity that the Oriental sages’ thinking and singing inspired in Bringhurst is astonishing. Indeed, *The Book of Silences* has been a work in progress from 1986 to 2009.

Not much is known of this legendary sage beyond elementary information. The details of his biography are based, however, upon an abundance of Tibetan hagiographies dating hundreds of years beyond even the latest dates assigned to him. Thus, “the figure to whom the name “Sarāha” is given is a construct of the religious imagination, and a vibrant

⁵⁹ See *Song of Enlightenment, by Great Master Yung Chia of the T’ang Dynasty*, p. 42. In the commentary following this excerpt, the Tripitaka Master Hua says: “One’s own Mind is like a great, bright mirror, which reflects all the ten thousand things without any one of them hindering any other. Each thing retains its basic characteristics and is not confused in the substance of the mirror. [...] This Mind-mirror is far-reaching, great, bright, and still, permeating the “Great-thousand” universes, numerous as grains of sand. Nowhere does its light fail to circulate; nowhere does its brightness fail to shine. It is so great that there is nothing outside of it, and so small that there is nothing within it. [...] This perfection of radiance, this brilliance of light, is the fundamental substance of our mind’s light.” Ibid., p. 43.

⁶⁰ “Sarāha” was originally published as A.23 • *Saraha*. Lexington, Kentucky: The King Library Press, 1984. Folded broadside, 26 × 33.5 cm. “Published in an edition of 150 copies, numbered and signed.” Contents: A poem (rpt. in A.32, A.47, A.65, A.92, B.18, C.45). Then it was reprinted in A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), A.47 *The Calling* (1995), A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001), and A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009). It was also reprinted somewhere else: (1) B.18 *The New Canadian Poets, 1970–1985*, edited by Dennis Lee, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985: pp. 26-39. Contributions: “These Poems, She Said”, “Deuteronomy”, “Demokritos”, “Leda and the Swan”, “The Stonecutter’s Horses” (all rpt. from A.14); “Sarāha” (rpt. from A.23). (2) C.45 “Sarāha”, University of Arizona Poetry Center Fall 1985 Calendar of Readings (Tucson, Arizona). Rpt. from A.23. Accompanied by biographical note and announcement of reading. In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, the calligraphy accompanying this piece reads: wù wǒ tóng gēn = *things I same root*.

⁶¹ Robert Bringhurst, *The Book of Silences*, Los Angeles: Ninja Press, 2001. See the separately bound section entitled “Contents & Notes” at the end (unpaged).

one at that.”⁶² Far from being a monolithic figure, he is variously depicted as being a conveyer of doctrine, an exemplar for living, an object of reverence and a source of blessings. But he is steeped in obscurity and we might never know for sure whether he composed all or any of the large corpus of spiritual songs traditionally attributed to him. Sarāha⁶³ lived possibly in the late 8th and early 9th century CE. Born in eastern India to a Brahmin family, he is considered one of the founders of Buddhist Vajrayana, in particular of the Mahamudra tradition. He was a student of Haribhadra, who was in turn a disciple of Shantarakshita. Sarāha belongs among those masters who gave voice to their experiences not in learned treatises of philosophy, but in songs that are a perfect incarnation of philosophical poetry or poetic philosophy. Performed on the banks of the River Ganga, the *dobās* (songs in couplets) of the great Brahmin Sarāha are his most important work of spiritual philosophy and are compiled in *Dobākosa (The Treasury of Dobā Verses)*. According to Kurtis Schaffer, *dobās*⁶⁴ may be described as “rhapsodies, or emotionally charged verse expressions of spiritual experience whose formation is often piecemeal, owing more to the tides of tradition than any single author.”⁶⁵ Schaffer celebrates the uniqueness of Sarāha’s work in these enthusiastic terms:

Sarāha’s *The Treasury of Dobā Verses* is a gripping, often iconoclastic poetic song. *The Treasury of Dobā Verses* begins with a sarcastic critique of social, ritual, scholastic, and meditation practices considered by Saraha to be absurd and useless or detrimental to spiritual growth. The leitmotifs of the work are the immediacy of the ultimate spiritual experience in human bodily existence, the impossibility of adequately expressing this experience, and the necessity to engage in the proper meditative practice with an altruistic attitude under the guidance of one’s spiritual mentor in order to bring such an ecstatic experience to life in oneself. Yet Saraha’s

⁶² Kurtis R. Schaeffer, *Dreaming the Great Brahmin. Tibetan Traditions of the Buddhist Poet-Saint Saraha*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 4. Schaeffer claims that most scholarly studies devoted to the Indian sage have focused almost exclusively on trying to reconstruct the details of his biography. But the Brahmin is an “unknowable historical figure” due to the scant sources of reliable information available. Therefore, his study is concerned instead with “studying Tibetan, Nepalese, and Indian hagiographic narratives of Saraha’s life as constituting interesting literary traditions in their own right.” *Ibid.*, p. 4. Thus, his aim is to shift scholarly attention to “the literary life and history of the work [Saraha’s] as it was taught, transmitted and transformed by members of Buddhist traditions in India, Nepal, and Tibet, as well as to the development of the saintly figure of Saraha in Tibetan and Indic narrative traditions.” Schaeffer is interested in “the vicissitudes of the work’s textual corpus” and in the “immense creativity that his image inspired in a number of religious and cultural arenas.” *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶³ As for the meaning of the sage’s name itself (Saraha or Sarahapa), “it is composed of the words *sa ra*, which is “arrow,” and *ha pa*, which is “to have shot,” “to have flung.” Therefore, there are two explanations: that this is a name of confidence, and that since the *dākinī* of primordial awareness shot him with an arrow, primordial awareness dawned upon him.” Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 135.

⁶⁴ In his *Ornamental Flower for the Dobās*, Chomdern Raldri explains the meaning of the word *dobā*: “Since *dohā* is “plentiful” or “uncontrived,” [dohās] teach the actual mind which is uncontrived by afflictive emotions or concepts [...] it is milking the primordial awareness of one’s mind.” Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 130.

⁶⁵ Kurtis R. Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 6. Schaeffer explains the concept in detail: “From as early as the seventh century CE, later North Indian Buddhism saw the emergence of a poetic form of religious expression, songs in the late Middle Indo-Aryan dialect of Apabhramśa, of various lengths and consisting primarily of rhymed couplets, extolling the beauty and simplicity of tantric spiritual experience and social practice. In time this genre came to be designated *dobā*, the name of the meter most frequently employed. From the seventh to the twelfth century these songs were performed, commented upon, and transmitted both orally and through manuscripts. [...] Though several have come down to us in Apabhramśa [...] thanks to the efforts of Tibetan, Nepalese, and Indian scholars of the eleventh through the thirteenth century, the largest collection of these Buddhist songs is to be found in Tibetan translation. Saraha’s *Treasury of Dobā Verses* is thus but one of a handful of such late Indian Buddhist poetic works, though in many ways it was the most significant in terms of its impact on later Buddhist literature and thought. Saraha is heralded by a number of Tibetan Buddhist traditions as the paramount Indian “spiritual adept” or *siddha*, and he stands at the heart of a rich hagiographic corpus of writings...” *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

work is intriguing not only by virtue of its often beautiful expression of a Buddhist vision of the relation between human existence and ultimate reality, but also because it has come down to us in a state of fantastic variegation and has meant many things in many forms to those who have been involved with it. From version to version, lines are reordered, omitted, or expanded; vocabulary is changed, forming a constellation of variant works with a shifting core.⁶⁶

Sarāha was a singer of spiritual songs and he sang his songs “not in order to argue some particular doctrine or preserve his poetry for posterity, but rather to bring his disciples to enlightenment.” His singing was that of an enlightened being and the act of singing was “nothing less than an enlightened act, geared toward liberating his disciples.”⁶⁷ His songs were a means not just to bring his disciples along the path of enlightenment, but means to teach oneself about one’s true nature.⁶⁸ The work of writing, editing and redaction was left to his disciples. Spiritual songs were thought to have been orally composed and only later written down. Thus, the primacy of speech over writing, of the master’s oral instructions over the written word, is clear from the outset in the Buddhist tradition. Sarāha’s singing was the product of a revelation given to him and the *dobās* were a kind of revealed literature. Of course, writing was essential to the perpetuation of the *dobās* for the benefit of later spiritual seekers, but orality is praised as the lifeblood of the instruction of the adepts. Thus, his role in the creation of the *dobās* is found in the opening passage of Chomden Raldri’s *Ornamental Flower for the Dobās*: “The Great Brahmin of Southern India, Saraha, heard [the Buddhist teachings] under the arcane lord Vajrapāni, student of the Buddha Vajradhāra, and under the dākinī of primordial awareness, Sukhasiddī, and composed this text of the *Dobā*... [Saraha] taught it to Master Padmavajra, Noble Nāgārjuna and Śabareśvara.”⁶⁹ Thus, the power of Sarāha’s words in many of his spiritual songs, marked by what Schaeffer calls “the predominantly apophatic rhetoric of Buddhism,” is precisely their message of ineffability in accord with their revealed nature. There is a contradiction inherent in any attempt to speak of a spiritual experience, which is by definition inexpressible. Songs have the power to convey the inexpressible, to stand above the ordinary language of learned treatises to inspire others towards enlightenment. But, of course, the words of the *dobās* are nothing more than indicators of the truth, not the truth itself.⁷⁰ The essential meaning lies not in the words themselves, but beyond themselves.

The profundity of philosophic thought conveyed in Bringhurst’s poem is of a precious and rare intensity. His three-stanza poem on Sarāha consists of three distinct movements for the reader’s soul. The first movement is a miniature meditation on the nature of *what is* and *what isn’t*. To Sarāha’s mind, enlightenment exists within every single human being. Hence his fundamental plea to aspirants and spiritual seekers was not to search anywhere for truth but in one’s mind,⁷¹ and so the opening lines of “Sarāha” are a celebration of the mind’s power to apprehend the ultimate essence of reality:⁷²

⁶⁶ Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 6. Schaeffer offers a translation of Sarāha’s *Treasury of Dobā Verses* alongside a fascinating 13th-century commentary entitled the *Ornamental Flower for the Dobās* by Chomden Raldri (1227-1305). Throughout our analysis of Bringhurst’s poems on Sarāha’s thinking, we will be quoting from Schaeffer’s translation.

⁶⁷ Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 84. The Tibetan traditions speak of Sarāha as a singer of songs, not as a writer. “The copying down of the Great Brahmin’s inspired aphorisms were seen as the work of his disciples, grand-disciples, and spiritual descendants.” *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁶⁸ Schaeffer, p. 96.

⁶⁹ Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 86 and p. 129.

⁷⁰ Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 97.

⁷¹ Sarāha celebrates the power of the mind with these verse lines: “*Mind itself alone is the seed of all, / From which existence and nirvana emanate. / To the mind, a wish-fulfilling jewel, / Which grants what fruit is desired, I pay homage. / Because the mind is bound, so one is bound. / If just this is released, there is no doubt. / [...] The mind must be apprehended*

What is
 is what isn't. What isn't
 is water. The mind is a deer.
 In the lakes of its eyes,
 the deer and the water
 must drink one another.
 There are no others,
 and there are no selves.
 What the water sees
 is – and is not what you think
 you have seen in the water.

At the heart of this stanza there is a handful of fundamental ideas central to the Indian sage's thinking. In the first place, a potent equation is posited in the very opening lines: *what is* is *what isn't*, which is *water*. From the verse lines that follow we gather that *water* stands for reality, whereas the *deer* stands for the mind, i.e. for the self coming to terms with the world. What interests Sarāha above all other things is the primordial confrontation of self and reality. Eyes are the primary sense organ through which the self absorbs reality, but also the windows wide open onto the world through which the self must let itself be absorbed by reality itself. Hence, "*the deer and the water / must drink one another.*" The perfection of insight remains in the mind, which is radiant light. This is a form of true, non-conceptual primordial awareness of the ultimate nature of things. In some of his verses of his *Treasury of Dobā Verses* (74-75), Sarāha affirms that "*One in whose heart the mentor's words have entered / Will as if see a treasure in the palm of their hand.*"⁷³ Technically speaking, these lines concern the co-emergent primordial awareness through which the mind comes to be non-dually aware of the ultimate essence of reality. "Because this radiant light, the nature of the mind, arises simultaneously with cyclic existence [and] all being, it is called "co-emergent," and since the two obscurations are overcome when that is directly realized and meditated upon, [it is] also called "primordial awareness."⁷⁴ The dualism of perceiving subject and perceived object is thus transcended, and the mind "unaffected by defilements or concepts, dwelling like the unmarred sky, pervades all things."⁷⁵ In this respect, that "*There are no others, / and there are no selves*" means that dualism is transcended. The highest truth is a primordial awareness free from apprehender and apprehended. Or, to put it differently, co-emergence is non-dualistic self-knowing. When mind realizes mind, objects appear as if in a dream: "*Just as salt dissolves in water, / So mind dissolves into nature. / Then self and other are seen to be the same.*"⁷⁶, says Sarāha in lines 387-389 of his poem. The mind is primordial wisdom and it leads the path towards the enlightened body of reality. It is only natural that the ideographic form accompanying Bringhurst's poem in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986) should read as follows: "*Things I same root.*" Sarāha cuts away the

like the sky, / Just like the sky, so should the mind be held. / When this egoic-thought becomes nonegoic, / By this unexcelled enlightenment will be attained." (ll. 167-178 of his *Treasury of Dobā Verses*). Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 147. The thought occurs that this is the Oriental equivalent of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself".

⁷² In his own poetry, Sarāha speaks of the wrong apprehension of reality: "*For some [reality] is conceptually visualized as space, / Still others would have [reality] possess emptiness. / In general they are fixed in contradiction.*" (ll. 47-49 of his *Treasury of Dobā Verses*). As for the reference to *conceptualizing space*, this is "an assertion that the macrocosmic and microcosmic are similar. [Impermanence] is seen in terms of space, time, and direction. In the first case, space is seen as impermanent because the clouds, planets, and stars [are impermanent]. [In the second case,] since time changes, it is seen to be impermanent. [In the third,] due to the directions of the rising and setting of the sun, [direction] is seen to be impermanent. Furthermore, a simple look at the sky refutes [this]." Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 136.

⁷³ Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 138. These words are evocatively reminiscent of Blake's ten centuries later.

⁷⁴ Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 132.

⁷⁵ Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 131.

⁷⁶ Schaeffer, *ibid.* p. 161.

errancy of dualistic appearances of subject and object.⁷⁷ When there is absolutely no awareness of self and other, a state of perfect bliss is achieved by the truth-seeker: the reality of the mind shines everywhere and a primordial awareness arises all of a sudden that sheds light on the innermost recesses of all things. Furthermore, “*What the water sees / is – and is not what you think / you have seen the water,*” says Sarāha’s voice at the end of the first stanza in Bringhurst’s poem. What reality sees *is* and it might not exactly conform to what the apprehender sees as a reflection on the water’s surface. This means that perception is not altogether reliable in our intellectual confrontation with the world. Breaking free from the web of illusion or delusion, we must turn the root of all appearances into vain emptiness and install ourselves in the realm of non-conceptualization. Even seeing is conceptual to a certain extent. One must cultivate non-conceptual primordial awareness, free from the bondages of afflictive emotions and conceptualization. In this context, seeing, hearing, touch and so forth are nothing more than “dream visions in the life of the mind.”⁷⁸

The second part (and stanza) of Bringhurst’s poem further elaborates on non-conceptual emergence and on the abandoning of thinking, conceptuality and thought. First, Sarāha gives voice to what looks like a paradoxical statement: “*There is something, no nothing, / but neither. No is / and no isn’t, but neither.*” As the primordial awareness arises, the mind is set free from the external things, which shine like illusions in a dream. It is not possible to draw any distinctions any longer. Being aware of the self, the self itself is “aware of everything as stainless ultimate reality.”⁷⁹ Then, Sarāha encourages the truth-seeker not to “*defile the thought / by sitting there thinking.*” By abandoning thinking, and breaking free from all the fetters of afflictive emotions and conceptualization, the enlightened mind penetrates the essence of reality. By leaving the mind without concepts alone, the ego is no longer deluded or deceived by insubstantiality. “*Do not corrupt your mind, / whose nature is pure, with meditative concentrations,*” says Sarāha in verse line 97 of his *Treasury of Dobā Verses*.⁸⁰ Then nothing exists externally; those who think that what appears to the mind is external are seized with suffering. When the mind is purified to its very essence, it learns that the outer is inner: if primordial awareness dwells in the body, then there must be some kind of underlying unity beneath mind and body and something else. At this point, Sarāha’s poetic persona in Bringhurst’s poem affirms the potent equation of mind, body and speech:

No difference exists
between body and mind, language
and mind, language and body.
What is, is not. You must love,
and let loose of, the world.

⁷⁷ As he himself puts it in 113-118 in his *Treasury of Dobā Verses*, “*In the highest great bliss, / There is no self, there is no other. / In front, behind, throughout the ten directions, / Whatever you see, that is this. / This very day the protector cuts away errancy, / Now you need not ask anyone else.*” Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 143. The vision of dualistically appearing subjects and objects ceases the very moment the mind is plunged into primordial awareness: “*Looking and looking at the nature of the primordially pure sky, / Vision of it ceases. / As in time even [conceptuality] ceases*” (139-141), says Sarāha in his verses. Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 144.

⁷⁸ Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 153. Sāhara says (ll. 255-260): “*Today the glorious master has taught / That nature is primordially nonarising, so I understand. / Seeing, bearing, feeling, memory, / Eating, smelling, wandering, going, and staying, / Chitchat and conversation; / If you know that these are mind, nothing moves from this unitary kind.*” *Ibid.*, p. 153. And again, in lines 335-336: “*Objects are totally purified, unable to be relied upon; / To be taken up only as emptiness.*” *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁷⁹ Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 155.

⁸⁰ Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 141. Somewhere else, Sarāha says: “*All being are belittled by thought... [...] / Primordial awareness is unsurpassed by thought.*” Lines 189 and 194. Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 149.

Body, mind and speech are something of a talisman in Bringham's poetry. They are the title of a key section (section IV, "Body, Speech and Mind") in *Tzibalem's Mountain* (1982) and they are the gist of an early short lyric poem like "A Quadratic Equation". The three realms of mind, body and speech are inextricably linked to each other, they are one and the same. It is in the body that primordial awareness arises, and the body is the house of the mind, and speech is the means through which we try to communicate the inexpressible. Enlightened body, mind and speech look at the world from a fresh perspective. It is not necessary to travel far away in search of the truth: it is closer at hand, within the limits or boundaries of one's self. The potential for self-enlightenment resides within every single human being, for the Buddha exists in the body too. Thus, in lines 232-234 Sarāha says: "There is no other boundary region like the body; / I, virtuous have seen this for good and with certainty. / Stay in the mountain hermitage and practice self-restraint."⁸¹ What is left for humans to do is to stand awed in the face of the mystery inherent in *what is*, to love the world just for what it is instead of yoking it down under the vacuous burden of conceptualization. To let loose of the world possibly means what Sarāha says in these verse lines (107-112):

Do not divide, do not unify,
Do not fabricate differences in kind;
Transform the whole of these three realms [body, speech, mind]
Into one color, one great passion.
Here there is no beginning, middle, or end,
No existence, no nirvana.⁸²

The third part of "Sarāha" concerns the very nature of poetry itself. The poem turns self-reflective for a while and directs the reader's attention to the fact that poetry has nothing quintessentially to do with words.⁸³ Sarāha is a poet-philosopher, and so he knows firsthand what it means to try to make poems to convey difficult ideas to his disciples. That poems are made out of words seems to be an undeniable fact, but words are nothing more than pointers to the truth, not the truth in themselves. They are bricks out of which

⁸¹ Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 152.

⁸² Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 142.

⁸³ In an unpublished interview conducted at the *Facultad de Filosofía y Letras* of the University of Córdoba (Spain) on 7 April 2010, when the author was asked what poetry was made out of, he answered thus: "There are many people who use the word *poetry* as the plural of the word *poem*. I tend not to use it that way. I think the plural of *poem* is *poems*, and *poetry* is a good name for the substance, or the quality, or the essence of what makes a poem a poem. Words can call it into being, perhaps. [...] I mean, there are all sorts of popular expressions. I mean, you might use *poetry* to mean, to refer to things that are not necessarily made out of words. We can talk about the poetry in the situation, the poetry of a piece of music, the poetry in a painting, the poetry in a piece of choreography. We talk about *poetic justice*. All these popular expressions are pointing at some quality that isn't necessarily to be found in words. In fact, it might be one of its characteristics: that it resists being confined in words. But words are one of the things we use to try to catch it. So I think of this word machine, these word structures as a little bit like the net that hunters use to try to catch, for instance, butterflies or whatever. So I think it is a kind of figure of speech, too: to think that the thing to catch poetry in is itself poetry. [...] I become more and more convinced as I grow older that poetry is a quality of existence, and that we try to capture this, I don't know, however we can, but the favourite way, or the most famous way, is with human language. I don't see anything inherently poetic in language itself, but it can become poetic, maybe naturally become poetic the way flowers bloom and the sun shines. But I think that if your picture of poetry is confined to these little constructions made out of words that you find in poetry magazines, then you're missing the point. That's just a way of trying to get there, a way to try to touch or point at this thing. The truth is all around us, but it resists being caught, and it resists being carved up into manageable pieces that you can put into a book and on a page. So you are always, we are always, I think, reduced to gestures, to trying to allude to something that we can't quite put on a page or in a book. You don't have to call it poetry, you can call it music or even call it *being*, or even call it whatever you like. But *that*, the thing whatever it is, is what I am interested in. And I hope that the poems participate in that in some way that they direct people's attention toward that."

poems are formed, but not poetry itself. To Bringham, poetry is a quality of existence at large, and speech, human languages, are just one of our favourite means to try to capture *what is*. Poetry is synonymous with *being*, and *being* is somehow ineffable or inexpressible.⁸⁴ Poems are something else: the visible manifestations of poetry carved out of words, in much the same way other art forms are made of some other basic matter. Sarāha stumbles upon this as if he were experiencing a moment of revelation with the texture of transcendence:

I used to write poems,
and like yours, they were made
out of words, which is why
they said nothing.
My friend, there is only one word
that I know now, and I have somehow
forgotten its name.

It remains a true mystery what the word Sarāha has just somehow forgotten is. Once again, the primacy of speech over writing is taken for granted as part of the Buddhist belief that spoken instruction from the spiritual master takes precedence over the writing down of his words on the part of his disciples and descendants. After all, poems (spiritual songs) were for Sarāha just a means to lead his students along the path towards enlightenment.

IX · SARAHA'S EXERCISE FOR BEGINNERS

“Sarāha’s Exercise for Beginners”⁸⁵ is the companion poem of “Sarāha”. In a sense it is also an exacting poem, one that requires of readers that they pay attention to the profundity of thought conveyed in each stanza, pregnant with Sarāha’s philosophical ideas. It is nonetheless intended as a simple exercise for beginners, for those who are not yet familiar with the Indian’s poet-philosopher’s thinking and singing. The starting point of the poem is a brief reflection on the nature of the mind, which is the ubiquitous theme in “Sarāha”, concerned as it is with exploring in depth the relationship between perceiving self and perceived world. A handful of verse lines (477-480) in Sarāha’s *Treasury of Dohā Verses* might have been the source of inspiration for Bringham’s first stanza: “*Let the elephant-mind wander free, / Let it answer to itself. / {Since you understand it, don’t ask anything of it.} / Let it drink the water from the skyward river, / Let it be at lakeshore as is its wont.*”⁸⁶ In the poet’s hands, these lines become a beautiful five-line stanza of utter simplicity:

What is the brain but the back of the face?
Climb down from the elephant
of the mind you are riding, climb down
and leave it to drink

⁸⁴ Sarāha says (lines 283-286): “*Free of color, quality, words, and examples, / It cannot be spoken, and in vain I point it out. / Like the bliss of a young woman, desirous in love, / Who can teach its noble power to whom?*” Schaffer, *ibid.*, p. 154.

⁸⁵ “Saraha’s Exercise for Beginners” was first published in A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986). Afterwards, it was reprinted in A.47 *The Calling* (1995) and in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009), but it was not included in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001). It was also reprinted in B.66 *Parole sull’acqua: Poesie dal Canada anglofono e francofono* (bilingual anthology, English and Italian), a cura di Liana Nissim e Caterina Ricciardi. Roma: Edizioni Empiria, 1996: pp. 200-204. Contributions: “Death by Water” (rpt. from A.14); “Saraha’s Exercise for Beginners” (rpt. from A.32), with Italian translations. In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, the calligraphy accompanying this piece reads: shi fei yi qi = *yes no one breath*.

⁸⁶ Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 167-168.

or to drown in the river.

The metaphor at heart of this stanza is exactly the same as in the Indian sage's poem quoted above: the mind is an elephant, and by asking truth-seekers to climb down the elephant, Sarāha's poetic persona in Bringhurst's piece is encouraging them to leave conceptualization aside, to settle themselves in the realm of primordial awareness, free from the bondages of thought. After all, the brain is "*but the back of the face,*" one more bodily part in humans' physiological morphology. However, we do know that it is in the mind that the potential for self-enlightenment resides after all. But first of all it has to break free from afflictive emotions and concepts to be able to reach into the ultimate essence of reality. Hence, "*What stirs in the heart / comes to rest in the heart / like dust in a cave*" is possibly meant as a reference to those afflictive feelings that reside in the heart as the indestructible vital point in the human body where the luminescence of the mind fades away under the impact of violent emotions. Among the benefits of gaining an awareness of co-emergence is precisely that whichever pain dulls the heart is annihilated and it becomes dust that settles down on the floor, as if in a cave.

However, the core of Bringhurst's poem is to be found in the third stanza, which captures the essence of Sarāha's philosophical thinking. At the heart of this stanza are a string of what looks like tautologies or truisms. First, "*Thought is thought, and not / anything more*", insists the poetic voice. It is no panacea if the truth-seeker is to make any progress at all. Secondly, "*Seeing is seeing*", and even seeing is conceptual. Thought and seeing are nothing more than paths that seek imperfectly to attain enlightenment, which is only possible when a dualistic mode of thinking is transcended and the distinction between inside and outside, between apprehender and apprehended, between self and other, vanishes into nothingness. Thirdly, "*What is is what is*" means that vast reality is manifest and visible from the very beginning of time and humans should be ready to see it just for what it is. All three statements coalesce logically into yet another seemingly paradoxical statement. Thought, seeing and *what is* should lead the spiritual seeker towards unity, which is one and zero at the same time. All distinctions vanish when the mind comes to the realization that nothing is external, that the mind is the light that shines upon and penetrates into all things in this world.⁸⁷ When the egoic mind is released, the supreme nirvana is attained, for the jewel of the enlightened mind shows things as they are:

These three together
are what they are, and their total is one,
which is what there is and is equal
to zero. A is not A; one is not one;
this too is the rule.

Bringhurst's poem closes with a three-line stanza dealing with the unspeakable, the unspoken and the ineffable. The language is kept simple and gnomic: "*Only insofar as one is / speechless can one really / think with words.*" And the message is crystal-clear, in spite of the seeming opaqueness of this statement: the experience the enlightened mind goes through when nirvana is attained is inexpressible. Or, to put it differently, the spiritual awakening undergone by the seeking soul in the face of reality is hard to communicate through words of the mouth. To the Buddhist frame of mind, words are inadequate to express the

⁸⁷ In his verses (lines 504-514) Sarāha says: "*Enlightenment does not dwell in the words or in the home. / Completely aware that this is how it is, / Through the stainless nature of the mind, / Base everything upon nonconceptuality. / This is self, just as this is also other. / What is meditated upon, who meditates – / Free these from the bonds of divisiveness, and / The Self will be liberated. / {Just like what is seen in the ocean:} / <Just as when the ocean becomes placid, / Sea foam dissolves into the water that it is.> / Do not commit the error of self and other.*" Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 169.

complexity and intensity of such an experience, and so reaching beyond words into the realm of silence seems to be the only option left. Once one comes to realize that words are not efficient or reliable tools to convey the mystery inherent in *what is*, can one truly start thinking with words.

X · BAIZHANG HUAIHAI

“Baizhang Huaihai”⁸⁸ is Bringhurst’s homage to a Chinese Zen master who lived during the Tang Dynasty. From an entry devoted to this sage in the “Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures” at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, we learn the essentials of this sage’s life in a miniature biography provided by the poet himself: “Baizhang Huaihai (Pai-chang Huai-hai, 720-814) Reputedly the author of the first set of Zen monastic rules, including the famous formulation ‘One day no work, one day no eat.’ Born in Fujian, he succeeded Mazū Daoyi (Ma-tsu Tao-i) as Abbot at Nankang in Jiangxi, then moved to Xinwu, also in Jiangxi, under Baizhang Mountain.” Furthermore, in the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst tells us very briefly that he was “A Zen monk working in Jiangxi; author of the first set of Zen monastic rules.” And in the 2001 incarnation of the Oriental sages sequence, the poet gives us only basic information concerning the spatio-temporal coordinates of Baizhang’s life: “Baizhang Huaihai (Pai-chang Huai-hai) 720-814? Nankang & Xinwu, southeastern China.”⁸⁹ Being the dharma heir of Mazu Daoyi, his disciples included Huangbo Linji and Puhua. Baizhang is said to have established what might have been the first set of rules regulating Zen monastic discipline. Among those rules is the well-known formulation “A day without work is a day without food”, which points directly to the Zen monks’ farming activities as part of their ascetic daily routine, which helped them to survive in times of want, unlike other sects which seemed to rely more on donations. As to the plausible interpretation of this monastic rule formulated in the form of an aphorism, the thought occurs that there are at least two possible interpretations: one is literal and is meant to suggest that unless one attends one’s responsibilities in the monastery to ensure the provision of daily food, there will not be a chance to eat; another is figurative and has to do with the notion that a day spent in idle leisure is a sad waste of time, for work is a kind of nourishing food or nutriment for the human soul. Whichever the case, the rule is intended to encourage diligence and discipline among Zen monks, to banish idle leisure and laziness. Baizhang’s teachings and sayings were translated as *Sayings and Doings of Pai-Chang* (1978) by Thomas Cleary.

Bringhurst’s piece is written in crystal-clear language, and yet the transparency of the words on the page hides a wealth of meaning and a semantic density that is not easily apprehended upon a first quick reading of the text. Rereading “Baizhang Huaihai” with all the careful attention it deserves, we learn that this is possibly a miniature meditation on how humans come to know anything at all about reality. Thus, throughout the whole piece the reader’s attention is directed towards the mind and the role it plays when the perceiving subject comes to terms with the perceived world of phenomena. A living composition on

⁸⁸ “Baizhang Huaihai” was first published in A.32, *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), and then it was reprinted in A.47 *The Calling* (1995) and, slightly revised, in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001) and in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009). In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, the calligraphy accompanying this piece reads: yī rì bù zuò / yī rì bù shí = *one day no work, one day no eat*.

⁸⁹ Robert Bringhurst, *The Book of Silences*, Los Angeles: Ninja Press, 2001. See the separately bound section entitled “Contents & Notes” at the end (unpaged).

epistemology: this is what Bringhurst's poem might be, but also a perfect illustration of what philosophical poetry or poetic philosophy might be. Thinking and singing go hand in hand once again within the tiny confines of this short meditation, as in the best poems of the sequence on the Pre-Socratic thinkers, or as in the best passages of Bringhurst's elegantly written prose pieces collected in *The Tree of Meaning* or in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing*. In this particular case, Bringhurst gives voice to the Oriental sage's thinking and so, in what follows, we shall try to elucidate how his thinking unfolds. These are the two opening stanzas of the poem:

The mind appears to be
because of what the mind
appears to think of.
Nothing is external. Only

knowing is external. Only
knowing is beyond the reach
of knowing. Pure unbeing
is a seamless understanding of the world.

Just for the sake of clarity in the exposition in our critical analysis, we shall subdivide the sage's train of thought into smaller discernible units. Even though we are well aware that this is an artificial approach, we do not intend to replace the original composition with a purely explicatory commentary. At least three key ideas are discernible here:

- (1) *The mind seems real to us because of the ontological reality of all the things in the world it thinks of.* Or, to put it differently, it is what the mind thinks of that gives it ontological reality. The mind exists because it perceives what are no doubt real objects in the world. Now, Zen is characterized by a direct dealing with the fundamental facts of existence: it abhors generalizations; it enjoys fact, particulars and details instead. By insisting on the idea that the mind's existence is dependent on the very existence of the objects populating this world, the Zen mode of thinking is emphasizing the very physicality of material things, which is an undeniable fact.
- (2) *Everything that is exists in the perceiver's mind, or the mind is the world.* Though this might come as a contradictory statement to the one above, it seems to logically follow from it. If the mind is made up of all the things it perceives in this world, then the whole world is somehow inside the mind, it is absolutely internal.⁹⁰ This is a form of extreme idealism that denies the dualism of perceiving subject and perceived object, as it postulates the essential unity of both of them. It does not, however, deny the objective existence of the world. Hence, "*Nothing is external*" and "*only knowing is external*": in searching for insights into the real, the mind seeks erroneously outside itself for enlightenment when the truth is present there, close at hand, from the start. Knowing *knowing* appears to be not feasible though, for there is no way of ascertaining when one is knowing for sure.
- (3) *Only by shedding one's body and mind is it possible to attain reliable knowledge of the truth.* Rujing Tiantong embraced "the casting off of body and mind" for the truth-seeking individual to gain a valuable insight into the nature of existence. As soon as one gets rid of all the wearisome burden that intellectualizing accumulates upon our shoulders, understanding or sudden enlightenment occurs. "*Pure unbeing*" possibly denotes this breaking through, this getting rid of all superfluous burdens that prevent us from touching the world with our

⁹⁰ This is, by the way, a recurrent idea in Bringhurst's poetry too: the mind is made of all the animals and plants and places in this world, says the poet somewhere else. See, for instance, the opening lines of section IV of *Conversations with a Toad*: "*The mind is the other. The mind / is a long complication of water. The mind / is time, space and all creatures. The mind / is the world.*"

own naked hands; and “*seamless understanding*” is one where there is no split self, looking inwards upon itself and outwards upon the objects of perception it seeks to understand.

As a way of conclusion, the poetic voice claims in the third stanza that “*thinking comes to pass*” only when we acknowledge that knowing and thinking as such do not exist. The path to knowledge for the Zen mind is the sudden breaking through of *satori* – i.e., the enlightenment attained through personal and unmediated confrontation with one’s own being, which hides the ultimate truth of reality one is seeking after all the time. The language deployed by Bringhurst is the pregnant language of paradox, capable of conveying subtle nuances of meaning of impressive complexity to the reader:

When it is known that there is
no such thing as knowing,
thought that no such thing as thinking
is, then thinking comes to pass.

Bringhurst’s composition is a well-wrought artefact in which all words and ideas fall exactly into place to form a beautiful *Gestalt*. At several points throughout out thesis, it has been claimed that the author revisits his own poems time and again to revise, polish and perfect them even more. Sometimes the changes may involve nothing more than substituting a punctuation sign, the replacement of one word by another, or a slightly different line arrangement, but on other occasions the revision may entail the complete rewriting of a whole stanza that changes considerably the whole piece. “Baizhang Huihai” is no exception in this respect. Whereas the first part of the poem concerns the way the mind comes to terms with the real, the second part deals with the nature of *what is*. This is the natural progression of the sage’s train of thought. Of *what is*, the poetic persona highlights two fundamental aspects: (1) “*In all of what is, there is / nothing quite lifeless,*” which means that all in this world is truly alive, even if we humans, self-centred and egoistical as we tend to be, often forget this elemental truth; and (2) “*What is is what you cannot / carry with you and what can’t / be left behind,*” which looks like a paradoxical definition of *being*. After all, words are not completely reliable tools to a Zen monk, who firmly believes in the unmediated personal confrontation of one’s own being with the world as the only path towards enlightenment. It might be worth recalling that in the Buddhist tradition “the spoken takes precedence over the written, and the unspeakable over the spoken,” as Bringhurst points out in the Japanese calligraphy that precedes the sequence of “The Book of Silences” in *The Calling*.

XI · NANQUAN PUYUAN

Being deeply concerned with the serious vocation of poetry, Robert Bringhurst is well aware that there is a wealth of ideas about the ultimate nature of reality to be found in the company of the ancestors, both western and eastern. Ancestors are not quite dead, but truly alive to the mind and to the heart of a poet who is after the universal, after invaluable insights into those fundamental questions that have been asked time and again throughout the history of humankind. Whereas the 12 poems in *The Old in Their Knowing* sequence show him trying to master the lessons of the Pre-Socratics, the sixth-century BCE philosopher-poets living in Asia Minor in the very cradle of Western philosophy, the sequence of often shorter poems in *The Book of Silences* gives us a picture of the poet coming to terms with the elemental teachings of Oriental sages from the Far East. The resulting poems are short impersonations of these sages’ thinking that are reminiscent of the more complex dramatic

monologues Bringhurst composed in the 1970s, particularly the impressive biblical pieces entitled *Deuteronomy* (1974), and *Jacob Singing* (1977), as well as *The Stonecutter's Horses* (1979), on the last will and testament of the Italian humanist Petrarch. As Bringhurst himself puts it in the 2001 edition of *The Book of Silences*, “The speakers of these poems are the ghosts of Asian monks, hermits, philosopher-poets and intellectual trouble-makers, most of them Buddhists, some of them Taoists, some of them too far now in the past to place in any lineage of which we know the name.”⁹¹

Now, in this context “Nanquan Puyuan”⁹² concerns another Oriental sage who lived in China many centuries ago. What this short poem with narrative aspirations conveys is possibly the sense of quietude and calm imperturbability this sage sought to achieve throughout his life in every small gesture of everyday existence. Nanquan Puyuan (Nanch’uan P’u-yuan), 737-834?, was born in Zhengzhou, Henan (China) and spent his life in Anhui Province, in northeastern China. Not much is known of his life, except that he was a Zen master, that he led a solitary life, and that he devoted much of his time to practicing meditation in search of some form of final enlightenment.⁹³ In the “Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures” at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringhurst informs us that Nanquan Puyuan was “a Zen monk trained, like Baizhang, under ‘The Old Horse,’ Mazu Daoyi, in Jiangxi. His own hermitage was farther north, in the oak forests of Anhui.” This biography in miniature is informative enough, as it tells us in a nutshell what ideal of ascetic life Nanquan Puyuan probably embraced. He was named after a mountain in present-day Anhui Province, as he lived as a hermit amid the solitude of the woods nearby. Trees must have meant much to this sage, possibly as much as they mean to Bringhurst himself. As a Zen monk he must have been an ascetic man, dismissing unnecessary material comforts that might hinder the path towards enlightenment.

In Bringhurst’s poem on the figure of Nanquan Puyuan, the emphasis is laid precisely on a sense of beautiful serenity and imperturbable peace of mind. “Let me tell you a story,” announces the speaking voice in the very first line of the poem, which might be Nanquan Puyuan’s or not. The reader’s expectations are somewhat defeated though, as not much happens in this story the sage is about to tell us. Consisting of three movements for the soul, which roughly correspond to the opening, middle and end of a conventional story, the piece seeks to teach a simple lesson in between the lines: it is of the essence that humans be *present* with their entire being in every simple experience and moment in time. There are three characters in Puyuan’s story: a gardener, a cook and a jay. The plot, if this

⁹¹ Robert Bringhurst, *The Book of Silences*, Los Angeles: Ninja Press, 2001. See the separately bound section entitled “Contents & Notes” at the end (unpaged).

⁹² “Nanquan Puyuan” was originally published as C.50, [Eleven poems], in *CutBank* (Missoula, Montana) 26 (Spring/Summer 1986): 37–58. It was then reprinted in A.32, *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, in A.65, *The Book of Silences*, and in A.92, *Selected Poems*. In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, the calligraphy accompanying this piece reads: yì jiàn guò qīng tiān = *one arrow outdistance blue sky*.

⁹³ “Nanquan Puyuan (748-835) was a disciple of Mazu Daoyi and the teacher of famous Zhaozhou (in Japanese, Jōshū). His lay surname was Wang, and he came from Xinzheng, in Zheng Province. Even before he became an old Zen teacher his students referred to him as “Old Teacher Wang.” Before meeting Mazu, he was already widely versed in the various schools and scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism. At their first meeting, he is said to have “instantly forgotten the net of delusions and delighted in samadhi.” [...] After gaining transmission from Mazu, Nanquan built a solitary hut on Mt. Nanquan in Chizhou and remained there for more than thirty years practicing Zen. A high-ranking official named Lu Geng invited Nanquan to descend from the mountain and honored him by becoming his student. Due to this event, Nanquan’s reputation spread widely and students numbering in the hundreds came to study under him.” See Andrew E. Ferguson, *Zen’s Chinese Heritage: The Masters and Their Teachings*, Somerville (USA): Wisdom Publications, 2000, pp. 104-105.

might be called a plot at all, unfolds in straightforward and simple declarative sentences marked by strong enjambment:

Let me tell you a story. The gardener
and the cook sat together
in the garden. A jay sang. The gardener

tapped his fingernails against
his wooden chair.

The jay does what jays are supposed to do best of all – singing –, whereas the gardener and the cook are sitting together in the garden, apparently doing nothing, in silence in what is possibly an idyllic quiet place. The jay sings twice and then falls silent all of a sudden. In the face of its singing and non-singing, the reactions of the humans involved in this simple scene are different: while the gardener taps his fingernails against his wooden chair, the cook remains unperturbed, “*sitting / quietly, while all this / was happening, sipping his tea.*” That the gardener should echo the jay’s singing with the tapping of his fingernails against the wood of the chair he is sitting on is possibly meant to suggest that there is a subtle connection between these seemingly discrete creatures. Jays use their throats to produce their own music; humans use their hands to emulate the sounds of nature. Possibly this is a too far-fetched interpretation, though, and none of this was intended by the author. But the thought occurs, nevertheless, that the gesture of the fingertips tapping against the wooden chair is no random choice: it might denote impatience on the part of the gardener, or it might consciously echo the singing of the bird, even if only quite clumsily, as though to acknowledge the jay’s presence in the whole scene. Whichever the case, the closing lines of the poem make clear that the whole piece is built around a pair of simple dichotomies – i.e., motion vs. stasis and sound vs. silence. Of course, it is not a happy coincidence that the cook should be sipping his tea quietly while the jay was singing. The tea ceremony has a special significance for Zen practitioners, as it requires that one’s presence of mind be complete throughout the whole process of making, serving and drinking one’s tea. That the final tone should be one of peace and serenity is in accordance with an anecdote concerning the sage’s death:

When Nanquan was near death, the head monk said, “Master, where will you be a hundred years from now?”

Nanquan said, “I’m going to be an ox living down at the bottom of the mountain.”

The monk said, “May I follow you to that place [as an ox]?”

Nanquan said, “If you follow me, you must do so with a single blade of grass in your mouth.”

The master then became ill. He said to the monks, “The stars’ light is dim but eternal. Don’t say that I’m coming or going.” When he finished speaking, the master died.⁹⁴

XII · HAN SHAN

“Hán Shān”⁹⁵ concerns the legendary figure of a Tang Dynasty poet who lived in the ninth century CE and whose name means literally “Cold Mountain”. He lived as a hermit in a

⁹⁴ See Andrew E. Ferguson, *Zen’s Chinese Heritage: The Masters and Their Teachings*, Somerville (USA): Wisdom Publications, 2000, pp. 106-107.

remote region most of his lifetime, dedicated to the composition of poems scattered on stones, bamboo, wood, walls and the rocks in the mountains he called home. All these poems were collected afterwards by Lu Ch'iu-Yin, Governor of T'ai Prefecture, who gives us a moving portrait of the legendary poet.⁹⁶ In a brief but enlightening entry in the "Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures" at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringhurst informs us that Hán Shan (c. 800 AD) was "The hermit poet of Cold Mountain, in the Tiantai Range, Zhejiang."⁹⁷ In the "Cast of Suspicious Characters" at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst writes almost the same: "Hán Shan (fl. c. 800 AD) The hermit poet of Cold Mountain in the Tiantai Range, Zhejiang." And in the separately bound section entitled "Contents & Notes" of the 2001 edition of *The Book of Silences*, Bringhurst gives us only essential information regarding this Oriental sage: "Han Shan "Cold Mountain" c. 800 Tiantai Range, Zhejiang Province, eastern China." The recluse is thought to have composed around 600 poems, but not all of them survived. All have an even number of lines, with an odd number of characters in each line throughout the same poem. From the over 300 surviving poems⁹⁸ of this legendary poet is his life to be reconstructed with more or less precision. Hán Shān's poems have often been translated into English, but one of the most accomplished translations is that of the American poet Gary Snyder, whose "Cold Mountain Poems" were published in *Evergreen Review*, no. 6, in 1958. Indeed, Han Shan was a sympathetic figure for the Beat Generation, Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac among them. In the "Preface to the Poems of Han-Shan by Lu Ch'iu-Yin, Governor or T'ai Prefecture", Gary Snyder meditates on Han-Shan thus:

Kanzan, or Han-Shan, "Cold Mountain" takes his name from where he lived. He is a mountain madman in an old Chinese line of ragged hermits. When he talks about

⁹⁵ "Han Shan" was originally published as C.48 • "Hán Shan", *Prism International* 24.2 (January 1986): 43. It was then reprinted in A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), in A.47 *The Calling* (1995), in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001), and in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009). It was also reprinted in B.69, *A Matter of Spirit: The Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry*, edited by Susan McCaslin, Victoria, British Columbia: Ekstasis Editions, 1998: pp. 41-58. Contributions: Ten poems and a short prose piece. "Poem about Crystal", "Deuteronomy", "Herakleitos", "Parśvanatha", "Nagarjuna", "Sengzhào", "Hán Shan", "Yúnmén Wényan", "Thin Man Washing"; "Sunday Morning" (all rpt. from A.47); • brief essay, "In Praise of Vacant Lots." The calligraphy accompanying this poem in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* reads: hán shan lù bù dào = *Cold Mountain reach no road*.

⁹⁶ See Gary Snyder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2004, p. 35-36: "No one knows just what sort of man Han-Shan was. There are old people who knew him: they say he was a poor man, a crazy character. He lived alone seventy li west of the T'ang-hsing district of T'ien-t'ai at a place called Cold Mountain. He often went down to the Kuo'ch'ing Temple. At the temple lived Shih-te, who ran the dining hall. He sometimes saved leftovers for Han-shan, hiding them in a bamboo tube. Han-shan would come and carry it away; walking the long veranda, calling and shouting happily, talking and laughing to himself. Once the monks followed him, caught him, and made fun of him. He stopped, clapped his hands, and laughed greatly – Ha Ha! – for a spell, then left.

He looked like a tramp. His body and face were old and beat. Yet in every word he breathed was a meaning in line with the subtle principles of things, if only you thought of it deeply. Everything he said had a feeling of the Tao in it, profound and arcane secrets. His hat was made of birch bark, his clothes were ragged and worn out, and his shoes were wood. Thus men who have made it hide their tracks: unifying categories and interpenetrating things. On that long veranda calling and singing, in his words of reply Ha Ha! – the three worlds revolve. Sometimes at the villages and farms he laughed and sang with cowherds. Sometimes intractable, sometimes agreeable, his nature was happy of itself. But how could a person without wisdom recognize him?"

⁹⁷ From the entry included in the "Cast of Suspicious Characters" at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), we learn exactly the same: that Hán Shan was "The hermit poet of Cold Mountain in the Tiantai Range, Zhejiang."

⁹⁸ "I ordered Tao-ch'iao and the other monks to find out how they had lived, to hunt up the poems written on bamboo, woods, stones, and cliffs – and also to collect those written on the walls of people's houses. There were more than three hundred. On the wall of the Earth-shrine Shih-te had written some *gatha*. It was all brought together and made into a book." Gary Snyder, *ibid.*, p. 38.

Cold Mountain he means himself, his home, his state of mind. He lived in the T'ang dynasty – traditionally A.D. 627-650, although Hu Shih dates him 700-780. This makes him roughly contemporary with Tu Fu, Li Po, Wang Wei, and Po Chü-i. His poems, of which three hundred survive, are written in T'ang colloquial: rough and fresh. The ideas are Taoist, Buddhist, Zen. He and his sidekick Shih-te (Jittoku in Japanese) became great favorites with Zen painters of later days – the scroll, the broom, the wild hair and laughter. They became Immortals and you sometimes run onto them today in the skidrows, orchards, hobo jungles, and logging camps of America.⁹⁹

Born into a wealthy or noble family possibly in the town of Handan, Hán Shān had a privileged early life. Well educated and widely travelled, he served as a military and applied unsuccessfully for different government posts. It seems he did not advance much in the bureaucracy and the official examinations, which required a perfect command of the classics and a perfect body (and Hán Shān had an injured foot, perhaps because of a riding accident). He even married and moved to the countryside, where he became a farmer. However, with the passing of time, he became more and more dissatisfied with his lifestyle and the worldly affairs of men and so he decided to leave home and what was to him the madness of the civilized world. Taking with him just a handful of books, he wandered from one place to another until he reached a remote place called Cold Mountain¹⁰⁰ in the Tiantai Range, which would become his true home. There he would build a hut, dig a pond and plant vegetables to get himself his own food, in much the same way Henry David Thoreau would do in Walden some ten centuries later. Upon seeing that the hut and the garden demanded constant attention of him, he moved to an empty rock cave deep in the mountains where there was nothing but echo and some rays of the morning sun.¹⁰¹ His cave, called 'Hanyan', was a day's travel from Guoqing Temple, where two close friends of his, Fenggan and Shih-te, lived. Shih-te would visit Hán Shān's home from time to time. Hán Shān spent his time there as a hermit, writing the memorable poems for which he is remembered after such a long time. After so many centuries, his strong voice is heard loud and clear with moving relevance. A profound and quiet elegance is easily discernible in his poems. Written in straightforward language of utter simplicity, they fall into three distinct categories: first, the biographical poems about his life prior to his arrival at Cold Mountain; secondly, the religious and political poems critical of conventional attitudes; and thirdly, the transcendental poems dealing with his life as a hermit at Cold Mountain. Thematically, Hán Shān draws heavily on Buddhist and Taoist notions, and so his poems explore life's shortness and transience and the simplicity of life in communion with nature, while they also display a deep concern for humanity. Like most Zen masters, who are totally identified with nature, Hán Shān views the surrounding natural world at Cold Mountain as his host and himself as nature's guest. His inner life is complete when it merges into nature and becomes one with it.

⁹⁹ Gary Snyder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2004, p. 35.

¹⁰⁰ Some of the poems translated by Snyder speak of Cold Mountain. Thus, poem 5 of Snyder's "Cold Mountain Poems" reads as follows: "I wanted a good place to settle: / Cold Mountain would be safe. / Light wind in a hidden pine – / Listen close – the sound gets better. / Under it a gray-haired man / Mumbles alone reading Huang and Lao. / For ten years I haven't got back home / I've even forgotten the way by which I came." Ibid., p. 43. And poem 7: "I settled at Cold Mountain long ago, / Already it seems like years and years. / Freely drifting, I prowled the woods and streams / And linger watching things themselves. / Men don't get this far into the mountains, / White clouds gather and billow. / Thin grass does for a mattress, / The blue sky makes a good quilt. / Happy with a stone underhead / Let heaven and earth go about their changes." Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁰¹ In this respect, Han-Shan was a precursor of Bringhurst's own Tzuhalem, the nineteenth-century Coast Salish Indian who lived on the mountain with his many wives.

Bringhurst's composition manages to convey the serenity and elegance of Hán Shān's poetry. Like his Oriental predecessor, Bringhurst has always sought the quiet solitude of the mountains and the company of trees, away from civilization, amid a saner ecology of *what is*. His poem consists of three discernible parts: the first part deals with the mind and equates it to the moon shining over the hills; the second one dwells on the ultimate sense and nature of *what is*; and the third part is a farewell on the part of the legendary poet, challenging humans to live their lives in a genuine fashion. The poem opens thus with a beautiful meditation on the part of the poetic persona on Han Shan's mind, which resembles the moon up in the sky. The mind is to the skull, what the moon is to the night sky: it shines and illuminates the dark recesses of the human head. What is simply astonishing about Bringhurst's simile is that the mind is described in purely physical terms: its texture and colour, its taste, its smell and its feel, are exactly the same as those of the swollen moon, as seen in motion above the hills and reflected in the unfathomable pools of autumn. The perceiving subject and the perceived object become one and the same, and a fundamental identity between man and nature is affirmed:

Friends, the mind, or at any rate
my mind at this moment, is much
like the moon. It is swollen
with light, it is dry and in motion.

Its taste and its smell, its feel
in the skull, are as those of the moon
over the steep hills and the bottomless
pools of deep autumn.

Man is after all a tiny part in the grander scheme of things, a sparkling element in the living mesh of things, where he belongs. *I am in Nature and Nature is in me*, seems to say the poetic voice. And this is an essential Zen tenet: humans and Nature are not separate, they are one and the same thing, they recognize each other in their primeval or pristine encounter. Hán Shān was well aware that amid the solitude of Cold Mountain he was more truly himself, away from the hypocrisies of the so-called civilized world. That he chose to live as a hermit, away from human intercourse, is an eloquent gesture in itself. That he should have decided to spend his time reading and composing seemingly ephemeral poems on the rocks of the mountains he considered his natural home is expressive of a lucid mind that was after grander things in his life. Hán Shān must have been an appealing personality to Bringhurst himself, not just because of his own lifestyle of asceticism characterized by the practice of *breathing through the feet*, but also because of the elegant simplicity and profundity of thought of his poems. The thought occurs that the Oriental sage also breathed through his hands as he painted his poems on rocks, trees and bamboo. Here was a man capable of living on peaceful and respectful terms with Nature. He embraced a form of ecology that must have surely been a source of inspiration to Bringhurst as well.

At the geometrical heart of "Hán Shān" (i.e., the third stanza) we find an attempt to communicate the unspeakable. *What is* is elusive sometimes; *being* is no easy to pinpoint. Han Shan's persona addresses his *friends* (fellow human beings) explicitly to convey to them the mystery inherent in everything that exists. The four-line stanza brings together the pool and the hills from the two previous stanzas. No straightforward definition of being is easy to find, and so the language deployed here is paradoxical and verges once again on gnomic revelation:

Friends, what is is much like the pool.

What is not is not unlike the air,
and what neither is nor is not neither is
nor is not like or unlike the hills.

Three categories of *being* are distinguished: (i) *what is* resembles the pool, which is water and a mirror that reflects everything that looks into its clear waters; (ii) *what isn't* resembles the air, which is invisible and untouchable; and (iii) *what neither is nor is not* resembles and does not resemble the hills at the same time. *Being* is beyond verbalism. As we have already seen, Zen refuses to be caught in the maze of abstract speculation and conceptual vocabulary. It is curious to see how Hán Shān (or Bringhurst's dramatic impersonation of him in this poem) makes use of words and how he communicates what cannot be communicated. "As soon as appeal is made to words, we leave life itself and involve ourselves in every kind of "logical" controversy. We construct our own traps and then struggle to escape from them."¹⁰² From the almost hopeless intricacies of intellection it is difficult to escape. This is the reason why Hán Shān gives voice to the following conclusion: "*there is no / comparison, is no description, assertion, / negation. I tell you conclusively, / there can be no conclusions.*" Being is ineffable; words are not reliable or effective tools to convey the kind of spiritual commotion that *satori* brings to the truth-seeker. This partly accounts for the fact that many Zen masters were highly enigmatic in their behaviour and bizarre in their pedagogic methodology. The goal was the experience of *satori*: an awakening that allowed the truth-seeking individual to penetrate the structure of reality. In realizing that the mind resembles the moon in the night sky, Hán Shān is undergoing a sort of epiphany, or experiencing a moment in time with the texture of transcendence. That Bringhurst should convey this in simple and elegant language is truly a miracle.

"Hán Shān" closes with the sage's farewell to humankind, as it were. The tone of the last stanza is one of calm and serenity, learned through first-hand experience of what it means to lead a genuine human life. This is something of a histrionic farewell: the poet says goodbye to his fellow human beings and encourages them somehow to take their own paths in life: "*Those who know how to live / will leave with me / in different directions.*" Han Shan does not wish any form of fame or immortality, not even a group of unconditional followers, and yet his poems turned him into one of the immortals. *Find your own way, dare think and live for yourself* – this seems to be the lesson he has to teach before leaving. Poems 11 and 23 of Snyder's "Cold Mountain Poems" might be a good conclusion to our critical introduction to Hán Shān:

Spring-water in the green creek is clear
Moonlight in Cold Mountain is white
Silent knowledge – the spirit is enlightened of itself
Contemplate the void: this world exceeds stillness.

*

My home was at Cold Mountain from the start,
Rambling among the hills, far from troubles.

Gone, and a million things leave no trace
Loosed, and it flows through the galaxies
A fountain of light, into the very mind –
Not a thing, and yet appears before me:

¹⁰² Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, ed. by William Barrett, Westminster, MD, USA: Doubleday Publishing, 1996, p. 305.

Now I know the pearl of the Buddha-nature
Know its use: a boundless perfect sphere.¹⁰³

In the Afterword to his *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, Snyder quotes Du Fu as saying that “The ideas of a poet should be noble and simple.” Bringhurst’s ideas are both noble and simple and profound. That is why it is a pleasure to re-read his poems, inexhaustible bits of wisdom. Furthermore, Snyder says: “There are poets who claim that their poems are made to show the world through the prism of language. Their project is worthy. There is also the work of seeing the world *without* any prism of language, and to bring that seeing *into* language. The latter has been the direction of most Chinese and Japanese poetry.”¹⁰⁴ Such is the case of Bringhurst’s poetry as well.

XIII · YUNYAN TANSHEG

“Yúnyán Tánshèng”¹⁰⁵ is Bringhurst’s piece on another Chinese sage who lived in the eighth and ninth centuries CE. Compared to other poems in the Oriental sages sequence, it was published relatively late, in 1995, when Bringhurst decided to expand it in significant ways. Thus, from an entry included in the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), we learn the basics of this Oriental sage: “Yúnyán Tánshèng (Yün-yen T’an-sheng, 780–841) ‘Frowning Cloud.’ The teacher of Dòngshan Liángjiè.” And in the 2001 edition of *The Book of Silences*, Bringhurst says this: “Yunyan Tansheng (Yun-yen T’an-sheng) 780-841? Hunan, central China.” Bringhurst’s poem is reminiscent of the serene minimalism of much Oriental poetry, not only in the straightforwardness and transparency of the language used in the two parts “Yúnyán Tánshèng” consists of, but also in the characteristic imagery they display. Indeed, “Zen refuses to make use of abstract terms, to indulge in metaphysical speculations, or to involve itself in a series of questions and answers. Its discourse is always short, pithy, and right to the point.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, part 1 opens with the simple words of a host inviting the guest (the reader) to cross the threshold into a cosy room where tea is about to be served: “Come in. Have some tea. / There is water in the pot, / and there is fire in the stove.” Three simple verse lines will suffice to set the tone of serenity that pervades the whole composition. From the very outset, the parallelism of Bringhurst’s words point to the simplicity the poet aims at: words invisible as air that hide a treasure of ideas, an impressive profundity of thought. Now, tea is the most visible emblem of the Orient: the ceremony of making and serving tea to others demands that the people present be careful and attentive throughout the whole process. A curious metamorphosis happens as the tea leaves are mixed with boiling water to produce a stimulant that might be useful for the Zen meditation practitioner to stay awake.

However, the gist of the first part of Bringhurst’s poem is something else: it has to do with the precedence of the spoken over the written, of speech over writing, and of the unspeakable over the spoken in the Buddhist tradition. It eludes pure rationalization, it escapes the realm of discursive understanding. Zen encourages truth-seeking human beings to attain enlightenment by themselves, just by seeing into their genuine self-nature. Serenity and truth were there, inside ourselves, from the very start, even if everyday life

¹⁰³ Snyder, *ibid.*, p. 49 and p. 61.

¹⁰⁴ Snyder, *ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁰⁵ “Yúnyán Tánshèng” was originally published in A.47 *The Calling* (1995), and then reprinted in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001) and in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009).

¹⁰⁶ Suzuki, *ibid.*, p. 285.

circumstances make us live on the superficiality of things, on the surface of reality as it were, without truly delving into its innermost recesses. The experience of *satori* is something inevitably personal and one needs no intermediaries to attain enlightenment or sudden insight into the essence of things. Others' teachings, old precepts, philosophizing or the sheer effort of the intellect will not do: one needs only a first-hand confrontation with living, pulsating facts. A couple of centuries later, another sage, Dahui Zonggao, would burn all the copies available of the venerated *Blue Cliff Record* to encourage people to start looking at the world from a fresh standpoint. Therefore, in "Yunyan Tansheng" there is a reference to "the closed book":

But everything I have to say is written
on the thin lips of darkness
in the closed book: the black leaves

you don't see when you open it – though
each one slips into its place again
as soon as you turn the page.

The textual hinge "But" comes as a surprise. What does Yúnyán Tánshèng's poetic persona intend to convey through these enigmatic words? Possibly these lines are meant to signify that whatever this sage has to say of importance is primarily spoken in the first place, and that if it is to be encoded within the boundaries of a book, his enlightening lessons are probably to be found in "the thin lips of darkness" of its bound pages. His insights are in the dark places inside the book, for they love to hide from the inquisitive gaze of the reader. They are freely playing as no one opens the book to read it. The very moment someone takes the book so as to peep inside, all that is seen is the white pages. The black ones, subversive and eel-slippery, hide into place so that no one can see them. For wisdom is not to be found within the boundaries of a book. Life is a miracle filled with unfathomable mysteries, and the answers to this enigma are not contained in books, after all. One needs to see the world with their own eyes, touch things with their own naked hands, learn everything there is to learn about reality by not knowing, i.e. by unlearning the wearisome burden of unnecessary data accumulated on our shoulders by centuries of acculturation that do not allow us to see into things on our own. That is the lesson Yúnyán Tánshèng possibly intends to teach the reader or the hearer.

The second part of Bringhurst's poem is a perfect example of another jewel-like short lyric, strongly reminiscent of Japanese haikus, but also of the koans Zen monks use in their search after enlightenment. In these lines, the musicality is brought about by repetition – either by the repetition of the same lexical items (*wind* and *stones*) or by the repetition of the same syntactic structures (parallelism). Two movements for the soul are discernible in this pattern of sonorous words tessellated into two stanzas of utter simplicity. In the first movement, the focus is on the non-human sphere of wind and stones: we are back in an elemental world where nothing is truly lifeless, but, quite on the contrary, teeming with life. Humans have no monopoly on language, and the whole of reality speaks and sings its song in its own language. *Everywhere being is dancing and singing*, as Bringhurst would put it. The wind and the stones are endowed with the astonishing capacity to speak and to listen, for everything in this world wants to *mean* something. Unlike human beings, who seem not to have patience any more to listen to what others (humans and non-humans) might have to say, the wind stops for a while to listen to what the wind has to say. The same happens to stones: they speak, but they also hear. Hence:

When the wind speaks, wind listens.

When stones speak, stones
hear what they say.

Now, the second movement is altogether different though: “*Going over the old bridge, / if you see yourself in the stream, what / message can you give to your reflection?*” Humans speak, but do not say much, and do not have the patience necessary to listen to what they themselves or others have to say. The closing lines have the texture of a koan with which the Zen practitioner is to struggle to reach some form of enlightenment. Crossing an old bridge, a human being is confronted with his or her own self-image as reflected in the waters of the flowing stream. The river is the very embodiment of perpetual change, motion or flux of all things in this world of insubstantiality, impermanence and ephemeral phenomena. What is one to say to one’s reflection on the mirror of the stream waters? The image used by the poet may well evoke the act of introspection and psychological investigation involved in the Zen practice of exacting meditation itself. But there is something truly uncanny about these lines: What if one has nothing to say to their own reflection? Does it mean that we are half alive, or half dead, or dead in life, unable to escape the delusion of the senses?

XIV · LINJI YIXUAN

“Línjì Yìxuán”¹⁰⁷ concerns an essential Zen master who lived in China in the ninth century CE. He is one of the greatest and most influential of the Tang period Chan masters, and the founder of the Linji school of Chan Buddhism during Tang Dynasty China. Bringhurst has produced a unique poem of great beauty and formal perfection in which he seeks to capture the thinking of this great ancestor who lived so many centuries ago. In the “Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures” at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringhurst informs us that Línjì Yìxuán (Lin-chi I-hsuan, c. 800-867) was “A Zen master from Hebei, founder of the monastic tradition which bears his name. In Japan, where the tradition flourished for centuries, he and his school are known as Rinzai.” And in the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst tells us very briefly that he was “A Zen teacher from Hebei, who founded the Línjì or Rinzai School.” Equally short is the entry devoted to him in the 2001 edition of *The Book of Silences*: “Linji Yixuan (Lin-chi I-hsuan) c. 800-867 Traveled throughout China, then settled in Hebei, in the northeast.”

Born to a family called Hsing probably between 810 and 815 in the Ts’ao District in the far western corner of present-day Shantung Province, the area just south of the Yellow River, Línjì Yìxuán¹⁰⁸ (or Rinzai, as he is known in Japan) left his home at a fairly early age to study Buddhism in a number of places and become a Buddhist monk. First he devoted himself to the study of monastic discipline and the different sutras and treatises – the scriptures of traditional Mahayana Buddhism. Afterwards, dissatisfied with these studies, he directed his attention to Chan. As was common practice at this time, Línjì wandered from one place to another seeking instruction from different masters at various monasteries.

¹⁰⁷ “Línjì Yìxuán” was originally published in C.50 [Eleven poems]. *CutBank* (Missoula, Montana) 26 (Spring/Summer 1986): 37–58. Later, it was reprinted in A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), revised in A.47 *The Calling* (1995), reprinted with minor changes in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001) and reprinted in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009) from A.47. In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, the calligraphy accompanying this piece reads: rú shuǐ zhong yuè = *like water within-it moon*.

¹⁰⁸ Details concerning the life of this sage are lifted from *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, translated by Burton Watson, Boston & London: Shambhala, 1993, pp. xii-xvii.

Thus, he left his homeland and journeyed to the area south of the Yangtze, where he met the Chan master Huang-po, named after the mountain where he resided with a group of monks. This master under whom Línjì first studied was Hsi-yün (d. ca. 850) of Mount Huang-po, but he would not attain the correct understanding he was desperately searching for. Urged by his own master, the monk decided to leave the group and go elsewhere in search of illumination: Ta-yü was the master he was looking for. Finally, Línjì attained enlightenment while having a conversation with the monk Ta-yü (Dàyù), a hermit who lived in seclusion in a mountain retreat in the same region. After achieving enlightenment, Línjì returned to his master's temple to continue with his training, or probably travelled back and forth between the two masters. Eventually, probably in 851, this sage moved to the Línjì temple in Hebei, after which he and the lineage of Chan Buddhism which he founded were named. He died in his mid-fifties after an intense life of travel and teaching. Chan teachings were introduced to China by a monk from India called Bodhidharma, who arrived in south China late in the fifth century or early in the sixth century. His life is steeped in legend and so almost nothing can be said for sure about him or his teachings. Línjì Yìxué's teaching line was the dominant school throughout China and when Chinese Chan was introduced to Japan in the thirteenth century, it was called Zen. In fact, the Japanese Zen sect known as the Rinzai school is a branch of the lineage Línjì founded.

Chan Buddhism emphasizes the accessibility of enlightenment to all persons as well as transmission outside the scriptures. This partly accounts for the popular appeal of Chan among simple men and women of the time. However, Línjì's own strict teaching style¹⁰⁹ was inspired by his master's and it was characterized by "paradoxical exchanges between student and master, the shouts and blows, and other seemingly irrational or violent actions."¹¹⁰ It included abrupt and harsh encounters with his own disciples, aimed at pushing his students to attain the moment of enlightenment, and so among his methods were common such practices as shouting and administering blows to his students with his stick. However, Línjì Yìxué also made use of iconoclastic sermons and lectures urging students to set themselves free from the influence of masters and doctrinal concepts so as to discover their true Buddha-nature. The *Lin-chi ch'an-shih yü-lu* or *Recorded Sayings of Ch'an Master Lin-chi*, often referred to simply as the *Lin-chi lu*, compiles these sermons and lectures, as well as stories of Línjì's interviews with Chan masters, contemporaries and students, and extensive descriptions of his life and teachings. This compilation is a text of major importance and "the final major formulation of Ch'an thought in China" and is "unparalleled in Ch'an literature for its vividness and forcefulness."¹¹¹

Now, Bringham's homage to Línjì Yìxué is an accomplished poem consisting of two sections that have evolved from one textual incarnation to another with the passing of time. Section 1 consists of eleven (originally twelve¹¹²) two-line stanzas of utter concision and linguistic economy that capture the essence of Línjì's Chan Buddhism. As a whole, section 1 of Bringham's poem looks like a string of jewel-like enigmatic statements that keep on resonating in the reader's mind long after one has finished reading them. Upon closer inspection, this first section can be subdivided into three distinct parts: while it

¹⁰⁹ According to Burton Watson, Línjì Yìxué lived during a complex period in the history of China, at a moment when the nation was plagued by strife and unrest and on its way towards the political disunity that the end of Tang Dynasty China brought with it. "The harsh and troubled nature of the period in which Lin-chi lived perhaps helps in part to account for the radical tenor of his teachings and the urgent, almost militant manner in which he proclaims them." *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, p. xv.

¹¹⁰ *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, p. xii.

¹¹¹ *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, p. ix.

¹¹² Two lines from the earlier version in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* are omitted here right before the two last pairs of verse lines: "Host and guest, we eat one another / for breakfast. This too is the way."

opens with a series of commands in the imperative form that might be interpreted as being instructions for truth-seekers to live truly (to the fullest of human capacity as it were), the second part focuses on the ultimate essence of *being* and on speech, and from this follows a sort of afterthought which declares in vehement words that the only way of setting order upon the world is precisely by not knowing and not owning the world with one's hands. Thus, the orders of the first movement are all conveyed in simple language of crystal-clear clarity, which is one of the appealing stylistic features of Bringhurst's poems. Beneath some of these commands are Línjì's own words as recorded in the *Lín-chi lu*:

- (1) "*Take no shit, said Línjì. / Behead the Buddhas. Cow the pig of the world.*" What Línjì is doing here is encouraging his students to leave aside doctrinal concepts and the teachings of the revered masters. That is shit in the end, for genuine enlightenment is not more distant than one's mind and body. After all, Zen emphasizes precisely the accessibility of enlightenment to everyone who might care to pay attention, for the Dharma of the mind "can enter into the common mortal or the sage, the pure or the filthy, the sacred or the secular."¹¹³ Whichever path he might make up his mind to choose, what matters is that he should take control and do nothing that might entail conscious effort to attain the ultimate truth of things. Bringhurst might have found inspiration for this first elemental statement in the *Lín-chi lu* itself. Hence, beneath these words might well be hiding this passage: "Followers of the Way, if you want to get the kind of understanding that accords with the Dharma, never be misled by others. Whether you're facing inward or facing outward, whatever you meet up with, just kill it! If you meet a buddha, kill the buddha. If you meet a patriarch, kill the patriarch. [...] Then for the first time, you will gain emancipation, will not be entangled with things, will pass freely anywhere you wish to go."¹¹⁴
- (2) "*Take hold of it, use it, but do not / give it a name: this is the ultimate principle.*" Chan Buddhism distrusts the power of words to grasp or capture the essence of things. In principle, language is an unreliable tool in humans' confrontation with reality, and so one must dispel the illusion that they are effective or faithful embodiments of the real. Thus, in speaking of the Dharma of the mind, of the truth of the mind, Línjì utters these illuminating words: "The Dharma of the mind has no fixed form; it penetrates all the ten directions. It is in operation right before our eyes. But because people don't have enough faith, they cling to words, cling to phrases." And then, he urges followers of the Way to "get hold of this thing and use it, but don't fix a label to it. This is what I call the Dark Meaning."¹¹⁵ Direct or unmediated apprehension of the ultimate nature of reality must do away with words, so that the truth-seeker might come to dwell in the realm of the unspeakable or unspoken. No effort is required of him or her as long as the mind is focused on what really matters and words are not allowed to interfere. On the contrary, those who cling to words and let them obstruct them cannot perceive the Way clearly, for their eyes are blinded by language.
- (3) "*Sleep, eat, pee: / this is the essence of the way.*" Línjì wants his adepts to live ordinarily, to lead a simple life where no strained efforts are made to attain enlightenment. Beneath Bringhurst's concise verse lines resonate powerfully these words: "Followers of the Way, the Dharma of the buddhas calls for no special undertakings. Just act ordinary, without trying to do anything particular. Move your bowels, piss, get dressed, eat your rice, and if you get tired, then lie down. Fools may laugh at me, but wise men will know what I

¹¹³ *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, p. 30.

¹¹⁴ *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, p. 52. Somewhere else, Línjì says: "Followers of the Way, what is important is to approach things with a true and proper understanding. Walk wherever you please in the world but don't let yourselves be muddled or misled by that bunch of goblin spirits. The man of value is the one who has nothing to do. Don't try to do something special, just act ordinary. You look outside yourselves, going off on side roads hunting for something, trying to get your hands on something. That's a mistake. You keep trying to look for the Buddha, but *Buddha* is just a name, a word." Línjì's deep distrust of language is self-evident in these words.

¹¹⁵ *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, p. 29 and p. 30.

mean.”¹¹⁶ Obeying the simple impulses of the body should be enough to gain insight into the essence of things. This seems to be the message implicit in these words. Chan Buddhism rejects intellectualization and convoluted speculation, and favours direct, first-hand experience of life itself instead. Needless to say, one of the most elemental experiences is that of bodily necessities: humans need eat, sleep and pee to keep on living a normal, healthy life.

- (4) “Build a boat in the mountains, / cut steps in the sea,¹¹⁷ / but no speculation, no fortification, no bridges,¹¹⁸ / burned or unburned.” At the heart of these paradoxical words palpitates the all-important message that one might try to fulfil what seem unattainable feats (like building a boat in the mountains), but one should avoid intellectualizing at any cost. Unmediated experience of the Dharma of the mind is not something that requires time or hard thinking, because it is something that humans already have within themselves. They do not have to look for it any further than their own mind. Once the mind is freed from its shackles or manacles, it shines with the light of non-discrimination, as it comes to dwell in the realm of emptiness or non-dualism, where all distinctions are transcended and men of the Way come to depend or lean on nothing.¹¹⁹ True, clear and complete understanding is well aware that phenomena of the world are to be perceived as being “empty of characteristics”, for “none have any true reality”.¹²⁰

The second movement of the first section of “Línjì Yìxué” dwells further on the nature of *what is* and on language. It opens with a straightforward statement: “There is nothing to do.” According to Sengzhào (384-414), “what is valued in every age is to have nothing to do. With regard to the Way, when one is mindless, then all things will proceed smoothly.”¹²¹ Enlightenment comes when least expected at all; it is something that comes uninvited, overwhelming the mind in its entirety all of a sudden. One needs make no exhausting effort at all. For his part, Línjì says that “the really first-rate fellow knows right now that from the first there’s never been anything that needed doing.”¹²² Once again, the emphasis is laid on the simple fact that one needs not look much further to find the ultimate essence of things: just be delving into the inner recesses of one’s attentive mind, one will find the answer one is desperately looking for. Things flow naturally if let alone to follow their own course. Hence, “The answer / is perched on your lips like a bird.” The bird might not be chirping at all, it might just perch silently on one’s lips, but it might sing *being* into full bloom any moment. The lines that follow elaborate on this beautiful image of speech as a bird perching, not nesting, in one’s lips: “If it nests in your mouth, how will you speak? / How will you weave if it nests in your hands?” Speech is a beautiful and precious tool among humans, but it is no panacea. The bird of speech cannot stay for long in one’s mouth and build a nest there because it would prevent our own speaking. And it cannot dwell in one’s hands for long either, because it would not allow us to weave things with our own hands. All around us *being* is woven into the essence of the living fabric of things: “Singing and dancing! These are the signs / of the silent and still.” As the very title of one of Bringhurst’s compilations of essays puts it, *everywhere being is dancing (and singing)*, in and through its manifold incarnations, expressions or manifestations. *What is* has got many faces and is manysided, and yet it is one and the same. The opposites of singing (speech or sound) and dancing (motion) are silence and stillness: these are also constituent parts of

¹¹⁶ *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, p. 31.

¹¹⁷ This line reads differently in the *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* version: “a ferry at sea”.

¹¹⁸ In A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001) the only textual variants are these: “no speculations” and “no fortifications”, in the plural, not singular as in the *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* and *The Calling* versions.

¹¹⁹ *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, p. 36.

¹²⁰ *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, p. 35.

¹²¹ Words found in the *Pao-tsung lun*, attributed to Sengzhào. *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, p. 30, note 1.

¹²² *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, p. 34.

what is. The closing verse lines of the second movement of section 1 of Bringhurst's poem dwell precisely on the nature of *being*. It is not easy at all to make clear what might be simply unspeakable or ineffable, and this is why the poet needs use gnomic words that might sound obscure or impenetrable to the reader at first :

Is? No. Isn't? No. Is and isn't? Neither is nor isn't?
None of these. None of these and more.¹²³

As Línjì puts it: "As I see it, there's no Buddha, no living beings, no long ago, no now. If you want to get it, you've already got it – it's not something that requires time."¹²⁴ As pointed out above, phenomena are "empty of characteristics" and "none have any true reality." Ultimately all distinctions should be transcended by the non-discriminative mind – i.e., the mind that dwells in the realm of emptiness or non-dualism. To this mind there is no point in telling apart contraries or opposites, because *what is* and *what isn't* exist simultaneously as indivisible sides to the same coin. Línjì puts it in these terms: "All the ten thousand kinds of contrived happenings operate in a place that is in fact no place. Therefore the more you search the farther away you get, the harder you hunt the wider astray you go. This is what I call the secret of the matter."¹²⁵ Part of this secret is discernible in the eyes of the deer as it flees away in horror, as the last lines of section 1 declares. The important insight comes as an afterthought and makes explicit a central idea: "Only a man with no hands / can reorder the world." How is it possible to reorder the world making no use of hands at all?, one might ask. In Bringhurst's thinking, hands are always damaging and disrespectful towards *what is*. One needs to breathe through their feet; to absorb *being* through the living, palpitating pores of one's skin; to breathe in the world and to let oneself be breathed in turn by the gigantic lung of the world itself. Using no hands to reorder the world also means letting things flow smoothly, making no conscious effort to attain final enlightenment or deep insight into the essence of things, acknowledging that we humans also belong to this grander scheme of things, and nothing need to be done by us to keep the world alive. Enlightened beings know that there is nothing for them to do, for being will keep on singing and dancing till the end of time.

The second section of "Línjì Yìxué" is the one that has undergone more profound textual changes¹²⁶ in each successive incarnation of the poem. It consists of five symmetrical stanzas: two four-line stanzas followed by a two-line transition stanza and by two more four-line stanzas. Three parts are then clearly discernible in the overall pattern of this composition: a celebration of the unreality of reality itself; the transcending of the birth-death dichotomy; and a final meditation on the ultimate unity of *what is* as apprehended from the standpoint of non-dualism or emptiness. Thus, the Rinzai master is convinced that the true man has no name, no home and no address. An enlightened being has "no form, no characteristics, no root, no beginning, no place he abides, yet he is vibrantly alive."¹²⁷ It is illusory or deceptive to think that we do have a home, or even that we have something permanent called *identity* or *personality* to which to hold on to

¹²³ This verse line reads differently in the *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* version: "No! No! None of these and more".

¹²⁴ *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, p. 33.

¹²⁵ *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, p. 36.

¹²⁶ In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* the opening stanzas read differently: "To hear in the chirp of the bird the original / *isn't*, and in the answering chirp of the bird / that what is is what isn't and this is / the whole of the dusty world / is to die a good death, / trampled by watersnakes, torn / on the antlers of the snowshoe hare. // There is nowhere to go. Nothing / is *there*. What is / is all *here*, and what isn't / is everywhere. // You can begin by renouncing / your home, if you are so brash as to think / that you have one. Know this: the true face / has no features, the true man no name / and of course no address."

¹²⁷ *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi*, p. 36.

desperately, or even a conventional occupation. “There is nothing to do”: the enlightened beings who are aware of the unreality of reality know this for sure and make no effort at all. Truth-seekers should start then their education process by abandoning what looks like certitudes:

And so,
to begin with, leave home –
if something has made you imagine
you have one. Examine your face

in the mirror of the air,
and sit down with the man
who laughs when you ask him
his name, occupation, address.

The master’s instructions to live fully are simple and clear. Leave the notion of home behind and start thinking of yourself as something that belongs to something which is grander than yourself. In addition, air is invisible or transparent, and so it will not give you a reflection of your face back. This means that there is no self, no identity, no personality. Ideally there should be ideally no occupation either. And there are no distinctions to be made by enlightened beings: death is nothing to care about for “*Dying is one more simple thing everyone does, / like scratching the ear and undressing.*” In non-discriminative thinking, the apprehender of reality is beyond pairs of opposites and contraries, well aware that all phenomena are emptiness, or part of an undifferentiated unity. This is the fundamental idea explored in the third part of section 2 of Bringhurst’s poem, woven with gnomic words that pose an intellectual challenge to the reader who remains alert to subtle nuances of meaning. Thus, there is no way of drawing a clear-cut distinction between *thinking* and *not thinking*, in much the same way there is no way of telling *what is* and *what isn’t* apart. In the ancestral art of swordsmanship, there is no way either of differentiating between sword, swordsman, stroke and not striking. Even harder to understand are the closing verse lines, which affirm that “*One and not one / are one. One is not two. One is also / not one.*” *Being* is one but at the same time it is *manysided*, for it finds expression in the myriad different things populating reality. *What is* and *what isn’t* live side by side too. And so the poetic voice concludes that “*This arithmetic / lives in the flowering / heart of the world.*” Bringhurst’s poem is the best homage possible in honour of Línjì Yìxuán’s thinking. That his thought is still relevant to us is manifest in the very fact that Bringhurst’s poem speaks to us with a rare and beautiful urgency. At a time of egoistic thinking in which no one thinks beyond themselves, the voice of this ancestor speaking through the prism of Bringhurst’s words remind us that there is a larger world out there of which we are a tiny part, and that, if we are to live to the fullest of human capacity and attain true self-realization, it is part of our responsibility to acknowledge that *being* is something larger or vaster than the human realm.

XV · DONGSHAN LIANGJIE

“Dòngshān Liángjiè”¹²⁸ concerns a Zen master who lived in ninth-century China, best known for founding the Soto school of Zen, contributing to the flourishing of Zen in his

¹²⁸ “Dòngshān Liángjiè” was originally published in C.63 [Four Poems]. *Canadian Literature* 140 (Spring 1994): 79-85. Contents: • “Dongshan Liangjie” (rpt. in A.47, A.65, A.92); • “Xuedou Zhongxian” (rpt. in B.58); • “Yongjia Xuanjue”; • “Dogen” (excerpt rev. in B.72, C.71). Later, it was reprinted in A.47 *The Calling* (1995), A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001), and A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009).

lifetime, and re-evaluating the Five Ranks doctrine. Bringhurst's homage to this old sage from the Orient is an accomplished eight-stanza poem that captures the essence of his thinking. Though this is a complex composition, the poet is willing to help the reader somehow in understanding and enjoying the thought of this Zen master. Hence, an entry included in the "Cast of Suspicious Characters" at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995) informs us that Dòngshān Liángjiè (Tung-shan Liang-chieh, 807–869) was "A Zen teacher working in Jiangxi. The Cáodòng or Soto school of Zen is named for him and his student Cáoshan Běnjí." And in the 2001 edition of *The Book of Silences*, Bringhurst gives us only elementary information regarding this Oriental sage: "Dongshan Liangjie (Tung-shan Liang-chieh) 807-869 Jiangxi Province, southeastern China." Not much is known of the exact details regarding his personality and experiences beyond a handful of pieces of information regarding his daily rituals as a monk, his style of spiritual education and a few more events of his life. The two primary sources we have available are Keizan's *Denkoroku* (*Transmission of Light*) and *T'su-t'ang-chi* (*Records from the Halls of the Patriarchs*). This scant information, usually limited to dates, names and general locations, has been preserved in the form of philosophical dialogues between Dòngshān and his various teachers.

Born during the Tang dynasty in the town of Kuei-chi (in the southeast of present-day Chekiang Province), Dòngshān Liángjiè started his studies in Chan Buddhism early in his life, when he was still a young boy, as the common practice of the day prescribed for the elite educated families. One day, as his teacher was reciting the "Heart Sutra", the boy interrupted him at a crucial point to give voice to his essential disagreement with the fundamental doctrine of the scripture. As master Keizan puts it,

When Dongshan was a boy he followed a teacher and recited the Heart Wisdom Scripture. When he came to the point where it says, "There is no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, body, or mind," he suddenly felt his face with his hand and said, "I have eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and so on – why does the scripture say they don't exist? The tutor was amazed and said, "I am not your teacher." Then he directed Dongshan to a Zen master, who initiated him. He was fully ordained as a monk when he was twenty-one.¹²⁹

This was a decisive moment in his lifetime and, as a result, at the age of 10 Dòngshān left home to become a monk. He travelled to the nearby monastery on Wu-hsieh Mountain, where he joined the students of Chan Master Ling-mo. Having his head shaved and taking the yellow robes, he started his path towards monkhood. At the age of 21 he was ordained as a monk at the Shao-lin-ssu Temple on Mount Sung. Afterwards, he spent a long time wandering from one place to another, seeking instruction from different Chan masters and hermits in the Hung-chou region. Thus, Keizan informs us that, in the beginning of his study, Dòngshān joined the congregation of Nanquan Puyuan.¹³⁰ Among the most illustrious of his masters was Yúnyán Tanshèng (780-841), of whom Dòngshān became the dharma heir. He called on this great Zen master to inquire him on the teaching of inanimate things. Keizan recounts the encounter:

Dongshan left Guishan and went to Yunyan. Bringing up the preceding events, he asked, "Who can hear the teaching of the inanimate?" Yunyan said, "The inanimate can hear it." Dongshan asked, "Why don't I hear it?" Yunyan raised his whisk and said, "Do you hear?" Dongshan said, "No." Yunyan said, "If you don't

¹²⁹ See *Transmission of Light [Denkoroku]. Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan*, translated and with an introduction by Thomas Cleary. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990, p. 164.

¹³⁰ *Transmission of Light [Denkoroku]. Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan*, p. 165.

even hear my teaching, how could you hear the teaching of the inanimate?” Dongshan said, “What scripture contains the ‘teaching of the inanimate?’” Yunyan said, “Haven’t you read where the Infinite Light Scripture says, ‘Rivers, birds, trees and groves, all invoke the Buddha and the Teaching?’” At this Dongshan had an awakening.¹³¹

After a long period of study, at the age of 52 Dòngshān established his own school at Tung-shan in Kao-an of the Yu-chang Hsien province. This became one of the “Fives Houses of Zen” set up at this time by different masters with distinct teaching styles and different ideas. Though with the passing of time these came to be seen as being sects, it was common practice for students to visit the other masters in nearby schools. Dòngshān had his own personal methodology to help his disciples attain enlightenment. Grouped under three categories, students were either of the kind of those who see but do not yet comprehend the Dharma, those in the process of understanding, and those who have already understood. He made use of short poems to expound Zen principles to his students and to himself, as well as metaphors drawn from everyday experiences so that his pupils could understand. Also, he conceived of koan practice as not having a specific goal, which would entail an artificial distinction between ignorance and enlightenment. Thus, he promoted “silent illumination Chan” (sitting just for the sake of sitting) among his disciples and a self-fulfilling path towards enlightenment instead of a competitive path. In addition, one of the most important contributions to Buddhist thought Dòngshān made had to do with his complete re-evaluation of the “Five Ranks” doctrine, which mapped out five stages of comprehension of the relationship between the absolute and relative realities. Dòngshān died at the age of 63, after a whole lifetime devoted to monkhood and Zen. But he had many disciples to provide continuity to his teachings. Among them were T’sao-shan (840-901) and Yun-chu (835-902). The latter would start a branch that survived into the seventeenth century in China. The great Dōgen Kigen was indeed educated in the traditions of Dòngshān’s Zen Buddhism thirteen generations later. As he returned to his homeland, he started the Soto school in Japan.

“Dòngshān Lǎngjiè” opens with a simple celebration of Nature, as embodied by “one tree growing / in the worked earth” and “one bird flying”. They might be interpreted as standing for earth and sky, respectively, or to embody the whole of Nature. One is many, and many is one, when the mesh of living things (human and non-human) is seen as constituting a subtle organic unity. An enigmatic reference follows to a “stone woman” who dances when a “wooden man” sings, as if to convey the sense that the whole cosmos is alive, dancing and singing. What is most interesting about the one tree and the one bird mentioned in the opening lines of Bringhurst’s poem is that they live in perfect harmony with the surrounding world that is their natural home. They have no hands, which, to Bringhurst’s mind, are always disrespectful and damaging to the world itself, but they do have mouths (leaves in the case of the tree and a beak in the case of the bird) with which they eat what the earth so generously gives them for their sustenance; they do have feet (roots in the case of the tree) that link them to the earth and keep them erect; and they do have arms (branches in the case of the tree and wings in the case of the bird) with which “they trace the original / shapes of the mountains.” Contrary to conventional expectations, the tree’s and bird’s arms serve a purpose that has nothing to do with the tree’s branches growing upwards in all directions, in search of light and oxygen for photosynthesis, or with the bird’s wings to fly carelessly up in the sky. As a token of their gratitude, as it were, the tree and the bird use their arms to pay homage to the mountains far away in the horizon. They feel grateful that they belong among a grander scheme of things where mountains are

¹³¹ *Transmission of Light [Denkoroku]. Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan*, pp. 166-167.

one more element of the gigantic whole. Dòngshān was eager to find the sense and meaning of the teaching of inanimate things. One might contend that trees and birds are not inanimate at all, though mountains might certainly be so. But, by ‘inanimate’¹³² is meant something vaster: all things, including mountains, trees, birds, stones, the sky, murmuring streams are always teaching, clearly, unceasingly, in all times. One has only to imitate the growing tree and the flying bird in their respectful attitude to *what is* and keep one’s feet standing firmly on the ground to breathe through them, for they are our elemental link with the earth, to begin with. This is the notion of *breathing through the feet* that Bringhurst embraces in his 1986 seminal essay, the autobiographical meditation published in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*.

In stanzas 3 to 5 the dramatic persona of Dòngshān Liángjiè speaking in this poem seems to be addressing his pupils. At the core of the teaching he is trying to convey to them (and to us readers) are two fundamental ideas. First, the master seems to encourage his students to practice seated meditation with complete dedication, as a way of self-fulfilling realization, unaware of what is going outside. If outer distractions manage to lead them away from the path towards illumination, that means that “*your mind is unclear / and your meditation imperfect.*” Secondly, Dòngshān promotes the cultivation of a deep questioning of everything, great doubt as a path leading towards enlightenment, for the truth is to be found within oneself, and not somewhere else, outside. “*You may only agree if you disagree / equally,*” says the master. Finally, Dòngshān draws an all-important distinction between the intimate knowledge animals and trees have of the essence of reality, and the imperfect form of knowledge humans appear to attain with much effort. Even though reality is elusive, it is an inherent part in humans, regardless of whether we are aware that this is the case:

Saints and great teachers do not
know reality. Mountain cats, bristlecone
pines, wild buffalo do.
Though you are not it, it is certainly you.

The most enlightening lessons Dòngshān has to teach us are to be found in the closing three stanzas of Bringhurst’s poem, though. Just for the sake of clarity in our critical analysis, we shall map the three elemental lessons briefly:

- (1) The sky is a mind, not a text for humans to decode. Hence, “*A sky full of migrating birds / is a mind, not a text to be studied / for seconds or centuries.*” The migrating birds are not letters or words on the blank page of the sky; the sky is a mind rich in ideas instead. Facing the sky, one needs not resort to intellectualization to penetrate the simplicity of the vast expanses of blue emptiness. Buddhist tradition favours speech over writing, gives preeminence to silence over vacuous words, acknowledges the unspeakable or ineffable that is inherent in the mystery of *what is*. Also, acknowledging that the sky is a mind, not a decipherable enigma or intellectual challenge to humans’ intellect, entails acknowledging that the world is alive with Buddha-nature, that there is a universal substratum uniting all creatures in subtle ways we do not quite perceive. *Being* is pulsating in every tiny part of which reality is constituted; *what is* is a mind that seeks to know and that teaches all the time. At this point, all distinctions and contradistinctions and contradictions are dissolved, for Zen embraces a non-dualistic mode of thinking in which perceiving subject and perceived object become

¹³² Keizan says that “observing carefully, you become fully aware of this mystic consciousness, which is called “inanimate” or “insentient”. It is called inanimate because there is no running after sound and form, no bondage of emotion or discrimination.” *Transmission of Light [Denkoroku]. Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan*, p. 169.

one and the same. Round and clear knowledge does not depend on thought, for *being* is immutable and clear.

- (2) There is an inevitable unity underlying the multiplicity or plurality of beings. Hence “*One plus one / plus one equals one equals many. / One minus one equals equally many.*” These statements give voice through paradox to what looks like a truism or elemental truth: *being* assumes manifold forms in the creatures populating this world. Beneath these words is the notion of microcosm and macrocosm: a single thing contains the universe in its entirety. *E pluribus unum, e pluribus plus*. A blade of grass evokes all the grass existing in the world. One tree growing and one bird flying stand for all the trees and birds in the world. Words will not do, will not suffice to make others understand this, for they are not accurate and they give us only a tentative approximation to things. And yet everything is always teaching, clearly, unceasingly.
- (3) There is at the centre of reality a latent dichotomy between motion and stasis. This is symbolized by the flight of geese crossing the sky and the quietude of the stones and the trees contemplating their sheer love of motion: “*The geese / cross and are gone. Below them the stones / have learned how to dance and the trees / how to fly without leaving their places.*” Though stones and trees cannot defy the gravity law that keeps them firmly rooted on the ground, the former know now how to dance and the latter how to fly without moving, just through sympathetic observation of the geese’s flight. The flying geese have taught them their love of motion, and this pulsating motion makes both stones and trees participate in the universal grace that pervades all creatures, animate and inanimate alike, in this world of ours.

Now, sages (truly enlightened beings) are not saints or teachers, who do not know reality, as claimed in stanza four of “*Dòngshān Liángjiè*”, but something else. Sages are those who penetrate the three above principles, and the ultimate essence of reality. They manage to accomplish this most difficult of tasks just because they know how to pay attention. They use their ears not just for hearing, but for breathing in the whole world; they use their eyes not just for seeing, but for eating the whole world. They never tire of keeping their ears and their eyes wide open to the world out there, and to the world inside themselves. No matter whether they open or close their sense organs, their inner attention is always on guard. Bringham puts it in simple, almost invisible words:

The sages have learned how to breathe
through their ears, how to eat with their eyes.
Time and again they forget
to open and close them.

That *Dòngshān* is a sage himself is demonstrated by the following event in his life as recounted by *Keizan*. On one occasion, having asked *Yúnyán Tansheng* about the best way to see his true being, *Dòngshān* still had some doubts. His master had told him to “ask the messenger within.” Afterwards, he was “greatly enlightened when he saw his reflection in the water as he crossed a river.” At that point in time, he said in verse:

Don’t seek from others
Or you’ll be estranged from yourself.
I now go on alone –
Everywhere I encounter It.
It now is me, I now am not It.
One must understand in this way

XVI · XIANGYAN ZHIXIAN

“Xiāngyán Zhixián”¹³⁴ concerns the thinking of another Oriental sage. In a brief entry at the end of the 2001 Ninja Press edition of *The Book of Silences*, Bringhurst himself provides us with just the essentials regarding the date and place of this sage’s life: “Xiangyan Zhixian (Hsiang-yen Chih-hsien) c. 830-898 Central China.” Here is a ninth-century Chinese thinker who still has something of concord to teach humans breathing the same air eleven centuries later. Bringhurst gives voice to his thinking in a seven-stanza poem structured around two movements for the soul. Both are inextricably linked to one another though, for they constitute a perfect organic *Gestalt* in which ideas flow smoothly into one another. The composition opens with a twofold order addressed to someone who might well be the present-time reader, or any reader of any time who might care to listen to what this sage’s impersonation has to say: “*Eat light. / Where there is nothing to listen / to you, nor to listen to, / listen.*” Light is a recurrent motif in Bringhurst’s poetry: it is light that imbues every single thing in the world with a special aura that renders it visible to the naked eye. Light is to the eye what air is to the lung: whereas the former makes seeing possible, the latter makes breathing possible. And both seeing and breathing are essential to humans’ life. The speaking voice in Bringhurst’s poem urges the reader to “*eat light,*” which is to be interpreted as absorbing the light with one’s whole body, through the skin pores as it were, and not just through one’s eyes. It also urges us to *listen*, even if there is nothing out there to render listening meaningful. But listening always makes sense as soon as we realize that everywhere *being* is dancing and singing, striving to make itself audible to humans and non-humans alike.

Now, the stanzas that follow these opening lines, though still a part of the first movement of the poem, are truly enigmatic. “*The essence of the way*” is said to be found in a “*dragon purring in the dead tree*” and walking in the way is “*the naked eyeball / shining from the skull,*” looking in every direction and absorbing everything it sees. These are words someone else spoke long ago, but they turn to be no words at all, and yet they are attributed to an unknown “you” that might or might not be the reader. The language is paradoxical and the meaning is obscure, hard to decipher. The speaking voice appears to somehow evoke the pre-eminence of speech over writing, of the spoken word over the written one, of the unspeakable over the unspoken. At any rate, throughout the first four stanzas, light, listening and seeing are brought together as paths leading into *being*, the innermost substratum of all things. At the intersection point where light and the eyes meet there are “*two silences*” that nonetheless coalesce into radiance and evoke uninterrupted dialogues that have been going on as if from the dawn of time. The eyes are invented by light itself to “*detain it,*” to grasp or capture it midway despite its volatile or evanescent nature. Light and eyes are silences because they do not speak; they do not speak either to understand each other, to coalesce into perfect harmony:

The light and the eyes it invents to detain it are two
silences, one radiance, many
unfinished yet fully
complete conversations.

¹³³ *Transmission of Light [Denkoroku]. Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan*, p. 167.

¹³⁴ “Xiangyan Zhixian” was first incorporated into the Oriental sages sequence in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001). It was then reprinted in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009).

The second movement for the soul of “Xiāngyán Zhìxián” (stanzas 5 to 7) speaks of a time before the poetic *I* at the centre of Bringhurst’s composition was born. Punctuated by the repetition of the time expression “before I was born”, the *mirror*, the *scriptures* and the *bowl* mentioned in these lines are perfected expressions of nothingness. It is no accident that the speaking subject should see nothing, not even his own reflection, in the mirror; or that he should find nothing but speaking voices erasing the written words on the pages of a book; or that he should find the bowl empty, filled with nothing but hunger. Glass, voices erasing the page and hunger are all forms of nothingness as it were:

I looked in the mirror before I was born
and saw nothing but glass. I opened the scriptures
before I was born and heard voices
erasing the page.

How are these enigmatic lines to be interpreted? The meaning is far from clear. What follows is conjecture only. First, the sage Xiāngyán Zhìxián has learnt to forget about his narcissistic self and so he sees not his self-image given back by the polished, shiny surface of the mirror, but just simple glass. Only by transcending the ego, is it possible to see things for what they truly are. Secondly, in scriptures that are supposed to provide him with revealed knowledge, a form of ultimate truth, he hears only voices undoing the words on the page. This, of course, may suggest the pre-eminence of speech over writing in the Buddhist tradition, but it is uncanny that the voices should not prevail somehow. They are as if self-cancelling themselves in erasing the very words on the pages of the scriptures. Or this may be intended as a reminder that knowledge is not to be sought in the insights of others, frozen down in books of wisdom. The truth is much closer at hand: it is inside oneself and so one needs not go any further than oneself. And thirdly, the clean and empty bowl contains nothing but hunger, but hunger is not just physical: humans have thirsted and hungered for the truth ever since the beginning of humankind. What the sage sees with certitude inside the bowl is a catalogue or enumeration of bodily parts that are the very incarnation or abode of physical hunger. What he sees in the bowl is “*nostrils and teeth*,” but, curiously enough, “*no mouth and no belly*.” The rest of the bodily parts include everything else except fingers and hands, which, unlike feet, are damaging in Bringhurst’s thinking:

Wings, but no fingers. Elbows
and earlobes and shoulders and feet
going down on their knees
and then creeping back up, but no hands.

XVII · YUNMEN WENYAN

“Yunmen Wenyan”¹³⁵ was originally published in 1993 in a literary magazine called *Windhorse Review*, along with three more poems from the Oriental sages sequence. The

¹³⁵ “Yunmen Wenyan” was originally published in C.62 [Four poems], *Windhorse Review* (Yarmouth, Nova Scotia) 11/12 (Summer 1993): [6-7]. Contents: • “Lotus Flower Mountain”; • “Rújìng” (rpt. as “Tiantong Rujing” in A.47, A.53, A.53a, A.65, A.92); • “Yúnmén Wényan” (rev. in A.47, rpt. from A.47 in A.65, B.69, A.92); • “Fayan Wényi” (rev. in A.47, A.65, A.92). [There are misspellings in the titles of the latter two poems.] Afterwards, it was revised in A.47 *The Calling*, and reprinted from A.47 in (i) B.69 *A Matter of Spirit: The Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry*, edited by Susan McCaslin, Victoria, British Columbia: Ekstasis Editions, 1998: pp. 41-58. Contributions: Ten poems and a short prose piece: “Poem about Crystal”, “Deuteronomy”, “Herakleitos”, “Parśvanatha”, “Nagarjuna”, “Sengzhào”, “Hán Shan”, “Yúnmén Wényan”,

original text¹³⁶ underwent profound changes in its next textual incarnation in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), where the two-stanza poem became a three-stanza piece of utter beauty and perfection. Bringhurst's poem concerns Yunmen Wenyan, a major Chinese Zen master of Tang China and the founder of one of the five major schools of Chan, the so-called Yunmen school, which flourished into the early Song Dynasty and had a strong influence on the upper classes. A brief entry included in the "Cast of Suspicious Characters" at the end of *The Calling* gives us the essentials concerning this sage: "Yúnmén Wényǎn (Yün-men Wen-yen, 864–949) A Zen teacher born near Shanghai. He taught in northern Guangdong." And in the 2001 Ninja Press edition of *The Book of Silences*, Bringhurst tells us this: "Yunmen Wenyan (Yun-men Wen-yen) "Cloudgate" 864-949 Southeastern China." So here is a Zen monk who lived in the ninth and tenth centuries CE and left a precious legacy in the form of penetrating thinking, the echoes of which are captured by Bringhurst in this moving homage to the master.

Born in the town of Jiaxing near Suzhou and southwest of Shanghai to the Zhang family, Yunmen Wenyan became a monk at an early age under the guidance of Zhi Cheng, a Zen master in his home town. He studied with this teacher for several years, taking his monastic vows at the age of 20. Unsatisfied with the teachings, he sought the instruction of another master, Daozong (also known as Bokushu or Muzhou Daozong), who practised a rigorous and demanding form of Zen in Mu-chou so as to help his disciples gain enlightenment. Upon his encounter with Daozong, he insisted on being accepted as a student and, as the master would not admit him, he had his leg broken as Daozong shut the gate catching the monk's leg and breaking it as a result. Afterwards, Daozong recommend him to seek instruction from the eminent Zen master Xuefeng Yicun of Mt. Hsiang-ku, in Fuzhou. He became his disciple and, after a few years of rigorous discipline, he eventually attained enlightenment. Yunmen Wenyan ended up joining the Lingshu monastery on Mt. Lingshu under Rumin Chanshi, who became his great friend. Upon his death, Yunmen became the head priest of the monastery. Under the patronage and protection of the ruler Liu Yan, he was appointed abbot of the Lingshu monastery. Innumerable visitors from all over China would travel to this monastery in search of enlightenment on the part of the Zen master. As they proved too distracting for Yunmen's taste, he asked the king to help him build a new monastery on Mount Yunmen. At the age of 64, Yunmen moved to his new monastery, where he lived and taught for the rest of his life. He took the name from the mountain on which the monastery was built. He died at the age of 85 or 86, and was buried with great honours. Yunmen Wenyan was particularly renowned for his forceful, subtle and direct teaching, mystical at times. He would avail himself of sudden shouts and of blows with a staff to help his disciples attain enlightenment. One of the most eloquent of the Zen masters, Yunmen had also an impressive wisdom and an amazing skill at oratory. In his use of old cases, stories and paradoxical statements, he was one of the great pioneers of the koan tradition that would evolve much later into a venerated Zen practice. Many of the stories and koans collected in the *Blue Cliff Record* include 18 contributions by Yunmen; eight of his sayings are included in *Records of Serenity*, and five in *The Gateless Gate*.

"Thin Man Washing"; "Sunday Morning" (all rpt. from A.47); • brief essay, "In Praise of Vacant Lots."; (ii) in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001), and (iii) in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009).

¹³⁶ This is the original text published in C.62: "Not only stones and trees are our teachers. / The truth of the world / sparkles in slopbuckets, toilet bowls, turds. / Are your eyes plugged up with light, / your ears with music and your nose with sweet spring air? / Everything that has ever existed is medicine. // Bright emptiness burns in the doorway. / In the cupboard it fills up the dishes and bowls. / The flames in the stove are preaching the law. / Past, present and future have come here to listen."

Bringhurst's poem on this Zen master appears to capture the essence of Yunmen's thinking. If one were to identify the fundamental theme at the core of this composition, it might not be altogether unwise to say that it concerns the possibility of humans' penetrating the ultimate truth of reality by paying attention to everything in this world that is incessantly speaking its own lessons clear and loud for anyone who might be willing to listen. Zen masters go in fear of abstractions and always prefer to be concrete. Instead of talking about *being* or *reality* or *self*, they talk about stones, mountains, flowers, clouds, streams or birds. Thus, to the Zen mind, any sensuous object that is seen or heard or touched is susceptible of being turned into the subject of the deepest metaphysical speculation and significance as well. All creatures in this world, sentient and non-sentient alike, are pervaded by Buddha-nature, and so Nature (which is made up of mountains, trees, animals, flowers, stones and streams) does have something important to tell us about reality and about ourselves. *Being* is universal and is singing its uninterrupted song everywhere you turn to look or to listen to; the only thing demanded of us is that we pay attention. Hence, the first stanza in Bringhurst's poem opens with a forceful statement:

Stones and trees are my teachers, but
there are others. The truth of the world
sparkles in slopbuckets, toilet bowls, turds,
and in festering sores.

Understanding or sudden enlightenment is not to be sought primarily in books, but in the vast world of things that are teeming with life and rich in meanings and lessons to deliver to attentive humans. The poetic persona of the sage in Bringhurst's poem is made to affirm that he has got an infinity of teachers in this world: not just stones and trees set in idyllic settings, but a whole range of things where the Western mind would not bother to look for a tiny speck of truth. But to Yunmen, the *radiance of the truth* is discernible everywhere, even in what looks like vulgar or mediocre things such as excrements or festering sores defiling the purity of the human body. This makes sense if we bear in mind that Zen is characterized by a non-dualistic mode of thinking in which the dichotomy of perceiving subject and perceived object is transcended into the realm of the absolute or unity: Zen takes us to the realm of non-dichotomy. What Zen advocates is an essential unity between humans and the world at large which was present there from the very beginning. This unity is not posited as an intellectual construct, but as an undeniable fact as it were. The idea of a perfect communion or identification between self and Nature is at the very heart of the second stanza. How to communicate what is difficult to communicate when words will not do? The poetic voice makes use of a rhetorical question: "*Are your eyes plugged up with light, / your ears plugged up with music / and your nose with sweet spring air?*" The parallelism of these three verse lines eloquently insists on elemental things of this world (light, music and air) with which we are perfectly and naturally united. The senses are the windows of the body open onto the world out there, of which we are a tiny part after all. At first, this seems to be beyond verbalism; words will not do to convey this sense of the sublime grandeur of *what is*. Eyes, ears and nose are just the bodily organs through which we absorb the world in its entirety to make it amenable to human understanding; they are the windows through which Nature is observed. Aided by the intellect, which Zen does not despise altogether, the senses give us first-hand information about the world, allow us to gain a direct apprehension or grasping of *what is*.

In an enlightening essay entitled "The Role of Nature in Zen Buddhism", D.T. Suzuki dwells precisely on the relationship between Nature and humans in the thinking of the Zen masters. The handful of conclusions he comes to are worth considering in this context for they are relevant to our train of thought here. He opens his essay by dwelling

on ideas associated in the Western mind with Nature, and he claims that the Nature-man dichotomy arises from the Biblical account of creation, in which God gives humankind the power to dominate all creation. This power-relationship is the origin, Suzuki says, of the idea firmly ingrained in the Western mind that Nature is something to be conquered, subdued and exploited by humans for their own material welfare and comfort, for their own selfish ends. This also brings out the problem of human rationality: whereas humans are rational creatures, Nature is purposeless and brutal fact, and it operates blindly. Thus, man feels the need to strive to make Nature amenable to his idea of rationality, to bring it under his control. As soon as man is made in God's image and commanded to dominate Nature, we are witnessing "the real beginning of human tragedy."¹³⁷ The very idea of domination is ego-centred and the struggles that follow from this very idea of power are tragic. Suzuki summarizes these ideas concerning Nature as man's objective world as follows:

. . . let us understand Nature as something antithetical to what is ordinarily known as divine; as something irrational yet amenable to our mechanical, economic, utilitarian treatment; as something not human, not in possession of human feelings, and devoid of moral significance; as something which finally overpowers Man in spite of Man's partial and temporary success. In short, Nature is brutally factual, with no history objectively set before us and to be regarded as commercially exploitable, but finally swallowing us all in the purposelessness of the Unknown.¹³⁸

Of course, this is not the right way of thinking according to Suzuki, for, to begin with, humans are part of Nature itself. Humans are Nature-made, not man-made. "There is nothing in Man that does not belong in Nature," he says. Nature includes all created things, and "To think that these are all under human control is altogether illogical and cannot be consistently maintained. But Western people unconsciously follow this idea and their moral attitude towards Nature is thereby determined."¹³⁹ This notion of treating Nature as something irrational and hostile, inner matter and brute fact, is a purely Western idea, and humans have no right to make Nature obey its will or impose their way on Nature, even less to exploit or abuse it for their own selfish ends. Humans make use of all Nature has to offer economically, "with no sense of kinship with it, hence with no sense of gratitude or sympathetic affiliation."¹⁴⁰ In this Western frame of mind, Nature and man are strangers to one another and there is no way for them to communicate with one another along fluid or smooth lines of respect. Man must remain an outsider confronting sheer emptiness if he

¹³⁷ Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, ed. by William Barrett, Westminster, MD, USA: Doubleday Publishing, 1996, p. 278. Suzuki is convinced that "Nature has a great deal more to say to us. Nature is indeed an eternal problem, and when it is solved, we know not only Nature but ourselves; the problem of Nature is the problem of human life." *Ibid.*, p. 278. Thus, Nature poses the major intellectual or epistemological challenge to all the human beings of all times.

¹³⁸ Suzuki, *ibid.*, p. 277.

¹³⁹ Suzuki, *ibid.*, p. 278. This Western attitude towards Nature is summarized as follows by Suzuki: "1. Nature is something hostile to Man and drags him down when he is struggling to reach God. [...] 2. While Nature and God are warring against each other, Nature and Man are also at war, or rather, as commanded by God, Man is always striving to exercise his dominating power over Nature. 3. There is no way for Man to approach Nature in a conciliatory, friendly spirit: one works to destroy the other. There is nothing in Nature that will help Man in his spiritual advancement. 4. Nature is a material world and the material world is meant for exploration and exploitation. 5. In another sense the material world is brute fact. [...] Intellect cannot do anything with it, but has to take it as it is and make the best of it. 6. The dichotomy of Nature-and-Man implies hostility, even an utter irreconcilability, and is, therefore, mutually destructive. 7. No idea seems to be present here which indicates or even suggests human participation in, or identification with, Nature. To the Western mind Nature and Man are separate." *Ibid.*, pp. 279-280.

¹⁴⁰ Suzuki, *ibid.*, p. 283.

does not manage to subdue this vast unknown quantity which is the objective world. This, of course, generates feelings of anxiety, fear and insecurity in the face of what looks like an alien world. Now, for Zen Buddhism humans must be insiders, not outsiders. As Suzuki puts it:

Nature produces Man out of itself, Man cannot be outside of Nature, he still has his being rooted in Nature. Therefore, there cannot be any hostility between them. On the contrary, there must always be a friendly understanding between Man and Nature. Man came from Nature in order to see Nature in himself; that is, Nature came to itself in order to see itself in Man.¹⁴¹

Zen embraces the fundamental idea that humans are in Nature and that Nature is in humans. It is not a question of mere participation in each other, but a fundamental identity between the two that is posited vehemently instead. But identity does not entail the annihilation of one at the cost of the other. “The whole universe which means Nature ceases to be “hostile” to us as we had hitherto regarded it from our selfish point of view. Nature, indeed, is no more something to be conquered and subdued. It is the bosom whence we come and whither we go.”¹⁴² Thus, Nature becomes part of our being as soon as we recognize it as Nature and an essential unity or identity of man and Nature is acknowledged. In its urge to reach the ultimate core of meaning, humans come to face this elemental truth. Man and Nature are not separate; they belong together and are thoroughly merged into one another even if their identities remain clearly distinguishable.¹⁴³ Nature is not a hostile place either, and so the poetic voice in “Yunmen Wenyan” celebrates the fact that it is a benevolent whole, beneficial to humans: “*Everything that has ever existed is medicine.*” This is an essential intuition that occurs in timeless time, in an absolute present where time seems to be cancelled out or suspended for a while. All planes of time are present here and now, as it were, as the radiance of the truth pervading the whole of existence is celebrated in exultant words that speak of “*bright emptiness*” and “*flames in the stove*” in the familiar realm of domestic life. Buddha-nature is present in all beings regardless of their sentience or consciousness, and ordinary things are surrounded by a mysterious halo that betrays the existence of the non-visible, of the transcendental conjunction of light and air and music on the texture of things, all of which reminds us that Nature is in us and that we are in Nature. The law that the flames recite is possibly the omnipresence of something grander than humans themselves that unite all beings, animate and inanimate alike. Every being is in possession of the Buddha-nature:

Bright emptiness burns in the doorway.
In the cupboard it fills up the dishes and bowls.
The flames in the stove are reciting the law.
Past, present and future have come here to listen.

¹⁴¹ Suzuki, *ibid.*, pp. 283-284. Suzuki dwells on this notion in detail: “This is objective thinking, to say that Man comes from Nature and that Man sees himself through Nature, or that Nature sees itself through Man. [...] To turn to subjectivity means to turn from Nature to Man himself. Instead of considering Man objectively in opposition to Nature, our task is now to make Man retreat, as it were, into himself and see what he finds in the depths of his being. The problem of Nature thus becomes the problem of Man: Who or what is Man?” *Ibid.*, p. 284.

¹⁴² Suzuki, *ibid.*, p. 308.

¹⁴³ By the end of his essay, Suzuki claims that Zen is no form of escapism and that it acknowledges a perfect union with Nature, while all around us becoming is going on in all its infinitely varied forms: “Zen, therefore, does not try to disengage us from the world, to make us mere spectators of the hurly-burly which we see around us. Zen is not mysticism, if the latter is to be understood in the sense of escapism. Zen is right in the midst of the ocean of becoming. It shows no desire to escape from its tossing waves. It does not antagonize Nature; it does not treat Nature as if it were an enemy to be conquered, nor does it stand away from Nature. It is indeed Nature itself.” *Ibid.*, p. 307.

XVIII · FAYAN WENYI

“Fayan Wenyi”¹⁴⁴ captures the essence of the thinking of another eminent ancestor and sage. From a brief entry included in the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), we learn who this Oriental sage was: “Fayan Wenyi (Fa-yen Wen-i, 885–958) Founder of the short-lived Fāyān school of Zen. He was born in Hangzhou and taught in Nanjing.” And in the 2001 edition of *The Book of Silences*, Bringhurst provides us with another luminous piece of information: “Fayan Wenyi (Fa-yen Wen-i) 885-958 Nanjing, northern China.” Bringhurst’s poem has undergone significant textual modifications¹⁴⁵ with the passing of time until it has reached what might be its definitive incarnation. His poetic corpus is truly alive and so poems are revised time and again, polished and improved upon: certain lines are added, other lines are omitted or rearranged differently, and even some words are replaced with others. Normally textual changes are for the better: the changes incorporated improve the musicality of the poem or makes a particular point clearer for the reader. After all, Bringhurst is a poet who aims at being clear and transparent for the reader, which does not mean necessarily that his poetry is not intellectually challenging and exacting.

No distinct parts appear to be discernible in “Fayan Wenyi”, which is a river-poem, one where stanzas flow naturally and smoothly into one another to form a perfect *Gestalt* in which all words fall exactly into place. It opens with an enigmatic conversation reminiscent of the philosophical conversations between master and student so typical of Zen koan practice. The master asks a simple question: “*Where are you going?*”, and the disciple answers “*I don’t know.*” “*Not knowing is close*”: this is the master’s reply. Sometimes we move and we pretend we are going somewhere and yet we ignore what our destination is. A critique of purposeless action is what the master might intend to convey to the truth-seeker with his enigmatic words. Or rather, not knowing, not making any effort to know anything at all, to penetrate the ultimate essence of things, might be the best path leading towards self-enlightenment. Therefore, the student decides to “*stay in one place for a while*” and seek inside himself, we presume, in search of his true being and the truth of reality. This is what Zen encourages its adepts to do: searching outside oneself is nonsense as the answer is close at hand from the very start since all humans are endowed with the Buddha-nature. When enlightenment is attained, the truth-seeker realizes that reality is an indestructible unity where it does not make sense to draw distinctions between “*waking and dreaming, / arriving and leaving*” for they are “*flower and stem.*” They are the sides to one and the same coin. Once again, Bringhurst makes use of tautological statements to try to convey the inexpressible: “*we are where we are, / eating the answer each day, and excreting the question.*” The key to the answer is deep inside ourselves and we do not seem to notice it. We eat the answer every day

¹⁴⁴ “Fayan Wenyi” was originally published in C.62 [Four poems], *Windhorse Review* (Yarmouth, Nova Scotia) 11/12 (Summer 1993): [6-7]. Contents: • “Lotus Flower Mountain”; • “Rújīng” (rpt. as “Tiantong Rujing” in A.47, A.53, A.53a, A.65, A.92); • “Yúnmén Wényan” (rev. in A.47, rpt. from A.47 in A.65, B.69, A.92); • “Fayan Wényi” (rev. in A.47, A.65, A.92). [There are misspellings in the titles of the latter two poems.] Afterwards, it was revised in A.47 *The Calling* (1995), further revised in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001) and reprinted from A.47 again in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009).

¹⁴⁵ The original text as published in C.62 consists of four instead of five stanzas. Stanzas 1 and 2 are exactly the same, but an extra stanza (the third one) is added in the definitive textual incarnation of the poem. Stanzas 4 and 5 read slightly differently in C.62: “*The whole is the truth, which like us has arrived / at this place, and like us is departing. / The truth, like the rest of us, dies and is born / and goes on with the business of living. // What should one do with the night and the day? / Every step, every breath / should roll like an egg / to the edge of this question.*” In the 2001 version of the poem the last line is also different: “to the edge of *the* question”, and not “*this* question”, as in *The Calling* version.

because it is visible and palpable in reality, and we excrete the question in return so as to start the whole questioning all over again:

giving back shit, which the flowers and fireflies
eat, or hiding the shit, or feeding
the shit to our friends and our children,
and giving back nothing.

In the meantime, “*the whole is the truth*” and it is right in front of us, before our eyes, “*tying its shoe, with its coat on one shoulder.*” Which means that it is ready to go away, that we should seize the opportunity to catch it unless it slips away or vanishes into nothingness. The truth might be eel-slippery, elusive, because it loves to hide from humans’ inquisitive gaze. Like human beings themselves, the truth is engaged in the art of living too: “*The truth, like the rest of us, dies and is born / and goes on with the business of living.*” And in the closing stanza, the reader gets to hear the soliloquizing of the monk or student presented in the first stanza of the poem:

What shall I do with the night and the day,
with this life and this death? Every step, every
breath rolls like an egg
to the edge of this question.

In lines reminiscent of Eliot’s Prufrock’s uncertainty, the pupil or disciple wonders what he should do about time passing by. Time goes by inevitably and inexorably, and there is nothing the monk can do about it. All the steps he is taking along the path of life, every breath he is taking at every moment in his lifetime, is drawing him closer and closer to the end, but also to this inevitable question: How to make the most of time? How to make of one’s stay on earth a genuine life? All the actions taken in one’s life and all the words uttered on time, and all the paths not taken determine the course of one’s journey. The only problem is that there is no return point, no turning back time, and the painful doubt remains whether one is making the right decisions along the way.

XIX · LIANHUA FENGXIAN

“Lianhua Fengxian”¹⁴⁶ was originally published under the title “Lotus Flower Mountain” in a literary magazine entitled *Windhorse Review* in 1993. Since then, the original four-stanza poem¹⁴⁷ has undergone important modifications till it has reached its final textual

¹⁴⁶ “Lianhua Fengxian” was originally published under the title “Lotus Flower Mountain” in C.62 [Four poems], *Windhorse Review* (Yarmouth, Nova Scotia) 11/12 (Summer 1993): [6-7]. Contents: • “Lotus Flower Mountain”; • “Rújìng” (rpt. as “Tiantong Rujing” in A.47, A.53, A.53a, A.65, A.92); • “Yúnmén Wényan” (rev. in A.47, rpt. from A.47 in A.65, B.69, A.92); • “Fayan Wényi” (rev. in A.47, A.65, A.92). [There are misspellings in the titles of the latter two poems.] Afterwards, it was published under the title “Lianhua Xiang” with some textual variants in C.74 [Two Poems]. *Canadian Literature* 155 (Winter 1997): 15, 179. Contents: • “Lianhua Xiang”; • “Keizan”. Here it was published as “Lianhua Xiang”, not as “Lianhua Fengxian”. Finally, it was included as part of the Oriental sages sequence in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009), where it was reprinted from C.74. It was never published as part of the sequence as published in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001).

¹⁴⁷ This is the original text of the poem as published in C.62: “Stop writing the guidebook. / Our ancestors reached here as well. / They tasted this wind, and they left us this cache / of old footsteps. They left us // these splinters and flakes of ideas, / the husks of their thought, / where they sat, night after night, by the fire / and sharpened their questions. // This is no first ascent, and no summit. / They also were here. They left

incarnation in *Selected Poems* (2009). It concerns the thinking of another Oriental sage essential to Bringhurst's search after moveable and flexible structures of knowledge that are urgently necessary to humankind nowadays. Lianhua Fengxian belongs among those ancestors whose company the poet has sought time and again in search of some form of enlightenment, possibly both intellectual and spiritual. In the short poetic prose piece accompanying the 28 poems that make up the Oriental sages sequence as published in *The Book of Silences* in 2001, Bringhurst gives us these luminescent words as a gift in what looks like an autobiographical text that is worth quoting in full:

My father was born in the village of Garland, Wyoming, in 1915. After Pearl Harbor, close to Garland, the Heart Mountain prison camp was built and filled with Japanese Americans, jailed because of their race. Among the prisoners was the Buddhist teacher Senzaki Nyogen. I was born the year he was released.

Not many years later, in Utah, then California, I was reading Buddhist books that many kids in North America were reading in those days: books by Senzaki's friend Suzuki Daisetsu, and translations – usually poor ones – of older Pali and Chinese and Sanskrit texts. Why did we read them? We didn't know. We knew they told us something other books quite frequently forgot.

A few years after that, I began what has become a lifelong practice: rooting through the library, digging up the dead, holding their bones to my ears like shells, and pulling their skulls down over my head. There may be reasons for such deviant behavior. I was born in the year of the dog. I also spent my early days in houses with no books. The library and bookstore, when I discovered them, seemed to me the finest candy stores on earth. And I come from a long line of refugees and orphans. In the tradition I was born to, birth is not what counts. Progenitors are chosen instead of imposed, and ancestors are earned instead of inherited.

In my twenties, I started to read, then to translate, the philosopher-poets of early Greece, and to go on little joy-rides with their ghosts. In my thirties, I started thinking back to all those Asian poet-monks I'd read of but had never really read. I wanted to go walking with them too.

I never got very far in studying Chinese or Japanese, so the walks were always short, but over twenty years we walked a little way. These poems are the result.¹⁴⁸

There is something moving about the words Bringhurst deploys to refer back to these Oriental sages, whom he considers his ancestors: "In the tradition I was born to, birth is not what counts. Progenitors are chosen instead of imposed, and ancestors are earned instead of inherited." Literary tradition is not something one inherits spontaneously, but something one must earn through personal effort and deliberate study of the achievements of the old masters. In this, Bringhurst is following closely in the steps of Ezra Pound, who was convinced that there was no use in trying to accomplish, literarily speaking, what had already been accomplished with undeniable excellence by someone else. It was, however, a test of an author's sincerity that he approached his craft with rigorous knowledge of the technical elements involved in it. This partly accounts for the fact that, from the very beginning of his literary career forty years ago, Bringhurst applied himself with great diligence to the study of the masters of a number of literary traditions in search

us / their spent breath / and the touch of their hands on the stones. // If they came all this way, / why didn't they stay here? / Eh? Could it be because this / was the start of their path?" What might be the definitive textual incarnation of this poem consists of five stanzas instead of four and has been significantly perfected in many ways with the respect to the original text. This is common practice with Bringhurst: the poems that make up his corpus are a work in progress that is revised and polished time and again. Nevertheless, the *Ur-text* is here quoted in full just to give an idea of the way it has metamorphosed into a unique piece of utter perfection and beauty.

¹⁴⁸ Robert Bringhurst, *The Book of Silences*, Los Angeles: Ninja Press, 2001. See the "Prospectus" at the end (unpaged).

of inspiration for his own poetic enterprise. If nothing else, Bringhurst is diligent and hard-working, and he has seized every opportunity to improve his craft as a poet. But poetry is a life-long vocation in his case, a genuine calling, not a pastime or part-time activity. Assiduous translation practice from a number of modern and classical languages, the conscientious study of prosody, and the meditation on crucial aspects related to poetry, language and tradition in his brilliant essays are certainly a part of this self-imposed Spartan discipline that has occupied him for decades now. In this self-willed determination to earn a place among the best of the ancestors of Western and Eastern traditions, he resembles certain Buddhist monks who would endure all kinds of physical and mental hardships so long as they could attain the enlightenment *satori* brought about.

To his mind, literature is *Weltliteratur* and nothing of value or relevance can be accomplished unless one knows firsthand the best that has already been thought or done in the past. Thinking and singing are the two sides of the same coin: what we find in the extant fragments of the poet-philosophers known as the Presocratics and what we read in the Zen Buddhist texts of the Oriental sages is philosophical poetry or poetic philosophy in which ideas sing and dance with perfect naturalness. This is the kind of poetry that interests Bringhurst: one that brings ideas and music together; one that fuses profundity of thought, feeling and clarity of speech. And this is the kind of poetry he himself is interested in producing. The words are so clear that they are almost invisible, and yet they are a pleasure to listen to, for they are imbued with a precious musicality that is expressive of careful devotion to a craft that seeks to communicate important ideas in memorable forms. There is then nothing devious about his behaviour as he digs up the bones of his ancestors, metaphorically speaking, in those libraries where he hears the echoes of his predecessors speaking loud and clear to him. In this respect, “Lianhua Fengxian” is a well-wrought composition in honour of the Buddhist monks and philosophers that dared think with astonishing profundity about fundamental questions – i.e., those questions that have been asked time and again by humans over the centuries. The poem consists of two parts: whereas the first part (stanzas 1 to 3) offers an exhaustive catalogue of the legacy our ancestors have left us, the second (stanzas 4 and 5) dwells on the universal things that pertain to humankind despite the passing of time.

Bringhurst’s poem opens with a verb in the imperative form: “*Stop writing the guidebook.*” With these words the poetic persona of Lianhua Fengxian the poet is impersonating here might be addressing a disciple, the modern reader or himself. Whichever the case, the meaning is crystal-clear: knowledge, even less wisdom, is not to be found in books. One must look somewhere else for illumination. Zen Buddhism dismisses intellectualization and encourages its adepts to find enlightenment within themselves. There is no need to search outside oneself, for the nature of the mind is radiant light and each human being is already an enlightened Buddha from the very beginning. And yet one needs to acknowledge that one’s ancestors accomplished much that needs to be borne in mind when trying to penetrate the ultimate essence of things: “*Our ancestors reached here as well,*” which is to say *nihil novum sub sole*. There is a purely physical and subtle substratum uniting us human beings of the present with these ancestors who lived in the past: our breathing the same air, our tasting the same wind on our tongues. But the legacy we should be grateful heirs to includes something else, the catalogue of which unfolds in the three opening stanzas of Bringhurst’s poem. “*They left us / this cache of old footsteps,*” and so their traces are discernible on the ground, and also:

They left us these splinters and flakes
of ideas: the inedible bits of their thought
that fell where they sat, night after night

by the fire, to sharpen their questions.

This is no first ascent and no record-book summit.
They also were here, and they left us
their spent breath
and the touch of their hands on the stones.

That Zen goes in fear of abstractions is made clear from the two stanzas just quoted above. As in the case of the extant fragments that have been preserved of the Pre-Socratics' thinking¹⁴⁹ in ancient Greece, at the very cradle of Western philosophy, these Oriental sages have also left us "*splinters and flakes of ideas*", "*inedible bits of their thought*", and tiny packages of precious insights into the nature of reality. These would come into the light of day as these thinkers sat by the fireside asking the same questions tirelessly, sharpening them in the process, in their search after the right answers – which is also an implicit reference to koan practice in among Buddhists. Remnants of visions or tattered fragments of wisdom: this is what the Pre-Socratics and the Oriental sages have left us as their irreplaceable legacy. It cannot be seen or touched, but only celebrated with a profound sense of gratitude for their having thought these intuitive insights for our own benefit. Furthermore, these Buddhist sages have left us "*their spent breath*" and "*the touch of their hands on the stones.*" For instance, Han Shan at Cold Mountain comes immediately up to one's mind – the wandering poet who lived as a hermit in a cave deep in the mountains and devoted his time to composing poems on stones, bamboo, trees, and rocks of what he deemed to be his natural home. Their breath has not extinguished altogether; there are still traces of their hands on the stones that the stones have not quite forgotten yet. We have only to listen and to look with fresh eyes and open ears to see that these ancestors are not quite dead. Something of them has survived the passage of time. Now, mountains were of paramount importance for Buddhist monks. As Bringhurst himself explains in the untitled headnote preceding the section of "The Book of Silences" as published in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986):

Most of them were wanderers, and most of them resettled, taking new names from the neighboring mountains. They are not just people who were places; they are people who *became* places – when everything encouraged them instead to become consumers and provisioners: bureaucrats or managers; trapped, coopted laborers or lords.¹⁵⁰

Hence "*this is no first ascent and no record-book summit,*" for these sages have been there already before we even started climbing the mountain. In the secular adventure of humankind's search after the truth, our predecessors did much of value for us. Humans from all times and places on earth have been tackling the same fundamental questions after all. We share much more than we might think at first. Upon closer inspection, it seems that the Pre-Socratics and the Oriental sages were asking the same questions with their sharpened minds after all. *Where is truth to be found? Is knowledge of reality a possibility? How do humans come to know anything at all? What is the world (and the things in it) made of? Are words reliable in our representation of the world? Does language manage to somehow capture the essence of things?* They sought hard to reach to the very roots of *being*. These are the fundamental questions that poetry, science and philosophy ask tirelessly and look for satisfactory answers to. In the second

¹⁴⁹ Bringhurst's words on the ancestors and the tattered fragments of their visions in this poem are strongly reminiscent of those he uses to refer to the Pre-Socratics in *The Old in Their Knowing*. Thus, the closing line of "Herakleitos" is "*Wind stirs his ashes*", and in "Pythagoras" Bringhurst speaks of "*remnants*", of "*rubble of picked-over thought*", of the mind of Pythagoras standing "*on two columns of words*" amid so much havoc and destruction.

¹⁵⁰ *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, p. 10.

part of the poem, Bringhurst emphasizes precisely the sense of kinship (both human and intellectual) that unites all men and women with their ancestors. On their ascent to the summit of the mountain (which is a splendid or eloquent metaphor to signify the conquest of knowledge and truth), our ancestors “*inhaled the same light with their own eyes / and exhaled their shadows the same.*” Not only did they breathe in the same air, but also breathed in the same light emanating from the sun and breathed out their own shadows onto the ground. *Ubi sunt?*, asks the poetic voice. “*Why didn’t they stay if they came here? / And where are they now?*” Why did they have to die after so much effort to attain enlightenment, to touch the truth with their finger tips? The answer is found in the closing stanza:

Every day is the first day. Every day
is the second, the third and the last.
Every step is the centre, the edge,
the beginning and end of the path.

The poetic persona manages to convey with utter simplicity and elegance such profundity of thought that these lines keep on resonating in the echo-chamber of one’s mind long after one has finished reading this poem. The metaphor used by the poet is twofold: it is temporal, for each day is the first and also the last; but it is also spatial, for every step we take is ubiquitous and reaches in all directions to the beginning and end of the path, to the centre and to the peripheral areas. The ultimate message is crystal-clear again: we humans must start anew, from scratch every day, because the conquest of knowledge, the search after the truth, is bound to begin every new day with renewed energies.

XX · XUEDOU ZHONGXIAN

“Xuedou Zhongxian”¹⁵¹ is an absolutely accomplished poem in *The Book of Silences* and another remarkable example of Bringhurst’s attempts to express the inexpressible. Most of the compositions in the Oriental sages sequence are pieces of meditation that are variations on *being*. And this poem proves to be no exception. It concerns the thinking and singing of another ancient Chinese monk who lived a long time ago. In the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst gives us the essentials concerning this sage: “Xuedou Zhongxian (Hsueh-tou Cheng-hsien, 980–1052) ‘Snowcave’. A Zen monk and poet in the tradition of Yúnmén. He compiled an anthology of koans, writing a short poem to accompany each. A century later a Rinzaï monk named Yuánwǔ Kèqín – the teacher of Dàhuí Zonggō – edited the collection, adding a commentary and notes, to produce what is known as the *Bìyán Lù* or *Blue Cliff Record*.” And in the 2001 Ninja Press edition of *The Book of Silences*, he gives us only elementary details: “Xuedou Zhongxian (Hsueh-tou Ch’ung-hsien) “Snowcave” 980-1052 Southern China.”

Bringhurst’s poem consists of seven stanzas, which can be divided into three distinct parts that convey a sort of epiphany to the reader. As the poem’s meaning unfolds

¹⁵¹ “Xuedou Zhongxian” was originally published in C.63 [Four Poems], *Canadian Literature* 140 (Spring 1994): 79-85. Contents: • “Dongshan Liangjie” (rpt. in A.47, A.65, A.92); • “Xuedou Zhongxian” (rpt. in B.58); • “Yongjia Xuanjue”; • “Dogen” (excerpt rev. in B.72, C.71). It was revised in A.47 *The Calling* (1995), and then reprinted from A.47 in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001) and in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009). It was also reprinted somewhere else: (i) in B.58 *Windhorse Reader*, 2nd edition, edited by John Castlebury, Yarmouth, Nova Scotia: Samurai Press, 1995: pp 38–39. Contribution: “Xuedou Zhongxian” (rpt. from C.63); and (ii) in C.75 “Xuedou Zhongxian”, *London Free Press* (London, Ontario), 10 January 1999: D1 (rpt. from A.47).

into full bloom, we realize that a moment of revelation with the texture of transcendence is at stake here. The first part of the poem (stanzas 1 to 3) communicates this sense of ineffability inherent in that moment out of time at which the self confronts the depths of its being and finds out the ultimate essence of reality within itself. Koan practice among Buddhists resonates powerfully beneath the verse lines of the first stanza, surrounded as they are by a gnomic halo. Throughout the whole composition the poet relies on the use of paradoxical language to try to capture what is otherwise simply incommunicable or inexpressible. Nonetheless, the sage's dramatic impersonation in Bringhurst's poem evokes a moment of utter transcendence with astonishing mastery:

There is no person. There are no words.
There is this moment, silent and speaking.
What seem to be beings are facets of time
permitted to dance in the light or to listen.

Xuedou Zhongxian's persona speaks with moving confidence and serenity. The statement that "*there is no person*" is meant as a reference to the vanishing of egoic personality during this moment of insight into the nature of things, whereas the statement that "*there are no words*" suggests that language proves to be an inadequate tool to convey the insights gained to others, even to oneself. Words are also altogether dispensable at the very moment of encounter between the self and pure being. They are unreliable, inefficient and unnecessary. What transcends the limits of verbal expression is the unspoken or the unspeakable, and it is this precisely what the sage is handling with his beautiful mind. The only thing that appears to truly exist is *this moment* isolated in time (or out of time), which is paradoxically *silent* and *speaking* at the same time. Silence is pregnant with meaning as it points all the way straight into the heart of *being* as it were. Against the backdrop of an ultimate substratum underlying all the transient things in this world, what the truth-seeker understands all of a sudden is that the multiplicity of *beings* are nothing but incarnations, expressions or "*facets of time / permitted to dance in the light or to listen.*" *What is* exists somehow in the flux of time, dancing in the light and listening to itself as part of the grander scheme of *being*. Needless to say, words will not do when it comes to capture or to grasp this intense penetration into the real.

At this moment of enlightenment, the self attains other meaningful insights into reality though: "*All eyes shine toward / one another; all eyes shine away,*" as if to acknowledge that they share in the same experience of transcendence. In addition, speech is not altogether abandoned or left behind, for body, speech and mind go hand in hand in Bringhurst's poetry: "*What will your first words be, now that your last / have already been spoken?*" This rhetorical question might sound paradoxical, but it does make perfect sense: what the Buddhist sage is asking is precisely how is one to start speaking again after going through such an intense experience of self-illumination. Once one has entered the realm of silence and the unspeakable, how is one to make words effective again? Which words is one to choose to communicate the insights gained into the essence of things? There is something irreverent about using words to say nothing at all, about handling words as if they were vacuous tools that have nothing to say. This is something one must avoid at all costs. Hence the first part of Bringhurst's poem closes with a reflection on expression through verbal means among humans and through means other than verbal among animals: "*Self-expression is easy. Expressing what is / is a little more difficult.*" These two simple sentences encapsulate Bringhurst's poetics with astonishing linguistic economy: the poet is after a poetry that is based on profundity of thought and universals, and not on narcissistic experience and mere opinion. It does not take much effort to express what one feels deep inside, to give voice to the private cartographies of the self, but it is difficult to find the

right way to grasp and convey *what is* to others with clarity, objectivity and relevance. It seems that animals are specially good at expressing *what is*, even if they do not use recognizably human speech to fulfil this purpose: birds sing and fly, and they express *what is* through their singing and their flying with the utmost natural spontaneity. Hence “*Orioles sing. The kingfisher chortles / and falls like an axe through a hole in the rain.*” There is nothing else for them to do; it is more than enough for them to do what they know how to do best of all, because it is in their nature.

The second part of “Xuedou Zhongxian” concerns a journey to visit “*the one with the answers.*” Now, the Zen sage is addressing directly a *you* that might or might not be the reader, invited to cross the threshold and take an active part in the spiritual quest the sage is trying to convey to us. It remains unclear where exactly this strange woman lives who is in possession of all the answers to our questions. She is a supernatural being, a goddess, or Mother Earth herself, as “*each step is exactly halfway to her home,*” which suggests that she is closer at hand than we might think at first. There is no need for those who set out on this journey to take any special tools with them: the knife and the hammer mentioned in the poem prove useless as they have not even the indispensable parts that constitute them naturally. What is the sense in taking “*a knife*” with “*no tang or handle*”, or “*a hammer*” with “*no socket or shaft*”? That “*the one with the answers*” is a pervasive presence in the world is made clear in the fifth stanza, where we learn that she uses neither silence or words to answer the questions posed to her. The parallelism and the beauty of these lines make them truly memorable:

Standing invisibly in the hills,
walking inaudibly on the seafloor,
the one you can talk to will use
neither silence nor speech to reply.

The third and last part of “Xuedou Zhongxian” (stanzas 6 and 7) tessellates spatial and geometrical imagery into a unique tapestry to evoke the ultimate unity of all reality, while at the same time it dwells on the notion of the body as microcosm that contains the whole world in its entirety within itself. Contradiction is at the heart of certain statements. For instance, that “*There is only one way. It goes every direction.*” points to the ubiquity of *being*, to the universality of a substratum uniting all things into one. Regardless of the way one chooses to approach *being*, all paths will take one there, for it is ubiquitous. “*The circle is square, / and its corners are everywhere.*” is another variation on this same notion of the ubiquity of *what is*. Of greater interest is the idea of the body as microcosm at the heart of the sixth stanza:

The seventy joints of the body are knotholes
through which the turtles peer out of the river,
through which the sea-turtles enter the sea.

Mapping the geography of the human body, the poetic voice comes to discover that it is filled with *knotholes* (resembling those on the wood of the trunk or branches of a tree) through which different manifestations of *being* find their way in or out into a different world. Inner is outer, and the other way around: the human body contains the world inside its boundaries, which are not strictly speaking limits. This is the reason why it is possible to affirm that, at the elemental joints of the human body, turtles find their way out of the river and into the sea. Now, Bringhurst’s poem closes with an enigmatic order for the *you* being addressed throughout the poem to “*Carry your nostrils out into the woods with you, / one in each hand.*” How is it possible to take nostrils in one’s hands?, one may ask. Of course, this is

figurative language. What the poetic voice of this Oriental ancestor is telling us is that we should breathe through our hands in much the same way we breathe through our feet when we walk. Or, to put it differently, he is urging us to listen, to pay attention to *what is* with due reverence and gratitude and respect. In the woods we will find ourselves more truly if we just care to *breathe in* the world in its manysided subtlety and we let it breathe us in.

XXI · DANXIA ZICHUN

“Danxia Zichun”¹⁵² is a dramatic impersonation of the thinking of another Oriental sage who lived in the early second millennium CE. It seems that not much is known of this Chinese Zen monk, apart from some basic details preserved in *Denkoroku* (*Transmission of Light*) by master Keizan.¹⁵³ In the “Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures” at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringhurst informs us that Danxia Zichun (Tanhsia Tzu-ch’un, c. 1065 - c. 1135) was “a Zen monk whose poems are gathered in the Xutáng Jí – a book whose title might be translated either as *Gathering in the Empty Room* or *The Vacant Hall Collection*. His chosen name, Danxiá, means Redcloud.” Furthermore, in the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst gives us only essential pieces of information concerning this Oriental sage: “Danxia Zichun (c. 1065 – c. 1119) ‘Redcloud.’ A Zen monk whose poems are collected in the *Xutáng Jí* or *Gathering in the Empty Room*.” Even briefer is the information provided by Bringhurst in the 2001 edition of *The Book of Silences*: “Danxia Zichun (Tan-hsia Tzu-ch’un) ‘Redcloud’ c. 1065 – c. 1119 Southern China.”¹⁵⁴ Reading this miniature biographies of Danxia, one is reminded that one’s lifetime on earth is reducible to just a handful of elemental data: the date of birth and death, the name of the place where one has spent their days, and one’s calling or vocation. Not much needs to be added to this short catalogue. What remains of Danxia’s thinking is valuable enough even a thousand years later, and so Bringhurst chose to devote time to this unique sage.

Bringhurst’s poem consists of five short stanzas of three verse lines each, but two movements for the reader’s soul are easily discernible: the one concerned with a personification of the earth as a whole that is truly alive and the other concerned with the

¹⁵² “Danxia Zichun” was originally published as C.50 [Eleven poems], *CutBank* (Missoula, Montana) 26 (Spring/Summer 1986): 37–58. It was then reprinted in A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, slightly revised in A.47 *The Calling*, and reprinted in its definitive incarnation in A.65 *The Book of Silences* and in A.92 *Selected Poems*. In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, the calligraphy accompanying this piece reads: zu táng jí = *empty hall assemble*.

¹⁵³ See *Transmission of Light [Denkoroku]. Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan*, translated and with an introduction by Thomas Cleary. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990, p. 200: “Danxia left home to become a monk at an early age. He became enlightened under the tutelage of Zen master Daokai. In his first inquiry he asked, “What is the one statement that all the sages since antiquity have handed on?” Although the successive enlightened ones have changed in appearance, there is always that which is handed on, which has no front or back, no above or below, no boundaries, no self or other. This is called the nonempty void. This is the true ultimate for all people; it is inherently complete in everyone.

Yet many students think erroneously of it as original nothingness, declaring that there is nothing to say and nothing to know. The ancients called such people outsiders fallen into empty nothingness. They never become really free.

So you must be thoroughgoing and continue until all is exhausted and even emptiness is empty; yet there is still something that cannot be emptied. Investigating thoroughly, once you manage to see it, you will be able to make a statement. Therefore Danxia called it the statement that has been handed down.”

¹⁵⁴ Robert Bringhurst, *The Book of Silences*, Los Angeles: Ninja Press, 2001. See the separately bound section entitled “Contents & Notes” at the end (unpaged).

hill waking up to the glory of a new day. That this man's name should mean "Redcloud" comes as no surprise: it makes perfect sense when one reads a poem like this, meant to capture somehow the essence of this thinking and this sage's conception of nature. The language used by Bringhurst in the making of his composition is elegantly simple and understandable, but the thought displays a profound subtlety and complexity that is moving: here is the monk's spirit seizing upon the living, pulsating fact that the earth is truly alive, and the encounter takes place with no intervening agents or intermediaries. In fact, Zen encourages its adepts to grasp reality with their own naked hands before it slips away. Intellect is not altogether reliable in experiences like this where the soul awakens to a sharpened state of awareness and gains an insight into the essence of reality. Normally, we are made to live on the superficiality of things, but a closer look at the world reveals transcendental nuances hitherto unnoticed:

The whole earth closes
like a fist and touches,
once, the rimless drum,

and opens
slowly as a rose¹⁵⁵
while no one listens.

Bringhurst is at his best handling luminescent metaphors in the weaving of his poems, and metaphor is the very foundation of these two short stanzas. The earth is personified and conceived of as being a living creature in its entirety. It closes like a fist that touches "*a rimless drum*" making it sound and it opens like a rose into the daylight of a new day. Maybe a reference is implicit here to the natural succession of night and day: at night the earth closes upon itself like a fist that resonates against the infinite (*rimless*) drum of the dark skies, and at daytime it opens like a rose to the warmth and protection of the benevolent sunlight. It all happens "*while no one listens,*" for the earth loves hiding from humans' inquisitive gaze, possibly because humans in general are too busy doing other things to have any spare time to pay attention to the genuine miracle and mystery of *what is*. This idea is recurrent in Bringhurst's poetry: for instance, it is also found most eloquently in *New World Suite No. 3* (2005): "*And the hills dance, / but only when no one / is looking*" (staves 126-128 of movement I), "*The eye of the earth is open / but it is hidden*" (staves 25-26 of movement II), and "*What is / is not hidden, although it is hiding*" (staves 2-3 of movement III). Earth dances to the inaudible rhythm of a drum of gigantic proportions that we do not seem able to perceive in any straightway fashion unless we get rid of wearisome intellectualizing burdens and learn to look at the world from a fresh standpoint.

The second part of Bringhurst's composition focuses on the hill upon which the sunlight shines announcing the coming of a new day. Needless to say, hills and mountains figure prominently in the lives of these Oriental sages, who spent much of their lifetime as wandering or itinerant monks travelling from one temple to another in search of instruction from the best masters of their time, or lived close to trees and mountains after which they themselves were named. To an attentive observer of the natural world, the summit of the hill could be said to resemble a human skull in its round-shaped outline against the horizon. The hill is also alive in its own way, and so it "*wakes from its dream / before morning,*" earlier than humans themselves wake up to resume their daily routines. At first sight, it may seem that the hill is completely naked and exposed to the pitiless effects

¹⁵⁵ In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, these two lines read slightly different: "and slowly opens / like a rose".

of elements, but it is not, since it is covered with moss and with benign moonlight at night (notice the alliteration of /m/ in *moonlight* and *moss*). The thought occurs that hills lead a simple life of asceticism that must have been appealing to Zen monks. They do not need much to feel satisfied: “*impeccably dressed*” in moonlight and moss, hills are also “*well fed*” and “*well rested*,” and they give “*not a thought to returning*.” Where to?, one may ask. They do not give a thought to returning to the realm of darkness and dreams that night-time brings with it. They are happy to dance to the rhythm of singing earth; they are happy to feel that they fit in the grander scheme of things and so the arrival of a new day is a good reason to celebrate the constant feast that existence is. Danxia Zichun is Redcloud: it occupies an even humbler place within this subtle mesh of living things: he is the cloud coloured or tinged red by the sun rays, hovering or wandering freely above the tranquil hills covered with moss. The overall impression is one of serenity and gratitude in the end.

XXII · DAHUI ZONGGAO

“Dahui Zonggao”¹⁵⁶ embodies the thinking of another essential twelfth-century Chinese Zen master who advocated the use of koans as the most effective path leading towards self-enlightenment. From an entry included in the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), we learn that Dahui Zonggao (Ta-hui Tsung-kaio, 1089-1163) was “A Zen monk of the Rinzai school. His teacher was Yuánwǔ Kèqín, who edited the poems of Xūdòu to produce the *Blue Cliff Record*.” And in the separately bound section entitled “Contents & Notes” of the 2001 edition of *The Book of Silences*, Bringhurst gives us only essential information on this Oriental sage: “Dahui Zonggao (Ta-hui Tsung-kaio) 1089-1163 Southern China.” Robert Bringhurst’s piece is a most accomplished poem in honour of this great thinker. In one sense, it is a miniature treatise on the nature of the truth as conceptualized by this sage; in another sense, it is a profound meditation on learning as the ultimate vocation of all human beings of all times, which is an idea central to Bringhurst’s own thinking as it unfolds in his own poetry and in his own delightful essays, where the line separating poetry and prose is altogether irrelevant. What is simply astonishing about this composition is that Dahui Zonggao’s and Bringhurst’s thinking fuse together into a harmonious whole, so that one is no longer in a position to say where the one’s thought ends and the other’s begins. It is necessary to have the penetrating mind of a Dahui Zonggao to be able to produce a memorable poem of everlasting beauty like this one.

Born in Zuancheng (Anhui Province, in southern China), Dahui Zonggao left his home at the age of 16 to become a Buddhist monk at 17. As the common practice of the day prescribed, he wandered from one Zen community to another seeking the instruction of the most lucid minds of his time. He mastered almost all the valuable Zen writings there were to master at that time, particularly the records of the *Five Houses of Chan* by Yunmen Wenyan and the old sayings of the masters collected and commented on by Xuèdòu Chongxian which formed the basis for the *Blue Cliff Record*. However, disappointed with intellectual study and incapable of achieving enlightenment, he made up his mind to move somewhere else and study under the guidance of Zhan Tangzhou. This master quickly recognized the intellectual potential of his student and made him his personal attendant. After his master fell ill, Dahui Zonggao asked him to recommend him a new master to

¹⁵⁶ “Dahui Zonggao” was first published in A.47 *The Calling* and then it was reprinted with a minor change in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001) and in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009).

whom he could turn to so as to continue his studies. Yuánwǔ Kèqín became his new teacher and gave him a difficult koan to struggle with: “East Mountain walks on the water.” After repeated failure to give the teacher the right answer, he attained his great breakthrough or *satori* on 13 May 1125. The disturbance of his mind ceased, time stopped and he remained in a state of utter calmness. From that point onwards, the great doubt necessary to have the determination to break through became central to Dahui’s own teaching. At the age of 49 he was appointed as abbot of Ching-shan monastery in Lin-an (in Hangzhou), where he gathered many followers, including high ranking officials. But soon he fell out of favour with the imperial government because of his association with a high official who fell out of favour himself and was exiled to a hostile place where he nonetheless kept on teaching. Eventually he was pardoned and allowed to return to his monastery, where he died on 10 August 1163.

Only a collection of koans entitled *The Storehouse of the True Dharma Eye* can be attributed to Dahui Zonggao with certainty. In collaboration with Ta-kuei, he also compiled the *Treasured Teachings of the Ch’an Monastic Tradition*, a set of instructions governing monastic life devised by older Chan abbots. Dahui was a vigorous critic of what he called the heretical Zen of silent illumination (i.e., the practice of just sitting in meditation in tranquillity and quietness), which led to a sort of vacuous drowsiness rather than to genuine enlightenment, and he advocated the Zen of koan introspection instead. Koans had to be truly penetrated, not intellectualized. It was precisely this intellectualization of koan practice that prompted him to destroy all the copies of his own master’s book. Though he was a firm believer in koan practice as the most effective method to achieve enlightenment, Dahui Zonggao was aware that this practice had become superfluous literary study in his own time and he decided to burn all the available copies (and the wooden blocks to print them) of his own teacher’s koan collection, the so-called *Blue Cliff Record*, one of the most venerated texts at that time. To him, working with determination on just a handful of koans was enough for any individual determined to attain enlightenment through daily meditation practice. *Satori* was available to all humans provided that they set about achieving enlightenment with strong determination. It was of the essence for truth-seeking individuals not to be fooled by words, for them to doubt even their own existence. Five centuries later, the great Japanese Rinzai master Hakuin Ekaku would also champion koan practice and great doubt as the best way to awaken to a new awareness.

Now, Bringham’s poem on this remarkable sage displays a clearly tripartite structure. Stanzas 1 and 2 embody in a nutshell Dahui Zonggao’s thinking on the ultimate nature of truth. We humans cannot put a stop to our inquiries into an ultimate truth any more than to our own breathing. This could be said to be an anthropological universal, and a recurrent preoccupation in Bringham’s poetry. How humans come to terms with the world through the prism of their senses and their mind is a theme central to his own poetics. Here is a poet concerned to ask his own questions and find his own answers to the problem of human knowledge. To what extent is it possible to know the essence of reality? What have the great minds of all times and traditions thought about this primordial encounter between humans and the world of which they are a part? In trying to find his own answers, he has turned for enlightenment to the insights of the best ancestors, western and eastern alike. The old in their knowing – the Presocratic philosophers and the Buddhist monks from India, China and Japan, but also the Haida mythtellers whose works he has translated into English – had much of transcendental value to teach him. Sārāha, Nāgārjuna, Dōgen, Hakuin, Pythagoras, Herakleitos, Empedokles, Parmenides, Demokritos, Ghandl and Skaay are all talisman names with him. To all of these poet-philosophers, the oral takes precedence over the written, poetry and philosophy walk along

the same path towards the same destination, and speech is sometimes a form of struggling with silence in their attempt to speak the unspeakable. What Bringhurst has learnt from all of them in the form of jewel-like conclusions is to be found scattered in his poetic corpus and prose pieces. What still astonishes one is the precious and rare coherence of his findings and of the lessons he has captured in his writing.

“The truth is not for contemplation,” says the poetic persona twice at strategic points in “Dahui Zonggao”. The path leading towards the truth entails getting at the facts at first hand, by personal experience, and not through any intermediary agent. Spiritual awakening is only possible by absorbing the flowing of the life-stream itself, by inhaling and eating the whole world in its entirety. *Breathe in and swallow the whole world on your own if you are seeking enlightenment,* these are Dahui’s elemental instructions for the Zen initiate. To gain an insight into the life-principle from which the universe takes rise, including one’s own humble existence, one needs not study the classics, but simply deeply delve into the mysteries of their own being and the world. But, at the same time, one must let the world inhale and swallow oneself. Bringhurst conveys all this with astonishing beauty, through verse lines marked by parallelism used to eloquent effect:

The truth is not for contemplation.
Just to know the odors of the truth
you must inhale the whole world
and be inhaled by the world in your turn.

To learn the flavors and the textures of the truth,
you must bite, chew and swallow the whole world –
every answer, every question – and be bitten,
chewed and swallowed in your turn.

D.T. Suzuki quotes four elemental statements attributed to Bodhidharma that are the core principles of Zen teaching: *“A special transmission outside the Scriptures; / No dependence upon words and letters; / Direct pointing to the soul of man; / Seeing into one’s nature and the attainment of Buddhahood.”*¹⁵⁷ These principles encourage the Zen practitioner to give up philosophizing and vacuous contemplation, and to see straightway into the truth of enlightenment in order to attain Buddhahood. For Zen does not rely on the intellect for the solution of its deepest problems. *“The real character of Zen is independent of learning and intellectuality,”*¹⁵⁸ Suzuki tells us. We need to see into our own nature through our own efforts, for the Buddha-nature of which we are all in possession. Thus, the real gist of Zen is *“seeing into one’s own Nature.”* Around this principle the whole of Zen is crystallized.¹⁵⁹ The fundamental truth of things is perceived through a literal physical process of making internal what is seemingly external: the mind absorbs or swallows the world outside, while the world, as if were a gigantic lung or mouth, also inhales and eats the perceiving subject. The world is really the world when it is assimilated into our own being and we are absorbed in it. However, dualism is not real either, for *“to see dualism in life is due to confusion of thought; the wise, the enlightened, see into the reality of things unhampered by erroneous ideas.”*¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, ed. by William Barrett, Westminster, MD, USA: Doubleday Publishing, 1996, p. 11 and p. 71.

¹⁵⁸ D.T. Suzuki, p. 81.

¹⁵⁹ D.T. Suzuki, pp. 87-88.

¹⁶⁰ D.T. Suzuki, p. 86.

Dahui Zonggao is absolutely explicit in saying that wisdom is not to be found in books. That he despised books is demonstrated by the fact that he gave precise instructions to burn all copies of the *Blue Cliff Record*, the venerated collection of koans. “*I have burned my teacher’s books,*” says the poetic persona twice in the last stanza. Dahui advocates the pre-eminence of the personal experience of truth over book-knowledge. By integrating into their living bone and flesh the infinity and mystery of things that make up the world in its entirety, humans are in a position to touch the truth with their own hands. Thus, intuitive understanding and seeing into self-nature is upheld against intellectual learning and philosophizing. In this context, enlightenment is much more than quietly contemplating the truth. It entails letting oneself plunge into the flowing stream of the mind and self-nature to apprehend our true nature.¹⁶¹ “The essence of Zen consists in acquiring a new viewpoint on life and things generally,”¹⁶² which is called *satori*. Reality is an indivisible organic whole and *satori* allows the Zen practitioner to grasp the entirety of life. The experience is at once purifying, enhancing and exacting, for it demands great stamina on the part of the truth-seeker. It shakes profoundly the moral and spiritual foundations of the self. Now, Suzuki reminds us that the general tendency of Buddhism is more intellectual than emotional. *Satori* is above all *noetic* and Zen is a form of *transcendental intellectualism*.¹⁶³ To see into one’s original nature: this is Zen according to Suzuki.

And yet, reality is always vaster than what we might come to learn, perceive or know of it. It is filled with wonders, mysteries, and unfathomabilities that defy our discursive understanding. Bringhurst’s poem closes with what, judged by the ordinary rules of logic, would not make much sense: “*I have burned my teacher’s books, / and now, together, we will read them.*” How is it possible to read from the books you have just burned?, one may ask. Dahui Zonggao’s gnomic, paradoxical language is intended to shake the Zen truth-seeker convictions, to make him doubt profoundly so that he/she might start anew from more solid ground. “*The truth is not for contemplation*” means at this point that Dahui is against quietist practices of meditation that lead to mental drowsiness, unproductive emptiness or useless blankness. What he advocates instead is the systematic practice of koans to attain genuine enlightenment for oneself, without any intervening agents whatsoever.

XXIII · Tiantong Rujing

“*Tiāntóng Rújìng*”¹⁶⁴ is Bringhurst’s accomplished poem in honour of another immortal Zen monk who lived in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE. In an entry included in the

¹⁶¹ D.T. Suzuki, p. 89.

¹⁶² D.T. Suzuki, p. 97. This is Suzuki’s definition of *satori*: “*Satori* may be defined as an intuitive looking into the nature of things in contradistinction to the analytical or logical understanding of it. Practically, it means the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistically-trained mind. [...] All its opposites and contradictions are united and harmonized into a consistent organic whole. This is a mystery and a miracle, but according to the Zen masters such is being performed every day. *Satori* can thus be had only through our once personally experiencing it.” *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

¹⁶³ Daisetz T. Suzuki, *ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁶⁴ “*Tiantong Rujing*” was originally published in C.62 [Four poems], *Windhorse Review* (Yarmouth, Nova Scotia) 11/12 (Summer 1993): [6-7]. Contents: • “*Lotus Flower Mountain*”; • “*Rújìng*” (rpt. as “*Tiantong Rujing*” in A.47, A.53, A.53a, A.65, A.92); • “*Yúnmén Wényan*” (rev. in A.47, A.65, B.69, A.92); • “*Fayan Wényi*” (rev. in A.47, A.65, A.92). [There are misspellings in the titles of the latter two poems.] Afterwards, it was reprinted as “*Tiantong Rujing*” elsewhere: (i) In A.47, *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995); (ii) as A.53, *Tiantong Rujing*. [Vancouver: University of British Columbia. 1996.] Broadside, 21.5 × 28 cm. Contents: A poem (rpt. from A.47), with announcement of a reading by Bringhurst, 9 October 1996; (iii) as A.53a,

“Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst tells us very briefly that Tiāntóng Rújǐng (T’ien-t’ung Ju-ching, 1163–1228) was “a Zen monk of the Soto school who taught in Jiangsu and Zhejiang. Teacher of Dōgen.” And in the limited 2001 Ninja Press edition of *The Book of Silences* (in the separately bound section entitled “Contents & Notes”), Bringhurst provides us with just elementary information: “Tiantong Rujing (T’ien-t’ung Ju-ching) 1163-1228 Zhejiang Province, eastern China.” Again, spatio-temporal coordinates will suffice to contextualize the thinking of this Oriental sage within the larger framework of Zen Buddhism. Tiāntóng Rújǐng was one of the eminent Zen monks of the Soto school. He lived in Qingdé Temple on Tiāntóng Mountain in Yinzhou District, Ningbo. Master Keizan tells us that “Rujing gave up doctrinal studies and went into Zen when he was nineteen years old. He joined the community of Zen master Zhijian and spent a year there constantly sitting in meditation, which he did more than the others.”¹⁶⁵ His teacher was Xuedou Zhijian (1105-1192), the 16th-generation dharma descendant of Huineng. Afterwards, he himself became the teacher of the great Dōgen, to whom he gave dharma transmission. Tradition has it that he is the originator of the notion of “the casting off of body and mind”, which is central to Bringhurst’s piece, as we shall see below in due time. He was a model of exacting self-discipline and commitment to Zen as a genuine way of life.¹⁶⁶ To be disciplined in Zen is no easy task. Great stamina and a very long and exacting constant vigilance are required of the truth-seeking monk. One must be ready to give in body and mind for the truth after sustained struggle with oneself. In this respect, D.T. Suzuki gives us a most illuminating definition of Zen:

Zen in its essence is the art of seeing into the nature of one’s own being, and it points the way from bondage to freedom. By making us drink right from the fountain of life, it liberates us from all the yokes under which we finite beings are usually suffering in this world. We can say that Zen liberates all the energies properly and naturally stored in each of us, which are in ordinary circumstances cramped and distorted so that they find no adequate channel for activity.¹⁶⁷

Bringhurst’s poem consists of three stanzas and three clearly distinguishable parts. The first stanza (and part) conveys the sense of self-discipline characteristic of Rujing’s practice of Zen. Renouncing all family affiliations and the steadfast safety of the teachings of his own masters, Tiāntóng Rújǐng embarks on the difficult task of *unknowing what he knows* so as to be in a position to better understand the ultimate nature of reality. No conscious effort is required on the part of the monk to know; *knowing* occurs when he least expects it to happen, when he reaches the moment of no-mind or no-thought, which refuses to be expressed in words of the mouth:

Tiantong Rujing. Flyer, 11 × 14 cm. (same as A.53 but in a reduced size); (iv) in A.65, *The Book of Silences* (2001); and (v) in A.92, *Selected Poems* (2009).

¹⁶⁵ See *Transmission of Light [Denkoroku]. Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan*, translated and with an introduction by Thomas Cleary. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990, p. 214. Keizan also informs us that “After he made his determination at the age of nineteen, Rujing stayed in monasteries, never returning to his native place. Not only that, he didn’t even talk to people from his homeland.” *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹⁶⁶ Again, Master Keizan tells us that “Throughout his papacy at several public monasteries, Rujing’s self-discipline was different from others, in that he was committed to being the same as the monks. [...] Furthermore, he kept his succession a secret, not revealing it all his life; only at the end did he formally acknowledge the teacher from whom he had inherited the teaching. This was not only to put off worldly craving for fame, but also out of deference for the good name of Zen. Truly his virtue was unequalled in his time, his discipline peerless in ancient or modern times.” *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹⁶⁷ See Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki*, ed. By William Barrett, Westminster, MD, USA: Doubleday Publishing, 1996, p. 3.

The names of my parents and teachers
are silences, zeroes. I learned what I know
by not knowing. I passed my exams
and presented my thesis by cleaning latrines.

In these accomplished lines, we see the truth-seeking monk in search of alternative paths leading to enlightenment other than the intellectualizing one: he is ready to give up his own family and his own teachers in his attempt to face the ultimate truth without any intermediaries or intervening agents. His parents and teachers are nothing but *silences, zeros*, that will not avail him of the kind of intense enlightenment he is looking for. Sudden insight into the essence of reality occurs by personal effort and when least expected, amid far from sublime daily routine activities such as latrine cleaning. This was his own way of passing exams and completing a doctoral thesis almost nine centuries ago. Beneath this first stanza there is also a discernible spark of biographical substratum: “At one point, when he [Tiāntóng Rújǐng] asked to be put in charge of cleaning the latrines, Zhijian [his teacher] asked him, “How can you clean what has never been dirty? If you can tell me, I’ll put you in charge of cleaning.” Tiāntóng Rújǐng was at a loss; even after two or three months had passed he still didn’t know what to say.”¹⁶⁸ Tiāntóng Rújǐng is convinced that knowledge is to be gained not by analysis or comparison, but through personal, unmediated experience. Therefore, one must be ready to remain alert all the time and see into things with the third eye. But attaining satori is no easy task either. According to Suzuki, a monkish life requires the austere practice of asceticism and “it implies the elevation of one’s spiritual powers to their highest notch. All the utterances and activities of the great Zen masters have come from this elevation. They are not intended to be enigmatic or driving us to confusion. They are the overflowing of a soul filled with deep experiences.”¹⁶⁹

The second stanza of “Tiāntóng Rújǐng” dwells on the sage’s process of *knowing by not knowing*. Two related statements are tessellated into the making of this stanza, which has an appealing gnomic aura about it. On the one hand, the first enigmatic statement concerns the all-important voice vs. silence dichotomy. Bringhurst’s book is entitled *The Book of Silences* after all. It is through silence that these Oriental sages focus their minds in their relentless search after enlightenment. Silence is a precious thing, especially when there is so much noise overwhelming the truth-seeking individual from every single direction. And noise is certainly a source of inattention or distraction that prevents the reflecting subject from achieving the peace of mind required to gain lasting insights into reality. Speech might be dispensable, especially if what the human voice has to unveil is not more beautiful or relevant than perfect silence already is. Hence “*A man raising his voice to silence an echo / has nothing to say but has not learned to say it.*” This looks like a paradoxical statement that defies the rules of ordinary logic. An echo is possibly the resonance of *what is*, and so we have no right to try to silence it in any way. Being humble in the face of *what is* is tantamount to learning to say nothing at all. Or, to put it differently, the enlightened Zen monk knows when to keep silent and say nothing at all, for what he might say could possibly defile the utter perfection of silence itself. But, of course, it takes practice and time for the initiate to perfect his own technique of keeping quiet. On the other hand, the second statement at the heart of the second stanza deals with the notion of creation. “*Creation is set to begin at this moment. / The time before anything was is right now.*” Every single individual has the opportunity to find enlightenment by his or her own personal efforts, and there is no need to turn to others’ intervention. Tiāntóng Rújǐng would always exhort people just to sit in meditation and to develop their mind fully, concentrating only on truth, not following the fashions of

¹⁶⁸ *Transmission of Light [Denkoroku]. Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan*, p. 214.

¹⁶⁹ Daisetz T. Suzuki, *ibid.*, p. 20.

the time, but emulating the Way of time immemorial instead.¹⁷⁰ In this context, creation means the chance to start anew for yourself, to seek the truth right now, regardless of others' attempts at self-enlightenment. Needless to say, the experience of *satori* or sudden enlightenment is central to Zen experience. By concentrating on their minds alone, humans might gain valuable insights into the nature of their own being – insights that will shake the very foundations of their selves.

Now, the third stanza of Bringhurst's poem explores the notion of "the casting off of body and mind". In progressing towards the light, the truth-seeking monk is to abandon his body and his mind behind, as it were. The poetic persona in the composition says: "*Shedding body and mind is like lifting your foot. / Setting it down is like shedding the shedding.*" We humans are too ego-centred and the ego-shell in which we live is the hardest thing to outgrow. To live a life of truth and enlightenment, it is essential for the individual to set his or her mind free of the oppression and tyranny of intellectual accumulations, a wearisome burden. But getting rid of the manacles and fetters of our ignorance that prevent us from understanding the true condition of existence is no easy task at all. Escaping the bondage in which all finite beings find themselves means breaking free from the chain of ignorance, which is wrought of nothing else but the intellect and sensuous infatuation.¹⁷¹ Thus, Zen masters help inquiring souls to get back to the original state of freedom that was inside every single human being from the very beginning. Freedom is never truly realized until we once personally experience it through our own efforts,¹⁷² and this is why Tiāntóng Rújìng champions the shedding of body and mind, even "*the shedding of the shedding.*" Shedding one's body and mind should be a natural process, as natural as breathing itself, or as lifting or setting one's own foot when walking. Tiāntóng Rújìng himself attained enlightenment only after he shed his own body and mind. After struggling with master Zhijian's enigma for more than a year, Tiāntóng Rújìng found the light at last:

... once he got so that there was no skin to strip off, no body or mind to shed, he said he had hit upon what has never been defiled. Yet even so, already he had a spot on him – that is why it says his teacher hit him even before he had finished speaking. At that point his whole body broke out in sweat – having let go of his body, he attained power. So we know that original purity has never been subject to defilement at all. Therefore Rujing always used to say, "Zen study is the shedding of body and mind."

Now tell me, what is the undefiled?

The breeze of the Way, blowing far,
Is harder than diamond;
The whole earth is supported by it.¹⁷³

Bringhurst's poem closes with what looks like an exultant affirmation of universal motion or flux. The bridge crossing a stream is flowing in much the same way the stream flows naturally into the sea. What crosses the bridge are snowmelt and rain, not just human steps or footprints. Bringhurst's lines are another perfect example of haiku-like precision and imagery; they evoke through simple means a complex cluster of ideas: "*The bridge you are*

¹⁷⁰ *Transmission of Light [Denkoroku]. Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan*, p. 217.

¹⁷¹ Daisetz T. Suzuki, *ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁷² Suzuki explains this in further detail: "The ultimate standpoint of Zen, therefore, is that we have been led astray through ignorance to find a split in our own being, that there was from the very beginning no need for a struggle between the finite and the infinite, that the peace we are seeking so eagerly after has been there all the time." *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁷³ *Transmission of Light [Denkoroku]. Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan*, pp. 217-218.

guarding crosses the stream / as fast as it can. The bridge I am walking / is flowing. Its footings are snowmelt and rain.”

XXIV · DOGEN KIGEN

“Dōgen”¹⁷⁴ concerns one of the major Buddhist masters of all times and the founder of the Sōtō school of Zen in Japan. Bringhurst’s poem was originally published in seven sections in the journal *Canadian Literature* 140 (Spring 1994) alongside other poems in the Oriental sages sequence. Afterwards, it was revised into further textual incarnations until it reached what might be its definitive state – a six-part poem of utter beauty and technical perfection that testifies to Bringhurst’s mastery of the English language. Possibly it remains one of the most accomplished pieces in the sequence, along with “Sāraha” and “Nāgārjuna”. From an entry devoted to this eminent sage in the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), we learn that Dōgen (1200–1253) was “A Zen teacher born in Kyoto. He studied in China with Tiāntóng Rújìng, then returned to Japan to found the monastery of Eihei-ji on the northwest coast of Honshu.” And a brief entry at the end of *The Book of Silences* (2001) informs us of this sage in these terms: “Dogen Kigen 1200-1253 Traveled from Kyoto to Zhejiang Province, China, then back to Honshu, Japan.” Bringhurst strives after clarity and wants his poems to be understood, so this kind of textual aids are scattered in most of his poetry books. But who exactly was this sage who is he dramatic persona behind one of the most impressive pieces in the sustained meditation on being, mind and speech enacted in *The Book of Silences*? It might be wise to start from the very beginning.

Dōgen¹⁷⁵, also called Jōyō Daishi or Kigen Dōgen (b. Jan. 19, 1200, Kyōto, Japan – d. Sept. 22, 1253, Kyōto) was a Japanese Buddhist who introduced Zen to Japan in the form of the Sōtō school. Probably Dōgen was born into a noble family, though he was the illegitimate child of a man who served in the imperial court as councilor of state. His father died when he was a child and his mother also died shortly afterwards, when Dōgen was only seven years old. Ordained a monk at 13, Dōgen studied the holy scriptures of Buddhism on Mount Hiei, the centre of Tendai (T’ien-t’ai) Buddhism, without, however, fully satisfying his spiritual aspirations. One single question seemed to obsess him: the Tendai concept of ‘original enlightenment’ claims that all human beings are enlightened by nature and so the notion of achieving enlightenment through spiritual practice is flawed from the outset. In search of a satisfactory answer to this pressing concern, he travelled from one temple to another to ask other Buddhist masters. One of them, Kōin, the Tendai abbot of Onjōji Temple, suggested that he should travel to China to study Chan under the most prominent masters of the time. After spending some time in Kennin-ji Temple under Myōzen, in 1223 he and Myōzen undertook the dangerous passage across the sea to China.

¹⁷⁴ “Dōgen” was originally published in C.63 [Four Poems], *Canadian Literature* 140 (Spring 1994): 79-85. Contents: • “Dongshan Liangjie” (rpt. in A.47, A.65, A.92); • “Xuedou Zhongxian” (rpt. in B.58; rev. in A.47 and rpt. from A.47 in A.65, A.92, C.75); • “Yongjia Xuanjue” (rev. in A.47 and rpt. from A.47 in A.65 and A.92); • “Dogen” (excerpt rev. in B.72, C.71; revised in A.47 and further revised in A.65; rpt. from A.65 in A.92). Later it was revised in A.47 *The Calling* (1995) and reprinted in (i) C.71 “From Dogen.” *The Amicus Journal* (New York) 19.1 (Spring 1997): 44. “Dogen”, part 3, rpt. from A.47, and in (ii) B.72 *Poetry Comes Up Where It Can*, edited by Brian Swann, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000: pp. 27-28. Contributions: Excerpts from “Conversations with a Toad” (rpt. from C.72) and from “Dogen” (rpt. from C.71). Afterwards, it was slightly revised in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001) and reprinted from A.65 in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009).

¹⁷⁵ See the entry on ‘Dōgen’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 8, p. 4737. See also *Enlightenment Unfolds. The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dōgen*, edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi, Boston & London: Shambhala, 1999, particularly pp. xiv-xxvii.

Between 1223 and 1227 Dōgen studied meditation in China. First, he visited the masters of the leading monasteries in Zhejiang province and found that training was based on koan practice, whereas sutras were not studied any more. Dissatisfied with the heavy emphasis laid on koans, he visited Zen master Tiāntóng Rújìng, who reputedly had a different method of teaching Zen to his students. In 1227 Dōgen gained enlightenment under Tiāntóng Rújìng, who taught him the importance of casting off body and mind, a notion central to his own writings.¹⁷⁶ Back in Japan again in 1227, he lived at various temples and worked for the spread of Zen practice. His first literary work, *Fukan zazen gi* (1227; *General Teachings for the Promotion of Zazen*), is a short text containing a brief introduction to the Zen practice of *zazen* or sitting meditation. He spent his last years teaching and writing at Eihei-ji Temple, a temple which he founded and which became one of the two head temples of Sōtō Zen in Japan even to this day. In the autumn of 1252, Dōgen fell ill and showed no signs of recovering. Before travelling to Kyōto in search of a remedy for his illness, he made his disciple Ejō his dharma heir, making him the abbot of Eihei-ji. In 1253 he died soon after arriving in Kyōto.

Like Bringham, Dōgen himself was a prolific author of philosophical essays and poems, and he would revise his own writings over time to perfect them. He was also an accomplished stylist writing in both Chinese and Japanese. His style was concise, compelling and inspiring, and his use of language was completely unconventional. His works seek to express the inexpressible by means of a creative use of the potential inherent in language, which he takes to extreme positions. His chief work, *Shōbōgenzō* (1231-53; *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*), containing 95 chapters concerning Buddhist practice and enlightenment, was written over a period of more than 20 years. It consists of his elaboration of Buddhist principles in the form of talks and various writings on topics ranging from monastic practice to the philosophy of language, being and time. Dōgen also compiled over three hundred koans in Chinese without commentaries added in a book entitled *Shinji Shōbōgenzō* or *Shōbōgenzō Sanbyakusoku* (*The Three Hundred Verse Shōbōgenzō*), which he might have started compiling from different sources even prior to his trip to China. Furthermore, the lectures he delivered to his monks at Eihei-ji were collected under the title *Eihei Kōroku* or *Dōgen Oshō Kōroku* (*The Extensive Record of Teacher Dōgen's Sayings*) in ten volumes. His sermons, lectures, sayings and poems were compiled shortly after his death by his main disciples – Ejō, Senne and Gien. Another collection of talks that Dōgen gave to his leading disciple was recorded and edited by Koun Ejō himself in the work entitled *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* (*Gleanings from Master Dōgen's Sayings*) in six volumes. *Hōkyōjōki* (*Memoirs of the Hōkyō Period*) is a one-volume work, his earliest, which records the questions and answers between Dōgen and Tiāntóng Rújìng. It was discovered by Ejō shortly after the master's death.

In Dōgen's Zen there are several fundamental concepts that are recurrent throughout his prolific work. The primary concept underlying Dōgen's Zen is the inseparability of practice and enlightenment (*oneness of practice and enlightenment*): to practice the Way single-heartedly is in itself enlightenment. Thus, Dōgen considers *zazen* or meditation in a sitting posture as being identical to Zen. It is a kind of meditation in which the truth-seeker's mind remains alert though free of objects and directed to no specific object or particular content. Just sitting, with complete non-attachment to the goal of

¹⁷⁶ Thus, in his *Genjōkōan*, Dōgen says: "To study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things of the universe. To be enlightened by all things of the universe is to cast off the body and mind of the self as well as those of others. Even the traces of enlightenment are wiped out, and life with traceless enlightenment goes on forever and ever." See Hee-Jin Kim, *Eihei Dogen, Mystical Realist*, Somerville, MA (USA): Wisdom Publications, 1987, p. 125.

attainment was the key to the practice of *zazen*. The practice of *zazen* and the experience of enlightenment are one and the same thing for Dōgen, for all understanding derives from *zazen*. This is the heart of his teaching in fact. As Kazuaki Tanahashi puts it summarily, in the process of spiritual pursuit the seeker is bound to overcome a number of obstacles along a hard path before attaining the final goal or destination, which is enlightenment and becoming a fully awakened one or a buddha. Now,

Dōgen accepts this image of a linear process of seeking. But he also talks about the way as a circle. For him, each moment of practice encompasses enlightenment, and each moment of enlightenment encompasses practice. In other words, practice and enlightenment – process and goal – are inseparable. The circle of practice is complete even at the beginning. This circle of practice-enlightenment is renewed moment after moment.

At the moment you begin taking a step you have arrived, and you keep arriving each moment thereafter. In this view you don't journey toward enlightenment, but you let enlightenment unfold. In Dōgen's words, "You experience immeasurable hundreds of eons in one day." The "circle of the way" [...] may be taken to represent the heart of his teaching.¹⁷⁷

Thus, enlightenment as a breakthrough experience through which the truth-seeker attains the wondrous heart of nirvana was the core of Dōgen's Zen. And nirvana is regarded as the realm of nonduality, "where there is no distinction between large and small, long and short, right and wrong, appearing and disappearing, self and other. It may be called reality itself, or the absolute place beyond time and space. This is a realm that cannot be grasped objectively. The intuitive awareness or transcendental wisdom that goes beyond dualistic, analytical thinking and leads us into this realm is called *prajñā* in Sanskrit."¹⁷⁸ This awakening is beyond thought and also beyond words.

I

"Dōgen" consists of six sections that capture the essence of this Zen master's thinking and singing. Throughout the whole composition, the emphasis is laid on Nature as the true home of the human soul. All six parts are variations on the fundamental idea that humans find themselves more truly in the natural world as soon as they transcend the distinction between self and other (between apprehender and apprehended) and reach the realm of non-dualism. Thus, part 1 of "Dōgen" offers a technically perfect and profound meditation on the nature of the mind and gives advice as to how to live to the fullest of human capacity in perfect harmony with Nature. The piece opens with three simple statements that aim at defining the essence of the mind:

¹⁷⁷ *Enlightenment Unfolds. The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dōgen*, edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi, Boston & London: Shambhala, 1999, p. xxviii.

¹⁷⁸ *Enlightenment Unfolds. The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dōgen*, p. xxxi. "Dōgen calls this place of inner freedom the Buddha realm. It is where one is many, part is whole, a moment is timeless, and mortality is immortality. To experience this beyondness in the midst of the passage of time, change, and decay is a miracle. For Dōgen, this miracle can happen each moment, as each moment of duality is inseparable from a moment of nonduality. Duality and nonduality, change and no-change, relative and absolute, coexist and interact with each other. Dōgen calls the experience of this dynamic "actualizing the fundamental point." It is an immediate but subtle and mysterious unfolding of nirvāna within a life of change and decay. Dōgen suggests that we can realize this dynamic of "not one, not two" by going into and maintaining the deep consciousness that is experienced both in *zazen* and in daily activities conducted in a meditative state of body and mind." *Ibid.*, pp. xxxi-xxxii.

The mind is old snow, new snow, brooding rain.
The mind is lichen crust and stone.
Pebbles and sticks are the fountains of wisdom.

All three metaphors at the heart of this stanza equate the mind with the world of Nature: the mind is everything that it apprehends, everything that exists in this world. Though only non-sentient things are mentioned in these lines, they are nonetheless living creatures that form part of the very palpitating fabric of *being*. Wisdom, if it exists at all, is to be found not in books or in the teachings of the old masters, but in simple “*pebbles and sticks*.” But wisdom is not the same as knowledge, for one strives to gain knowledge whereas wisdom is something that comes to the truth-seeker uninvited as it were. Wisdom is effortless, and it has to do also with a clarity, tranquillity and serenity of mind that is rare to find among humans. Possibly stones and trees are wiser in their way than humans; they do not seek egoistically to understand or to have dominion over the rest of creation as humans do. In this context, only metaphor seems to be the only effective way to apprehend a kind of truth that is latent beyond the surface of things, because it uncovers subtle connections where there is apparently nothing to see.

The three stanzas that follow evoke the sacred communion that unites self and Nature. Dōgen’s voice encourages truth-seekers to spend their lifetime in the mountains, close to the trees and streams that might teach them an elementary lesson of what it means to *be in peace* with and in the world. Needless to say, Bringhurst embraces the conviction that the hills are home to humankind and the ultimate source of a precious wisdom. Nature is seen as being truly alive in every single element it is made of. Thus, a snowflake, though transient and ephemeral, has a graceful wisdom of its own that humans should emulate, and an ancient stone has still the lustre of youth in its prime and it is wiser because it has lived longer than humans will ever live. Trees and streams have also something of fundamental value to teach humans. Hence, the speaking voice in the poem encourages the listener to let trees and gutters act out their gestures and prayers, for trees have got branches or arms that can make humans’ gestures and flowing gutters have got a voice that can speak humans’ prayers. The strong lyricism of Bringhurst’s words makes these verse lines truly memorable:

Go into the hills and remain there forever.
Wise as a snowflake that lives
for ten minutes, wise as a stone

that is young at three million years,¹⁷⁹
let the trees make your gestures,
the gutters your prayers.

Bringhurst’s poetry explores the issue of speech, of a sort of *universal speech* to be more precise: every single thing in the world wants to *mean* something and so it speaks a language of its own. Human languages are just one more instance of this universal compulsion of *being* to signify, but humans have no monopoly on language, though we, egoistic beings, might think we do. Not only can Nature speak; it can also read the language that humans are written in. The river speaking its own language can read humans’ note of themselves to the hills. Also, the wind and the trees’ leaves have the power to give voice to humans’ thoughts. Hence, Dōgen’s dramatic persona in the poem says: “*Pass the note of yourself to the river / to read to the hills. Let the wind and the leaves / speak your thoughts in their*

¹⁷⁹ In the textual incarnation of the poem in C.63, this line reads as follows: “that is young at 3,000,000 years”.

language.” The stream of consciousness of the human mind might well find an echo in the subtle movements and sounds of the wind and the whispering leaves of trees. What is simply astonishing about Bringhurst’s statement is that the speaking of the wind and of the leaves reveals human identity: that is the essence or the gist of what they are saying. In delivering their messages, they are somehow uncovering our own very nature for ourselves. This is why it is necessary to spend time in the solitude of the hills; Nature has much to teach us about the human condition if we only pay attention with open eyes and alert ears. The speaking persona in the poem urges listeners to let their thoughts be spoken by wise Nature in its own language. It does not matter much whether one has many or few thoughts – “*any number will do.*”

The potent equation Bringhurst seeks to explore in section 1 of “Dōgen” is precisely that set up between human beings and the world through the mind and through the senses. In this respect, in the two closing stanzas of “Dōgen”, self and Nature are brought together into a unity by means of a handful of metaphors that proclaim the sameness of the world and one’s eyes, of the world’s face and one’s face, and of one’s eyes and others’ eyes seeing one. The world is made of the thoughts of humans, it is made of what we think of it. Now, that the world should be conceptualized as being “*one – either one – / and neither and both of your eyes*” only highlights the simple fact that eyes are the windows open onto the world through which humans absorb reality and through which they should let themselves be absorbed by the world. A human face contemplating the world is the face’s world when true communion happens between inner and outer, self and other, observer and apprehended. But above all things, “*the eyes in your face / are the eyes you have seen, / seeing you, in the faces of others.*” Eyes become the link between humans; vision affords an opportunity to delve into the other’s private soul or intimate self as it were. As Dōgen himself puts it in his illuminating essay entitled “Actualizing the Fundamental Point”,

To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self if to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of enlightenment remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.¹⁸⁰

In the realm of non-dualism there is no point in distinguishing between apprehender and apprehended, between inner and outer, between self and other. One touches enlightenment the very moment one transcends all distinctions and comes to realize that reality is one, that the mind is one and the same with the world and all the elements in it. The complex and subtle organic *Gestalt* the world is speaks a language of its own and finds its perfected expressions in the majestic-looking mountains, whispering trees’ leaves, flowing streams, ephemeral snowflakes and millennial stones.

II

The second section of “Dōgen” is a perfect short jewel-like lyric poem consisting of only seven verse lines. The language is kept simple and elegant, and the profundity of thought is astonishing; it is a miracle that Bringhurst should manage to say so much with so few words. Also, this poem is punctuated by enjambment at crucial points where the sense of the words tessellated into the composition flows uninterruptedly from one line into the next. Once again, this little poem dwells on the equation of humankind and Nature. It

¹⁸⁰ *Enlightenment Unfolds. The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dōgen*, edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi, Boston & London: Shambhala, 1999, p. 36.

explores the vastness of a drop of blood (standing for humans) and of a drop of rain (standing for Nature), thought to contain the whole world in its myriad manifestations and creatures. But the world is also in a state of permanent flux, as Herakleitos affirmed so long ago, for nothing at all has unchanging self, and the world itself as a whole is no exception at all. Blood and rain have something elemental in common – their being liquids, their being the living substance of the human body and of the Earth as a living organism as well. What a blood drop and a rain drop contain is enumerated in four pairs of contraries or opposites that constitute the beating heart or irreducible core of this short poem, which has the simplicity of a rain drop itself:

One drop of blood, one drop
of falling rain contains
the final truth, the temporary
lie, the day, the night,
the earth, the sky,
the light, the dark, the still
unfurling world.

That the vast world is reflected in the tiny elements it is made of is a recurrent notion in Dōgen's writings. Thus, at some point of his essay "Actualizing the Fundamental Point", the Japanese sage says: "Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken. Although its light is wide and great, the moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide. The whole moon and the entire sky are reflected in dewdrops on the grass, or even in one drop of water."¹⁸¹ "Without contraries there is no progression," said the Romantic poet William Blake some centuries later. The dichotomies or contraries enumerated here are no random choice, of course: *truth* and *lie* are categories related to epistemology (notice that the truth is *final*, whereas the lie is only *temporary*), *day* and *night* are time-related concepts, the *earth* and the *sky* are the two fundamental elements of Nature present in all cosmogonies in almost all human civilizations around the world, and the *light* and the *dark* are associated to the knowledge and ignorance (but also to warmth/safety and to hostility/danger), respectively. But, at the heart of all these pairs of contraries, the joyfully seeking mind finds out that reality is characterized by utter impermanence. The unfurling world we humans live in is one that is "*still unfurling*," coming into full bloom all the time. Of course, this is also associated to the passing of swift time. Once again, in an essay entitled "Informal Talks" (recorded by his disciple Ejō, attendant monk, ca. 1237), Dōgen says that nothing is for certain in this world:

Impermanence is the truth that is right in front of you. You need not study other people's words or textual evidence on this matter. To be born in the morning and to die in the evening, not to see someone today whom you saw yesterday – the impermanence of life is in your eyes and ears. You should not see or hear it only in terms of others but apply it to your own self.¹⁸²

III

Section 3 of "Dōgen" is a moving homage to mountains, which figure so prominently in Bringham's literary career from the very start. Mountains were of the essence to the Oriental sages as well, for often they were named after them or after the monasteries they lived in, and most of the time these Buddhist sage-monks did not lose

¹⁸¹ *Enlightenment Unfolds. The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dōgen*, p. 37.

¹⁸² *Enlightenment Unfolds. The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dōgen*, p. 53.

sight of their sharpened outline on the horizon. Their sheer size and vastness in space must have been awe-inspiring to them, but also a source of inspiration and a reminder that Nature is the embodiment of sublime beauty. Mountains appear to be walking on the surface water of the lakes where they look at their own reflection. This seems to be the starting point for the meditation on mountains and water at the heart of the third part of Bringhurst's poem. The subterranean equation running through the whole composition is that of the human body and the Earth, of self and other. Or, to put it differently, the body is a microcosm, a reflection of the whole world at large (or macrocosm): a single tiny thing contains the universe in its entirety. The poet manages to express the inexpressible by means of simple and transparent words that sound euphonicly owing to the use of alliteration (notice, for instance, the repetition of the /w/ sound in *walking, water* and *world*) and lexical repetition. The sentences woven into the living fabric of this piece are all in the present continuous tense, which lays the emphasis on the fact that the world is "*still unfurling*." The resonant tapestry of words woven by Bringhurst reads as follows:

Under the sunrise the mountains
are walking on water.
This is the skin.
The mountains are dancing.
They are walking on their toes
on all the water in the world.
This is the blood.
And all the water in the world –
oceans, raindrops, runoff dipped
in cupped hands, moistened lips and tears –
is holding up the mountains.
This is the ligament. This is the bone.

Back in an elemental world of stone, air and light, Bringhurst reminds us in this long stanza that reality consists of such non-human things as mountains, water, earth and sky. Similarly, the human body consists of nothing else than skin, blood, ligament, bone and marrow. In a sense, the mountains are the skin of the world, all the water of the world (arranged *in crescendo* according to sheer size in the enumeration that ranges from the immense *oceans* to the tiny *tears*, thus uniting world and body) is the blood, and the water sustaining the pillars of the world are the ligament and the bone. What is being celebrated here with utter enthusiasm is the sheer physicality of both the world and the body. The human mind is a beautiful organ of knowledge and perception of reality, but it is not disembodied: it finds its physical home inside a body which is made of exactly the same substance as the rest of the world. Hence, the Earth and the human body are one and the same thing. Furthermore, the relationship holding between mountains and all the water in the world is one of mutual dependence. Whereas mountains dance joyfully or walk on their toes on the shiny mirror-like surface of the oceans, rivers and lakes, all the water of the world holds up the mountains as though it were a solid foundation for the gigantic masses of earth.

When enlightenment is attained, the truth-seeker transcends all distinctions and contradistinctions the very moment of casting off the body. At the heart of the universe he/she discovers an elemental kinship uniting all things, human and non-human alike. In this respect, the fundamental identity between the world and the human body is emphasized again in the second stanza of this technically perfect poem. The Oriental sage's voice explicitly claims that "*The bones are flowing water.*" Inner and outer are one and the same: the bones of the human body within and the oceans of the world without are flowing water. What is more: "*There is marrow in the bone*" and "*In the marrow is blood,*" and so water

and blood are also one and the same thing. The entire world is not unchangeable, not immovable. It flows. And flowing is the perfect action “*the still unfurling world*” does. What follows is a command addressed to the listener – “*Never judge by just one world*”¹⁸³ – which remains truly enigmatic in this context. Is this statement intended to evoke the existence of a plurality of worlds within and without? We do not know for sure. What we do know for certain is that the poem closes with a vehement statement that keeps on resonating in the echo-chamber of one’s mind long after one has finished reading it: “*If the mountains stop walking, the world / will stop being born.*” In an essay entitled “The Time-Being” (1240, Fukakusa), Dōgen says that “time itself is being, and all being is time”¹⁸⁴ in terms that are reminiscent of the words uttered by Heidegger seven centuries later. And he adds:

Mountains are time. Oceans are time. If they were not time, there would be no mountains or oceans. Do not think that mountains and oceans here and now are not time. If time is annihilated, mountains and oceans are annihilated. As time is not annihilated, mountains and oceans are not annihilated.¹⁸⁵

These words of Dōgen might have well served as the textual source for Bringhamst’s own meditation on mountains and all the water in the world. That mountains keep on walking (i.e., keep on reflecting their image on the surface water of streams, lakes and oceans under the sunlight) guarantees that the world keeps on existing and being born time and again. In this sense, the mountains are like the sun, which provides humans with light, warmth and protection. Mountains are literally the link that brings the sky and the earth together; midway between both sky and earth is the water covering the skin of Mother Earth on which mountains walk and dance to the rhythm of universal *being*, which is time to Dōgen. *All things are moments in time*, claims the sage, and they are linked to one another in a subtle manner in much the same way seconds flow into further seconds. But to *being* and *time* we shall turn presently below.

IV

Section 4 of “Dōgen”¹⁸⁶ is a short piece of meditation on *what is* and on *time-being* in two little movements for the soul. In the first one, *what is* is seen as “*the foundation of the mind*”: all the things in this world are the mind itself, or the mind is everything it apprehends. In incantatory lines marked by alliteration that brings about a subtle musicality, the sage’s voice affirms that there is a simultaneity inherent in the being of *what is*: “*Everything that is is root and stem / and fruit and flower, / head and tail, back and belly, belly and bum.*” There is no way of drawing a distinction between what seems to be successive stages in the *unfurling* nature of all things that populate this world: what exists is root and stem at the same time (and not just literally in the vegetable realm), head and tail (in the animal realm), or back and belly (among humans). Opposites or contraries are two sides to the same coin, in much the same way sound and silence, earth and sky, light and dark, day and night are also contraries that are reconciled into an organic synthesis where all things are subtly connected to everything else. In the essay mentioned above, “The Time-Being”, Dōgen claims that “In essence, all things in the entire world are linked with one another as

¹⁸³ This verse line reads differently in *The Calling* version: “Never judge by just one word. / Never judge by just one world.”

¹⁸⁴ *Enlightenment Unfolds. The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dōgen*, p. 69.

¹⁸⁵ *Enlightenment Unfolds. The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dōgen*, p. 74.

¹⁸⁶ Section 4 of “Dōgen” was originally section VI in C.63. Section IV in this early textual incarnation of the poem reads as follows: “Water knows what to do / as the temperature rises and drops. / Water knows what to do / as it flies through the air / or touches the ground. / Water knows what to do / as it touches the water.”

moments. Because all moments are the time-being, they are your time-being.”¹⁸⁷ And he also affirms this:

The way the self arrays itself is the form of the entire world. See each thing in this entire world as a moment of time.

Things do not hinder one another, just as moments do not hinder one another. The way-seeking mind arises in this moment. A way-seeking moment arises in this mind. It is the same with the practice and with attaining the way. Thus the self setting itself out in array sees itself. This is the understanding that the self is time.

Know that in this way there are myriads of forms and hundreds of grasses [all things] throughout the entire earth. The study of this is the beginning of practice. When you are at this place, there is just one grass, there is just one form; there is understanding of grass and non-understanding of grass. Since there is nothing but just this moment, the time-being is all the time there is. Grass-being and form-being are both time.

Each moment is all being, is the entire world. Reflect now whether any being or any world is left out of the present moment.¹⁸⁸

The words just quoted may shed some light on the second movement for the soul in section 4 of Bringhurst’s poem. *Being* is time and all things that *are* are moments in time; self and other are also time. Any living thing is an uninterrupted succession of moments in time that keep it identical to itself as it were. Though nothing stays the same and everything is in a state of permanent flux, it is yet possible to penetrate the unchanging substratum or immortal ground of existence, for, though time-being has the quality of flowing, there must be an irreducible core of being at the heart of the world. But time-being is fluid and ever-flowing, changing all the time. Flowing is the elemental quality of time, and moments past and present do not overlap chaotically. As Dōgen puts it, “So-called today flows into tomorrow, today flows into yesterday, yesterday flows into today. And today flows into today, tomorrow flows into tomorrow.”¹⁸⁹ In Bringhurst’s hands these words become an accomplished stanza of utter technical perfection:

Everything that is is every
time that ever was
or is or will be and is
passing through the heart between your hands.

This is not an unintelligible message at all. It does make perfect sense. These words affirm the equation of *being* and time, and these words remind us that the body, the self and the other are also time. Time is fluid and spills in all directions through one’s fingers without the self being able to prevent its scattering everywhere. Every single thing that exists is, has been and will be uninterruptedly itself in spite of the constant change the world is subject to.

V

Section 5 of “Dōgen” proclaims the equation of world and self once more. It consists of two clearly distinct parts: whereas the first part appears to suggest that the world is a painting of a gigantic size, the second suggests that the self is the world itself in miniature. That a painting is made of colours, lines and planes beautifully arranged in space

¹⁸⁷ *Enlightenment Unfolds. The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dōgen*, p. 71.

¹⁸⁸ *Enlightenment Unfolds. The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dōgen*, p. 70.

¹⁸⁹ *Enlightenment Unfolds. The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dōgen*, p. 71.

seems to be a truism. That a painting is meant to be a stylization or a slice of the living world (or a fragment lifted up from reality) seems to be another truism. Now, the *raison d'être* of a painting is precisely the existence of an observer, who looks at it in depth in search of some form of beauty and truth. At the exact intersection of the painting and the observer's eye the meaning of the former comes into relief, to the surface as it were. Seeing a painting is indeed the first elemental gesture towards exegesis or interpretation of the same. The mind apprehends whatever lies on the canvas through the eyes and seeks to understand it. However, Bringhurst's poem opens with a handful of verse lines that conceptualize the world as being a huge canvas where the common ingredients to be found in a painting are missing. What is more, the creative hand that brings the painting into existence is nowhere to be seen and the observer's eye has none of its morphological constituents. It is as though these lines emphasized emptiness or nothingness as the essential prerequisite for attaining genuine enlightenment. Bringhurst relies on parallelism and alliteration (notice the repetition of /p/ in *pigment* and *paint*, of /b/ in *bristles* and *brush*, and of /l/ in *lid* and *lens*), as well as on simple declarative sentences to convey such profundity of thought with total linguistic transparency:

There is no pigment in the paint.
 There are no bristles in the brush.
 There is no hand.

There is no lid or lens
 or retina in the eye.

The second part of section V of "Dōgen" makes explicit the equation of *world* and *self* with crystal-clear clarity. Though the observer's eye cannot penetrate the essence of the painting that the vast world is, the world can see "*the forms and colours / that you are, which are / the world's forms and colours / in your size.*" This is just to say that the macrocosm that the world is finds an echo or reflection in the microcosm that a human being is. The self is nothing more than the very world in miniature, or, to put it differently, a duplicate of the beauty and grandeur of *what is* on a smaller scale. Not only are humans made of the same substance as the rest of creation, but also they show the same forms and colours one finds in the world at large. That the world should see into humans while humans seem to be unable to see the world for what it is remains puzzling and intriguing, and, in fact, the closing lines of section 5 of "Dōgen" dwell on this mystery somehow. Also, the senses are mixed up and so the silence of the world can see humans breathe, whereas the breath humans breathe can hear them. It is as though Bringhurst's poem became metapoetic or self-reflexive for a while: the breath one breathes might well refer to the reader's voice reading "Dōgen" aloud, or the painted man speaking in the poem might also be the dramatic impersonation of Dōgen himself, the sage speaking to us from beyond time to enlighten us on the ultimate nature of reality:

The silence
 you have come to see

 can see you breathe; the breath you breathe
 can hear the painted man in whom
 this painted voice is speaking.

VI

The last section of “Dōgen” was section VII of the poem as originally published in C.63. Like the previous section, it consists of two parts as well. The whole of “Dōgen” is like a perfect circle that achieves its own completion at this point, where the mountains at the centre of the meditation in the first section are again brought to the foreground. The poet makes use of tautology to convey a difficult message that might sound paradoxical or unintelligible at first. However, upon closer inspection, it turns out to be perfectly understandable. Dōgen’s voice reminds us that one has to go to the mountains to heal oneself, to find oneself more truly in solitude: *“Everyone goes to the mountains, / yet no one is there.”* How is it logically possible to say that everyone goes there and yet nobody is to be found there? This paradox is meant to suggest that going to the mountains is no guarantee that enlightenment will be attained for sure. The tautology that follows these verse lines is puzzling too: *“we are who we are / and mountains are mountains.”* The Japanese sage appears to suggest that there is no easy way of reconciling mountains and human beings, that it is difficult to achieve a true communion between both. *“The mountains are coming to us, / and no one is here.”* Once again, these lines suggest that a gap impossible to bridge separates humans from mountains; one has to shed off the body to go beyond appearance and reach the realm of non-dualism, where apprehender and apprehended are one and the same.

As claimed in section 1 of “Dōgen”, the mountains are dancing and walking on their toes on all the water of the world. They are flowing then, for the entire world is flowing too. The second stanza of section 6 is a perfect haiku-like lyric in itself, reminiscent of the simplicity of much Japanese poetry. At the heart of these lines is the dichotomy between motion and stillness: contrary to one’s expectations, it is the mountains that are flowing and the water that is still. Dōgen is sitting quietly meanwhile, possibly practising *zazen* (seated meditation) to attain enlightenment or nirvana. He touches serenity with his own mind, which becomes a sky reflected on the still surface water of a lake. The sky and the lake are looking into each other’s eyes, in much the same way Dōgen’s mind is looking into his own self and into the world simultaneously to grasp the ultimate essence of things. Bringhurst manages to convey all this wealth of meaning in simple words that are almost invisible to the reader and yet of a breathtaking beauty:

The mountains are flowing,
the water is still,
Dōgen is sitting.
His mind is a lake looking upward,
a sky looking down.

A sense of gloom reminiscent of William Butler Yeats’s “The Second Coming” or “Sailing to Byzantium” pervades the second part of section 6 of “Dōgen”. It speaks of the dead and of the living, of the way they interact with one another in this world. The opening statement is not gloomy at first: *“Inside the dead man’s breath, the living breathe.”* This might be interpreted as meaning that we living humans of today owe much to our ancestors, and so we might be said to breathe inside their own breath. The insights into reality of such a beautiful mind as Dōgen’s are still a nourishing source of inspiration for us, an invaluable aid for us to understand the world we live in. However, the verse lines that follow this initial reflection depict a hellish scenario of pain, violence and horror. They convey none of the serenity inherent in the idyllic setting where Dōgen sits in contemplation in the face of the whole universe as embodied by the majestic mountains. Now, the picture offered by these lines might have well been lifted from Dante’s *Inferno*, where humans are subject to the most awful torments conceivable. A woman in labour is populated by the dead or hungry ghosts with cruel intentions striving hard to be born back into life. This is unnatural of course. That the dead should disguise as living beings, that they should crawl back into

the mother's womb as if to reverse time's arrow, and that they should be plotting to do something ominous against humankind is simply scary. These are Bringhurst's words on this peculiar hell:

Inside the living woman's pain,
the dead, pretending to be soldiers,
hunt for sons and enemies and joy.
The hungry ghosts, disguised as living beings,
are sucking their own bones.

The hungry ghosts grow younger,
crawling backward through the womb.
They swarm like angry hornets through the loins.

The poem closes with one more reference to the mountains, but this time the sense of the sublime that surrounded them like a halo in all previous sections of "Dōgen" is missing altogether: "*Dancing, broken / arm in arm with mountains, / is not a children's game.*" It is hard to leave the world of humans behind and to live in retreat in the company of huge mountains. It is a demanding and exacting enterprise, both physically and spiritually, for the truth-seeker who is determined to penetrate the heart of things. Like many other Buddhist sages, Dōgen was such a man, endowed with impressive stamina and determination to succeed in his spiritual quest. But what he did, following the mind as far into the realm of non-dualism as it would take him, is not "*a children's game.*" It takes time, constancy and single-mindedness to accomplish this.

XXV · KEIZAN JOKIN

"Keizan Jokin"¹⁹⁰ is possibly one of the most accomplished short pieces in *The Book of Silences* sequence. It is a succinct and eloquent impersonation of the thinking of another essential Japanese Zen master who lived in the Middle Ages. Bringhurst provides us with only elementary information regarding this sage's life: "Keizan Jokin (1268-1325) Eiheiiji, north of Kyoto. Traveled Japan widely."¹⁹¹ These are only elemental spatio-temporal coordinates, but the entry the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* devotes to this unique monk unveils important details about his life and his work. Keizan Jōkin¹⁹² (b. 13 Nov. 1268, Echizen province [now in Fukui prefecture], Japan – d. 22 Sept. 1325, Noto province [now in Ishikawa prefecture] was an important priest of the Sōtō sect of Zen Buddhism, who founded the Sōji Temple (now rebuilt in Yokohama), one of the two head temples of the sect. At the age of 8, Keizan became a novice under the tutelage of Gikai at the Eiheiiji Temple, the headquarters of the sect. He was formally ordained at the age of 13 and received dharma transmission from Tettsū Gikai at the age of 32. After studying at the Daijō Temple, he became a teacher there, where he propagated the teachings of the Sōtō sect for 10 years. He then became the head priest of the Shogaku Temple. Keizan gave the temple a new name, Shogaky-zan Sōji Temple, and affiliated it with the Sōtō sect in 1321.

¹⁹⁰ "Keizan Jokin" was first published as C.74 [Two Poems]. *Canadian Literature* 155 (Winter 1997): 15, 179. Contents: • "Lianhua Xiang" and • "Keizan". Then it was published as a part of the Oriental sages sequence in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001) and also reprinted in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009).

¹⁹¹ Robert Bringhurst, *The Book of Silences*, Los Angeles: Ninja Press, 2001. See the separately bound section entitled "Contents & Notes" at the end (unpaged).

¹⁹² See the entry on 'Keizan' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 16, p. 9130.

Later, when he preached to the emperor Go-Daigo on the Ten Questions on Buddhism, Sōji Temple became an imperial temple.

Indeed, Keizan is known as the second of the great founders of the Sōtō Zen sect in Japan. Whereas Dōgen is credited with being the founder of Japanese Sōtō and so is acknowledged as “Highest Patriarch”, Keizan is known as Taiso (or “Greatest Patriarch”) and is said to have spread Sōtō Zen throughout Japan with the help of his disciples. In fact, he established several temples throughout his lifetime, renewing the religious traditions of its founder, Dōgen, and extending the appeal of Sōtō Zen to the rural population. Under him the Sōtō sect developed rapidly. Furthermore, he did much to encourage the training of women in Buddhism, possibly because of the decisive influence of his own grandmother and mother on Keizan as a young boy, during his formative years. Among his works (including an autobiography, as he was the first Japanese Zen monk to detail his own life) figures prominently *Denkōroku* (literally, *Transmission of Light*), which consists of 53 sermons that trace the linear evolution of Sōtō Zen lineage from Shakyamuni Buddha to his immediate predecessor in Eiheiji, Ejō. Throughout his life, Keizan embraced the bliss that comes from the practice of meditation and the joy that comes from the knowledge of the Dharma. In this respect, *Denkōroku* or *Transmission of Light* is “one of the major classics of Japanese Zen Buddhism. Ostensibly a collection of stories about fifty-three Buddhist illuminates from India, China, and Japan, in reality it is a book of instruction in the art of satori – Zen enlightenment.”¹⁹³ And satori is an essential initiatory experience in Zen Buddhism, as it represents the beginning of true Zen realization. Consisting of tales about the awakenings of 53 successive generations of masters, Keizan’s book is the most thorough guide to satori in the entire Japanese Zen canon, as it offers quintessential techniques for realization of satori, “showing how this experience transcends time, history, culture, race, gender, personality, and social status.”¹⁹⁴

Zen teaches that the potential to achieve enlightenment is inherent in everyone but lies dormant because of ignorance, because of the heavy load culture puts on our shoulders and the constraints imposed upon our perceiving mind and senses. It is best awakened not by the study of scriptures, the practice of good deeds, rites and ceremonies, or worship of images but by a sudden breaking through of the boundaries of common, everyday, logical thought.¹⁹⁵ This is what is found in the experience of satori, which cleanses our mind and makes it ready for a fuller apprehension of reality. Now, the thought occurs that satori is possibly the underlying key concept beneath Bringham’s personal homage to this Oriental sage in his poem “Keizan Jokin”. Satori is thought to be the true beginning, not the end, of Zen, as it is “the key to inner freedom and independence, the door to higher knowledge” and it entails a “radical liberation from needless constraints of inculcated worldviews.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ *Transmission of Light [Denkōroku]. Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan*, translated and with an introduction by Thomas Cleary, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990, Introduction, p. vii.

¹⁹⁴ *Transmission of Light [Denkōroku]. Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan*, p. vii.

¹⁹⁵ See the entry on ‘Zen’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 30, p. 18177. The path towards enlightenment differs from one Zen sect to another: “The differing sects have various methods of achieving this enlightenment. The Rinzai sect emphasizes sudden shock and meditation on the paradoxical statements called koan. The Sōtō sect prefers the method of sitting meditation (*zazen*). A third sect, the Ōbaku, employs the methods of Rinzai and also practices *nembutsu*, the continual invocation of Amida (the Japanese name for the Buddha Amitābha), with the devotional formula *namu Amida Butsu* (Japanese: “homage to Amida Buddha).”

¹⁹⁶ *Transmission of Light [Denkōroku]. Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan*, pp. vii-viii. As Thomas Cleary puts it in his enlightening Introduction, satori is the “realization of the “original mind” as it is in itself, the universal ground of consciousness, concealed beneath the temporal conditioning that forces people to experience life through outlooks arbitrarily limited by their cultural, social, and personal histories. [...] It allows the individual access to a range of mental potential beyond the limitations of outlook defined by ordinary processes of acculturation, socialization, and education.” *Ibid.*, p. vii.

By letting go of “circumstantially ingrained attachments, biases, and blind spots that close minds into tunnel visions of life,”¹⁹⁷ the stream of consciousness is cleaned out, the individual is freed from the identification of personality with self, and so access to a higher form of knowledge is possible. Thus, Bringham’s poem opens with a four-fold order for the individual to give up writing, several art forms and even thinking in search of emptiness and a subsequent Zen realization, a fuller life and a greater completeness:

Give up writing, he wrote.
Give up music and singing, he sang.
Give up poetry, painting, calligraphy,
dancing and miming, he mimed.
Give up thinking, he thought.

In these parallelistic verse lines, the initiate is advised to get rid of the huge burden that culture and education have put upon his shoulders. What is truly essential in one’s confrontation with one’s original mind? In one’s thorough search for emptiness that seeks to clean out the mind completely to make it more receptive and attentive, one must stop cultivating *writing*, which is a shadowy replacement of living speech emanating from one’s lungs; *music and singing*, which are a form of sublime entertainment for the human soul; *poetry, painting and calligraphy* (inextricably linked to one another in Oriental cultures), art forms that seek beauty, eternity and truth through indirect means; *dancing and miming*, or the love of sheer motion in time and space; and even *thinking*, for rational thought is no infallible path or tool to achieve enlightenment. What is paradoxical about all four orders is that *he* (a third person personal pronoun possibly designating Keizan himself) forbids himself and other Zen initiates the practice of all these arts through exactly the same means he is condemning. In a nutshell, the speaking voice beneath the four commands encourages the initiate to start anew, to turn the mind into a sort of *tabula rasa* upon which to build a new awareness from scratch. Writing, music, poetry, painting, dancing and thinking might well be no more than useful intermediary tools in our confrontation with reality, means that might lead the way towards enlightenment, but they are nonetheless instruments, aids, tools.¹⁹⁸

To overcome the duality of self and other, to go beyond the narcissistic identification of self with personality, it is necessary for the individual to give up everything he/she knows of. Only emptiness is the proper beginning in the search after the light central to Zen Buddhism. And reality is larger than our limited and unreliable perception of it. Therefore, from the words tessellated into the second stanza we gather that song, dance and thought have an independent existence of their own, away from the narcissistic self: “*But the song kept on singing, / the dance kept on dancing, / thought kept on thinking*”. Now, singing, dancing and thinking are recognizably human activities or actions. However, they are a tiny part of the grander scheme of things too, and so the poetic voice also invokes such natural elements as the breezes and the sun: “*the breezes kept on blowing, the sun / continued to shine*.” Zen appears to dismiss the egoistical anthropocentrism that Western culture embraces. Humans are not at the very centre of the universe, and so it is of the essence for us to learn to be humble and grateful in the face of *what is*. Emptying one’s mind of all superfluous cultural accretions is just the beginning for a fuller realization of the ultimate nature of reality and of our place in it.

¹⁹⁷ *Transmission of Light [Denkoroku]. Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan*, p. vii.

¹⁹⁸ And yet, despite Keizan’s dismissal of writing and art forms, we know that “During the 16th-century period of political unrest, Zen priests not only contributed their talents as diplomats and administrators but also preserved the cultural life; it was under their inspiration that art, literature, the tea cult, and the *nō* theatre, for example, developed and prospered.” Entry on ‘Zen’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 30, p. 18177.

XXVI · JAKUSHITSU GENKO

“Jakushitsu Genko”¹⁹⁹ explores the thinking and the singing of another essential sage from the Far East. According to Bringhurst, Jakushitsu Genko (23 June, 1290 – 25 September, 1367) was “from Japan, traveled to China, then back to Okayama & Kyoto, Japan.”²⁰⁰ And from an entry devoted to this sage in the “Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures” at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, we learn that he was “A Zen monk trained under Issan. He studied in China from 1320 to 1326 and lived as a hermit in Okayama, in southwestern Honshu, on his return to Japan.” And in the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst tells us very briefly that he was “A Zen monk, poet and hermit living in Okayama.” Born into an aristocratic family at a time of social unrest and political turmoil in Japan, Jakushitsu was sent to a monastery in Kyoto at the age of 12. Though he did not seem to have a strong religious vocation as a young boy, a meeting with a visiting Zen monk made a deep impression on him. The monk’s wisdom, peace and meditation practices convinced him of the path his own life should take from then onwards. After spending the years 1320 to 1326 in China, where he studied Zen with well-respected masters of the Linji school, he returned to his homeland, where he lived as a wandering hermit for a long time, seeking the quiet and solitude of remote locations away from the cities. He was reputed for his flute-playing and his poetry, as well as for his ascetic way of life, one that embraced Zen ideals and practices. Towards the end of his life, he was coaxed by a local lord to settle down and teach Zen to those who might be eager to listen to what he had to say. Thus, he became the first abbot of Eigen-ji, a temple erected expressly for him to teach Zen to others as a spiritual guide and teacher.

It seems that many of these Oriental sages Bringhurst is interested in were wanderers concerned with asking fundamental questions, with thinking with intensity and depth in search of their own answers. These were monks, priests, thinkers, hermits, philosophers, musicians and poets for whom the universe was still a *whole* of subtle interconnections; for whom body, speech and mind were one and the same thing in our emotional and intellectual confrontation with the world. Jakushitsu Genko was one of such rare specimens: a Japanese Rinzai master, an excellent flute-player and an accomplished poet, even though he questioned at times the value of writing poetry. What was the point of devoting one’s energies to words when silence was preferable? And yet his poems have been handed down to 21st-centuries readers as some of the finest examples of Zen poetry. Now, “Jakutshitsu Genko”, Bringhurst’s poem, is nothing more and nothing less than a masterly and moving homage in honour of a great poet and thinker who was capable of producing poems where ideas had plenty of room to sing and dance in. As in all great poetry, thinking and singing go hand in hand in this short composition that is worth analyzing in detail.

Bringhurst’s piece on Jakushitsu is a perfect example of the jewel-like short lyrics that punctuate the author’s poetic output from time to time. The poet manages to say much with few words, as if in an attempt to say the most with the fewest words possible. And Bringhurst is precisely at his best in poems like this which try to convey profundity of thought with ascetic linguistic means. Incidentally, this poetic economy might be a hint of

¹⁹⁹ “Jakushitsu Genko” was originally published as C.43, “Jakushitsu”, in *Whetstone* (Lethbridge, Alberta) Fall 1984: 31. It was then reprinted in A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, in A.47 *The Calling*, in A.65 *The Book of Silences*, and in A.92 *Selected Poems*. In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, the calligraphy accompanying this piece reads: wú xīn sì qiū yuè = *own mindbeart similar autumn moon*.

²⁰⁰ Robert Bringhurst, *The Book of Silences*, Los Angeles: Ninja Press, 2001. See the separately bound section entitled “Contents & Notes” at the end (unpaged).

Jakushitsu's own despising of words and of poetry as an ultimately futile enterprise when one should be seeking silence instead. Thus, the composition consists of only two four-line stanzas of utter linguistic precision and evocative musicality. The first stanza offers a glimpse of the physical setting in words that are reminiscent of the Japanese haiku:

Wind through the warp
of the waterfall, talking.
Moon above the hill across the harbor,
climbing and gleaming.

With only a few brushstrokes, the landscape is depicted with astonishing economy as a place of essential elements – the basic ingredients of the scenery are wind, water, moon, sky and hills. The alliteration of /w/ in such key words as *wind*, *warp* and *waterfall* subtly points to the fundamental interconnectedness inherent in the living mesh of things. Thus, the wind speaks and sings its own song as it passes through “*the warp of the waterfall*.” No human voices are heard amid this quiet landscape of silence. The moon is a mute witness up above in the sky, over the hills on the other side of the harbour. It follows its own path with utter serenity as well. In the face of the sublime of this scene, the mind is closely connected to the moon. In fact, the ideographic form accompanying this poem in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* reads wú xīn sì qiū yuè = *own mind/heart similar autumn moon*. Hence the mind resembles an autumn moon gleaming calmly in the heavens. The whole picture is then one of peacefulness and quietude. It is only natural that such a calm landscape should prompt the poetic persona of Jakushitsu to meditate on death in these terms:

When I am dead and my bones lie
mindlessly in the dirt,
they will be
as transparent as ever.

Bones are a recurrent lexical item in Bringhurst's poetry; it occurs time and again in many of his compositions with powerful resonances. Bones remind us humans that we are ultimately simple matter of stubborn physicality, that we are made of exactly the same constituents as the rest of reality, and that we fit in into the grander scheme of things, both living and non-living alike. To Jakushitsu's mind, dying is tantamount to self-annihilation and extinction into the very dirt out of which we came into being. There is no reason why death should be feared, no reason to lose one's peace of mind in the face of physical dissolution. In his infinite wisdom and serenity, the sage knows that his bones will be “*as transparent as ever*,” that is to say, his bones will fall exactly into place next to the whispering wind, the singing waterfall and the gleaming moon. Nothing will have been lost or left behind *en route*, for the whole of existence is just sheer metamorphosis – everything is in a state of perpetual flux. This is possibly a rudimentary form of epiphany, an experience of enlightenment that the perceiving consciousness has undergone all of a sudden. An intimation of one's mortal nature might turn out to be a painful experience, but it is not such thing to Jakushitsu, for whom death means re-union with *what is*, blissful communion with the surrounding world, so that the dual existence of subject and object, self and other, conscience and world, is annihilated for good. The final lesson is then one of humility and gratitude; we humans must learn to see ourselves for what we are: perishable flesh and bones that are seeking their way back home since the very moment we are born.

XXVII · BANKEI YOTAKU

“Bankei Yōtaku”²⁰¹ concerns one of the major Zen masters ever born in Japan and the author of the so-called “Unborn Zen”, which, according to Daisetz T. Suzuki is “one of the most original developments in the entire history of Zen thought”²⁰². In its genius and utter simplicity and wholeness, his teaching of the Unborn is reminiscent of the great Chinese masters of the golden age of Zen in the period of the T’ang dynasty.²⁰³ Bringhurst pays homage to this lucid thinker in the form of a poem published for the first time in 1994 to honour the prestigious Canadian poet Leonard Cohen. In an entry in the “Cast of Suspicious Characters” at the end of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst tells us that Bankei Yōtaku (1622-1693) was “A Zen monk and Confucian scholar, born near Himeji, in southern Honshu.” And in the 2001 edition of *The Book of Silences*, he summarizes the intense life led by this Zen monk in just one line: “Bankei Yotaku 1622-1693 Himeji, Ako & Nagasaki, Japan.” These two entries hardly convey the intensity of the life of a remarkable man rich in experiences, widely travelled, who found it extremely hard to attain final enlightenment. Since early in his life, Bankei was determined to penetrate the ultimate essence of things, and so he wandered from one place to another, seeking instruction from all the masters he stumbled upon along his way, practising sitting meditation in complete solitude during days on end, away from human intercourse and with total disregard for his own health.

Bankei Yōtaku²⁰⁴ was born at Hamada, a small village in the province of Harima, to a physician of samurai rank in the service of the ruling Awa clan who, for unknown reasons, resigned his post, married a woman and made a living through the practice of medicine. When his father died, Bankei was only ten years old and his eldest son and his mother would raise him and his other brothers and sisters. The records of his life reveal that he was an intelligent, sensitive, rebellious and stubborn child. At the age of eleven, he was sent to the village school, where he was eagerly interested in the pursuit of his studies, which entailed the recitation of the Confucian texts, the *Great Learning* among them. One day, the teacher recited the key verse line “The way of great learning lies in clarifying bright virtue.” Bankei wanted to know immediately what “bright virtue” meant and interrupted his teacher in search of illumination. None of the answers he gave the child were satisfactory to his taste. This experience was a turning point in his life, inasmuch as it marked the beginning of his own personal spiritual quest after enlightenment. This questioning became an all-consuming passion that would determine the course of his future life for the next 14 years. From that moment onwards, Bankei seized every opportunity to ask other masters for help, but none would give him what he was after. None of his inquiries brought him a glimpse of understanding. Wandering aimlessly alone, he would lose all interest in schoolwork and so his brother banished him from the family home. Thus, Bankei started his own wanderings, even if one friend of the family allowed him to stay in a small hut of their possession up in the hills behind his house. His sole task was to clarify the meaning of “bright virtue”, away from all outside distraction.

²⁰¹ “Bankei Yōtaku” was originally published in B.48, *Take this Waltz: A Celebration of Leonard Cohen*, edited by Michael Fournier and Ken Norris, Ste Anne de Belleville, Québec: The Muses’ Company / La Compagnie des Muses, 1994: pp. 20-21. Contribution: • “Bankei Yōtaku in Los Angeles” (here dedicated to Leonard Cohen). Then, it was reprinted as “Bankei”, minus the dedication, in A.47 *The Calling* (1995), and as “Bankei Yōtaku” in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001) and in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009).

²⁰² See *The Unborn. The Life and Teachings of Zen Master Bankei 1622-1693*, translated and with an introduction by Norman Waddell, New York: North Point Press, 1984 (rev. ed. 2000), p. vii. Suzuki is the most lucid interpreter of Bankei’s “Unborn Zen”; in the forties he rescued this Zen thinker “from the obscurity of two and a half centuries of near-total neglect.” *Ibid.*, p. ix.

²⁰³ *The Unborn. The Life and Teachings of Zen Master Bankei 1622-1693*, p. ix.

²⁰⁴ The biographical information that follows has been lifted from Norman Waddell’s excellent introduction to *The Unborn. The Life and Teachings of Zen Master Bankei 1622-1693*, pp. 3-38.

Afterwards, Bankei spent several years at a temple of the Shin sect near his home village. At the age of 16, he visited the Zuiō-ji, a temple in the city of Akō, under the guidance of the Rinzai abbot Umpo Zenjō, a stern master who demanded complete dedication from his disciples. Bankei asked the abbot for advice to find the right answer to the consuming question of “bright virtue” and the master recommended the practice of seated meditation (*zazen*). Immediately, Bankei asked to be ordained as a Buddhist monk and stayed at the Zuiō-ji. Umpo changed his name to Yōtaku, which literally means “Long Polishing of the Mind Gem”. Subjected to an exacting training program under Umpo’s guidance, Bankei spent three years at his temple practicing seated meditation and possibly doing some work on koans. At the age of 19, Bankei was ready to depart. He started a new phase of wandering in his life: he moved from one temple to another, and more often he lived in solitary huts he himself built with meager materials, or slept in the open. This was an ascetic life of serious privations – years of hunger, physical and mental extenuation, even spent in the company of beggars – in which Bankei pushed himself past the bounds of physical endurance with the complete lack of regard for his health.²⁰⁵ After a wandering that lasted four years, Bankei went back to Umpo, but unfortunately he had not attained enlightenment yet. He had been unable to find a single person to help him solve his pressing doubts. At that point, Umpo told him that he would never attain enlightenment unless he looked deep inside himself. The answer he was looking for was not to be sought and found outside himself. Bankei left the temple once more and built himself a tiny hut where he was resolved to practice seated meditation till he broke through. Sitting for days on end, his body started to fester; he would give up eating for a long time to the detriment of his own health. He contracted tuberculosis eventually. Resigned to dying, Bankei attained sudden enlightenment during his near-death experience:

I felt a strange sensation in my throat. I spat against a wall. A mass of black phlegm large as soapberry rolled down the side. It seemed to relieve the discomfort in my chest. Suddenly, just at that moment, it came to me. I realized what it was that had escaped me until now: All things are perfectly resolved in the Unborn.²⁰⁶

The doubts that had been plaguing him ceased to exist. As he was strong enough to travel again, he visited Umpo to tell him of his experience. The abbot confirmed his understanding and advised him to seek confirmation from other masters. He recommended that he should visit Gudō Tōshoku, a prestigious Rinzai Zen master teaching at the Daisen-ji, a temple in the province of Mino. The Zen master was away visiting other temples under his supervision, and so Bankei decided to visit some other Zen teachers in the vicinity. He spent another year in the forested hills, working on his post-enlightenment phase. In the autumn of 1651 Bankei had the chance to meet with Dōsha Chōgan, a Chinese priest residing in a temple near Nagasaki. Eager to obtain verification from him, he had an interview with the master, who confirmed his enlightenment and also told him that his enlightenment was incomplete. He would not accept the master’s evaluation, and yet he decided to stay in his temple, Sōfuku-ji, under his guidance. In 1652 he would have another enlightenment experience while sitting in the darkness of meditation with his fellow monks. Later, Bankei returned to his native province of Harima, where he spent more time in solitary meditation and silent retreat, composing Buddhist chants pertaining to the Unborn. In 1672, at the age of 50, he was appointed abbot of the

²⁰⁵ In one of the records preserved, he says: “I pressed myself without mercy, draining myself mentally and physically; at times, I practiced deep in the mountains, in places completely cut off from human contact. [...] Whenever I heard of some teacher whom I thought might be able to give me advice, I went immediately to visit him. I lived that way for several years. There were few places in the country I did not set foot.” *The Unborn. The Life and Teachings of Zen Master Bankei 1622-1693*, pp. 8-9.

²⁰⁶ *The Unborn. The Life and Teachings of Zen Master Bankei 1622-1693*, p. 51.

Myōshin-ji in Kyoto. From then on he devoted his time to teach his “Unborn Zen” to others, priests and lay men and women.

Bringhurst’s poem consists of ten short stanzas of three verse lines each, marked by utter simplicity of language and imagery. The whole piece is an extended meditation on the Unborn, which to Bankei is the Buddha-mind that pervades all existence. As he himself says: “What I call the “Unborn” is the Buddha-mind. This Buddha-mind is unborn, with a marvellous virtue of illuminative wisdom. In the Unborn, all things fall right into place and remain in perfect harmony. When everything you do is done according to the Unborn, the eye that sees others as they are opens in you, and you know in your own mind that everyone you see is a living Buddha.”²⁰⁷ As in many other poems in the Oriental sages sequence, the mind occupies a central place in this meditation on the nature of *what is*. The radiance of truth is found everywhere one turns to look in the form of light emanating from *what is* in a spontaneous manner. There is no conscious effort made on the part of this light that is at the core of all things endowed with Buddha-nature, and hence the two opening stanzas emphasize this very notion of spontaneity and naturalness:

Light leaks from the mind like
tears from the eye,
blood from the body.

It flows from what-is like
sap from the tree. That is the only
reliable language.

As if it were a strange kind of liquid matter, the light that “leaks from the mind” to illuminate the world of things and phenomena seems to be “the only reliable language.” Zen despises words to a certain extent, for they do not express the truth of things with accuracy or precision. In dealing directly with the pulsating facts of reality, the mind needs no intermediaries in its confrontation with *what is*, and words are totally dispensable. Similarly, a sense of elemental kinship with the rest of bodily parts as well as with the natural world is highlighted in these verse lines. In much the same way the eye secretes tears and the body secretes blood, the mind secretes light. This light is the utter incarnation of *what is*, or the palpable manifestation of *what is*, and it flows in all directions from all things just like the life-giving sap flows from the tree. In this respect, in the “Ryūmon-ji Sermons” translated by Waddell in his edition of the priest’s records, Bankei deploys a language that is evocatively reminiscent of Bringhurst’s: “because of the unbornness and marvelous illuminative power inherent in the Buddha-mind, it readily reflects all things that come along and transforms itself into them, thus turning the Buddha-mind into thought” and “the Unborn is the Buddha-mind” and it is always “marvelously bright and illuminating.”²⁰⁸ The rest of Bringhurst’s stanzas go deeper into the notion of the Unborn. “*What is is unborn*” is the central statement, repeated with a number of variations in the rest of the poem. That was after all the core of the epiphany moment of revelation Bankei went through during his experience of near-death due to the tuberculosis he had contracted. Paradoxical language is pervasive, since what the poetic voice is trying to convey seems to be beyond verbalism, beyond the possibilities of discursive thinking. Suddenly we are plunged in the realm of the unspeakable and the unspoken, there where words do not reach. These are only instances:

²⁰⁷ *The Unborn. The Life and Teachings of Zen Master Bankei 1622-1693*, p. 59.

²⁰⁸ *The Unborn. The Life and Teachings of Zen Master Bankei 1622-1693*, pp. 39-40 and p. 42.

- (1) “*The source of what was / is what is, and the source of what is / must be what will be.*” This statement seems to cancel the serialism of time sequence: the present precedes the past and the future precedes the past. How is that logically possible unless we are installed in an absolute present or in timelessness, in a realm where time itself is transcended?
- (2) “*What is is unborn. / What is born is a gesture / towards or away.*” Only the unborn is and it is a strange kind of gesture whose sense or destination remains unclear. What is born is moving towards some new form of existence, or away from the pristine Buddha-nature present in all things and creatures in this world.
- (3) “*What is is unborn. / Nevertheless, / it is already bearing.*” and “*Being is bearing.*” *What is* is not yet born but is in the process of becoming. This is a state of perpetual metamorphosis that affects the whole of creation, and so it affects the human body (“*At the ends of the nerves, / what will be is breeding*”), but it also involves all the elements in Nature:

In bones and in river silt,
chromosomes, leaf-shapes,
in starlight and synapse and stone,

what no longer exists
is just shaving its face
and choosing its clothes.

These two stanzas just quoted seem to point to the very idea of reincarnation or transmigration, or simply they convey the sense that everything in Nature is subtly connected to everything else. What is not yet is getting ready in the most elemental of particles (bones, silt, chromosomes, leaf-shapes, starlight, synapse and stone is no random enumeration, as it comprises the human and non-human realms of existence, while not forgetting the shining stars of the night sky, or the cosmos in its entirety) for life again. There is no birth and there is no dying, or, as Bankei himself puts it, “There can be no death for what was never born, so if it is unborn, it is obviously undying.”²⁰⁹

Poetry is often the language of paradox, especially when such complex philosophical notions as those of Bankei’s Unborn Zen are being discussed in a poem. More often than not, we feel words fall short of what we intend them to communicate. And this is precisely what happens in “Bankei Yōtaku”, a poem of considerable conceptual difficulty that demands close attention on the part of the reader if he/she is to grasp its fundamental meaning. There is something of a circle-like perfection to the poem, on the other hand. If the opening stanzas announced that only the light emanating from *what is* was a truly reliable language, now the poem closes with a reference to words that “*are listening / for all you have to say,*” as if to capture the singing of *being* in the world. It remains unclear whom this *you* is meant to signify. Is it directly addressed to *what is*, to the unborn, to the Buddha-nature that is the underlying principle of all things? Possibly.

XXVIII · HAKUIN EKAKU

“Hakuin Ekaku”²¹⁰ concerns one of the major Japanese Zen masters who played a decisive role in the revivification of the Rinzai school. In *The Book of Silences* (2001), Bringhurst

²⁰⁹ *The Unborn. The Life and Teachings of Zen Master Bankei 1622-1693*, p. 41.

²¹⁰ “Hakuin Ekaku” was originally published as “Hakuin” in A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986). It was then revised in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2011), where the poem attained its definitive textual incarnation, later reprinted in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009). Curiously enough, this poem was not included in A.47 *The Calling*. In

speaks of this Oriental sage in almost telegraphic form: “Hakuin Ekaku 1685-1768 Haramachi, Japan.”²¹¹ But the entry devoted to this sage in the “Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures” at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* is a bit more informative: “Hakuin (1685-1768) A Rinzai master, born at Haramachi, near Mt Fuji. In 1716 he settled in to teach at Shoinji, not far from his birthplace.” But who exactly was this influential and remarkable Buddhist monk? It might be worthwhile to look into the details of his lifetime. Hakuin Ekaku²¹² (b. 19 Jan. 1686, Hara, Suruga province, Japan – d. 18 Jan. 1769, Hara) was an influential priest, a writer, and an artist who helped revive the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism in Japan. Born to a commoner family of low status in the small village of Hara, located at the foot of Mount Fuji, Hakuin possibly made his decision to become a Buddhist monk under the influence of his mother, a devout Nichiren Buddhist. At the age of 15, he was granted permission by his parents to join the monastic life and was formally ordained at the Zen temple of Shoin-ji. After the head monk of the temple took ill, Hakuin was sent to yet another neighbouring temple, Daisho-ji, where he served as a novice for three or four years. It was at this temple that he first read the Lotus Sutra and found it disappointing. At the age of 19, he went through a kind of faith crisis and made up his mind to abandon monasticism. He lost faith in the efficacy of Buddhism and travelled around studying secular literature, until he realized once more that he should resume monastic life and Zen practice.

Hakuin joined the Rinzai Zen sect about 1700. He subsequently became an itinerant monk, during which time he experienced what he considered to be enlightenment. Thus, he settled down at the Eigan-ji temple, where he had his first experience of enlightenment while locked away in a shrine of the temple for a whole week. It seems his master refused to acknowledge this enlightenment, whereby Hakuin came to the conclusion that there is no cycle of rebirth, and so he left once more. Afterwards, towards the end of his twenty-fourth year, he spent eight months of study under the spiritual guidance of the demanding teacher Shojū Ronin, who would remain his most influential master. Following several experiences of enlightenment, he left Shojū and travelled for several more years, wandering from temple to temple, perfecting his Zen. When he was 32, he returned to Shoin-ji, in his native town of Hara, and he became the abbot of the temple, where he served as spiritual master for fifty years. Hakuin experienced total enlightenment at the age of 41, as he was rereading the Lotus Sutra. From then on, he would spend his time teaching others to achieve enlightenment, writing and giving lectures to all those who would listen to him. Hundreds of students would come from all over the country looking for Hakuin’s guidance and teachings. As a result, Shoin-ji became a true centre of Zen teaching. In fact, after a period of moribund stagnation, Hakuin managed to refocus the Rinzai school on its traditional training methods, which integrated meditation and koan practice for initiates. Buddhism in Japan had been largely coopted by the Tokugawa shogunate, but while many priests sought personal advancement, Hakuin lived in great poverty among his peasant parishioners. He turned down offers to serve in the great monasteries in Kyoto, preferring to stay at Shoin-ji. He was a firm believer in bringing the wisdom of Zen to all people, and so he taught that direct knowledge of the truth is available to all, even the lowliest, and that a moral life must accompany religious practice. Hakuin was convinced that it was indeed possible for man to gain enlightenment by his own efforts. Leading a morally virtuous life was the fundamental lesson he taught humble

Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music, the calligraphy accompanying this piece reads: zhin qiaò = *mind/heart pierce*. In A.65 there is one extra verse line at the end that reads as follows: “*Still less is there none. / Still less is there neither.*”

²¹¹ Robert Bringhurst, *The Book of Silences*, Los Angeles: Ninja Press, 2001. See the separately bound section entitled “Contents & Notes” at the end (unpaged).

²¹² See entry on ‘Hakuin’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 12, p. 7181.

people. Thus, he attracted a large following that became a new foundation for Rinzai Zen in Japan.

The most important contribution of Hakuin to the Rinzai school was his systematization of koan practice in Zen teaching, which he utilized to aid meditation, as well as his emphasis on lifelong devotion to Zen practice. Hakuin returned to strict koan study and began to organize his materials into a course of study.²¹³ Koans were the best way to help students to achieve insight or attain enlightenment through intensive meditation and great doubt. As one struggles with a koan, psychological pressure and tension might smooth the path towards true awakening. In this training method students are assigned koans by their teacher and they must meditate on them. Once they attain enlightenment, they have a private interview with their master to demonstrate their insight. If satisfactory insights are attained, then the student is assigned a new koan to meditate upon. In this respect, Hakuin used classic koan collections inherited from China, but also invented his own koans, among them the well-known paradox of contemplating the sound of one hand clapping. He insisted on the need for never-ending and strict training to deepen the insight of enlightenment. Once the initial awakening is attained, the Zen practitioner must adhere to unremitting practice of the koan system. In this respect, he criticized quietist Zen practices that sought to simply empty the mind after a minor experience of enlightenment had been attained.²¹⁴ On the other hand, he was an active lecturer, touring all around Japan to talk about Zen, and he produced a prolific output, especially in the last 15 years of his life, to leave a record of his experiences and teachings for posterity. His writings²¹⁵ include *Orategama*, *Orategma zokushū*, *Yasen kanna*, and *Keisō dokuzui* (*Poisonous Stamens and Pistils of Thorns*), intended for advanced students of Zen. Hakuin is also known as a painter and calligrapher: his was the work of a simple and virtually untrained artist, but he wrote out poems, Zen sayings and mottoes, he drew caricatures and delightful pictures. All this was the by-product of his activity as a Zen teacher and preacher, not the conscious work of a practicing artist.

What is so moving about Zen practice is that initiates are able to cast aside the myriad circumstances to investigate their own selves alone. A sense of this self-introspection is conveyed by “Hakuin Ekaku”, Bringham’s moving homage to this Rinzai master who lived so long ago. The piece consists of a single stanza of only nine verse lines. “Mindheart pierce”: this is what the ideographic form accompanying this poem in its early textual incarnation in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* says. It certainly gives an essential clue as

²¹³ *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings*, translated by Philip B. Yampolsky, New York / London: Columbia University Press, 1971, pp. 11-12. “Hakuin insisted that, for Zen meditation practice, the practitioner must have three basic qualities: an overriding faith, a great doubt when facing the koans, and a strong aspiration and perseverance. The student’s first task was to see into his own true nature (*kenshō*). To this end Hakuin championed the *Mu* koan and later in his life the *Sekishū no onjō*, the “Sound of the Single Hand,” a koan which he himself devised. The method by which koans are to be solved is, of course, by disciplined *zazen*, or meditation sitting, accompanied by private interviews with the teacher (*sanzen*), in which the Master gives guidance and eventually sanction to the student’s understanding of a particular koan.” *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

²¹⁴ Philip B. Yampolsky quotes Hakuin’s words in his *Orategama* insisting on the need for meditation practice in the midst of activity, no matter whether in the common tasks Buddhist monks were expected to accomplish in their everyday life (caring for temple buildings and ground, growing vegetables, etc.) or in the bustle of the lay world: “I am not trying to tell you to discard completely quietistic meditation and to seek specifically for a place of activity to carry on your practice. What is most worthy of respect is a pure koan meditation that neither knows nor is conscious of the two aspects, the quiet and the active. This is why it has been said that the true practicing monk walks but does not know he is walking, sits but does not know he is sitting. For penetrating to the depths of one’s own true self-nature and for attaining a vitality valid on all occasions, nothing can surpass meditation in the midst of activity.” *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

²¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of the works of Haikun see the Appendix in Philip B. Yampolsky’s *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings*, pp. 223-233.

to the subject matter of this short meditation, which concerns the stillness of the mind and the ultimate nature of *being*. Written in simple declarative sentences where the verb *to be* predominates, “Hakuin Ekaku” consists of four statements of utter linguistic transparency, which is a recurrent stylistic feature of Bringham’s poetry. The semantic density and the profundity of thought are astonishing though, and also they are reminiscent of the gnomic dimension inherent in the koans Hakuin himself championed as a most useful aid to Zen practitioners’ meditation. These are the four statements Hakuin’s persona speaks in these lines with what looks like total serenity:

- (1) “*All beings are gods. Gods / are all beings.*” The same statement is repeated twice, though the order has been reversed. The essence of this statement is possibly the Buddhist belief that all sentient beings are endowed with Buddha-nature, that is, that every single creature in this world holds a sparkle of the divine and so is in a position to attain enlightenment. In another sense, these two simple sentences celebrate a sort of pantheism or even animism: by insisting on the fact that all beings are gods (by equating both beings and gods in both directions), the meaning conveyed is that of the ultimate unity of existence, whereby there is a divine substratum uniting all things in this universe. This insight into the One demands that the mind be liberated of ingrained prejudices and be alert to the breaking through that comes with profound meditation on *what is*.
- (2) “*The ice on the river / is time in the grip of your mind / in the grip of the water.*” This aptly intricate metaphor is possibly meant to elucidate or capture the ultimate nature of such a complex concept as time. But, in what way does ice on the surface of the river resemble time as apprehended by the mind? Reality is in a state of permanent flux whereby all things are in a state of becoming something else. Somewhere on the coast of Asia Minor, Herakleitos embraced this flux doctrine about 2,500 years ago. Given the perennial metamorphosis of everything in the world, phenomena are neither truly existent or absolutely non-existent, but are characterized by impermanence and insubstantiality. This is the kind of truth Hakuin might be giving voice to with these words. Now, ice resembles time in that it is frozen water, in much the same way time is a stylized abstraction that stands in sharp contrast to the incessant flux of things. However, the mind is said to be “*in the grip of the water,*” and water stands for sheer motion and change. Water is thus the perfect embodiment of change, in much the same way Herakleitos’ river was the perfect metaphor for his flux doctrine. If the mind is in the grip of the water, then it might be said to resemble the river itself in that it holds the so-called stream of consciousness – i.e., an inexorable current of thoughts and ideas flowing non-stop across one’s mind that the Zen practitioner must come to terms with during meditation.
- (3) “*What is / has no future, no present, no past, / no place and no nature.*”²¹⁶ These words affirm the non-existence of time, of space and of nature. We humans perceive phenomena flowing along the incessant current of the real within the ordering coordinates of time and space. But, if time and space are abolished, not much is left to sustain humans’ epistemological certainty. The very possibility of knowledge is at stake here. Hakuin seems to be saying that *what is* is atemporal and resides somewhere outside the province of time; it occupies no space and it has no definitive nature either. *What is* might be ineffable, and so no words will do to capture its ultimate essence. *What is* has a perfection and a purity of its own regardless of humans’ attempt to comprehend it. Only metaphor may prove a useful tool to aid humans in their intellectual confrontation with *what is*. Hakuin is practicing here the “great doubt” associated to the koan system he championed, so that the mind might start from scratch, precisely after questioning all those elemental things that are usually taken for granted as unmovable truth. The Rinzai master was convinced that, by their own efforts,

²¹⁶ The *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* textual incarnation of this poem has an extra verse line at this point: “The knowledge of this / has likewise no nature.”

humans could achieve enlightenment, though. This is then no nihilistic or pessimistic view on the possibility of gaining insight into reality.

- (4) “Cause and effect are the same: / there is not even one. / Still less is there neither.” This looks like a *reductio ad absurdum* or logical cancellation that leads to utter emptiness. The human mind explains reality in terms of causes and effects deriving from those causes. Now, if both cause and effect are one and the same thing, what are we left with? We are left with the unity of existence, with the unbreakable unity of reality, which is simply *one*, non-divisible into recognizable causes and effects, or discrete entities. Maybe all phenomena are phenomena of the mind, which is not altogether reliable either, for it is also in the grip of water, which is to say in the grip of unstoppable motion and change. Of course, this is only a tentative interpretation of these difficult and yet transparent words, which deal with a profundity of thought we are not accustomed to finding in the kind of poetry being produced nowadays. After all, Bringhurst’s poetry is philosophical poetry, or poetic philosophy – one where singing and thinking dance happily together.

As in many of his other short lyrics, Bringhurst manages to say so much so quietly that one reaches the end of “Hakuin Ekaku” with a true sense of catharsis or liberation. The effect of reading a poem like this is therapeutic in a way. One cannot but feel that we owe an immense gratitude to Bringhurst for having salvaged from the past such invaluable insights of a remarkable man like Hakuin for us readers. There was once a seventeenth-century Buddhist monk who believed in the power of the mind to set itself free of all constraints and start knowing everything anew from the very beginning. His belief in humans’ potential is still a moving source of inspiration for us.

XXIX · WÁNG BÌ

“Wáng Bì”²¹⁷ concerns the thinking of a precocious Chinese thinker who died at the age of 23, not without having completed a number of outstanding commentaries on the Daoist canonical text entitled *Daodejing*²¹⁸ (or *Laozi*), and the Confucian mantic classic the *Yijing* (*Classic of Changes*). His commentaries helped introduce metaphysics into Chinese thought, anticipating the work of the later neo-Confucians. It comes as a surprise that Bringhurst should have not included such an accomplished poem as “Wáng Bì” in the Oriental sages sequence as published in *The Calling* (1995) and in *Selected Poems* (2009). In any case, in the

²¹⁷ “Wáng Bì” was originally published as C.50 [Eleven poems], *CutBank* (Missoula, Montana) 26 (Spring/Summer 1986): 37–58. Afterwards, it was reprinted in A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986); it was also reprinted in B.44, *Literature in English: Writers and Styles from Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present*, edited by W.H. New & W.E. Messenger, Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1993: pp. 1401-3, 1529-30. Contributions: “The Raven Steals the Light” (rpt. from A.22); “Some Ciphers”; “Essay on Adam” (both rpt. from A.14); “Wáng Bì” (rpt. from A.32). Later, it was revised in A.65, *The Book of Silences* (2001). “Wáng Bì” is not included in the Oriental sages sequence as published in *The Calling* (1995) or *Selected Poems* (2009). In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, the calligraphy accompanying this piece reads: *tian di zhin xin = sky earth their mind/heart*.

²¹⁸ The *Daodejing* or *Laozi* is “one of the two foundation texts of Daoist philosophy in China, the other being the *Zhuangzi* (Sayings of Master Zhuang), which preserves the tradition of thought associated with Zhuang Zhou (369-286 BCE). [...] Whereas the *Laozi* is primarily addressed to the ruler who would be a sage-king and is mainly concerned with achieving the good society through harmony with nature, the *Zhuangzi* is contemptuous of rulership [...] and indifferent to social life in general and instead focuses almost exclusively on personal self-realization and the quest for happiness through the individual’s integration with nature.” See *The Classic of the Way and Virtue. A New Translation of the Tao-te ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, translated by Richard John Lynn, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, pp. 3-4. Thus, whereas the former concerns “how the sage rules the world in accordance with the spontaneous way of the natural”, the latter is “an explicit philosophical guide to personal understanding and self-cultivation.” *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

“Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures” at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringham gives us essential information regarding this sage: “Wáng Bì (226-249) Precocious author of a commentary on the works of Lao Tzu. He was a native of Shandong, employed at Luoyang, the capital of Wei, in what is now northern Henan.” And in the separately bound section entitled “Contents & Notes” at the end of the 2001 Ninja Press edition of *The Book of Silences*, Bringham gives us only brief spatio-temporal clues as to the identity of this important ancestor: “Wang Bi (Wang Pi) 226-249 Luoyang, northern China.” Bringham’s composition, “Wáng Bì”, captures the essence of his thinking, one that embraces that nothingness is the very basis of everything that exists in this world. *What is* and *what isn’t* have their innermost roots deep inside this *nothing* that is the mother and origin of everything. It is astonishing to see how fortunate humankind is to have had such a lucid mind that thought for us so many centuries ago. And it is a pity that he should have left the realm of the living at such an early age. Had he lived longer, he might have produced even greater works of sharp thinking and beauty.

Wáng Bì²¹⁹ (b. 226 CE, China – d. 249, China) was then one of the most brilliant and precocious²²⁰ Chinese philosophers of his day, so much so that his best known, brilliant commentaries on the *Daodejing* and the *Yijing* were strongly influential for centuries on end. He also wrote a commentary on the Confucian *Analects*, of which some fragments have survived till the present. And yet Wáng lived at a time of great political and social turmoil²²¹ in China, during the period of the collapse of the Han dynasty in 220 CE. He lived in dangerous times of political upheaval, but he was also at the very centre of major intellectual trends that had been developing for some time. At that moment in history, the elite’s interest shifted away from Confucianism towards Daoism, and Wáng saw it as his mission to create an understanding of Daoism that was consistent with Confucianism and yet did not fall into the errors of contemporary popular Daoist sectarian groups. This was consistent with his desire to restore order and a sense of direction to Chinese society after the turbulent final years of the Han dynasty. Wáng Bì belonged to a prestigious family that was actively involved in the government and politics of the late Han and early Wei period.²²² Thus, his father, Wang Hong, spent his life in the pursuit of an official career and ended up as a secretarial court gentleman whose job it was to draft edicts and other court documents. And his brother, Wang Hong, was appointed metropolitan commandant with the duty of supervising the entire officialdom of the capital. Wáng was unconventional and brilliant and did not concern himself with high office and reputation, though he became a court gentleman.

In his brilliant commentaries, Wáng Bì emphasizes the limited capacity of language to define complex concepts, for instance the very nature of the sage. The sage remains in the midst of human affairs and yet he accomplishes things by taking no unnatural action,

²¹⁹ See the entry on “Wang Bi” in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 29, p. 17621.

²²⁰ That Wáng Bì was a precocious child is clear from the information gathered in one of the primary sources for information on his life: a biographical notice by He Shao, a prolific essayist on the people and events of his times, preserved in Pei Songzhi’s commentary to the *Weizhi* (Chronicles of the Wei). Of Wáng He Shao says: “Wang Bi revealed his intelligence and wisdom even when still a child. By the time he was only about ten years of age, he had already developed a liking for the *Laozi*, which he understood thoroughly and could discuss with ease.” *The Classic of the Way and Virtue. A New Translation of the Tao-te ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, p. 11.

²²¹ “Wang Bi lived at a time of great social and political uncertainty and military strife, marked by rebellion, usurpation, civil war, invasion, and desperate economic conditions. It was the beginning of that time of disunity in China between the great Han (206 BCE-220 CE) and Tang (618-906) dynasties, [...] a disunity that lasted nearly four centuries.” See *The Classic of the Way and Virtue. A New Translation of the Tao-te ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, p. 5.

²²² *The Classic of the Way and Virtue. A New Translation of the Tao-te ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, p. 9.

for his conduct is an example of “effortless action”, that is to say, one in accord with the nature of things. The sage rises above all distinctions and contradictions, and he manages to put aside desires because they are corrupting and destructive.²²³ The unreliability or inefficacy of language²²⁴ is one of the philosophical notions central to his thinking, and it is consistent with the view of language propounded in the *Daodejing*. Words are inadequate for the expression of truth, and the *Dao* lies beyond language or verbalism. “Not only is language limited to naming specific things, it consists of names that at best only approximate the real nature of specific things and, as such, are inevitably false or counterfeit.”²²⁵ Therefore, words are to be distinguished from their underlying meaning, and so they must be somehow forgotten if the world of deep meaning is to be penetrated at all. Another central idea to Wáng’s thought is that of nothing²²⁶ or non-being as that out of which all the myriad things and phenomena arise. This nothing is the *Dao* itself: it has no form and no shadow, it is invisible, it is the supreme being or the mysterious centre of all things. Thus, Wáng’s theory of ontology (his study of *being*) rests on the concept of nothingness. While everything is governed by its own principle, there is one ultimate principle that underlies and unites all things – the *Dao*. Wáng interprets it as nothingness, but he does not see this nothingness as essentially in conflict with *being*. On the contrary, it is the ultimate source of all things; it is pure *being*. Thus, *being* comes from non-being, and non-being is the ultimate substance of *being*.

Although *The Book of Silences* consists of up to 32 different dramatic impersonations of Oriental sages, there is a single unity that runs through all of them. Although the ideas in it range across a vast perspective, together they are all of the same kind somehow and constitute a precious organic *Gestalt*. The mind is one of those recurrent themes throughout the entire sequence. Bringham’s “Wáng Bì” is no exception in this sense. It consists of three movements for the soul. The first part (stanza 1) looks like an epitaph composed in honour of the eminent Chinese philosopher, who died as a young man. It opens thus: “Wáng Bì of Wei / lies dead in his hut / at age 24.” What is so moving about this first stanza, marked by strong enjambment uniting short verse lines, is the simplicity of the language, as well as the notion that Wáng’s mind and body have returned to the natural world where they belong. Mountains figure prominently in Oriental philosophy, and, in fact, many

²²³ Though we will focus on Wáng’s ontology, it might be interesting to consider what this sage thinks of human emotions: “In his theory of emotions, Wang was concerned with the need for human beings to control their emotions. At one time he had a low opinion of Confucius because the famous sage was capable of expressing great joy and sorrow. Later, however, Wang decided that emotion belongs to human nature and that even a sage, as a person, can react only like a person. The difference between a sage and a normal person is that a sage will not be ensnared by emotion.” See entry on “Wang Bi” in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 29, p. 17621.

²²⁴ In his “Outline Introduction to the *Laozi*”, Wáng says: “Names do not arise without reason, and designations do not emerge without cause, so any name will always greatly fail to capture what it really is, and no designation will ever exhaust everything it really means.” *The Classic of the Way and Virtue. A New Translation of the Tao-te ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, p. 36.

²²⁵ *The Classic of the Way and Virtue. A New Translation of the Tao-te ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, p. 53.

²²⁶ ““Nothing” or “nothingness” [...] is a key concept in the thought of Wang Bi. By it, he seems to mean the perfect absence of conscious design, deliberate effort, prejudice, or predilection. The presence, on the other hand, of conscious design, deliberate effort, prejudice, or predilection is signified by *you*, which literally means “something” but also can mean “being,” in the abstract sense of the word, as well as the phenomenal existence of creatures, including humankind, everything in the plant world, physical phenomena in general, and events both natural and human. Wang identifies nothingness with the action or function (*yong*) of the *Dao* or the Natural (*ziran*). The *Dao* always “acts out of nothing... [...] Wang reads all the sections of the *Laozi* in terms of this basic truth: Nothingness is the principal attribute of all that is natural. To act out of nothing and thus in accord with the *Dao* inevitably results in success, safety, contentment, and happiness.” See *The Classic of the Way and Virtue. A New Translation of the Tao-te ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, pp. 17-18.

Buddhist monks and poets were named after the mountains they had nearby, close at hand. For instance, the well-known poet Han Shan was named after Cold Mountain, where he lived as a hermit for a long time, composing poems on bamboo, stones, trees, cliffs and rocks of the mountains where he felt at home. Similarly, Wáng Bì's mind is "*now one with the mountain*" and his flesh becomes "*grass, / voles, owls, / owl pellets, grass.*" Nothing is left behind *en route*, everything is preserved in the grander scheme of things of which humans are just a tiny part alongside non-human creatures, no matter whether animate or inanimate.

But the pulsating heart of the poem, the sharp thinking of Wáng Bì, is stored in the second (longer) stanza, the second movement for the reader's soul. It dwells on Wáng's ontology; it deals with his view on *non-being* as the source of everything in this world. The starting point is a simple statement that goes straight to the point: "*The use of the is / is to point to the isn't.*" All creatures and phenomena of this world point to or denote the existence of *the isn't*, which is to say nothingness or non-being, the central concept in Wáng's interpretation of the *Daodejing*. From this fundamental statement follow three essential implications punctuated by the repetition of "*Go back, look again,*" which is repeated three times. The three implications are formulated in paradoxical language that defy our understanding but do make perfect sense upon careful scrutiny:

- (1) Upon closer inspection, it turns out that *non-being or nothingness is pervasive in reality*. Hence, the poetic voice in Bringhurst's piece directs the reader's attention to "*the mind / of the sky and the heart / of the mountain*" just to learn that "*The mind is unbeing.*" By 'mind' the dramatic persona beneath these lines means not just the human mind, but the larger mind underlying and uniting all things in this world. This is the *Dao*, which is invisible, unformed, untouchable, out of which all things arise into existence. From the very outset, the sky and the mountain are brought together as if to symbolize a primordial act of creation, a *sui generis* cosmogony, not altogether dissimilar to or reminiscent of that recounted by Hesiod in his *Theogony*, where Gea and Ouranos are the protagonists of a cosmic marriage. But here there are no immortals uniting to bring about all that exists; *unbeing*, the *Dao*, is the sole progenitor of the universe as it were. And yet the sky and the mountain are perceived as being sentient, capable of holding a mind and a heart deep inside themselves. Humans have no monopoly on mind or heart, after all.
- (2) *What is exists* (or being exists). The canonical text of the *Daodejing* opens with these enlightening words: "The Dao that can be described in language is not the constant Dao; the name that can be given it is not its constant name. Nameless, it is the origin of the myriad things; named, it is the mother of the myriad things. Therefore, always be without desire so as to see their subtlety. And always have desire so as to see their ends."²²⁷ In Bringhurst's hands, this becomes gnomic lines pregnant with ontological meaning: "What is, / is. It consists / of what isn't. *Are* / is the plural of *is*; *is* / is the plural of *isn't*." What is in undeniably real, and it stems from what isn't, or, to put it differently, being comes from non-being. *Is* comes from *isn't* and *are* is the plural of *is*, just because what exists comes from non-being and it becomes the myriad forms of creatures and phenomena of this world.
- (3) But *what isn't also exists* (or non-being exists too). Hence, "*What isn't, / is. This / is the fusion of substance / and function, the heart of the sky / and the mind of the mountain.*" That these lines should look impenetrable, hard to decode, is consistent with the view propounded in the

²²⁷ *The Classic of the Way and Virtue. A New Translation of the Tao-te ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, p. 51. On these words, Wáng says: "Anything that exists originates in nothingness [wu], thus, before it has forms and when it is still nameless, it serves as the origin of the myriad things, and, once it has forms and is named, it grows them, rears them, ensures them their proper shapes, and matures them as their mother. In other words, the Dao, by being itself formless and nameless, originates and brings the myriad things to completion. They are originated and completed in this way yet do not know how it happens. This is the mystery beyond mystery." *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Daodejing that language is not altogether reliable or inefficient when it comes to expressing the truth of things, the ultimate essence of reality. The *Dao* is ineffable, hard to pin down. The poetic persona resorts to using gnomic language, as well metaphor, to try to convey the sense that non-being (identified with the *Dao*) is the ultimate life-principle underlying all things. That it constitutes a perfect unity is made clear by the references to the fusion of substance and function, as well as to the complementariness of “*the sky’s heart*” and “*the mountain’s mind*” (notice that the order has been reversed now with respect to the first implication above, where the poetic voice spoke of “*the mind of the sky*” and “*the heart of the mountain*”). Earth (the mountain stands for the whole earth in a sort of *pars pro toto* metonymy) and sky are united into one perfect whole, in much the same way being and non-being are not antagonistic at all and fuse together into the real.

Bringham’s poem closes with a stanza that was slightly changed in the final incarnation of this poem in the 2001 Ninja Press edition of *The Book of Silences*. In essence, the meaning at the heart of this stanza comes down to this: the path leading towards a virtuous life is to be found in the sage’s transcending all distinctions and contradictions, in acting in accord with the nature of things, in acknowledging non-being as the ultimate principle of reality, in letting things go their own way unimpeded, in naturalness and effortless action, in not being overcome by desire or violent emotions. From the realm of pure ontology, the poetic persona has now taken the path that lead to ethics:

To be, said Wang Bi,
without being; to think
without thinking; to open the hand,
and to stand on what isn’t.
We sink, said Wang Bi,
when we set out to stand on what is.²²⁸

XXX · JÍZÀNG

“Jízàng”²²⁹ is a short lyric poem on the metaphysics of another Chinese sage who lived in the sixth and seventh centuries CE. In the “Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures” at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringham tells us that Jízàng (Chi-tsang, 549-623) was “A metaphysician in the tradition of Nagarjuna and Kumarajiva, born in Nanjing. His mother was Chinese, his father Parthian, from what is now northern Afghanistan.” And in the 2001 textual incarnation of the Oriental sages sequence, the poet provides us with just elemental pieces of information in a brief entry: “Jizang (Chi-tsang) 549-623? Nanjing, eastern China.” Thus, Jízàng²³⁰ was an eminent Chinese Buddhist monk and scholar, often regarded as the founder of the so-called San-lu (Three Treatises or Middle Doctrine) school of Māhāyāna Buddhism in China. Born in Nanjing, in eastern China, Jízàng was truly precocious in spiritual matters. At the age of seven he became a monk and he studied the Madhyamaka treatises under the guidance of Falang at the

²²⁸ In its original textual incarnation in C.50 and in A.32 (*Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*), this stanza reads as follows: “To be, said Wáng Bi, / without being: this / is the way to have virtue. / Don’t fondle it, stand / on what isn’t. We sink, said Wáng Bi, / when we set out to stand on what is.”

²²⁹ “Jízàng” was originally published as C.50 [Eleven poems], *CutBank* (Missoula, Montana) 26 (Spring/Summer 1986): 37–58. Afterwards, it was reprinted in A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986) and A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001). “Jízàng” is not included in the Oriental sages sequence as published in *The Calling* (1995) or *Selected Poems* (2009). In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, the calligraphy accompanying this piece reads: èr dì = double truth.

²³⁰ See the entry on ‘Jizang’ (or Chi-tsang) in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, 2003, vol. 3 of the Microapedia, pp. 188-189.

Zinghuang Temple in Nanjing. Upon Falang's death in 581, Jízàng became the head monk of the temple. Since the age of 42, he travelled through China giving lectures, till he settled at Jiazang Temple, in Shaoxing, in the province of Zhejiang. Later in his life he was appointed head abbot of four temples by the emperor Gaozu, of the Tang Dynasty. Jízàng was a prolific author and wrote about fifty books in his lifetime, specializing in commentaries on the treatises he had studied early in his life and on texts from other Buddhist traditions. The San-lu school's basic doctrine is that, while the things of the material world may possess a temporary reality or existence, on the level of absolute truth there is no production or extinction, no permanence or annihilation, no unity or diversity, no coming or departure. Although the school did not survive past the 9th century CE, many Buddhists continue to study Jízàng's teachings, which strongly influenced the Neo-Confucian philosophy of the Sung dynasty.

Jízàng was convinced that all forms of attachments to anything brought about suffering. The attachment to a viewpoint from a purely logical perspective was no exception to this rule. Jízàng developed his "four levels of the two kinds of discourse": (i) The assumption of existence is conventional, and the idea of nonexistence is authentic. (ii) The commitment to a distinction being drawn between existence and nonexistence is conventional, and the denial of this duality is authentic. (iii) The distinction between committing to a distinction between existence and nonexistence is conventional, and the denial of the difference between duality and non-duality is authentic. (iv) All of these distinctions are conventional, and the authentic discourse regards that any point of view cannot be said to be ultimately true, and is useful only so far as it is corrective in the above sense. Now, this poses a form of radical epistemological indeterminacy or uncertainty. Language turns out to be not a reliable tool in the hands of logic and truth values when statements are made about the states of affairs in the world. Bringham's short poem, consisting of only 11 short verse lines, conveys this sense of radical uncertainty or nihilism:

I can affirm
that there is nothing to affirm
and there is nothing to deny.
What neither is nor isn't is
what is. It is
unthinkable, unspoken. So
we speak of it as ultimate
and ordinary, absolute,
routine. And this
two-sidedness
is its function.

Three little movements are discernible in the pattern of this short lyric of a gnomic nature. They flow into one another with the same naturalness with which a syllogism deduces a conclusion from two premises. First of all, the poetic persona of Jízàng affirms that there is no possibility of affirming or denying anything at all, for everything seems to be susceptible of being affirmed and denied, depending on the standpoint adopted. This might sound like a paradoxical statement devoid of logical meaning, but, upon close inspection, we realize that reality is complex and that language is not altogether reliable when we come to terms with that moment in time in which we are to communicate our insights into the ultimate nature of the real. Secondly, Jízàng's voice claims that *what is* is and isn't (what neither is nor isn't) simultaneously, and so it is unthinkable, unspoken, ineffable, beyond communication, beyond the power of common words to capture the essence of things. Any words will do then: this elusive *what is* can be *ultimate* and *absolute*, but also *ordinary* and

routine. These adjectives do not exhaust or capture with precision the essence of *what is*. And finally, this dual mode of thinking (which installs us in the realm of what looks like irreconcilable dichotomies) prevents us from truly understanding that *what is* has a sort of *two-sidedness* as its own function.

XXXI · NANYANG HUIZHONG

“Nanyang Huizhong”²³¹ is a unique poem in Robert Bringhurst’s sequence on Zen monks. It has got the compelling perfection and beauty of a snowflake. A part of this beauty stems from the very sublime confidence with which the sage’s voice communicates the certitude of something vastly greater than the world offers in its manysided multiplicity. *What is* is conceived in this poem as the irreducible ground of existence, the essence of everything, the ultimate reality beyond the purely visible. From this pure being or undifferentiated unity emerge created things, acquiring their names and distinct forms. From a brief entry included in the separately bound section of “Contents & Notes” at the end of *The Book of Silences* (2001), we learn only the essentials regarding this sage: “Nanyang Huizhong (Nanyang Hui-chung) 690-775? Baiya (White Cliff) Mountain, Hunan, central China.”

Like other Buddhist sages, this nine-century man was concerned to find out the ultimate nature of reality. In this sense, as pointed out above, Bringhurst’s poem is an accomplished meditation on *being* as the ultimate substratum of everything in this world. Once again, the language is kept simple and the poet resorts to the use of paradoxical and gnomic expression so as to give voice to the unspeakable. The four-stanza poem consists of two parts: whereas the first part focuses on a catalogue of the “perfected expressions” of *what is*, the second part constitutes an ambitious attempt on the part of Nanyang’s poetic persona to define *what is* directly. Hence, the piece opens with four simple verse lines that sing of the ubiquity of *being* anywhere one might turn to look, not just in simple natural (world-made) elements, but also in man-made things, imperfect though they may be:

Snowflakes, stones and clouds expound it.
Broken windows, spattered mortar, corpses,
squeaking hinges, slug tracks, stagnant pools
are among its perfected expressions.

The first stanza of the poem reveals an intimate, almost mystical bond between the perceiver and the perceived environment. It is as though a simultaneous sense of awe and kinship with the spirit that dwells in all things were being conveyed in a most subtle way. Thus, the sage’s voice worships natural forces and the elemental powers of life, and so we find no random choice of natural elements: *snowflakes* and *clouds* stand for the sky, *stones* stand for earth, and *pools* stand for water. Of the four classical elements only fire is missing here. To these must be added *slug tracks*, which evokes the realm of all animals, and *corpses*, standing for organic matter gone back to the bosom of Mother Earth out of which all living things come. All of them “expound it”, *it* being *what is*. What follows these world-made things is a catalogue of man-made things that have something wrong about them and yet are said to be “perfected expressions” of *what is* as well. What many of them (*broken windows, spattered mortar, squeaking hinges*) have in common is that they are constituent elements of humans’ homes within their larger home which is Earth.

²³¹ “Nanyang Huizhong” was originally published as part of the Oriental sages sequence in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001). It was not reprinted as part of the sequence as published in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009).

Human beings have always wanted to penetrate the ultimate essence of reality. Their fervent desire to know has pushed men and women of all ages to ask fundamental questions throughout the history of humankind. The second part of “Nanyang Huizhong” relies on the use of paradoxical statements to try to clarify the nature of *what is*. At this point, the sage aims at penetrating the heart of *being* straightaway. As in the first part, *being* is approached with loving reverence and awe. The starting point consists of two elemental statements that are simple and straightforward: “*What is is all false. / What is is all true.*” In terms of falsehood and truth, it turns out that *being* is both false and true, however paradoxical this may seem to be. *What is* is not easily reducible to one or the other. From these two statements follow a string of sentences in the present continuous that explore the nature of *what is*:

- (1) *What is* has the capacity to speak. Humans have no monopoly on speech and everything in the universe wants to *mean*. Hence, “*What is is admitting it is, / and what is is recanting.*” In Bringhurst’s poetry speech always takes precedence over writing, the spoken is prior to the written, silence precedes meaning as it were.
- (2) *What is* has also the capacity to write and to provide humans with reading matter. Hence, “*What is is now writing / the word you are reading.*” At this point, the poem turns self-reflexive, inasmuch as *being* is producing Bringhurst’s poem for us readers to read. Everywhere *being* is singing and dancing, and it finds a way to express itself through words to humans.
- (3) *What is* provides us humans with the necessary sustenance to keep us alive. It is thus “*donating and eating the food you are eating, / and keeping your fast*”, but it is also *being* that gives us breath and thought and is beneath our action or non-action:

It is giving and taking the breath
 you are taking, thinking the thought
 you are thinking, not doing what you
 are not doing. Eat it, breathe it, think it too.

The poem closes with a three-fold order for us to eat, breathe and think *what is* – i.e., to assimilate or absorb everything out there into the living fabric within ourselves. Outer is inner, and the other way around too.

XXXII · ZHAOZHOU CONGSHEN

“Zhàozhou Congshen”²³², later re-titled “Children of the Old Horse”, is closely connected to “Demons and Men”, another poem in “The Physics of Light” section in *Selected Poems* (2009), in its concern with Herakleitos’ flux-doctrine. What is striking about this short poem, written in spontaneous conversational English, is that Bringhurst manages to bring together into a brief composition of six three-line stanzas the thinking of two eminent philosophers: Herakleitos, the pre-Socratic philosopher who lived in Asia Minor in the sixth century BCE, and Zhàozhōu Cōngshěn (778 -897),²³³ a Zen Buddhist master who

²³² “Zhàozhou Congshen” was originally published in C.73 [Two Poems], *Canadian Literature* 154 (Autumn 1997): 8, 110. Contents: • “Zhàozhou Congshen” (rev. in A.65, A.85); • “The Living Must Never Outnumber the Dead”. It was then revised in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001), and reprinted from A.65 as A.85 *Zhàozhōu Cōngshēn*. Sherman Oaks, California: Ninja Press, 2007 (a broadside, 43 × 28 cm, 75 copies on Nideggen paper). Recently it has been reprinted from C.73 as “Children of the Old Horse” under the section heading “The Physics of Light” in *Selected Poems* (2009).

²³³ In *The Book of Silences*, Los Angeles: Ninja Press, 2001, Bringhurst gives us only essential information concerning this sage’s life: “Zhàozhōu Cōngshēn (Chao-chou Ts’ung-shen) 778-897? Traveled most of his

lived in Tang Dynasty China and was particularly known for his paradoxical statements and strange deeds. Paradox and obscurity seem to be two aspects both sages, Western and Eastern, had in common. At an early age, Zhàozhou became ordained as a monk and then, at the age of 18, he met Nánquán Pǔyuàn (Nan-ch'uan P'u-yuan, 738-834), “a Zen monk trained, like Bǎzhàng²³⁴, under ‘The Old Horse,’ MǎDào'yì, in Jiangxi. His own hermitage was farther north, in the oak forests of Anhui”, as Bringhurst himself tells us in the glossary at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986). Zhàozhou²³⁵ received the Dharma from Nánquán Pǔyuàn through a dialogue in which the master asked the young monk the koan “What is the Way?”. Zhàozhou attained enlightenment at the height of that intense conversation and continued to practice under the master’s guidance till he died. Afterwards, he wandered from one place to another, travelling throughout China, visiting the prominent Zen masters of the time before finally, at the age of eighty, he settled in Guānyīnyuàn, a ruined temple in northern China, where he taught a small group of monks for another 40 years till the very moment of his death. He became one of the great masters of Tang Dynasty China during a decadence time when the imperial hegemony was disintegrating due to the emergence of more and more regional military governors asserting their power. Many koans in the Buddhist classics *Blue Cliff Record* and *The Gateless Gate* concern Zhàozhou.

The later title of Bringhurst’s poem, “Children of the Old Horse”, makes sense as soon as we learn that ‘The Old Horse’, Mǎzǔ Dào'yì, was a Zen master, under whose guidance many prestigious Zen monks were trained, Nánquán Pǔyuàn among them. Both Herakleitos and Zhàozhou are considered to be children of the Old Horse, heirs to the same ancestral legacy and form of wisdom. And both sages are put in the improbable anachronistic situation of a modern classroom. Herakleitos is a visiting professor in some kind of university, giving a lecture to avid learners, and Zhàozhou is one of the students in the room. The Greek philosopher is expounding his flux doctrine, i.e. the notion that all sensible things in this world are in a state of permanent flux: “*Can’t step twice / into the same river, Visiting / Professor Herakleitos said.*” These simple words embody the Heraclitean view of the world as all flow and movement. One of Herakleitos’ most famous sayings is: ‘One cannot step twice into the same river, for the water into which you first stepped has flowed on.’ (fr. 21, Davenport’s translation). He also said: ‘Everything flows; nothing remains. [Everything moves; nothing is still. Everything passes away; nothing lasts.]’ (fr. 20, Davenport), and ‘The river we stepped into is not the river in which we stand.’ (fr. 110, Davenport). W.K.C. Guthrie tells us that “the statement of the flux-doctrine which has

life, setting in Hebei, northeastern China.” See the separately bound section entitled “Contents & Notes” at the end (unpaged).

²³⁴ In the glossary at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringhurst tells us who this sage was: “BǎIZHÀNG HUAIHAI (Pai-chang Huai-hai, 720-814) Reputedly the author of the first set of Zen monastic rules, including the famous formulation ‘One day no work, one day no eat.’ Born in Fujian, he succeeded Mǎzǔ Dào'yì (Ma-tsu Tao-i) as Abbot at Nanking in Jiangxi, then moved to Xinwu, also in Jiangxi, under Baizhang Mountain.”

²³⁵ See Andrew E. Ferguson, *Zen’s Chinese Heritage: The Masters and their Teachings*, p. 136: “Zhaozhou Congshen (778-897) was a disciple of Nanquan. He came from ancient Caozhou (near the modern city of Heze in Shandong Province). Zhaozhou’s first great awakening was at the age of eighteen. After receiving ordination on Mt. Song as a young man, he found guidance for several decades under Nanquan, until that teacher’s death. At that time, while already in his fifties, Zhaozhou set out travelling to further cultivate his practice. During this period he met several illustrious teachers such as Huangbo, Jiashan, Yanguan, and others. Eventually, Zhaozhou was invited to settle and teach at the Kwan Yin Monastery located in Zhaozhou (now the Bailin Monastery in Zhaoxian City, Hebei Province). Zhaozhou’s fame spread throughout China. Although he had thirteen Dharma heirs, his lineage soon died out. Among the many stories and kōans concerning Zhaozhou, it is “Zhaozhou’s Wu!” that is the most famous. This story is the first great kōan gate through which countless Zen students have passed. A monk asked Zhaozhou, “Does a dog have Buddha nature?” Zhaozhou answered “Wu! [in Japanese, *Mu!*]”

become almost canonical in later ages, πάντα ῥεῖ, occurs in the ancient authorities only in Simplicius (*Phys.* 1313-11), and is unlikely to have been a saying of Heraclitus.”²³⁶ In *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Kirk, Raven and Schofield claim that “the river-image illustrates the kind of unity that depends on the preservation of measure and balance in change,” and that the river-statement is found in at least two relevant fragments:

214 Fr. 12, Arius Didymus *ap.* Eusebium *P.E.* XV, 20, + fr. 91, Plutarch *de E* 18, 392B. [...] Upon those that step into the same rivers different and different waters flow... They scatter and... gather... come together and flow away... approach and depart. [...] According to the Platonic interpretation, accepted and expanded by Aristotle, Theophrastus and the doxographers, this river-image was cited by Heraclitus to emphasize the absolute continuity of change in every single thing: everything is in perpetual flux like a river. So **215** Plato *Cratylus* 402A... [...] *Heraclitus somewhere says that all things are in process and nothing stays still, and likening existing things to the stream of a river he says that you would not step twice into the same river.*²³⁷

So the river is the embodiment of the perpetual change inherent in reality. Everything is pure metamorphosis, nothing stays the same, and ‘Change alone is unchanging’ (fr. 23, Davenport). Once Herakleitos has propounded his flux-doctrine with such concision, Zhàozhou gives voice to what looks like common sense and says something to this effect:

Zhàozhou rose. Sir, he said, far
over your head there,
treading flowing water,

or standing in the middle
of your one-inch square
of dry rock,

five thousand miles from the closest
shore, where else
do you expect to step?²³⁸

If Herakleitos happens to be somewhere in the heart of continental China, with his feet pressing firmly on the ground, it is certain that the sea is far away from the exact location where he stands now. And if he is actually “*treading flowing water*,” then there is no way of stepping twice into the same river, because the river and the man are different from one moment to another. What is the point in reminding a classroom full of avid students like Zhàozhou that you can’t step twice into the same river? They already know. They have known it all the time. The Zen monk’s words are enigmatic, though, and still more enigmatic are the closing words of the poems: “*Quite, said Herakleitos, / and how often / can you step there?*” Zhàozhou leaves the classroom and marches away while singing “*left, right, left,*” which is a most curious reaction to the question asked by the visiting professor. His answer does not assume the expected form of words, but of an action instead. But, how are we to interpret this action? Possibly it is meant as a reminder that we humans flow in much the same way this incessantly changing river of reality flows. Actually, we are somewhere in

²³⁶ W.K.C. Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 450, footnote 1. Footnote 3 informs us that Aristotle, in *Metaphysics* 987a32, explains how Cratylus “carried the views of Heraclitus to their logical extreme by correcting the sentence ‘You can’t step into the same river twice’ to ‘You can’t step into it once’. Between the instant when your foot touched the surface and the instant when it reached the bottom the river at that point had already changed.”

²³⁷ G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 1983, pp. 194-195.

²³⁸ This stanza reads differently in its A.65 textual incarnation: “five thousand miles / from the nearest shore, where / else will you step?”

the middle of the river of changing life, bathed by the flowing waters in all directions. Therefore, we can step into the river any moment we choose to do so, or cannot avoid doing it, because motion is the very essence of the real.

XXXIII · HÓNG ZÌCHÉNG

“Hóng Zichéng”²³⁹ is a complex twelve-stanza poem that captures the thinking of another important Oriental sage. To grasp what this sage is saying, all one needs are eyes that will see and ears that will hear. Here Bringhurst “moves with authority beyond the margins of the anthropocentric and reaches for the real, which is, he posits, “for the most part non-human”.”²⁴⁰ In the “Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts and Other Creatures” at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringhurst gives us essential information regarding this sage: “Hóng Zichéng (Hung Tzu-ch’eng, c. 1550-1620) Also called Hóng Yingmíng (Hung Ying-ming), author of the *Caigen Tán* or *Conversations with Vegetable Roots*.” This poem was never again included in the sequence of *The Book of Silences* as a work in progress for a long time. Why Bringhurst decided to leave this poem out remains a mystery. An historically enigmatic figure, this Chinese philosopher lived during the end of the Ming Dynasty. Not much is known about him. What we do know for certain is that about four hundred years ago, Hóng Zichéng²⁴¹ took some time to write down his thoughts and sharpened perceptions for the sake of posterity. The resulting book was his major work, the *Caigen Tán* (*Vegetable Roots Discourses*), a compilation of philosophical aphorisms combining elements from Confucianism, Taoism and Chan Buddhism. The title makes reference to a comparison of the cultivation of human morality with that of plants, for ethics is one of the main concerns of this work indeed. A reading of the *Caigen Tán* discloses three important aspects about this sage. First, he drew for inspiration from Confucianism, Taoism and Zen Buddhism. Secondly, he must have been a well-educated or learned man on the ground of the references to passages of Chinese literature spanning a period of over two millennia. And thirdly, he was likely a consummate literati, absolutely convinced of the mystical value of literature.²⁴² He also wrote *Hsien-fo ch’i-tsung* (*Marvelous Deeds of the Immortals and Buddhas*), completed around 1602. It contains the legends of the deeds and sayings of Taoist

²³⁹ “Hóng Zichéng” was originally published in A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986) and then it was reprinted in (i) C.55 “Hóng Zichéng”, *Rambling Jack* (Auckland, New Zealand) 3 (November 1986): 14-16. Rpt. from A.32; and (ii) C.57 [Four poems]. *Rubicon* (Montreal) 8 (Spring 1987): 103-107. Contents: “Hóng Zichéng”, “Bodhidharma”, “Sengzhào”, “from *The Lyell Island Variations*: V. The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer,” all rpt. from A.32, but with two stanzas missing from the first poem. It was never reprinted in A.47 *The Calling* (1995), A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001) or A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009). In *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, the calligraphy accompanying this piece reads: zīn dì gān jìng fāng kǎ / dú shū xué gǔ = *mind/heart place dry clear before can study book, understand ancients*.

²⁴⁰ See Ron Clark’s review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, in *Wascana Review* (Regina) 22.1 (Spring 1987), p. 93.

²⁴¹ See *The Roots of Wisdom. Saikontan*, translated by William Scott Wilson, Tokyo, New York & San Francisco: Kodansha International, 1985. Much of this bio-bibliographical information is lifted from the Preface and Introduction to this translation of Hóng Zichéng’s masterwork.

²⁴² William Scott Wilson reminds us that “concern with literature and what it means is nearly as old as Chinese civilization itself” and that “According to these men, the Tao that is behind all natural principles and phenomena manifests itself by patterns... [...] Thus, the waves and ripples of all bodies of water, the blooming and falling of flowers, the sounds of the wind, or the flight of birds each is a manifestation of the Eternal Principle for our contemplation. Man, too, has his patterns, which are filtered through his mind and are best expressed in literature [...] If he will sit quietly and meditatively, they will naturally become manifest. [...] Such ideas, although never explained directly by Hung, run implicitly throughout his work in both content and style. We can see in him the literary man of the Tao: a happy contemplative with his books and brushes and musical instruments, never far from nature nor opposed to its pleasures.” *The Roots of Wisdom. Saikontan*, pp. 15-16.

immortals, Indian Buddhist patriarchs, and the Chinese patriarchs of Ch'an Buddhism, as well as comments on immortality and the mysteries of eternity.

The *Caigen Tán* was written toward the end of one of the most intellectually and spiritually stimulating periods in Chinese history, at a time where social stability brought about a remarkable growth in economics, amazing advancements in education, printing and the availability of books. It was also a time of syncretic thought characterized by a vivid cross-fertilization of views and, as a result, the widespread tendency was towards the unity of the three religions, though the predominant social thought was still the philosophy of Confucianism. The fundamental concept at the heart of all three religions (Confucianism, Taoism and Chan Buddhism) was “the natural equality of all men and all things in nature and their interaction and relationship with each other”.²⁴³ Whereas the Confucians emphasized the social and moral metaphor, the Buddhists chose to focus on the cultivation and meditation of one's original nature, and the Taoists dwelled on the great flow of life. All three, however, seemed to share the fundamental notion of “man's oneness with nature, and the resulting mysticism permeated the thought of each.”²⁴⁴ Sagehood was no longer an unattainable ideal belonging to just a few great men of the past: it was possible to learn to live to the fullest of human capacity and in harmony with the world. Therefore, in his book *Hóng Zichéng* urged humans to embrace simplicity, patience and lack of greed. Not only did he have a profound understanding of the world, but also he was endowed with an amazing capacity to express his insights into reality in a well-wrought poetic prose that still talks to us nowadays. Thus, his keen observations of the natural world and of human affairs are conveyed in a remarkable style that betrays a perfect command of the potential inherent in his language. In 357 verses, he managed to gather themes from all three philosophical traditions as well as from historians and poets of the history of China. The work is divided into two parts: whereas the former dwells on the art of living in society, the latter deals with man's solitude and his contemplation of nature. This lucid sage celebrates simplicity and urges readers to embrace artlessness, controlled moderation, self-tempering. The art of the simple in daily life is thus central to this work. His friend Yü K'ung-chien, The Master of Three Cliffs, wrote the Prefatory Verse to the *Caigen Tán*. It sheds light on the attitude and certain biographical details of this sage's life:

At one point my friend, Hung Ying-ming,
Brought his book, *Vegetable Root Discourses*, to show me,
And even asked me to write a preface.
At first I only looked at it in a desultory way;
Finally I straightened up the old books on my desk,
Swept away the worldly thoughts from my breast,
Took it in hand, and understood:
When he discusses Original Character,
I enter directly into its essence,
When he speaks of human nature,
I exhaust its inner workings in every way.
By his actions between Heaven and Earth,
I see the gentle waves within his breast.
Achievement and fame he regards as dust and waste,
And I know the loftiness of his insights.
The accomplishment of his brush
Is never far from green trees and blue mountains;
And the craft of his words

²⁴³ *The Roots of Wisdom. Saikontan*, p. 13.

²⁴⁴ *The Roots of Wisdom. Saikontan*, p. 13.

In the same Prefatory Verse, he imagines the sage going through considerable hardships: “He has tumbled and fallen in the wind and waves, harassed / and harried along steep cliffs.” And though he is not yet able to say “to what extent this man is enlightened”, he celebrates the *Caigen Tán* with these simple words: “One should know that true taste is within the vegetable root.” Which is to say that it is necessary to contemplate things over a period of time so as to be able to gain a true understanding of them, and that the image of the vegetable root is one of simplicity: “if we are truly to live, it is the simple things in life that will give us life’s true savor.”²⁴⁶ Thus, this superior man who lived so long ago peers deeply into transcendent reality and this work, the *Caigen Tán*, is what he comes up with as an imperishable gift to humankind in its entirety.

Bringhurst’s poem tessellates resonant and luminescent words into a complex tapestry of mastery design. Five movements for the soul are discerned in this pattern made of musical words. In the first part of the poem (stanzas 1 and 2), Hóng Zichéng’s voice urges us to simplicity and patience, but it also suggests that humans should sharpen their perceptions by simply paying attention to what is going on around them in the natural world. Artlessness or utter simplicity is what Nature teaches us, and it manages to accomplish this through simple means: “Stone under plum and bamboo, / their conjunction. Like them / to be artless, not thoughtless, / all the way through.” The picture of a stone lying quietly under a plum or bamboo conveys the sense of serenity and peace of mind one should ideally find in the natural world, the true home to the spiritual or truth-seeker. That a stone teaches us how to be artless and yet alert to the real comes as no surprise in the context of Bringhurst’s poetics, for whom the whole world is alive and pervaded by the halo of what could be called *universal being*. Now, it is a common place among these Oriental sages to insist that true wisdom is to be found not in books but elsewhere; the path to invaluable insights into the ultimate nature of reality lies in the direct confrontation between self and Nature, with no intermediaries in between. Hence, Hóng Zichéng’s dramatic persona in this poem says: “I have read / many books, and now / cannot write one.” Reading other sages’ words and illuminating intuitions into the world might prove an effective way of getting to penetrate reality, but it is not an infallible panacea after all. All the time spent reading others’ thoughts might well be useless, almost a waste of time, when one sets about writing down what one has learnt about the mystery inherent in life. In the face of words’ inability to capture *what is*, the only option left is *longheartedness*, this Oriental sage says. The key to the question is to have a big heart the size of the world. This might also be called generosity or, simply, virtue. *What is* is simply immeasurable though, owing to its varied richness or diversity, to its ineffable beauty and grandeur:

Longheartedness, that
is the answer. The wind
is a short flute, but the heart
is long. Longheartedness, yes,
but what is has no size. As its measure,
which flute shall we use?

The second part of Bringhurst’s poem (stanzas 3 and 4) affirms the need for an intimate communion between humans and Nature once again. Hence, “*When the face of a man is as thin / as a pine, his joy and his grief do not leak / through his eyebrows.*” As soon as

²⁴⁵ *The Roots of Wisdom. Saikontan*, p. 20.

²⁴⁶ *The Roots of Wisdom. Saikontan*, p. 9.

humans manage to become one with the world, there is reason to believe that they are on the path towards true wisdom, virtue and serenity. Joy and grief are emotions that the sage knows how to keep under control without letting them disturb his peace of mind. If a man can be sincere in his heart, harmonious in spirit, joyful in countenance and pleasant in his words, he will have accomplished much. Furthermore, Nature knows nothing of good or evil, of wrong or right either, as can be seen from “*Where is the right, / where is the wrong in the slow / wooden fountain we know as bamboo*” (notice the impressive metaphor here): in its simplicity or artlessness, bamboo teaches humans to stand on their feet pressing firmly on the ground and to elevate themselves upwards into the realm of pure air. In the face of bamboo, man perceives the original nature of his mind and the true form of human life, the true self of the universe. And the lines that follow are a meditation on what the species that populate this world. At this point, the sage’s voice essays several definitions of what a species is: “*Is a species / a law enforced by the court, or is it an idea?*”. It could be something else instead, and so the poetic voice explores other alternative definitions:

Or is it unbeing folded through being, a sudden
reflection, an image, a vision
through which other images, other visions
are tumbling and spilling? A vision
to which other visions are constantly
fed, and on which they are feeding?

The third part of Bringhurst’s composition (stanzas 5 and 6) celebrates the myriad forms of life (or species) that populate the world, while the emphasis is laid on birds: craneflies, finches and thrushes find room for themselves in these verse lines. Whereas birds simply “*cherish their natures*” and know how to live just the way they are, humans seek desperately to penetrate the world by means of a dichotomizing mind that divides the continuum of existence into pairs of contraries or opposites that are nothing but an oversimplification of the real: “*A waste of the mind to parcel what is / into ugly and beautiful. Useless / to fall for the habit of happy and sad.*” It is possible for humans to try to cling to time and hold it in their hands “*like two frightened thrushes*” or to hold nothing at all. Sooner or later, Hóng Zìchéng reminds us, “*each must release what he has*” and let it go. Similarly, in the fourth part (stanzas 7 and 8) of “Hóng Zìchéng”, Nature is depicted as being the true home of the self, the inspiration for virtuous action: “*Water and rock / are the roots of right action.*” (notice the alliteration of /r/ in these two memorable verse lines). The sage’s voice urges the truth-seeker to “*Bathe in the spaces*” instead of “*merely sweeping the stream*”²⁴⁷, to absorb *what is* into the living fabric of his being, and to let the world absorb his self too. Afterwards, Hóng Zìchéng’s poetic persona dwells on the relationship holding between mind and body, and between mind and reality. It wonders “*How much of the mind is confined to the body*” and also “*how much of the mind / [rests] in what the mind touches.*” What the mind touches after all is the world in its entirety, represented here by what looks like the random enumeration of “*the stars and clouds, / the color and shape of the woodpecker’s / crest, and the web of his motion?*” Stars and clouds are found in the sky, and the woodpecker is still a creature that lives and thrives in the air. The motion of his flight tells us that this bird is alive and is a tiny part of universal *being*, which sings through its manifold manifestations.

²⁴⁷ These words are reminiscent of a short poem by Hóng Zìchéng himself included in the *Caigen Tán*: “The chanting of the birds, the voices of the insects – / All are secrets in the communication of the mind. / The brilliance of the flowers, the color of the grasses – / These are nothing other than literary patterns of the manifest Way. / The man who studies such things must purify his natural capabilities, / Give his heart the timber of the sound of jewels, / And come to understand this truth in everything he touches.” See *The Roots of Wisdom. Saikontan*, p. 101.

The fifth movement of the poem (stanzas 9 to 12) is the most complex of all five parts “Hóng Zìchéng” consists of. A verse from the *Caigen Tán* might well have been the source of inspiration for Bringhurst’s words:

Men understand how to read books that have words,
But do not understand how to read those that lack them.
They know how to pluck the lute that has strings,
But do not know how to pluck the one that has none.
Caught by the form
But untouched by the spirit:
How will they get at the substance of either music or literature?²⁴⁸

In Bringhurst’s hands, these words become a simple six-line stanza of great beauty and perfection. The poetic voice meditates on literature and on music, as embodied by a book made of words and by a lute consisting of strings. Reading a book written in recognizably human words is no difficult task at all, in much the same way bringing music out of a tuned lute is not difficult either. What is truly difficult is reading a book without words or playing a lute without strings. But what is the intended meaning of these words after all? Getting at the substance of literature or music entails going beyond the words or the literal strings, beyond the purely material part a literary work of art or a musical instrument consists of. On a different plane, the book without words could be reality itself, a vast book of gigantic dimensions which is right in front of our eyes to read, and music might be what *being* sings uninterruptedly from the beginning of time. As is common practice with Bringhurst’s, such profundity of thought is conveyed through elegantly simple words that cling to one’s mind owing to their appealing musicality:

So you can read
a book full of words.
Can you read one without words?
You can bring music
out of that lute after tuning
the strings. Can you play one without strings?

The two stanzas that follow (stanzas 10 and 11) dwell on music and painting as man-made objects of inspiration for humankind’s enlightenment, on the one hand, and on mountains and clouds as nature-made things that remind human beings that they belong among a grander scheme of things. In both cases, humans might approach these art forms or natural elements in two different ways: either they penetrate the ultimate essence of reality to draw spiritual nourishment for their soul from music and painting or mountains and clouds as being a genuine inspiration for their own enlightenment, or they simply take with them all they can draw from them without truly getting at their substance, remaining on the surface of things as it were. Hence, the poetic voice claims that it is possible for humans to listen to music or look at a painting to nurture their mind with them, or simply to get “*their physical energy*.” Similarly, one might go to the mountains and study the clouds “*to draw wisdom / and strength from them*” or simply to see them as being “*loud noises / in visible terms*.” Humans do not learn much of value if they choose to remain on the surface, if they do not go beyond mere appearance to penetrate the essence of things, no matter whether they are man-made or nature-made objects. In the midst of mountains one can see the true form of human life, and by observing the fleeting or evanescent clouds in the sky, one might learn an elementary lesson of humility and gratitude. For as Hóng Zìchéng himself puts it in another verse in the *Caigen Tán*,

²⁴⁸ *The Roots of Wisdom. Saikontan*, p. 101.

The chatting of the birds, the voices of the insects –
All are secrets in the communication of the mind.
The brilliance of the flowers, the color of the grasses –
These are nothing other than literary patterns of the manifest Way.
The man who studies such things must purify his natural capabilities,
Give his heart the timber of the sound of jewels,
And come to understand this truth in everything he touches.²⁴⁹

The closing stanza of the poem is a twofold injunction for the truth-seeker to attain a true sense of communion with Nature, to become one with the world. Fused with the unity of what is, humans will find themselves more truly:

Taste the still air,
hear the still water: new leaves
will spring from the doorpost.
Plum and bamboo will rise through you.
Snowflakes and stones will set roots
through your shoulders and hands.

²⁴⁹ *The Roots of Wisdom. Saikontan*, p. 101.

PART IV

Polyphony and Prosodic Experimentation Poems for Several Voices

The Blue Roofs of Japan

The Quiet Wisdom of Japan: A Duet for Two Interpenetrating Voices

I · INTRODUCTION

Like other Bringham poems, *The Blue Roofs of Japan* is a work that has been a long time in the making. Actually it has spent 24 years looking for its right incarnation in the human voice and on the page, as a poem born of breath meant to be performed by two interpenetrating voices (male and female), with an undeniable well-wrought typographical realization as well that appears to have been fulfilled in its more recent version as published in *Selected Poems* (2009) by Gaspereau Press. It saw the light of day in July 1985, though it got to be published only in January 1986, in the literary magazine *Lines Review*. From its very genesis, it was accompanied by Program Notes which, like the poem itself, have evolved over time. In this, Bringham was closely following the example of such Modernist masters as T. S. Eliot, who also accompanied *The Waste Land* (1922) with erudite notes at the end. But Bringham's notes are of an altogether different nature, maybe even more pragmatic in a way: though the original 1985 "program notes" fulfilled a twofold purpose by insisting on the polyphonic nature of the poem and by shedding light on some oddities and Japanese references, later versions of the same "program notes" shifted the emphasis toward instructions on the actual performance of the poem or, to put it differently, on at least two ways of approaching the poem – either silently, by reading the words on the page aloud in one's mind, or through the actual sound of a performance, which requires two voices for actually speaking the poem aloud. The challenge was there from the start: for the first time in his literary career, Bringham was essaying something completely new, trying to compose a true oral poem to be interpreted by two voices which merged or coalesced at several points, thus building on a new density of meaning. In addition, this posed a typographical challenge: how to graphically represent the superimposition of two voices, speaking at the same time to produce a unitary *Gestalt* of sound and sense.

The editorial history of the poem itself testifies to its complex evolution. What follows is a detailed chronology of the various textual incarnations of the poem over time:

- (1) "The Blue Roofs of Japan", published in *Lines Review* (Edinburgh) 95 (January 1986): 65-69. It includes, at end of text, "Program Notes" dated Vancouver Harbour, July 1985. It is dedicated to American novelist Audrey Thomas, with whom Bringham had shared a two-week reading and lecture tour in the spring of 1985. It was in her voice that the poem seemed to be born, as the dedication in subsequent editions makes clear: "for Audrey Thomas, in whose voice it all began." While still in Japan, the poem seemed to be taking shape in Bringham's mind. In this first appearance, the text does not look like a poem for two voices. In sections I and II the opening stanza in each case is in italics, which suggests that it is meant to be read aloud by another voice; sections III and IV are for one voice only; and section V is *for two voices*, as the poet himself makes explicit in brackets. But here there is no real temporal synchronicity or interpenetration of the two voices, or, at any rate, the typographical realization of the poem on the page does not succeed in conveying the sense that the words are to be read or spoken aloud simultaneously. The poem and the "Program Notes" were further revised in the subsequent versions published in 1986.
- (2) *The Blue Roofs of Japan: A Score for Interpenetrating Voices*. Mission, British Columbia: Barbarian Press, 1986. [28] p. Paper, sidelaced, 19.5 × 28.5 cm. "100 copies, hand-numbered in

Roman numerals & signed....” ISBN 0-920971-05-9. Contents: a poem (revised from the original *Review Lines* text), with untitled headnote and, at end of text, “Program Notes” (also revised from the *Review Lines* text). The score was published in 1986 by Jan & Crispin Elsted at Barbarian Press and in a separate edition issued by William Hoffer. Afterwards, it was collected in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* in 1986. It had its first performance at the University of Montana, Missoula, on October 16, 1985, and was later broadcast on CBC Radio in a version produced by Don Mowatt. There is cassette tape containing an acoustic version of the Barbarian Press edition of *The Blue Roofs of Japan*, Vancouver, B.C.: privately published, 1986. It was performed by the voices of Robert Bringhurst and Donna White, and produced for the CBC by Don Mowatt. It was pirated from the 1985 CBC Radio studio tape.

- (3) *The Blue Roofs of Japan*. Vancouver: William Hoffer, 1986. [28] p. Paper, sidelaced, 19.5 × 28.5 cm. “150 copies, hand-numbered in Arabic numerals & signed....” Same as the Barbarian Press edition, except for cover, copyright page, title page, paper, and details of artwork and design. ISBN 0-919758-17-7.
- (4) *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986. With calligraphy by Yim Tse. 128 p. Paper, 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 0-7710-1661-1. This new book consists of six distinct sections – *The Book of Silences*, *The Lyell Island Variations*, *Gifts & Presences*, *Tending the Fire*, *The Blue Roofs of Japan: A Score for Interpenetrating Voices*, and *Thinking & Talking: A Prose Caboose* (an autobiographical essay and an interview) –, plus a glossary entitled “Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts & Other Creatures”, a key to the calligraphy, and an acknowledgements section. *The Blue Roofs of Japan* is the fifth section in the book. Both the text of the poem and the Program Notes (an untitled headnote¹) are further revised. Typographically, the text is printed in two colours, in black and blue ink.
- (5) *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press. 1987. First US edition. 128 p. Paper. Same as the Canadian edition, except for the title page, copyright page, acknowledgements, cover, and occasional minor typographic changes. ISBN 0-55659-003-2. Once again, *The Blue Roofs of Japan* is published here as a distinct section of the book.
- (6) *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970–1995*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995. 256 p. Paper. 14 × 22 cm. ISBN 0-7710-1651-4. Contents: foreword, thirteen distinct sections – *Conversations with a Toad*, *Hunters & Pilgrims*, *Deuteronomy*, *The Old in Their Knowing*, *Hachadura*, *The Stonecutter’s Horses*, *Bone Flute Breathing*, *Tzubalet’s Mountain*, *The Book of Silences*, *Lyell Island Variations*, *Their Names*, *The Blue Roofs of Japan*, and *New World Suite N° 3* –, plus a “Cast of Suspicious Characters”, an index of titles and first lines, and acknowledgments. The text of the poem and the program notes are further revised here, and the subtitle is changed to *A Duet for Interpenetrating Voices*. The typographical realization of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* is completely different: the male voice is in roman and the female voice is in indented italics, as explained in the untitled headnote containing the program notes².

¹ This is the full text of this untitled headnote in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*: “This is a score for jazz duet, which I hope will function also as a reading text. The full text of the poem is carried on both the righthand and lefthand pages of the book, but since the two voices frequently overlap, the two parts are not always legible on any one page. The lefthand pages give prominence to the male voice, the righthand pages to the female voice. Facing pages should be read not in sequence but together.

If the score is used as a performance text, the male performer should read from the lefthand pages while the female performer reads from the right. By looking through his or her own lines, each may see the other’s voice lurking in blue ink underneath. The male voice sets the timing, as it is the more verbose. (This is not a paradigm, but here it is the case.) The female voice cuts lyrically across. Sweetly, I suppose, but deeply enough to draw the necessary blood.” See *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, 186, p. 81.

² This is the full text of this untitled headnote in *The Calling*: “This is a poem for male and female speaking voice. The woman’s voice, which starts the poem and steers it, is set in indented italics. For the sake of legibility, the voices appear to alternate on the page. In fact, they must speak together:

- (7) *Selected Poems*. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press. 2009. 272 p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-068-6. Contents: untitled headnote, five distinct sections – *The Beauty of the Weapons*, *Deuteronomy*, *The Old in Their Knowing*, *Hachadura*, *The Stonecutter’s Horses*, *Bone Flute Breathing*, *Tzubahalem’s Mountain*, *The Book of Silences*, *Ljell Island Variations*, *The Physics of Light*, *The Blue Roofs of Japan*, *Conversations with a Toad*, *New World Suite No. 3*, *Ursa Minor*, *The Living* –, plus Index of Titles and First Lines, and Acknowledgments. Here *The Blue Roofs of Japan* subtitled, *Duet for Interpenetrating Voices*, is printed in two colours, in black and blue ink, on facing pages that the reader is expected to read simultaneously, as the untitled headnote³ containing the program notes makes clear. Typographically, the text is beautifully displayed on the page, in what Bringhurst deems a *legible and affordable* version at last. The poem appears in the last third of the book, which is devoted almost completely to Bringhurst’s polyphonic poems, i.e. his poems for multiple voices. *The Blue Roofs of Japan* is the first in the sequence. Subsequent many-voiced poems like *Conversations with a Toad* (1987), *New World Suite No. 3* (1995/2005) and *Ursa Major* (2003/2009) [*Ursa Minor* contains only the monologues and choruses of *Ursa Major*] would evolve into forms of increasing complexity.

To sum up, *The Blue Roofs of Japan* was first published in *Lines Review* in January 1986. It was then published as a separate publication in a special limited edition by Barbarian Press and William Hoffer in 1986, where both the text and the program notes were revised. Later it was collected in *Pieces of Map*, *Pieces of Music* (1986 & 1987), where the poem and the program notes were further revised. Much later, it was published in *The Calling* (1995) and *Selected Poems* (2009), where the poem and the notes were further revised.

The Blue Roofs of Japan is not an isolated work within the wider context of Bringhurst’s evolving corpus or oeuvre. Polyphonic poems were not born out of the blue, as it seems there is a natural progression or evolution towards these poems for multiple voices. The origins could be traced back to the poems of the 1970s, and the spirit can be seen stemming from such early dramatic monologues as *Deuteronomy* (1974), *Jacob Singing* (1977) and *The Stonecutter’s Horses* (1979). The origins could even be traced back to an early poem like “Hachadura” (1975), a long meditative piece described as *a chaconne for solo intelligence*, and to the sonata in three movements entitled *Tzubahalem’s Mountain* (1982). It is

Woman’s voice alone.

Man’s voice speaking *And the woman’s voice speaking*
while the woman speaks too. *at the same time.*

Man’s voice alone.

A performance score, with the two voices superimposed, printed in two colours, appears in *Pieces of Map*, *Pieces of Music* (McClelland & Stewart, 1986; Copper Canyon Press, 1987).³

³ This is the headnote in full: “*The Blue Roofs of Japan* is a poem for two voices – in principle little different from a sonata for cello and piano, except that here the instruments speak; they don’t quite sing. The full text of the poem is printed on both the righthand and lefthand pages of the book, but since the two voices frequently overlap, the two parts are not always legible on any one page. The lefthand pages give prominence to one voice, the righthand pages to the other. Facing pages should be read not in sequence but together.

Reading the poem aloud requires two people. When I was writing the piece, I thought of these two as a man and a woman. I still tend to think of the lefthand voice as male, the righthand as female, but I have also learned that, given the right voices, these roles can be reversed, or that both readers can be either women or men.

One reader, in any case, reads the black ink on the lefthand page while the other reads the black ink on the right. Under his or her own lines, each reader can see the other’s voice in blue. Enough blue ink is visible on every page to allow both readers to keep pace with one another. There isn’t, and in my view mustn’t be, a metronome. The only thing the readers have to pace themselves against is one another.” *Selected Poems*, p. 175.

also reminiscent of the “dramatic impersonations” of Oriental sages and philosophers included in *The Book of Silences* section in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), which were composed more or less at the same point in time in his literary career. In another respect, *The Blue Roofs of Japan* anticipates or prefigures the subsequent polyphonic poems, characterized by an increasing degree of complexity. A powerful meditation on human beings’ relation with the non-human, *Conversations with a Toad* brings together polyphony and an increasing ecological awareness in a long sequence consisting of ten sections; *New World Suite no. 3* dwells on ecology and language in four movement for three voices, thus increasing the number of voices involved in the making of the poem; and *Ursa Major* moves towards the realm of mythical thinking and a many-tongued world that unites Greek, Latin and Cree stories into a unique polyglot and polyphonic poem for several voices. Thus, experimenting with multiple voices is a new path Bringham started exploring at least 25 years ago. If Bringham conceives of his own poems as being the fruits of oral composition more than of writing, and if he is such an exacting self-editor, then it is only natural that the next step should be to think that not only do poems live in the voice, off the page, as works perpetually in the making, polishing themselves over time, but in the many voices that reality is full with or rich in, for the world is a polyphonic place in itself, and Nature (and music) is a genuine model for the kind of polyphony he is after. *Being* is plural and polyphonic, he says, and so it cannot dwell in a monolithic, homophonic poetry then, at least not exclusively. Only by having many voices in the making of a poem, is it possible to touch the plurality of *being* he sees and hears in the world. In this way, the many-voiced poem enacts a profound meditation and emulates the polyphony of the real world.

Beauty has always been an attribute of Bringham’s publications. Thus, *The Blue Roofs of Japan* is a perfect example of the book as a perfect artifact,⁴ a beautiful *made thing*. Bringham’s work won the 1986 Literary Prize for Poetry of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Indeed it meant a typographical challenge for the poet and his editors from the very outset, as it is a poem for two voices speaking simultaneously at times. Different ink colours had to be used then to represent the male and female voices speaking the poem. The lessons Bringham had learnt from music were present throughout; this poem in five parts was meant as a score for a “jazz duet”, but here there was no room for improvisation at all. For a proper understanding of the ambitious task the poet set for himself with this new work, it should be borne in mind that he produced a number of prose statements where he put forward his ideas concerning polyphony. The Program Notes preceding the poem in each textual incarnation, his ground-breaking essay “Singing with the Frogs” published in *Canadian Literature* (and Jan Zwicky’s relevant distinctions and valuable differentiations in response to his essay as well as the critical essay of Sean Kane, who dwells on polyphonic myth), “Licking the Tongue with a Forked Tongue” (the afterword to *New World Suite No. 3*), and Dennis Lee’s different conception of polyphony as enacting meditation (and the Trent Colloquium on polyphony held in 1996, of which we have Robyn Sarah’s testimony) are all crucial for an adequate understanding of *The Blue Roofs of Japan*. In all these prose statements dwelling on the concept of polyphony, language, nature and ecology are constellated into a beautiful meditation that illuminates the interstices of Bringham’s polyphonic poems. From the start, he is concerned to use the

⁴ William Bright, in a review of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* in *Fine Print* 13.3 (July 1987): 127-128, claims that the book is indeed a typographical achievement and that the book is an unusual book: “The book is, then, decidedly unusual in its concept. The poetic text itself, however, is clear, musical, and evocative. [...] Similarly, the design of the book – apart from the matter of the two voices – is effective in very straightforward ways. The Japanese calligraphic version of the title, stamped in blind on the cover as well as printed in black on the title page, combines with the oriental folding and binding to support the geographical localization of the text.” See p. 127.

term ‘polyphony’ with as much intellectual precision and rigour as possible. He had the literary precedents of Pound, Zukofsky and Basil Bunting, who searched for a verbal analogue for the fuge. But they produced *homophonic* poems in the end. A polyphonic poem is something much more complex. Polyphony in the natural world is the starting point for *literary polyphony* in Bringham’s train of thought. Humans happen to live in a many-voiced world where human languages are placed side by side with the languages of the nonhuman, since *homo sapiens* has no monopoly on language or meaning. Literary polyphony is a way of emulating natural polyphony, hence the title of his ground-breaking essay “Singing with the Frogs”. What is a polyphonic poem? It is a many-voiced poem – one in which several voices speak simultaneously to produce a multilayered message rich in environmental awareness. Though each voice has its separate agenda, none cancels what the other has to say. The result is much more enriching, much more real, closer to the world as it is.

The Blue Roofs of Japan. Duet for Interpenetrating Voices – that is the definitive title of this polyphonic poem included in the recent *Selected Poems* (2009) which saw the light of day in 1985, after Robert Bringham had completed a tour of readings and lectures in Japan with colleague and novelist Audrey Thomas, *in whose voice it all began*, as the dedication of the poem reads.⁵ The first appearance of the text was in *Lines Review* (Edinburgh) 95 (January 1986): 65-69, and it included “Program Notes” dated Vancouver Harbour, July 1985. As pointed out above in the detailed editorial history of the poem, the notes or program notes accompanying the poem and the poem itself were revised over time – in the first edition, *The Blue Roofs of Japan. A Score for Interpenetrating Voices*, published by Barbarian Press and William Hoffer in 1986, then in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986 & 1987), in *The Calling*:

⁵ In “Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue”, the afterword to *New World Suite Number Three* (2005) and a lucid meditation on the concept of polyphony, Bringham gives a detailed account of the genesis of the *The Blue Roofs of Japan*: “Twenty years ago, more or less, I was travelling by train in Honshu with the novelist Audrey Thomas. Audrey, looking out the window at the blue roofs, said, “If you lived in a house with such a blue roof, you’d wake up happy every morning.” Over the next few days, in the back of my head, these became the opening words of a poem. But the poem appeared to have a problem. It was jumping back and forth between Audrey’s voice, in which it had begun, and mine, in which I thought it might continue. I wanted to take full advantage of this problem, so I made no attempt to shut out either of these two voices. They would alternate, I thought. But they refused. They kept trying to talk at the same time – and kept succeeding. So the poem passed its problem on to me, in the form of a text I didn’t know how to print or perform.

Performing it turned out not to be so hard. It simply needed two speakers, a man and a woman, who enjoyed contradicting one another but didn’t want to drown each out. I discovered, though, that professional actors – who were recommended to me repeatedly for the job – often found it unusually difficult. Whether their normal turf is the stage, the radio studio or the camera lens, actors are trained to take control when it is their turn to talk, and to avoid upstaging others where the script says someone else should speak a line. The ideal co-performers, I discovered, were not actors but classical musicians. Whether they’ve ever read a poem aloud or not, chamber musicians know how polyphony works. They know that two or four or forty voices and ideas and personalities can occupy the same space at the same time, and can keep their own identities – even sharpen their identities – without endangering anyone else’s. They know that when two voices intertwine, the space they occupy gets larger, and the mind gets larger with it. It’s a lot like making love. It’s also like another bird arriving in the spring. When a new voice enters the ecology, if it isn’t unsustainably destructive, the universe inhales and makes room.

Soon I found myself attempting to explain to a publisher in Toronto why one section of my next book of poems had to be printed in two colors, with two texts superimposed. To my considerable amazement, the publisher went along, and the poem was printed as I had designed it: male voice in black over the female voice in blue on the verso pages, and the same texts reversed, female voice in black over the male voice in blue, on the recto of each spread. Two old friends, Jan and Crispin Elsted, proprietors of a letterpress operation called Barbarian Press, took the same text at the same time and approached it differently, setting it by hand in metal and printing the two voices blue and blind.

The Blue Roofs of Japan, published in those two incarnations in 1986, seems now like a very simple experiment and a very elementary and tentative attempt at a polyphonic poem. Still I learned enough from it to know that I had ventured into interesting terrain.” See pp. 3-4.

Selected Poems 1970-1995 (1995), and lately in *Selected Poems* (2009). The poem has been then a long time in the making, looking for the right typographical presentation or layout that Gaspereau Press seems to have found at last for this poem which is only truly alive in the voices of two performers. In this sense, *The Blue Roofs of Japan* marks something of a turning point in Bringhurst's unfolding literary career. It is the beginning of a path that the author has been exploring for so many years now: the path towards polyphonic poems, that is, poems for two or more simultaneous voices, speaking at the same time. Of course, this entails a considerable typographical challenge of sorts, and also a poetic and intellectual challenge for the author himself and the audience. Reading or listening to the performance of a polyphonic poem is an aesthetically gratifying experience, but it is also a strenuous experience, for it is a complex, demanding task to try to read the texts of two superimposed voices at the same time. This is why Bringhurst recommends that the poem be read aloud with the help of a friend; silent reading of a poem like this is a somewhat incomplete experience, not so rewarding after all. Or maybe the poet is right when he says that the right audience for any work of art is the gods, who are omnipotent after all.

Most critical essays and reviews devoted to an analysis of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* up to the present do not do justice to the complexity and beauty of this magnificent work, characterized by an intense lyricism, clarity of language, and profundity of thought – it is a breathtaking accomplishment and a poem about water, after all. Most reviews restrict themselves to a purely objective description of the way the book has been made in typographical terms or to stating that this is a poem for two voices, but not much is said towards the elucidation of the way it is constructed, of the way motifs unfold in the superimposed and interactive texts, of the ultimate meaning of this complex work. Indeed, it is no easy task to embark on a detailed analysis of a poem for two voices, especially if we bear in mind that this is a *sui generis* or extraordinary *genus of lyric*, as Jan Zwicky says in “Being, Polyphony, Lyric: An Open Letter to Robert Bringhurst”, *Canadian Literature* 156 (Spring 1998): 181–184, her response (and probably the most illuminating essay devoted to the author's concept of polyphony) to “Singing with the Frogs”, Bringhurst's seminal essay on polyphony, first published in *Canadian Literature* 155 and then reprinted with revisions in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing. Twenty Pieces of Thinking*. It is also more than a poem for two voices speaking contrapuntal texts at the same time – the *Gestalt* of the work of art is more than the simple sum of the parts. Something of great import, with the texture of transcendence, is being communicated to the listener or the reader. The poem is a quiet meditation on the four basic elements the whole world is made of (water, earth, air, fire); on the poet's role and on the nature of poetry as a way of touching or knowing being; on the need to open one's ears and eyes to the beauty of the Earth; on breath, speech and the origins of writing in Neolithic times; and on the *logos* governing the order and beauty of the world. It closes on an optimistic and quiet invitation for the listener or the reader to confront the world as it is and do justice to it by coming into close union with a grander scheme of things where everything fits in.

To return to the genesis of the poem, it might be wise to begin at the beginning. As pointed out above, in January 1986 *Lines Review* published the text of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* for the first time. The abyss between this original text and the 2009 version that we find (and will quote from in our critical analysis) in *Selected Poems* is simply astonishing. The fact that the 1986 poem was intended to be performed by two voices simultaneously was typographically signaled through a simple procedure: the female voice, which steers the poem, was in italics, while the male voice was in roman type. What is even more interesting is that, even if the poem is meant for two voices, they do not speak simultaneously except at one single point, in the closing lines of section V. One brief note by Bringhurst says so:

“If the word *Four* is sounded by the second voice, it falls in time with the word *earth* in the second-last line. This is the only occasion on which the voices coincide.” The rest of the poem was meant to be read by the voices in sequence, *not* simultaneously. Further revisions of the poem would make it into a truly polyphonic poem, as the Barbarian Press and William Hoffer editions and the version in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* make clear from the start: the words of the two voices are literally superimposed on one another to suggest the simultaneity of the speaking. Black and blue ink (as well as blind printing in the separate edition) are used to typographically convey the sense of polyphony. The poem becomes thus a true *score for a jazz duet*. It seems to us that the text is typographically impoverished in the material incarnation we find in *The Calling*, where the simple procedure of indented italics is used to represent the female voice. Fortunately, Gaspereau Press has made at last an excellent typographical job in *Selected Poems*, where we find *a true garden of colours* in the last third of the book, which is completely devoted to Bringham’s polyphonic poems. In the poet’s view, it is *legible and affordable*⁶, which is what really matters when it comes to a poem that is meant to come truly alive in performance. However, to lovers of well-made books, it seems to us that the 1986 Barbarian Press edition remains the most accomplished and beautiful. For practical reasons, we will have to resort to a typographically schematized layout of the text on the page: the steering female voice is in indented italics and smaller size than the male voice, in larger size and in roman type.

The “Program Notes” that accompanied the first appearance of the text in 1986 have never been reprinted again in exactly the same terms. They are a useful explanation of the experience in the poet’s life that gave birth to the poem, while at the same time providing a brief glossary of oddities (Japanese words) that are found in the text. The notes remain illuminating in a number of ways and so they are worth quoting in full:

In the spring of 1985, the novelist Audrey Thomas and I made a two-week lecture tour of Japan. This piece began to fashion itself in my mind while we were still in that country, living at unusually close quarters to one another and in (for us) unusually populous and exposed conditions. From the first, I intended the piece to function as a gift for Audrey – and this is so notwithstanding the poem’s assertion (with which I agree, if that matters) that the right audience for any work is not one’s colleagues but the gods. If that priority is clear, perhaps the work is free, like rice, to be useful also on a human plane.

I suspect a few of the Japanese references may need elucidation.

I mistranslate slightly the name of Ryoanji, the Peaceful Dragon Temple, in Kyoto – site of the most famous *karesansui* meditation garden in Japan. *Karesansui* means “withered hills and water.” The garden consists of rocks and raked gravel, not of what we call as a general rule living things.

The *shakuhachi* is an endblown bamboo flute. It is one of the principal instruments of *bogaku*, traditional Japanese music (as distinguished from *yogaku*, “sea music” – i.e., music of foreign origin).

Karamatsu, literally “Chinese pine,” is really the Japanese larch, *Larix leptolepis*, and *sugi* is the Japanese redwood, *Cryptomeria japonica*.

A *roshi* is a Zen priest; the title means simply “old teacher.”

I may say also, for the benefit of a European audience, that both Audrey and I were born in the United States. I was brought to Canada as a child; she came here under her

⁶ In the final acknowledgments section at the end of *Selected Poems*, Bringham devotes a short paragraph to the polyphonic poems in the volume: “Only a few of the poems in this book are polyphonic in the technical sense of the word, but they (and I) have been trying the patience of publishers and printers, and sometimes the patience of readers, since I first began to write them, twenty-five years ago. I’m grateful to Andrew Steeves and Gary Dunfield for making it possible to publish them in a form that is both legible and affordable, at last.” (p. 265)

own steam as an adult. This may have something to do with the brief quotation from *The Star-Spangled Banner* in Section III.⁷

These notes are reminiscent of the glossary of oddities found at the end of *Tzubahalem's Mountain* (1982) or *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982). The common impulse beneath all of them is, again, Bringhurst's love of intellectual precision. He wants to keep the concepts clear and distinct, which testifies to the seriousness with which he experiences his own vocation as a poet, committed to a millennial art in which the achievements of the past masters are the nutriment of the present. Indeed, Pound said that technique is a test of a poet's sincerity. We would add that it is also a rest of his intellectual honesty and an undeniable or tangible proof of his intense love of his calling.

II · CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

SECTION I

The Blue Roofs of Japan consists of five untitled sections or movements for two voices, reminiscent no doubt of the *sonata in three movements* that *Tzubahalem's Mountain* (1982) is, even if this was a *monophonic poem* in 21 sections where we got to hear a number of modulated voices – Tzubahalem's persona, the lover's, even the poet's. It is also reminiscent of the "dramatic impersonations" of *The Book of Silences* sequence, first published as the first section in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), which also found its source of inspiration in the Orient – in the wisdom of Japanese, Chinese and Indian sages. But in these dramatic *impersonations* the reader gets to listen to only one voice at a time, to one single *Weltaanschauung* as it were, to one single idiosyncratic way of perceiving the world through the prism of one single penetrating mind. In any case, we should be familiar by now with Bringhurst's way of constructing his own poems. The *total* poem entitled *The Blue Roofs of Japan* is much more than the mere sum of its constituent parts, but he focuses his attention first on small building blocks that, when brought together into a coherent whole, make perfect sense. Thus, the pattern is not clearly discernible in each tiny part; it makes itself clearer as the poem unfolds in time. At that point, recurrent motifs and themes become crystal-clear all of a sudden, and the ultimate message understandable. Though this is a demanding poem, that requires an active role in the decoding process on the part of the reader, the aesthetic pleasure derived from the whole experience by the attentive listener/reader is out of the question.

Let us begin at the beginning. Section I of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* sets the geographical and imaginative setting for the whole poem. It is also the longest of all five sections, and also the section of the poem where the two voices coincide in time much oftener than in the remaining sections. An attentive reading of this first part must take into account the two superimposed texts, their actual interaction at relevant points in the unfolding of ideas and emotions in the total text, and their distinct contribution to the cumulative building of meaning throughout the whole section. These are the opening lines of the poem:

In a house with

⁷ See "The Blue Roofs of Japan", published in *Lines Review* (Edinburgh) 95 (January 1986): 65-69. The "Program Notes" appear on p. 69.

From Bringhurst's words in this brief note, we gather that there are two possible ways of approaching this poem. Either you read it silently as it stands frozen on paper, keeping an eye on both pages at the same time, which is no easy task at all, or you speak it aloud with the help of a friend. In a meditation on voice, poetry and polyphony, poet Robyn Sarah, who also has a musical training, dwells on the possibility of actually reading two superimposed texts at the same time. First, she wonders whether there is such a thing "as a verbal or poetic equivalent to polyphony in music" and then she comes to the realization that

One can in various ways (spatially and/or using different typefaces) visually approximate the effect of two "voices" or "texts" meant to be read simultaneously rather than consecutively... [...] Inevitably they [such experiments] must be constructed, contrived... [...] it is not really possible to read and grasp two lines simultaneously: one is aware that one is only approximating the act – reading them consecutively and trying to imagine them superimposed. It is a rather strenuous mental exercise...⁹

This confirms our suspicion that the experience of silently reading a polyphonic poem is no impossible task, but it certainly falls short of the real thing, which is listening to its actual performance by two distinct voices speaking the texts aloud simultaneously. Silent reading is a form of precarious experience, incomplete, in a sense. The experience of listening to a polyphonic poem, come truly alive in the voices of the performers, must be something completely different. Needless to say, the very physicality of the human voice has a beauty about it that is lost on the silent page, where words are but a pale shadow of their acoustic realization. As Mark Dickinson puts it, Bringhurst's "polyphonic poetry, or poems for two or more voices that speak together at the same time, as in chamber music, challenges us to rethink the very way we read poetry."¹⁰ In this respect, polyphonic poetry remains a true intellectual and aesthetic challenge for attentive readers.

As pointed out above, the opening lines of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* set the tone for the rest of the poem. Once the setting has been so masterfully evoked, the poetic voices move on to a detailed unfolding of what it is one wakes up every morning *to* in this quiet place. At least seven more distinct parts or little movements are identifiable in section I. One of the most important recurrent motifs at the core of the poem is that of water, that most primordial of elements out of which the Earth is made. Thales, one of the pre-Socratic poet-philosophers Bringhurst pays due attention to in *The Old in Their Knowing* (2005), knew it for sure about 25 centuries ago. In a house with such a blue roof, one wakes up first of all to the singing of water. Thus, in the second movement of section I, we are directly plunged into a world of pleasing sounds, and subtly encouraged, urged or invited to embrace what could be called *a poetics of hearing* – i.e., a respectful attitude towards *reality as it is* which entails opening one's mind and senses to the beauty of the world:

To the talking mirror
To the talking mirror
of water.
of water. To the broken panes

⁹ See Robyn Sarah, *Little Eureka: A Decade's Thoughts on Poetry*. [Emeryville, Ontario]: Biblioasis, 2007: 205-226, which includes two letters by Bringhurst to Robyn Sarah, incorporated (along with letters from Dennis Lee) in Sarah's "A Dangling Conversation (for multiple voices)", a discussion of literary polyphony. See pages 206 and 209 in particular.

¹⁰ See Mark Dickinson's review of *Selected Poems*, entitled "In the Wake of Our Ancestors", published in *The Times* (London), August 8, 2009: *Weekend Review* 12.

To the talking mirror
of water, laid in the earth like leaded glass.
of water,

SP, pp. 176-177.

At the core of these verse lines are two essential metaphors: (1) “*the talking mirror of water*”, possibly a reference to the untroubled surface of a lake, where water is capable of a speech of its own while reflecting the world of appearances as if it were a faithful polished mirror, and (2) “*the broken panes / of water, laid in the earth like leaded glass,*” which evokes the metamorphic existence water leads in the form of streams, rivers, seas and oceans on the vast surface of the Earth in its entirety. Water and earth are one of those elemental pairs of contraries or opposites that occur time and again in *The Blue Roofs of Japan*, for they are indeed two of the basic ingredients the world is made of. The point is that *water speaks* (and this is personification too), and what it has to say is of the essence to human beings if we dare to listen to whatever lesson it has for all creatures on Earth. It is no wonder that the female voice should insist on this idea of *water speaking* by repeating exactly the same words of the first metaphor twice in a such a short space.

The irreducible core of meaning in section I is found exactly in the very heart of the composition. A cup of tea encompasses the Earth in its entirety; like the Earth itself, a cup of tea contains water too. Resemblances go even further than that: the shape of the cup is reminiscent of the curved contours of the Earth. Hence, holding a cup of tea in one’s hands is tantamount to holding the Earth in one’s hands as well. Whereas sight clearly predominated in the first movement and hearing in the second one, now touch is of the essence. All the senses must be involved in one way or another in this elemental confrontation of self with Nature. Indeed, this (cup = Earth) is the potent equation at the heart of this third movement for the soul, even if it is punctuated by two more fundamental dichotomies: order vs. disorder and empty vs. full hands. The hands, like the cup of tea, may be full or empty. They also remain a powerful symbol, for they are the expression of humans’ humility and generosity. That hands are empty means that they are ready to receive the gifts Earth gives them; that hands are full means that they are ready to offer whatever they may hold to the Earth. Possibly. Earth is *the cup containing everything*. That such a simple and humble item as a tea cup should contain the whole world is no small miracle:

To the cup containing
to
everything,
the cup containing
to warm it with the tea.
everything – the hands

To hold in the hands like a cup of tea,
always full and always empty,
always empty, always full –
the earthy asymmetry of the world.

To the rich, disordered earth,
and to the order of the earth.
to the sound of mountain water,
to the boundless

To the boundless –
truth of the ground.
not infinite, boundless –
truth of the ground.

To the world with its welcome
imperfections.
Violence hides in fastidious order.
Violence hides
under the lid of fastidious order.

SP, pp. 176-177.

In a contrapuntal way, the female voice utters the opposite words of what words the male voice utters. Where he speaks of hands holding “*the earthy asymmetry of the world*”, “*the rich, disordered earth*”, and “*the world with its welcome imperfections*”, she sings of “*the order of the earth.*” Interestingly enough, both voices converge into a realization that breathing through one’s own body in its entirety awakens up to “*the boundless / truth of the ground.*” The Earth is then a place of order and disorder: while order is associated to Apollonian reason and a rationalistic mode of thinking that hides violence (“*Violence hides in fastidious order*”), disorder sides with the beautiful imperfections, irregularities and asymmetry of the world, or, in other words, with a Dionysian spontaneous, elementary force of life. What the poet is after is *a truth of a polyphonic and lyric nature*: one that embraces the *plurality of being* and has room for the many-voiced creatures dwelling on Earth, each singing their own song and contributing to a boundless singing. This is the truth of a breathing Earth, one that is truly alive, one which is not misperceived by our greedy management of its limited resources, one which is truly alert to the beauty of *here* and *now*. Upon closer inspection, an attentive reader will notice that, in the lexical realm, the poet moves from the *world*, down to the *earth* and to the *ground*, thus conveying a stronger sense of physical immediacy. In fact, he speaks of “*the boundless truth of the ground*”, which is a reminder that one needs to keep one’s feet pressing firmly upon the ground and keep an eye on the actual, the real.

In *The Blue Roofs of Japan* we are constantly reminded that we are amid an exotic setting. The references to the *blue roof* and the *cup of tea* of the first and third movements respectively gave us significant clues about the exact geographical setting of the poem. In the fourth through eighth movements, we are plunged in the middle of Japan as perceived by the poet’s sensibility. Thus, the fourth movement evokes the time of the year, the actual temporal framework: it is June (it was in the spring of 1985 that Bringhurst and Audrey Thomas spent two weeks in Japan) in a Japanese city called Gifu, and the world is alive with fish and birds.¹¹ On the other hand, the moon is reminiscent of much classical Japanese and Chinese poetry, where the moon figures prominently as part of a quiet landscape, in the traditional haiku, for instance. Bringhurst’s imagistic verse lines resemble the cadences and minimalism of haiku, indeed: “*the moon / is choking on its own light; the river / fish are running; at Gifu the leashed / cormorants dive.*”

Water is a pervasive element in *The Blue Roofs of Japan*. Thus, in the fifth movement it comes up again to the polished surface of the poem in the form of a river. We say *polished* because so far we have paid attention foremost to *the density of meaning* this complex poem for two voices treasures beneath the transparency of the words with which it is woven. The

¹¹ By the way, fish and birds are recurrent motifs in Bringhurst’s poems: consider, for instance, an early poem like “The Fish Who Lived to Tell All About It”, or the poems “Waterbirds” and “Finch” included in the section entitled “The Living” in *Selected Poems*, or the birds in some of the 21 sections making up the sonata *Tzubalet’s Mountain*.

language sings, and musicality is to be heard in the alliteration of lines like these, for instance: “To the *water* that *walks* over stones / through the long *wooden* town / like a *roshi* on *wide wooden* slippers.” As the poet himself makes clear in the “Program Notes” of the 1986 text as published in *Lines Review*, a *roshi* is a Zen priest and the title means simply “old teacher”. The image in this simile is rare and beautiful: water walks elegantly on stone as it flows through the city, in much the same way a *roshi* walks on wooden shoes conveying his deep reverence for the wooden town and the ground he treads upon. The repetition of /w/ reminds us of the sound of flowing water in evocative ways. In this respect, it might be illuminating to remember Robyn Sarah’s train of thought on the kind of polyphony that is already implicit in any well-wrought poem. She claims that the interplay of sound and sense in poetry is already a form of polyphony. It is not certainly polyphony in Bringhurst’s strict usage of the term (he is exploring the possibilities of *a close literary analogue to musical polyphony*), but it does make sense to wonder whether this is not a rudimentary (and hence essential) form of achieving some kind of polyphony as a precondition for real polyphony. Good poets always pay attention to the sheer physicality of their *materia prima* (i.e., the sounds of words) and, as a matter of fact, Bringhurst followed Pound’s advice to study prosodic systems to learn the essentials of the poetic technique. That sound is of the essence in the making of a poem seems a truism by now, but sometimes we need to be reminded that this is the case:

If we accept that poetry, as an art, is based on a balance of sound and sense, [...] this interplay between words as soundscape and words as signifiers is an enormously complex kind of resonance in itself, and may be as close to musical polyphony as we can get in poetry, short of embarking on the kind of aural/oral experimentation that Bringhurst has undertaken [in his polyphonic poems].¹²

Water is not just a primordial element, it also brings together places far apart. The river flowing in what we presume to be Gifu takes us to “*the Chinese grid of the city*” and even further away into “*the Saskatchewan prairie*” in Canada. Water brings all places on Earth together in a way, for it is the fluid running through its veins, as it were. Of course, the motion in space is only imaginary. The geographical references are only meant as points of comparison in the metaphor and simile the poet makes use of to evoke the irregular flowing of the river – this is, after all, one of those *welcome imperfections* of the world announced earlier in the section. But the thought occurs that water is the universal matter uniting all places in the world, and that it is sharp as a knife blade, which is also a recurrent motif in Bringhurst’s poetry. Also, the allusion to the *Saskatchewan prairie* is a subtle

¹² See Robyn Sarah, “A Dangling Conversation (for multiple voices)”, *ibid.*, p. 212. In the same essay, she points out: “The idea that there must be some way to write a verbal fugue, some poem-equivalent to a musical fugue, tantalized me long before I’d heard of [Glenn] Gould’s “contrapuntal radio” and long before I knew that Pound, Bunting and others had obsessed over it.” (p. 213) And also: “I do think of sound and sense in poetry as interactive, already a kind of two-voiced counterpoint.” (p. 214) In a letter, dated 20 October 1996, addressed to Robyn Sarah in response to the essay on poetry and polyphony she sent to the participants in the colloquium on polyphony held at Trent University in 1996, Dennis Lee says that he agrees with the principle of “sound-and-sense being the matrix of polyphony” (p. 216). But again, Lee holds a very different view of polyphony too. In that same letter, he writes: “... the kind of poem that draws me particularly is one that enacts a trajectory of meditation by moving from one embodied voice to another, and then to another. And within the experiential terms that make sense to me, that enactment is simply impossible so long as a poem stays within a single voice. Lots of *other* kinds of poetic excellence are possible; but enacting a meditation is not – unless & until the poem finds a way to claim, embody, incarnate, each stage on its meditative quest by moving through an (unprogrammed) vocal trajectory. [...] That central intuition – that voice embodies, polyphony enacts – is what gives point to everything else I say. [...] Robert [...] wanted to reserve the term “polyphony” for work in which two or more independent voices are counterpointed.” (pp. 215-216) And Robyn Sarah adds: “Perhaps Bringhurst is right to want to reserve the term “polyphony” for the strict musical sense of simultaneously heard, separate voices.” (p. 218)

anticipatory echo of *New World Suite No. 3*, which is even more complex in its design as a polyphonic poem than *The Blue Roofs of Japan* is.

The whole picture of Japan is brought to a full circle with the references to the Sleeping Dragon Garden, the *shakuhachi*, the trees endemic to the land, and the Emperor in the following three movements. In the 1986 “Program Notes” mentioned above, Bringhurst gives us the necessary clues to understand the oddities in these verse lines. First, the *Sleeping Dragon Garden* is a slight mistranslation of *Ryoanji* (the “Peaceful Dragon Temple”) in Kyoto, which is “the most famous *karesansui* meditation garden in Japan”. “*Karesansui*, Bringhurst goes on, means “withered hills and water.” The garden consists of rocks and raked gravel, not of what we call as a general rule living things.” Japanese gardens have nothing to do with prototypical Western gardens, where flowers and trees are to be found in every single corner. The garden¹³ the poet alludes to is made simply of water and stone, so that we are back in an elemental world where silence reigns. Solitude, the silence of stones and the quiet murmur of water are all one requires for a proper meditation. Water keeps on speaking, even if in *wordless speech*, while stones remain mute surrounded by the irresistible halo of their silence and yet contributing to the music water makes as it touches them in its flowing. Once again, the female voice keeps echoing the key words uttered by the male voice: “*to the water, to the stone.*”

In the seventh movement we are truly plunged into a universe of sound, amid a breathing Earth which is singing a song of clarity and beauty:

To the spoken
shakuhachi, its calligraphy
of sound.

To the trees –
karamatsu, ginkgo, sugi, bamboo –
 to the speaking *to the trees;*
who speak for themselves; to the Emperor’s

¹³ In *Writing North: An Anthology of Contemporary Yukon Writers*, ed. Erling Friis-Baastad & Patricia Robertson, Whitehorse: Beluga Books, 1992: 158-160, Anne Tayler contributed two short prose pieces entitled “Largo” and “The Garden”. The first of these short prose pieces is a portrait of the author in relation to Bringhurst, the second a portrait of Bringhurst in relation to the author. The garden in question is one Bringhurst built – quite successfully by other accounts – in the late 1980s and early 1990s in front of his cabin on Bowen Island. This is an excerpt from the second prose piece:

“He is making himself a garden, at the front of the house that in local folklore has crept steadily down the hill, and even now is creeping further down the slope and working its way slowly through the foundations toward the still rocks of the hillside. He is making for himself a low maintenance Japanese garden.

A thin man with glacial eyes is washing his hands and writing the scenario of his garden as he would write the scenarios of women, with feeling orchestrated in the hands and the heart withheld from the eyes.

This man full of knowledge has turned old sod upside down, thinking to fool the grass, thinking the new tender shoots will be easy to pull, ignoring the matted rootedness of grass and sheep sorrel that has struggled there since the building was way, way up the hill where it could never really have been. He has spread carefully a layer of cedar bark chips on top of the upside down secretly fierce sod, as carefully as he would a layer of fine poems across the pillow of a new lover.

Of all, Japanese gardens are the most demanding. The spirit laid out demands the care of the hands that shaped it. And to begin, the gardener must rip off the skin of the earth, and throw it far away, then give the garden a new underskin. Only then can the surface flesh of the garden go down. Otherwise, the garden invites the invasion of other spirits, grass, sorrel, and other herbs. Only when a new underskin is down, can the garden begin. And once it is in place, the cycle of water and root and branch needs regular and careful attention. Even twenty years after the ripping of the old skin, the gardener will be tending the new flesh.

Only the stones can or will remain low maintenance.

The man with the colours of Glacier Bay in his eyes is making for himself a garden that he envisions will tend its own self. And when the garden cries out for something else, he’ll dispassionately remove those parts calling for his hand and discard them. Perhaps at the end of the pulling and replacing there will be nothing but stone to care for. That at last would be low maintenance, except of course for the ghosts of the sorrel.” *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.

karamatsu
bound and housebroken pines.
gingko sugi bamboo –

SP, pp. 178-179.

Here is the *shakuhachi*, “an endblown bamboo flute”¹⁴ typical of Japan, singing, and also the vernacular trees singing in a language of their own. The calligraphy of sound of the bamboo flute anticipates in a way the essay on the origins of writing in miniature which section III of the poem is. The word *calligraphy*, of course, has rich resonances about it in the context of Japanese culture, where it is a millennial complex form of art. “*Karamatsu*, literally “Chinese pine,” is really the Japanese larch, *Larix leptolepis*, and *sugi* is the Japanese redwood, *Cryptomeria japonica*.” Gingko is a Chinese tree with yellow flowers, and bamboo we all know. We are inevitably reminded of Bringhurst’s magnificent essay “Everywhere Being Is Dancing, Knowing Is Known”. What we witness in the penultimate movement of section I of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* is precisely *being* singing and dancing: water, stone, the *shakuhachi*, and diverse trees as *karamatsu*, *gingko*, *sugi* and *bamboo* are singing each their own song and contributing to the global song. The female voice repeats their names as if they were sacred, savouring their very texture on her tongue. And the poet himself is joining this harmonious song with his own, which is a melodious celebration of the *singing* of the Earth itself. His song is *The Blue Roofs of Japan*, of course. In the Western canon trees have got leaves that inevitably fall onto the ground with the arrival of autumn, and the leaves are a powerful metaphor for human lives since Homer’s and Dante’s time, but in the Orient, trees are singing creatures, truly alive, and they pluck the strings of their leaves to produce a fascinating kind of music.

Trees figure prominently in Bringhurst’s work, in his poetry and his essays alike. It is no accident that one of his two prose collections is precisely entitled *The Tree of Meaning* (subtitled *Thirteen Talks* in the 2006 Gaspereau Press edition and *Language, Mind and Ecology* in the 2008 Counterpoint Edition). Time and again, it has been claimed in previous chapters of our dissertation that there is a tremendous coherence to be found in Bringhurst’s thinking as it unfolds over time in both his poetry and his prose. The mind beneath his poems and his essays is exactly the same, after all. And sometimes it does not make much sense to draw a clear-cut line between these two realms of his work, nor does it make any sense at all to compartmentalize his facets as poet, linguist, typographer or cultural historian. The person remains whole and his vocation is the same: learning and sharing what he has learnt with his fellow human beings. Learning is the ultimate vocation of human beings, he says in his essay “The Vocation of Being, the Text of the Whole”. Bringhurst’s love of the woods and trees is something worth remembering precisely in this particular context, in which trees growing in Japan are such an essential part of the texture of section I of *The Blue Roofs of Japan*. In one unforgettable essay entitled “The Persistence of Poetry and the Destruction of the World”, only six pages long, he speaks with awesome reverence of a particular species of pine trees which are thought to be the oldest beings on Earth. A scientist identifies one such bristlecone pine he deems to be the oldest of them all and cuts it to count its rings and write a scientific report about it. The whole enterprise is demented; the loss is irreparable:

¹⁴ Bringhurst adds something else about this bamboo flute: “It is one of the principal instruments of *hogaku*, traditional Japanese music (as distinguished from *yogaku*, “sea music” – i.e., music of foreign origin)”, but this extra piece of information does make sense when we get to section V.

that is mysteriously *one* with the ideas and images – some fusion of form and content. There has to be more to compression in language than writing in short lines. I want *density*. And at the same time, I want something that levitates...¹⁷

It seems to us that this is precisely what Robert Bringhurst is doing in his polyphonic poems. Section I of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* offers a perfect balance of music and sense, the sound enacts the meaning as it were. There is density of meaning, profundity of thought, and also a kind of levity that makes this an enduring, valuable poem, not just for what it says, but also for the way in which it says what it has to say and unveil about the Earth. The lesson is elementary, though. To borrow Bringhurst's resonant words, the lesson can be best summarized in these terms:

I have been listening to the world for barely half a century. I do not have the wisdom even of a young tree of an ordinary kind. Nevertheless, I have been listening – with eyes, ears, mind, feet, fingertips – and what I hear is poetry.

What does this poetry say? It says that what-is is: that the real is real, and that it is alive. It speaks the grammar of being. It sings the polyphonic structure of meaning itself.¹⁸

SECTION II

Being and singing – this is what section II of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* is all about, which may sound simple enough, but is not. At the same time, we will posit the idea that this particular section is also *metapoetic* – i.e., it concerns the very nature and purpose of poetry. Tightly-woven though it is, this poem unfolds through three easily identifiable movements. It opens with water and it closes with singing. This is no accident indeed. As it is a relatively short poem, it might be illuminating for the purposes of our critical analysis to quote it in full from the very beginning. Once again, the indented italics verse lines are those spoken by the female voice:

This music is all about water,
This music is water, this water
she said. How the hollowed wood
is music:
redistributes water and air:
the hollow bamboo
ruffled or clear, how the breath
redistributes the water.
descends: how it pools and pours
The air, like the water, descends.

through the holes in the voice,
through the joints in the body, the stem
of bamboo, through the discontinuities
in the skeleton, knots in the plank
In the unbroken muscle of water,
at the annual branching, nodes
the wholeness of bone,
of nonbeing: not breath but the silences

¹⁷ See Robyn Sarah, "A Dangling Conversation (for multiple voices)", *ibid.*, pp. 218-219.

¹⁸ See Bringhurst's essay "The Persistence of Poetry and the Destruction of the World", *ibid.*, p. 43.

is the sudden completeness

between breathing: these

of being,

are the song; the rest

is mere singing.

the singing

SP, pp. 180-181.

First thing is facts. “*This music is all about water*”, affirm the opening words of the poem. Now, *this music* is a self-reflexive reference to the poem itself – to *The Blue Roofs of Japan* as a work of art –, but it could also be meant as a reference to *the music of being* (which is plural and polyphonic) that the poem is urging us readers to listen to from the very beginning. Both, this particular poem and *the music of being*, are one and the same thing, in the end. This constitutes a powerful statement on the very nature of poetry Bringhamst is after: “I want a poetry of knowledge and thought, not of opinion – and not of belief, which is merely dead thought, severed from the thinking. Poetry is the musical density of being, but sometimes it is silent, and sometimes that silence is musically still.”¹⁹ It is also a poetry firmly grounded in the essentials of reality, in the real, in *what-is*. While the male voice is saying “*This music is all about water*” in the opening line, the female voice is saying “*This music is water, this water is music*” exactly at the same time, thus emphasizing the potent equation at the heart of this poem: music is water and water is music. The implications are complex: (1) that music is water means that it is necessary and primordial sustenance for us human beings, and also that it is changeable, fluid, ever-flowing; (2) that water is music means that it is capable of singing, and that singing is not the sole prerogative of humans, for the singing is to be heard everywhere we turn to if we dare listen with our whole body. Bringhamst puts it very simply: “Poetry is the language of being: the breath, the voice, the song, the speech of being. It does not need us. We are the ones on need of it. If we haven’t learned to hear it, we will also never speak it.”²⁰

To return to this fundamental *music-water equation* again, there is another important fact that should not be overlooked at all. From the very opening first line, both voices are speaking simultaneously, underlying the importance of the equation being formulated through those words. If we interpret *music* as standing for *poetry* and *water* as standing for *earth*, metonymically as it were, then the fusion of the poetry Bringhamst is after with the world he celebrates in his poems is crystal-clear. His metaphysics is physics; his poems are rooted in the actual, in the real, in the overall orchestration of being he can hear everywhere he turns to look and listen. This fusion is also enacted by the actual merging of the speaking voices in this section. If we think of section I of *The Blue Roofs of Japan*, where the female voice somehow punctuated or echoed what the male voice said with almost the same words, we come to the realization that the true coalescence of the two voices from the start of section II is completely new. Now it is the male voice that steers and the female voice that superimposes its words on the ones uttered by the other voice at certain points. What could be called the *semantic coalescence* of the two texts is simply astonishing: each text makes sense on its own as an independent entity, while at the same time both texts merge into a single unity of meaning. It is as though the parallel texts were two streams of words that merge into one another at certain points to produce a new density of meaning. In other words, in section II of *The Blue Roofs of Japan*, voices are so deeply enmeshed in the fabric of the meaning of the poem that all separation is an illusion or a violence we exert on

¹⁹ See Bringhamst’s prefatory note to “The Book of Silences” in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), p. 10.

²⁰ See Bringhamst’s essay “The Persistence of Poetry and the Destruction of the World”, *ibid.*, p. 44.

the poem. This is no wonder, since great poetry has to be shaped or orchestrated in forms suitable to its magnitude, and the well-chosen words of this poem form a musical whole in their interpenetration with an impressive naturalness that achieves something of a climax in this particular section.

The true core of the poem is in the second movement though. Now *breath* enters the scene. Breathing is a recurrent motif and concept in Bringhurst's poetry, and this is no accident either. He conceives of his poems as being the fruits of oral composition rather than writing, and he embraces the conviction that all good writing is oral at its root and that poems come truly alive in the voice. Poems are handled by the voice, and the voice is made of breath, air coming out of our lungs with which we handle poems. Voice has its own anatomy. Bringhurst dwells on this idea in this magnificent passage from another brilliant essay:

Texts are things I make and things I read, digest, metabolize. They're also things I frequently interpret, in the very specific sense of giving them their typographic form. But most of all, texts are things I listen to. There are some very real and significant differences between oral and written literature, but I believe that all good writing has an oral root. All writing that is good to read sounds good when read aloud, because its goodness lies in part in its *humanity*. The humanity of a piece of writing is partly intellectual, of course, but it is also partly physical, like the humanity of a shoe or shirt or a shovel. It fits the human body. A good shovel fits the hand and foot, and a good sentence fits the voice, because that is the part of the body we normally use to handle sentences.

The voice has an anatomy, like the arm, the heart, the foot. The voice is made of breath. A sentence or a paragraph that pays no attention to the reach and rhythm of the voice is uncomfortable or painful, like a shoe that doesn't fit the human foot or a glove on the wrong hand. But a sentence that *does* fit the anatomy of voice and breath will touch, through them, some other rhythms of the body: those of the heart and hands and feet, and of the memory and mind. The limbs – the arms and legs – in Greek, are μέλοι [*mélōi*]. That is the root of the word melody in English.²¹

Breath is universal. In Bringhurst's conception of poetry, human beings are not alone in breathing; nonhuman creatures also breathe, and the Earth in its entirety is a gigantic breathing organism. Air breathing is what binds us together then. In strongly parallelistic verse lines, the poet brings the point home: breath *pools* and *pours* "through the holes in the voice, / through the joints in the body, the stem / of bamboo, through the discontinuities / in the skeleton, knots in the plank / at the annual branching, nodes / of nonbeing." Enjambment is crucial here, as some sense units flow nonstop into the following verse line with astonishing naturalness, and repetition through parallelism brings about an incantatory rhythmical effect. Here the reader is back in familiar territory; this is the geography of the human body (of bone, muscle, blood, vein, and voice). The novelty is that the human body is now reunited with the bodies of trees (notice the references to *bamboo* and the *knots in the plank*) and with nonliving creatures (which is what *nodes of nonbeing* probably refer to, though they might as well be meant as a reference to interstices of nonbeing in living beings). In other words, breath is descending through the bodies of every single creature on Earth, so that every single thing is truly alive, as the same universal current is running through their veins.

²¹ See Bringhurst's essay "The Vocation of Being, the Text of the Whole", included in *The Tree of Meaning, Language, Mind and Ecology*, p. 47.

In the closing lines of this poem comes a sort of afterthought. It is not the breath that is descending upon all creatures that is the song; it is “*the silences / between breathing*” that are *the song*. “*The rest is just singing.*” (By the way, in “These Poems, She Said”, the prologue poem in *The Beauty of the Weapons*, the poetic voice says: “Love is love of the thing sung, not of the song or the singing”.) This is the final revelation we have been waiting for, even if it was already announced by the music-water equation at the beginning of the poem. At this point, both voices converge into the final message: *the singing* are the last words uttered by the female voice alone, as if echoing the *mere singing* uttered by the male voice. A closer look at the words or text uttered by the female voice from beginning to end reveals something of essence: it claims that music is water, and the other way around; it reminds us of the hollow bamboo (possibly a reference to the *shakubachi*, or endblown bamboo flute mentioned in section I); it relates water to the human body by giving it muscle and bone, or so it seems; and it comes to the realization that in the muscle of the water and the wholeness of bone is “*the sudden completeness of being, the singing.*” *Being* and *singing* are brought together at last, by the two voices, in the closing of the poem. *Everywhere being is dancing*, and singing, and *knowing is known*. This music of Bringhurst is water, and the water is the music he listens to to make his own poems. In this *aesthetics of hearing or listening* to the world with one’s whole body, one listens attentively to what-is has to say and then sings in perfect harmony with the universal singing that is already going on. Silence, however, is also crucial. In *The Book of Silences* Bringhurst impersonates a number of Oriental sages in short lyric poems he calls “dramatic impersonations”; in his poems he gives voice to the thinking and singing of these ancient poet-philosophers, akin to the Pre-Socratics, who were the true beginning of Western philosophy. It is no accident that he should have made up his mind to entitle his book exactly like that. Silence, like sound, is an essential element of *what-is*. For Jan Zwicky, “being is the marriage of music and silence”. In her brief response to Bringhurst’s essay “Singing with the Frogs”, apropos being’s multiplicity or plurality and the importance of listening and singing, she says:

What your account also gets absolutely right, though, is the need some of us feel to make stuff out of words (and/or sound) that affirms our intuition of being’s multiplicity, and our sense of the primacy of aural experience for ontological insight. Being is the marriage of music and silence – by which I mean it’s an ecology. We *are*, anything *is*, when it listens and sings, not when it looks and says. And it listens and sings when it joins the chorus, not when it yells, wheezes, or melodifies its piece without paying attention to how that expression might pleasingly *fit* with-&-against what it’s hearing. Ecologies are elastic, reactive; they are metaphorically spatial; they are coherent. That is: they are lyric structures, as *Lyric Philosophy* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992) explicates this concept. This is why I think it’s important for philosophers to re-learn to think lyrically: they will never recapture the ability to perceive the world if they don’t. And to the extent that they misperceive it, and champion techniques that foster misperception, they are complicit in the destruction of beauty that exists here and now.²²

In an important recent essay entitled “Canadian Primal: Five poet-Thinkers Redefine our Relationship to Nature”, critic Mark Dickinson dwells on the common ground trodden by a group of five poets (Dennis Lee, Don McKay, Tim Lilburn, Jan Zwicky and Robert Bringhurst), all of whom appear in Tim Lilburn’s anthologies *Poetry and Knowing* (1995) and *Thinking and Singing* (2002). This essay is important for it tackles the fact that Bringhurst belongs among a group of other four poets that are also concerned with thinking and singing through poetry as a way of accessing a more organic form of truth. Most of them

²² See Jan Zwicky’s essay “Being, Polyphony, Lyric: An Open Letter to Robert Bringhurst”, published in *Canadian Literature* 156 (Spring 1998): 182-183.

were present at the colloquium on polyphony held at Trent University in the autumn of 1996. They are no recognizable poetic school, with identifiable program, and yet they constitute Bringhurst's literary generation. Mark Dickinson wonders what might bring them together though. He comes to the conclusion that they are poet-thinkers, or thinking and singing poets:

What brings them together? Consider the titles of Lilburn's two anthologies, which introduce them as a group, *Poetry and Knowing* (1995) and *Thinking and Singing* (2002), or Zwicky's 2003 book *Wisdom and Metaphor*, titles that suggest that these poets are really "poet-thinkers." While they are all university educated and philosophically engaged, this doesn't mean that they simply cut and paste complex ideas from discursive prose into verse. Each of them has stumbled onto *a way of writing that can be said to think poetically through a dance of ideas, images, sounds, and feelings that enact connectedness*; each, according to critic Stan Dragland, "would say that *their thinking is purest when it takes the form of poetry*."

This is a major undertaking. They have broken through a rigid division in Western thought that has effectively kept thinking and singing separate from each other for hundreds of years. We've come to associate thinking, for example, with such legitimate, muscular vocations as mathematics and scientific investigation. Singing, on the other hand, has been shackled to all that is considered secondary to the ascent of the rational mind: values, emotions, ethics, beliefs. The thinking and singing poets, as we might call them, have orchestrated something of a family reunion between literature siblings separated for centuries.²³

SECTION III

Littera scripta manet, said Horace almost twenty centuries ago. That is: *the written letter remains*, it sees the light of day with the vocation of being durable. Great or immortal poetry is that which also seeks to stand the test of time and usually succeeds in fulfilling its vocation. There are several ways of reaching a good understanding of the structure and meaning of the third section, or geometrical centre, of *The Blue Roofs of Japan*. One logical and rewarding way is to think of section III as being *an essay in miniature on the origins of writing*. Whereas section II was concerned with breath, speech and singing, this particular poem now under scrutiny dwells on the nature of writing and the singing that poetry is in Bringhurst's view. It comes as no surprise that this should be the natural progression from one section to another, for speech comes before writing: speech existed long before it was discovered that the human voice could be represented by symbols called *letters*. Elsewhere, Bringhurst has attempted a similar undertaking in prose: *The Solid Form of Language. An Essay on Writing and Meaning* (2004), that jewel of a book-length essay contained in a beautifully designed book made by the author himself and Andrew Steeves at Gaspereau Press, is a brief history of writing and script systems that begins with the interpretation of animal tracks on the ground. In Bringhurst's view, humans have no monopoly in meaning, and hence no monopoly in reading or writing either. From a purely anthropocentric view, it seems that language is an exclusively human phenomenon, but every single creature, living and non-living, on this earth speaks their own language. Language itself is but one more thread in that complex mesh of living things and meaning. Thus, Bringhurst is well aware that the whole world is alive with nuances of meaning as if it were a book of gigantic proportions in a state of permanent flux or perpetual change. Human language is but a tiny thread in the

²³ See Mark Dickinson's essay "Canadian Primal: Five Poet-Thinkers Redefine Our Relationship to Nature", published in *The Walrus* (Toronto) 6.5 (June 2009): 62-65.

living fabric of the whole. *The Solid Form of Language* opens precisely with these profound reflections on the nature of meaning, listening, reading, speech, writing and language:

Drop a word in the ocean of meaning and concentric ripples form. To define a single word means to try to catch those ripples. No one's hands are fast enough. Now drop two or three words in at once. Interference patterns form, reinforcing one another here and canceling each other there. To catch the meaning of the words is not to catch the ripples that they cause; it is to catch the interaction of those ripples. This is what it means to listen; this is what it means to read. It is incredibly complex, yet humans do it every day, and very often laugh and weep at the same time. Writing, by comparison, seems altogether simple, at least until you try.

Writing is the solid form of language, the precipitate. Speech comes out of our mouths, our hands, our eyes in something like a liquid form and then evaporates at once. It appears to me that this is part of a natural cycle: one of the ways the weather forms on the ocean of meaning. What else are the words we drop like pebbles in that ocean if not condensing droplets of evaporated speech, recycled bits of the ocean of meaning itself? Yet language can also solidify – into iridescent, sharp, symmetrical crystals, or into structures more like hailstones or shale beds or mud. In solid as in liquid form, the intersecting meanings may reinforce each other or rub each other out.

To bring the metaphor ashore, writing is language *displaced* from the mode of immediate gesture or speech to the mode of the memento – something like the seashells and the driftwood and the footprints on the beach. Writing is leftovers – but of a kind some people prize as highly as they do the original meal or parent organism itself.

And what is language? Language is what speaks us as well as what we speak. Through our neurons, genes and gestures, shared assumptions and personal quirks, we are spoken by and speak many languages each day, interacting with ourselves, with one another, other species, and the objects – natural and man-made – that populate our world. Even in silence, there is no complete escape from the world of symbols, grammars and signs.²⁴

Convinced that human language itself is part of the living mesh of things, Bringhurst explores the way humans have no monopoly on meaning, or reading and writing for that matter. Plants and animals have also their own way of leaving palpable signs in the earth, the home all beings share. What lies beneath all attempts at communication is an immense reservoir of meaning we all draw on in search of the ultimate sense of *being*. Whereas languages are a *natural* or spontaneous secretion emerging from the human body and mind, most prominently through breath, forming families in much the same way animals and plants do, scripts are *invented* highly organized and abstract systems conceived as ways of reducing the manifold nuances of the languages they serve to a manageable repertoire of symbols with which to convey meanings to others. Needless to say, scripts do not exhaust the immense possibilities or richness inherent in languages, which are complex living organisms. Like languages, humans, plants or animals, scripts are also grouped under different categories or species, and are also prone to change, evolve or even become extinct with the passage of time. At this point, it might be no exaggeration to affirm that section III of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* is the perfect companion poem to *The Solid Form of Language*, since both of them dwell on the nature of writing with astonishing economy and intense lyricism. Here it does not make sense at all to draw a clear-cut boundary between his poetry and his prose, for both works testify to Bringhurst's masterly command of the English

²⁴ See Robert Bringhurst, *The Solid Form of Language. An Essay on Writing and Meaning*, Gaspereau Press, 2004, pp. 9-10.

language, to his legitimate ambition to try to understand what language is from different standpoints, and to the absolute coherence implicit in the development of his thinking over time.

As pointed out above, section III of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* is an essay in miniature on writing. Now, there are at least two clearly identifiable parts in this poem. The first part concerns the birth of writing at the time of the Neolithic Agricultural Revolution, which brought about or coincided with the shift of hunter-gatherer societies to ones where farmers and herders prevailed. The domestication of plants and animals was parallel in time to the domestication of language through writing:

Writing is planting.
Writing is born in the lands of wet-farming.
The field prefigures the table and page.
The garden prefigures the table and page.

Is a woman's body

Writing derives
from the domestication of water.
Rain and the sea
are the mothers of letters.

the garden? Writing descends.

Rain and the sea,

rain and the sea

The mind of the scribe
moves like a long-legged waterbird,
stoops like a rice-farmer, steps like a crane.

are the mothers of letters.

Rain and the sea are the mothers of letters.

SP, pp. 182-183.

If the point of departure in section II was the equation *music is water*, here Bringhurst stumbles upon the intuition that “*writing is planting*”, and then he goes on from this potent equation and builds on the implications of this simple metaphor. Hence, with an astonishing linguistic economy, the opening four verse lines of this poem encapsulate a succinct account of the origins of writing. That it is “*born in the lands of wet-farming*” is only a reminder that writing was born in the late Neolithic, at a time when the Agricultural Revolution created the necessary preconditions for the birth of writing as a useful tool in the management of the earth’s resources. A huge degree of sophistication in the realms of political and social organization was required as an essential prerequisite for the emergence and sustaining of writing as such. In that context, the fields and gardens cultivated by those early farmers who had stopped wandering from one place to another were the perfect physical incarnation of two basic tools associated to writing and literacy: the table and the page. The thought occurs that the resemblance is quintessentially of a geometrical nature. Thus, both the field and the page are square- or rectangle-shaped figures, but also both of them bring some sort of order to plants and to letters: the rows of plants resemble the neat arrangement of letters and words on the page. What is interesting in Bringhurst’s statement, though, is that writing is born out of the ground itself, it is a natural secretion coming out from something so real and tangible as “*the lands of wet-farming.*” In other words, the act of writing on a page is not dissimilar from that of planting plants in a field or a garden, which is expressive of Bringhurst’s embracing an organic or telluric view of writing (and of language). The female voice suggests yet another possibility when asking “*Is a*

woman's body the garden?" This question has powerful resonances when placed side by side with the notion of Mother Earth, the Greek *Gea*, and the female creative force associated to the earth's fertility in a number of myths from different ancient civilizations. "Writing descends", like "breath or water descends" in section II, says also the female voice. The subtle echoes of intertextuality that bring all five sections of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* together are inescapably present. In addition, the *field* or the *garden* is the opposite of the *wild*, in much the same way *farmers and herders* are the opposite of *gatherers and hunters*. Order intervenes and asserts itself. Nevertheless, speech always precedes writing and script, and Bringhurst embraces no doubt the preeminence of speech over writing:

A script in itself is not a language; it is a system of representation, sufficient to catch some (but never all) of a language in its net. Human language, for its own sake, has no need of being written so long as it is spoken. Languages can and do attain at least as much sophistication, and as great a pitch of eloquence, in oral cultures as in cultures rich in printed books. And for ninety-five per cent of their time on earth, members of the species *Homo sapiens* evidently felt no need for the managerial control over language that a writing system permits. Still, language can and does adapt to writing. Just as plants and animals adapt to farming and ranching.²⁵

Thus viewed, it may seem that writing brought about only a deadening effect on humankind's sensibility and on their way of interacting with the world, which is obviously not the case. Writing certainly entailed a domestication of language, which was somehow in a state of absolute wildness, inasmuch as it reduced its manifold nuances to a manageable repertoire so as to codify, stabilize and record the eel-slippery nature of meaning, which is flowing from all directions in the world of the real. Even if writing is said to have been born to serve the pragmatic purposes of an agrarian society which was in desperate need of setting things clear and in order through the durable record writing provided, at some point *literary writing*, as Bringhurst himself points out, emerged with a subversive spirit that had nothing to do with the control and managerial purposes of writing as such, even if literacy creates the isolated self who writes. Again, in *The Solid Form of Language*, Bringhurst says something to this effect:

Reading comes first. The reading of tracks and weather signs is a fundamental mammalian occupation, practised before primates started walking on their hind legs, much less using hands to write. And writing, in a sense, is always on the verge of being born. All of us who speak by means of gesture, or who gesture as we talk, are gesturing toward writing. But it is a rare event for instincts such as these to crystallize into a system that can capture and preserve the subtleties of speech in graphic form. Such a system can only mature within a culture prepared to sustain it. Starting from scratch, with no imported models, people have made the shift from oral to literate culture at least three times but perhaps not many more than that. In Mesopotamia about 5,000 years ago, in northern China about 4,500 years ago, and in Guatemala and southern Mexico perhaps 3,500 years ago, humans created a script and a scribal culture, apparently without imported models of any kind.

In each case, the writing began with pictures – which, as they came to stand for words and then for syllables, grew increasingly abstract. In each case, the originating society was already highly organized, with a heavy investment in agriculture, architecture, social institutions and political centralization. And in each case, so far as we can tell, writing was first used in the work of political, economic or religious administration. Its use for literary purposes came later.

²⁵ See Robert Bringhurst, *The Solid Form of Language. An Essay on Writing and Meaning*, pp. 12-13.

Writing *in the literary sense* is one of the world's most solitary crafts, but it is only pursued on the margins of highly organized and centralized societies.

Literature – meaning storytelling and poetry – involves the use of language more for purposes of discovery than for purposes of control. It is a part of language itself: present, like language, in every human community. There are no natural languages without stories, just as there are none without sentences. Yet literature is not the cause of writing. Literature in the written sense represents the triumph of language over writing: the subversion of writing for purposes that have little to do with social and economic control.²⁶

And in another memorable response to Bringhurst's essay "Singing with the Frogs" (the other response was Jan Zwicky's essay, from which we have already quoted above), Sean Kane reflects on polyphony, on the management by man of the earth's resources, on the notion of man as *measurer of all things*, stemming clearly from the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle in his view, as well as on the profound implications of the Agricultural Revolution of the late Neolithic and the domestication of Nature. In Kane's view, prior to this revolution the world was a naturally polyphonic and plural place, a sacred space where the interaction between the realms of humans and of gods was still possible. The domestication in several realms that agriculture, farming and writing brought about seemed to have a deadening effect on humans' way of relating to the world. It meant an impoverishment for humankind:

That critique extends beyond Plato and literacy's reduction of plurality to essences – back even to the Agricultural Revolution of the late Neolithic which sponsored the idea that the natural world was something to be managed by man the farmer according to inventories of hoarding, scheduling and control. [...] Man becomes the measurer of all things. [...] Before *the Agricultural Revolution and its domestication of plants, animals, minerals*, and, arguably, *the domestication of language through writing*, nature was accepted as polyphonic, emergent, the place of the Gift. For hunter-gatherer civilizations, reality is plural and at minimum two.²⁷ [Italics mine.]

Turning back to Bringhurst's poem, writing is born of the domestication of water precisely because water is used to make the fields fertile and produce good crops. Water is then the primordial element out of which everything comes, including *a man-made thing* like writing, which belongs among the realm of what the Greeks called *techné*. The elemental units or atoms of writing are letters; their mothers are *rain and the sea*. This sounds like an example of mythical thinking: vertically-flowing rain falls down into the horizontally still sea and out of their union emerge the letters of writing as a result. Which is tantamount to saying that water is also the mother of letters, for rain and the sea are ultimately made of water. Any typographer would define the word *letter* in altogether different terms. This is Frederic Goudy's objective technical or scientific definition of 'letters' in Chapter I, "What Letters Are", in his book entitled *The Alphabet*, p. 9:

A LETTER is a symbol, with a definite shape & significance, indicating a single sound or combination of sounds, and providing a means, through grouping, for the *visible* expression of words – that is, of thoughts.

Originally, letters were adaptations of natural forms employed in picture-writing, but by a process of evolution, [actually degradation,] they have become arbitrary signs with little resemblance to the symbols from which they are derived. These arbitrary shapes have passed through their periods of uncertainty and

²⁶ See Robert Bringhurst, *The Solid Form of Language. An Essay on Writing and Meaning*, pp. 14-15.

²⁷ See Sean Kane's essay "Polyphonic Myth: A Reply to Robert Bringhurst", published in *Canadian Literature* 156 (Spring 1998): 184-192. See, in particular, p. 186.

change; they have a long history and manifold associations; they are classics, and should not be tampered with, except within limits that just discretion may allow.

An ornamental form once found is repeated, the eye grows accustomed to it and expects its recurrence; it becomes established by use; it may be associated with fundamental ideas of life and nature and is handed on and on, until finally its origin and meaning are, perhaps, lost.²⁸

What about the human factor? *“The mind of the scribe / moves like a long-legged waterbird, / stoops like a rice-farmer, steps like a crane.”* Calligraphy (i.e., the art of beautiful, stylized or elegant handwriting or lettering with pen or brush and ink) has always been highly revered in the Far East, for it involves the correct formation of characters, the ordering of the various parts, and the harmony of proportions. This is no minor undertaking. And the scribe works not just with his mind but also with his hand, which holds the brush or the pen, which makes the invisible thoughts simply and elegantly visible on the page. He serves his vocation with the methodical concentration with which farmers plant their rows of rice on *the page of the field* and with the same elegance and naturalness with which birds walk and leave their own footprints on the ground, because, according to Bringhurst, “Writing begins with the making of footprints, the leaving of signs. Like speaking, it is a perfectly natural act which humans have carried to complex extremes.”²⁹

Languages are natural organisms that survive in a healthy state as long as they are spoken by humans. In other words, speech is the natural state of human languages. They do not need writing, which is a form of human technology born in evolved societies for pragmatic, managerial and control purposes. This inevitably reminds us of Ezra Pound’s famous words that *technique is the test of a poet’s sincerity and honesty*, though in this particular context *technique* means something else. At some point in his life, the Modernist master also took an interest in the technology of writing; he devoted much time, energy and attention to the late Fenollosa’s papers on the ideographic nature of Chinese characters. The pictorial nature of those characters reminded him of a simple thing: maybe they were not that removed from the things they represented, maybe they were not completely arbitrary stylizations of the objects they named. This was crucial for the basic tenets of Imagism which he propounded in the first decade of the twentieth century; Chinese characters were poems in themselves, as it were, for their pictorial quality was a direct evocation of the thing named.

Bringhurst might have also found nourishment for his own interest in typography in the example set by Pound. This comes as no surprise in the case of a passionate lover of books, libraries, and, above all, languages. One feels tempted to affirm that language is what defines *Homo sapiens* as quintessentially human, and that it is language that keeps us

²⁸ See Frederic W. Goudy, *The Alphabet and Elements of Lettering*, New York: Dover Publications, 1963, p. 9. Similarly, in *A Short History of the Printed Word*, 1999 (2nd ed.), pp. 22-23, Warren Chappell and Robert Bringhurst define the concept in these terms: “The symbols that compose an alphabet are phonograms. This means they stand for speech sounds, not for objects or ideas. As writing systems go, they embody a extreme and convenient state of simplification, evidently first achieved by the Phoenicians and the Greeks. Other kinds of writing include syllabic scripts, such as those in use for Sanskrit, Hindi and Cree; consonantal scripts, including those of Arabic and Hebrew; and logographic scripts, such as those used for Chinese, classical Mayan and early Egyptian. In reality, all the systems humans use are impure and imperfectly consistent.” And in *The Solid Form of Language*, Bringhurst himself says “Writing, as Leonard Bloomfield wisely observed, is “an outgrowth of drawing.” [...] *Writing is abstract*. Pictures can be made by playing games with writing, but in writing itself no important pictorial content remains. In Eric Gill’s famous phrase, “letters are things, not pictures of things.” Some very eminent non-readers of Chinese have wanted to think otherwise, but this is true for Chinese characters as well as for Latin, Cyrillic and Arabic script.” (p. 16)

²⁹ See Robert Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographical Style*, chapter I, “The Grand Design”, p. 18.

humans apart from the rest of creation, as it were. Of course, this is only an egoistic, anthropocentric and grossly simplified view of the matter. Indeed, Bringhurst has spent a lifetime studying language as being something much larger than this: “language is actually part of the fibre of which life itself is spun”³⁰, he says. And in the preface to *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst claims that he would like to learn “*all the words and grammars in the world.*” If he works with words by the way of speech and writing, with mouthfuls of live air and handfuls of frozen symbols, then it is only natural that he would feel the need to explore language in its manifold manifestations, from as many different points of view as possible. Convinced though he is of the precedence of speech over writing, that oral literature is as rich and nourishing as the literature of literate cultures, Bringhurst is also an untiring life-long student of languages, a skillful translator from a number of modern and classical languages, and an expert typographer on the international scene. The poet, the linguist and the typographer are one and the same person, though, one that has spent a whole lifetime among spoken and written words. Thus, in the foreword to his impressive *The Elements of Typographic Style*, the author expresses his love of and passion for typography in the following enthusiastic terms, suitable to the voice of a humanist:

Typography is the craft of endowing human language with a durable visual form, and thus with an independent existence. Its heartwood is calligraphy – the dance, on a tiny stage, of the living, speaking hand – and its roots reach into living soil, though its branches may be hung each year with new machines. So long as the root lives, typography remains a source of true delight, true knowledge, true surprise.³¹

In the second part of section III, we encounter a powerful statement on both the nature of poetry and on Bringhurst’s own poetics. Two elegant movements for the mind are distinguishable though. In the first one, the poetic voice evokes not without a certain degree of nostalgia the way things went with hunters-and-gatherers civilizations. There was a time when there was room only for speech, when humans did not know that there was such a thing as writing to domesticate both water and language. Humans were nomads and so they could only take with them light luggage – air in their lungs for live speech which did not need to be recorded on stone, bamboo, papyrus or paper. With the emergence of fixed dwellings, there was an urgent need to set things in order and writing proved a most useful tool in the domestication of the earth. In the way plants and animals were already treated, farming and ranching had already prefigured this domestication. Hands are dangerous in a way feet are not, says Bringhurst in his essay “Wild Language”. Hands make tools and tools may prove to be dangerous in our interaction with the earth. One needs only to breathe through their feet to realize “*we don’t own what we know,*” in Don McKay’s words, which give voice to a committed form of ecological awareness. With the Agricultural Revolution of the late Neolithic, writing took control over the state of affairs. The millennial war being waged between those who think that they have a right to exploit the earth’s resources because the world belongs to them and those who think that they belong to the world had just possibly

³⁰ In *The Solid Form of Language. An Essay on Writing and Meaning* (2004), pp. 10-11, Bringhurst says: “Like other creatures, humans are heavily self-absorbed. We frequently pretend (or self-righteously insist) that language belongs to humans alone. And many of us claim that the only kind of human language, or the only kind that matters, is the kind that is born in the mouth. The languages of music and mathematics, the gestural languages of the deaf, the calls of leopard frogs and whales, the rituals of mating sandhill cranes, and the chemical messages coming and going day and night within the brain itself are a few of the many reminders that *language is actually part of the fibre of which life itself is spun.* We are able to think about language at all only because a license to do so is chemically written into our genes. The languages we are spoken in are those for which we speak.” [Italics are mine.] Martin Heidegger’s notion that *die Sprache spricht* (*languages speaks*, through our lips and through our hands) resonates powerfully beneath Bringhurst’s words in this quotation.

³¹ See Robert Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style*, 1999 (2nd expanded and revised edition), Foreword, p. 11.

begun. Greedy humankind would know no limits in its management of what magnanimous earth had to offer humans for their comfortable sustenance and survival. However, hunters and gatherers still breathed through their feet; they did not rewrite or erase the earth under their hands:

When you next see the hunters,
say to the hunters:
O say can you see
how the earth is rewritten
under our hands
until it says nothing?

Can you see?
Can you see how the earth is re-
written?

SP, pp. 182-183.

This resonant constellation of words resonates even further into the recesses of meaning of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* when placed against the words of one of the two quotes or linguistic thresholds with which Bringhurst prefaces *The Elements of Typographic Style*. The words are lifted from Kimura Kyūo's *Kenjutsu Fushigi Hen* [*On the Mysteries of Swordmanship*], a work composed in 1768:

— Everything written symbols can say has already passed by. They are like tracks left by animals. That is why the masters of meditation refuse to accept that writings are final. The aim is to reach true being by means of those tracks, those letters, those signs – but reality itself is not a sign, and it leaves no tracks. It doesn't come to us by way of letters or words. We can go toward it, by following those words and letters back to what they came from. But so long as we are preoccupied with symbols, theories and opinions, we will fail to reach the principle.
— But when we give up symbols and opinions, aren't we left in the utter nothingness of being?
— Yes.

The interaction between the ripples formed by the words of both Bringhurst's poem and Kimura Kyūo's quote is fruitful and enlightening. Both texts converge into *nothingness*. Language is not an end in itself, reminds us the Japanese sage, but a protective film that may help humans access the essence of things, of *what-is*. It is woven with signs, but signs are nothing more than signs, a replacement of the real. When all signs and symbols are left behind, the self enters the realm of pure being, *the utter nothingness of being*. Silence is preferable to language then; we only need to listen to the world with open eyes and ears. The *nothing* Bringhurst's poem tackles is of a very different nature, though. That "*the earth is being rewritten / under our hands / until it says nothing*" means that the way we relate with and exploit the resources of the world is not morally or ethically the right path to follow. The earth is being silenced, deprived of her own voice, because of our greedy and egoistical view that it belongs to man, *the measurer of all things*. Somehow, the poet is asking his fellow humans to stop for a while and think about the way they relate to the world to which we belong, to the mesh of living things of which we are but a tiny part, no more than that.

In the second movement the herders are acknowledged as having provided humans with the *metres* of poetry, but humans seem to quite have forgotten them. Then, the speaking voice encourages the person it is addressing to ask the hunters to teach us humans the same old song again:

Say to the hunters: The herders
 have taught us the meters, but we
 The herders have taught us
 have forgotten. Say to the hunters:
 the meters, but we have forgotten.

Teach us a song
 Say to the hunters:
 as subtle as speaking, teach us
 The mothers of rhythms
 a song as lean and as changeable
 are rain and the sea.
 as the world.

SP, pp. 182-183.

These words lay themselves as a bridge between section III and section IV, which is a meditation on the poet's function or role in human societies and on his potential immortality. They constitute a crystal-clear and powerful statement on Bringham's poetics – i.e., his view of the ultimate nature of poetry, or the kind of poetry he is after. The poetic message is emphasized through a simple device – repetition by the way of alliteration and parallelism. The song the speaking voice is asking to be taught is (1) “*as subtle as speaking*,” that is to say a poetry characterized by the naturalness or spontaneity of speech, and also more the product of orality than of written composition, and (2) “*as lean and changeable as the world*,” i.e. a poetry born out of the living and actual world, mobile and fluid, capable of changing with the world, a poetry with no superfluous ornament and marked by simplicity, clarity and elegance. This is the new song Bringham wants to learn to sing and the one he is singing right now in *The Blue Roofs of Japan*. Once again, the poem turns self-reflexive for a while; it turns *metapoetic*. Nature is the ultimate source both of writing and poetry; the only source of inspiration is *what-is*. Or maybe *the world itself is poetry*, for poetry is everywhere to be found, and *everywhere being is singing* and dancing to *the rhythms of the rain and the sea*. The female voice reinforces here and there throughout the poem what the male voice says. Precisely at this point, it insists on the fact that water (rain and the sea) are not only the mothers of letters, but also the mothers of rhythms. That is: the rhythm of poetry is based on the rhythms of the natural world.

In his essay “Canadian Primal: Five Poet-Thinkers Redefine Our Relationship to Nature”, from which we have already quoted above, Mark Dickinson explores the way the group of five poets included in Tim Lilburn's anthology *Thinking and Singing* are actually propounding a sort of *fluid mode of thinking* in their poetry. To these *singing and thinking poets*, metaphor is of the essence in their writing because it emphasizes the fact that words are multilayered repositories of complex meaning and also a way of gaining knowledge of the world. Metaphor also points to the interconnectedness of reality as a continuum which is emulated by the musical arrangement of well-chosen singing words on the page:

What they do with this speculative mode of thought distinguishes them from other philosophical poets, and qualifies their efforts as uniquely Canadian. They use poetry to think, along with the textures and rhythms, complicated histories, and subterranean energies of particular places: the family farm Zwicky grew up on in northwestern Alberta; Lee and Toronto; McKay and the west coast of Vancouver Island and the Avalon Peninsula. Working with the multiple resonances of words, the binding properties of metaphor, and other resources available to poets but off limits to prose writers, they emulate the nature of interconnectedness on the page.

If the earth is undergoing constant change and transformation, moving like a river through time, then the poet-thinker needs to build what Robert Bringhurst calls “kayaks” of thought to keep up with it; some “lithe, open, agile, portable structures,” not bulky “steamships and apartment blocks of belief.” Following this hunch has led the thinking and singing poets to a number of radical innovations in poetry.³² [Italics are ours.]

Kayaks of thought to move with the earth in its constant flux – this is the kind of poetry Bringhurst is after. One that is flexible, supple, open-minded, agile, rigorous, elegant, transparent, and polyphonic. Indeed, in his impressive essay “Everywhere Being Is Dancing, Knowing Is Known”, Bringhurst claims that verse is rooted in human physiology, poetry is rooted in the body. Then he celebrates the connection between the rhythms of poetry, the rhythms of the body and the rhythms of the Earth: “Linguistic rhythms are rooted in physiological rhythms – in muscle, blood, and breath – which are rooted in the air and in the ground. They answer to the rhythms of the world we inhabit: night and day, darkness and moonlight, summer and winter, wet season and dry. And where are those rhythms rooted? A durable subject for meditation.”³³

SECTION IV

The Blue Roofs of Japan turns *meta-poetic* at some points, and section IV is also *meta-poetic* in the sense that it is explicitly concerned with exploring the nature of the artist’s role in human societies and, in passing, the nature of poetry, which has been the fundamental thematic preoccupation in the previous section. It is possible to identify three distinct parts throughout this short poem for two voices. On this occasion, the female voice punctuates what the male voice says at five clearly identifiable points throughout the poem, by repeating echo-like words already uttered by the other voice. The first part concerns the artist’s function or role in society, the second deals with the nature of poetry, and the third tackles the issue of poetic immortality and the right audience for an artist’s works of art. *Nilhil novum sub sole* – these are not new questions. For centuries on end, the questions *What is poetry?* and *What is a poet?* have been asked time and again by poets, practitioners of this art, and by literary theorists alike. But there are no simple answers to these perennial questions. Most of the time, the emphasis is laid on the fact that poetry has quintessentially

³² See Mark Dickinson’s essay “Canadian Primal: Five Poet-Thinkers Redefine Our Relationship to Nature”, published in *The Walrus* (Toronto) 6.5 (June 2009): 62-65.

³³ Bringhurst, “Everywhere Being Is Dancing, Knowing Is Known”, in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing: Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, p. 28. Bringhurst dwells further on this all-important issue: “Verse in the sense of a measured, repetitive pattern of syllables is scarcely to be found among Paleolithic cultures, though poetry there is usually abundant. Peoples who choose not to domesticate plants and animals typically choose not to domesticate language either. The real hunter-gatherers I have known use language with great attentiveness and care, and they craft it with skill and dexterity – but in their oral literature, they typically accept its evolving structures and textures as part of the terrain, like the ways of animals, the growth habits of plants, and the grain of stone and wood. Sentences move like living creatures through the forest of the body and the mountains of the mind. They are snared when the time is ripe, and may be shared whenever the need or excuse arises. A song or story truly heard is a feast enjoyed, a meal consumed, a strength acquired. Language is not a beast to be yoked and harnessed but an independent being whose powers may contradict or amplify one’s own. // In neolithic cultures, plants and animals are herded more than hunted, and implements are typically of polished stone. More wild creatures are feared, but fewer are seen and fewer are eaten. Peoples who plant crops in orderly rows and put animals into pens, generally speaking, make a garden of language too. Their poets and storytellers domesticate the rhythms and patterns of speech into the forms we know as verse. When cultures begin to *take dominion* over the animal, vegetable, and mineral realms, they ordinarily seek dominion over the fourth kingdom, the realm of language too. Versification becomes, like history, a method of terracing, planting, and harvesting *time*. It becomes idealized language: something not at all synonymous with poetry but not infrequently given poetry’s name.” *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

to do with the art of beautifully arranging well-chosen words so as to produce memorable messages that tackle fundamental questions and that seek to survive the test of time. That great poetry is born into this world with this vocation of beauty, truth and eternity seems already to be a truism nobody would hesitate to back up. However, this concept of poetry rests firmly on the Indo-European root of the words *poet*, *poem* and *poetry*, the etymology of which highlights the fact that poetry is essentially made out of words. Bringhurst himself has paid attention to the etymology of the words *poet*, *poem* and *poetry* in languages other than those of the Indo-European family, and has found out interesting things:

The Greek verb ποιέω means to make or to do. The noun of agent descended from this verb, ποιητής [*poiētēs*], means a maker or doer. In the Greek of Aristotle or Plato, it is used to mean poet: someone who makes things out of words. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the same word is often used, but never to mean poet. It is used instead to speak of other kinds of craftsmen – metalworkers and carpenters especially – and these are usually described as artisans whose work is graced or guided by the gods. That’s a way of saying that humans can reach out, by making and doing, to realms beyond the human, and that the things humans make or do can have a presence and a value that might also reach beyond the human realm.

The Arabic word for poetry [...] means to know, to realize, to intuit; or to sense, to feel, to perceive. A poet [...] is not a maker but a perceiver: one whose eye or heart or mind is sharp. The Hebrew term for poetry [...] means to sing. [...] so a poet in Hebrew is [...] a singer, not a knower. Anglo-Saxon in this respect is closer to Arabic. There a poet is a *scop*, which means a sentry or a seer... [...] in German he is a *Dichter*: one who sorts and packs or weaves things into order, or caulks the leaks and cracks.³⁴

The poet is *someone who makes things out of words*, but he is also *a perceiver, a knower* and *a singer* when the etymology of the word is explored in depth in other human languages. Poetry is then also a form of knowledge, a way to come to terms with the real in search of insights into *what-is*. But Robert Bringhurst embraces a concept of poetry characterized by a most generous ecological *largesse*. Poetry, he says, is “a property of reality itself”³⁵ and it has nothing quintessentially to do with words. Poetry is part of the living mesh of things, of which language itself is also a tiny part, and so humans have no monopoly on poetry either:

If poetry is in fact a human invention, or a social construct, or a linguistic epiphenomenon only found in certain ritualized or aberrant and unpractical types of human speech, then poetry can tell us nothing much about [...] life and death, and probably nothing much about anything else of serious interest. And if poetry were that, I’d be ashamed and disappointed to be known as a poet and ashamed to have spent my adult life exploring the ways in which poetry works.³⁶

In 1957 or 1958, quite by accident, Bringhurst stumbles upon a classic book by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset entitled *La deshumanización del arte* (1925). There he comes across the following definition of poetry: “La poesía es hoy el álgebra superior de las metáforas: “Poetry today is the higher algebra of metaphor.”³⁷ These words stay with him further into his adult life and he finds that this is an ambitious and all-encompassing definition of what poetry is. Bringhurst’s poetry is rich in metaphors, which is no

³⁴ See Robert Bringhurst’s essay “The Silence That Is Not Poetry – and the Silence That Is”, included in *The Tree of Meaning, Language, Mind and Ecology*, p. 305.

³⁵ Bringhurst, “The Silence That Is Not Poetry – and the Silence That Is”, *ibid.*, p. 309.

³⁶ Bringhurst, “The Silence That Is Not Poetry – and the Silence That Is”, *ibid.*, p. 303.

³⁷ Bringhurst, “The Silence That Is Not Poetry – and the Silence That Is”, *ibid.*, p. 307.

coincidence at all, for in his hands they become a potent tool of gaining access into the essence of the real, of *what-is*. As a literary device, metaphor allows the poet to shed light on apparently unconnected realms of reality. Metaphor in poetry is not a way of blurring distinctions between things, but rather a way of highlighting the interconnectedness of reality, while emphasizing the uniqueness of each single thing at the same time. *What-is* is a continuum and distinctions between things and categories are differences we make through language, as Ortega y Gasset himself would put it.³⁸ Canadian poet, philosopher and musician Jan Zwicky has devoted a marvellous essay to this issue entitled *Wisdom & Metaphor*, from which Bringhurst quotes at several points in his essay “The Silence That Is Not Poetry – and the Silence That Is”. According to Bringhurst, a metaphor “asserts the identity “*x* is *y*” in a way that clarifies the vivid singularity of *x* as well as *y*. It clarifies what Ortega could call their *ensimismamiento*, or *in-itself-ness*. The term that Jan [Zwicky] would use is “*thisness*.” “*Thisness*,” she says, “is the experience of a distinct thing in such a way that the resonant structure of the world sounds through it.” Zwicky also says that “A metaphor is an explicit refusal of the idea that the distinctness of things is their most fundamental ontological characteristic.”³⁹ Things are connected to one another in most subtle ways and it is poetry or philosophy that uncovers the intimate connection that binds all things together.

The first part of the poem dwells on the artist’s mundane ambitions – “*a house in the country, a house / in the town, an apartment in history*.” The poetic voice wonders where these ambitions might have possibly sprung from, for it appears that it does not make much sense to devote one’s attention, time and energies to achieving such futile goals, which Bringhurst summarizes with astonishing economy in just three words, *money and jobs*,⁴⁰ in his autobiographical essay “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, included in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, 1986. For a poet who is after *a poetry of knowledge and thought, not of opinion*, it is nonsense to pursue the comfortable ease of a house in the country and in the town, or even an apartment in history, which is possibly meant as a reference to poetic immortality. Time and again, Bringhurst has insisted on one simple fact: it is a test of a poet’s seriousness and commitment with his vocation that he should pay due homage to his ancestors, learn from the best that has been thought and said by the masters of different traditions, and try to produce, if he can, valuable works of art to make them stand next to the masterworks of the past. If a poet handles words through his voice, hands and mind, then he should start by paying attention to the achievements of his ancestors. In an article entitled “Fruits of the excavation...”, published in *The Vancouver Sun*, 16 March 1984:

³⁸ “Y es que el mundo que rodea al hombre no se presenta originariamente con articulaciones inequívocas. O dicho de modo más claro: el mundo, tal y como él se nos ofrece, no está compuesto de “cosas” radicalmente separadas y francamente distintas. Hallamos en él infinitas diferencias, pero estas diferencias no son absolutas. [...] Lo primero que el hombre ha hecho en su enfrente intelectual con el mundo es clasificar los fenómenos, dividir lo que ante sí halla, en clases. A cada una de estas clases se atribuye un signo de su voz, y esto es el lenguaje. Pero el mundo nos propone innumerables clasificaciones y no nos impone ninguna. De aquí que cada pueblo cortase el volátil del mundo de modo diferente, hiciese una obra cisoria distinta, y por eso hay idiomas tan diversos con distinta gramática y distinto vocabulario o semantismo. Esa clasificación primigenia es la primera suposición que se hizo sobre cuál es la verdad del mundo, es, por tanto, el primer conocimiento. He aquí por qué, en un principio, hablar fue conocer. [...] Las lenguas nos separan e incomunican, no porque sean, en cuanto lenguas, distintas, sino porque proceden de cuadros mentales diferentes, de sistemas intelectuales dispares –en última instancia–, de filosofías divergentes. No sólo hablamos en una lengua determinada, sino que pensamos deslizándonos intelectualmente por carriles preestablecidos a los cuales nos adscribe nuestro destino verbal.” Ortega y Gasset, “Miseria y esplendor de la traducción”, *Obras completas*, vol. V, Madrid, Revista de Occidente, 1964, pp. 446-447.

³⁹ Bringhurst, “The Silence That Is Not Poetry – and the Silence That Is”, *ibid.*, p. 310.

⁴⁰ Bringhurst writes of “an insatiable white society with the stupidest goals in the world: money and jobs. Not piety, grace, understanding, wisdom, intelligence, truth, beauty, virtue, compassion. None of these.” *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, p. 109.

A5, Pete McMartin gives an interesting account of an interview with the poet. In illuminating words, Bringhurst dwells on the idea that poetry, like science, is a way of investigating what is real in the universe. This is what he admires foremost in the pre-Socratics, who were poets, philosophers and scientists all in one in their approach to *what-is*. Thus, the purity of Bringhurst's calling has a stubborn seriousness about it with which money or jobs cannot interfere at all:

“Poetry is not a very popular commodity in North America,” he says without resentment, “and I think it would be a mistake to assume that it should be. That would be the wrong way to go about it. If I believe, as I do, that poetry should be a way of investigating the scientific and tangible aspects of the universe, then poetry should be very much like the publication of scientific research papers, which usually never reach an audience of more than 200 or 300. I don't see why I should be famous. I don't expect it.”

Bringhurst's poems are infused with the tangible and scientific – biology, mathematics, physics, geology – and in that he feels close to the Greek poets. “I'm a student of the pre-Socratic philosophers because they understood that science and poetry are one thing. Those guys understood that their business was to understand the world. I believe it's my job to try and keep in touch with the past, the dead, to keep history from becoming an enormous burden we cannot lift.

“That's one of the reasons I like living here in this very place. I know that people have been living in this very spot 20,000 years, and they knew what they were doing. It's a good spot.”⁴¹

The second part of section IV tackles once again the nature of “hard” poetry that holds a true fascination for Bringhurst. Echoes from section II are again heard in these verse lines, where the equation *music-water* is invoked once more. The kind of poetry Bringhurst is interested in learning to make is one made of water and music – a poetry whose only source of inspiration is the tangible and real, and a poetry capable of truly singing the *song of the flesh* embodied by Earth itself. An elemental poetry like this emerges from the living soil, as it were, and so *the words are the earth* and the music is the rhythm of water. The fruit of this poetry is a song “*as subtle as speaking*” and “*as lean and changeable as the world*,” as the closing lines of section III intoned. Like a subterranean current water emerges and comes up to the surface as the recurring motif in most of the five sections that make up *The Blue Roofs of Japan*. Therefore, the words “*this music / is all about water*” are also meant as a self-reflexive reference to Bringhurst's poem itself:

Listen: this music
is all about water. The words
This music too
are the earth, and the music
this music too
is water.

SP, pp. 184-185.

The closing movement of section IV analyzes the role of the artist in depth – the question of literary immortality and the question of the right audience for an artist's works of art. To begin with, an artist is “*anyone / who remembers*.” But what exactly is it that he remembers?, we may ask. We take it that it is tradition – i.e., the best achievements by the

⁴¹ Pete McMartin, “Fruits of the excavation...”, *The Vancouver Sun*, 16 March 1984: A5.

masters of the past – that the artist remembers and tries to improve upon. It is against their ancestors that artists have to measure themselves. But, of course, this is but one possible interpretation. There are yet other possibilities. An artist could also be anyone who remembers the old song of the hunters-and-gatherers civilizations, for which the Earth was still a sacred, plural and polyphonic space to which due reverence, admiration and gratitude was paid in exchange for what she gave human beings for their comfort and survival. Whichever the case, in a recent article entitled “In the Wake of Our Ancestors”, a review of Bringhurst’s *Selected Poems* (2009) published in *The Times* (London), August 8, 2009: *Weekend Review* 12, Mark Dickinson describes Bringhurst’s vocation as salvaging “ancient forms of wisdom” that are still relevant in our ferocious consumer society, obsessed with “money and jobs”. The poet is much more interested in taking with him the invaluable insights into reality by ancestors from all times and traditions. In this context, the poet is he who listens to what the world has to teach him by way of lessons and then tries to produce a poetry as subtle, changeable and fluid as the world itself:

Once, while still in his thirties, the poet, translator and typographer Robert Bringhurst described his life’s work as packing out as much “salvageable wisdom” from ancient and indigenous, Western and Eastern traditions as he could carry, preserving it for a future far away from the “central insanities” of technological civilisation.⁴²

And which is the right audience for the artist’s achievements? The answer is simple and straightforward: the artist performs for the gods. *The others* are all negative references and happen to be there quite by accident. They are absolutely dispensable: *eavesdroppers* are not really able to listen to the earth singing, they just overhear reality singing; *boob-squeezers* are not capable of a sensible appraisal of the serious artist’s work; *thieves* are those who steal without acknowledging their sources, which is, of course, an undertaking of dubious morality; and *voyeurs* simply happen to be there looking shamelessly at what the serious artist is trying to do so conscientiously, with all the presence of mind and concentration he is capable of. In producing his art for the gods as the ultimate audience, the artist is looking beyond the short-term ephemeral success and into the realm of immortality, which is sanctioned with the passage of time by posterity, by the generations to come. The requirements that great serious art has to meet are those of excellence and universality. By writing a poetry capable of reaching beyond the realm of the immediate present, the poet is talking to coming generations while at the same time he is reaching beyond the realm of the purely human. Gods are immutable, unchangeable entities populating a realm apart where there are no calendars or ticking clocks. It is a realm of timelessness or of no time, unaffected by the ordinary passage of time. Great immortal poetry gets to be spoken by the gods themselves, in whose tongues there are “no dates and no names,” as if valuable poetry simply were absorbed into an indistinguishable canon of immortal works, a simultaneous constellation much like the one T. S. Eliot envisioned in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919)⁴³. This is tantamount to achieving a form of immortality. The thought occurs

⁴² Mark Dickinson’s review of *Selected Poems*, “In the Wake of Our Ancestors”, *The Times* (London), August 8, 2009: *Weekend Review* 12.

⁴³ These are Eliot’s words on the concept of tradition in his groundbreaking essay: “what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.” T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, London: Faber and Faber, 1986, p. 15.

that Pound insisted that the important thing was to get poetry to be written; it did not matter much who did the writing. In Bringhurst's words,

An artist is anyone
who remembers, it is not you nor me
anyone who
nor the boss but the gods who are watching.
anyone who
For these we perform. The others
are eavesdroppers, boob-squeezers, thieves
or voyeurs, or they work here.

The tongues of the gods include
no dates and no names.
This is the logos.

THIS
is the logos.

SP, pp. 184-185.

So the artist's role is, to put it very simply, to listen to reality and to remember what he has listened to so as to make his own works of art, which inevitably unveil the essence of *being* and participate in *being*. The closing verse lines of section IV speak of the λόγος (*logos*). *Logos*⁴⁴ is the Greek word for *word*, *reason* or *plan*. In Greek philosophy it meant *the reason implicit in the cosmos*, ordering it and giving it form and meaning. The Greek word κόσμος means, in fact, *order*. The idea of *logos* in Greek thought harks back at least to the 6th-century-BCE pre-Socratic philosopher Herakleitos, who discerned in the cosmic process a *logos* analogous to the reasoning power in man. Later, among the Stoic philosophers the *logos* was defined as an active rational and spiritual principle that permeated all reality. With the arrival of Christianity, the word took on new nuances of meaning. Thus, in the first chapter of *The Gospel According to John*, Jesus Christ is identified as "the Word" (Greek *logos*) incarnated, or made flesh. Now, what does the philosophical concept of λόγος have to do with *being* and *poetry*?, we may ask. Bringhurst's poetry aims to reach beyond the tangible and into the essence of things, into the λόγος as it were, that pervasive principle beneath the universe in its entirety. In this context, one is inevitably reminded of Robert Bringhurst's concept of *polyphonic poem* and of Jan Zwicky's response to "Singing with the Frogs":

You say in the first paragraph of § 2: a polyphonic poem is "[a] poem that ... *enacts* and *embodies* plurality and space as well as (or instead of) timelessness and unity." I don't think the parenthetical "or instead of" should be there. What allows *anything* to be genuinely polyphonic, in my view, is – as you say – the conversion of time to space; to the extent that the conversion is successful, the piece *exists as a synchronic unity*, even though it perforce elapses in time as it comes to be.⁴⁵

"*This is the logos*": the final words uttered by both the male and female voice in section IV point to a realm beyond the tangible which is possibly only reachable through polyphonic poetry like the one *The Blue Roofs of Japan* is enacting through the interpenetration of two voices that aim to reach a core of irreducible meaning. Far from contradicting each other, both voices are complementing what each has to say and enhancing the semantic density of

⁴⁴ For more detailed information, see the entry on 'logos' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 17, p. 10062.

⁴⁵ Jan Zwicky, "Being, Polyphony, Lyric: An Open Letter to Robert Bringhurst", *Canadian Literature* 156 (Spring 1998): 181.

the poem's statements about the world. The world Bringham envisions is simple and clear as water, and that water is precisely incorporated into the living fabric of his poem. This is possibly the ultimate elegance the poet is looking for when making well-wrought poems that bring *melopoeia*, *phanopoeia* and *logopoeia* together.

SECTION V

With section V of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* we are back to the complexity of the opening piece of the poem. The interplay between the male and female voice is remarkably complex: apart from the mere interpenetration or merging of voices at certain points, there are moments when the fusion yields an altogether new meaning, regardless of what each voice is saying through its text in that precise instant, and there are also moments when each voice speaks alone, in absolute isolation. As a result, the female voice is not just punctuating or echoing what the male voice says, but also giving a fresh point of view on the issue under scrutiny. The overall impression is then one of profundity and density of meaning. Reminiscent in many ways of the *dramatic impersonations* of the Oriental sages essayed by the poet in *The Book of Silences* (originally published as an independent section in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* in 1986, alongside *The Blue Roofs of Japan* itself), as well as of the poems in the sequence devoted to the Pre-Socratics, the closing composition of this polyphonic poem rings with philosophical echoes in its exultant celebration of the unity of all things in the universe. And this fifth piece is indeed a masterwork in miniature, a technical accomplishment, and also the true climax of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* in that it is an invitation for the listener/reader to become one with the world of beauty and perfection – a continuum of distinct things and yet connected entities made out of the basic ingredients or the four elements (earth, water, air, fire) identified such a long time ago by the sharp minds of attentive *perceivers* and *knowers* and *singers* from a number of traditions. Again, metaphor plays a decisive role in conveying what non-figurative language would fall short of conveying: by finding out potent equations beneath the world of appearances, the poet is uncovering subtle connections uniting or tying all things together, and he is also reaching beyond the realm of the human to speak for an audience of immortal, immutable gods. All textual threads and lexical nodes scattered in the previous sections of the poem are now brought together into a perfect circle, a *Gestalt* of dense meaning: water and music, earth and the sky, mountains and the sea, song and singing, and the *logos* are constellated into a perfect picture of calm and stasis which celebrates the endless motion and change of *what-iz*. It all unfolds throughout five simple movements which are analyzed in detail in the following paragraphs.

The circle is a perfect geometrical figure, highly revered as the embodiment of perfection itself since antiquity by astronomers, mathematicians and philosophers alike. The closing piece in *The Blue Roofs of Japan* draws the circle begun in the opening piece into completion: whereas section I celebrated the birth of a new day with the sunrise in the early morning, section V celebrates the unfolding of the afternoon gesturing towards the coming night. Now the circle is complete. Two equations are then celebrated in the simple, transparent, straightforward language of parallelism:

All afternoon, the slow
celebration of these

This music is water,

two equations:

utter exactly the same words, but this time their order is reversed. Whereas the male voice's final words evoke the notion of reality as a set of things marked by separation or distinctness, the female voice's final words stress the concept of reality as a unity or continuum. *There is no progression without contraries*, said the Romantic visionary William Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. It is a truism to say that human and nonhuman beings live in a world of opposites or contraries – light and darkness, sound and silence, day and night, life and death, love and hate. Water and earth are identified as being elements that tie us together while holding us apart at the same time. If they tie us together, it is because they are basic elements out of which everything is made. If they hold us apart, it is because they also embody the geographical distances of continents and oceans which, if vast enough, keep us apart because of the sheer immensity of space. What does space have to do with water or earth?, we may ask. Time and space are also basic elements or threads woven into the living mesh of things in the universe. Throughout history, humans have made their best to try to understand exactly what they are and have produced measurement instruments to ascertain and account for their real nature. Like time, space is also inescapable and real. Space could be said to be even more real than time, for beings (humans, animals and plants) move *in* or *through* space, which has got a sort of tangible texture. By contrast, time is of a different nature, more fugitive, eel-slippery and unreal, and it moves *through* us, in much the same way language moves through us and speaks through our breath and lips. Again, this is only one possible interpretation. There are others, for sure. That earth and water keep us apart might also suggest that the exact combination of these elements in the bodies of *what-is* gives as a result distinct or unique creatures (living and nonliving) on Earth. The proportions of water and earth vary considerably from one mountain, say, to a tree or a river. Their very physical constitution or texture keeps them distinct or apart along the boundless (not infinite) continuum which reality is.

At the heart of this second movement, essentially concerned with the *logos*, is what looks like an enigmatic reference: “*Earthsong and seasong, they say: / the native and foreign.*” The meaning becomes clear when these lines are placed against the “Program Notes” accompanying *The Blue Roofs of Japan* as it was first published in *Lines Review* in January 1986: “The *shakuhachi* is an endblown bamboo flute. It is one of the principal instruments of *hogaku*, traditional Japanese music (as distinguished from *yogaku*, “sea music” – i.e., music of foreign origin).” The enigmatic references to *earthsong* and *seasong* are now crystal-clear: the *earthsong* refers to traditional Japanese music (i.e., one stemming from the living soil or *genius loci* of the place), whereas *seasong* refers to *foreign music* (i.e., music coming from beyond the sea). Let us remember that Japan is an island full of mountains and separated from the Asian mainland by water. But of course, this interpretation does not exhaust the rich resonances *earthsong* and *seasong* treasure within themselves. They are reminders that the earth and the sea are the ultimate source of inspiration of the poetry Bringham is after, reminders that the earth taught us its metres when it started being cultivated in the Neolithic by the earlier farmers, and that the sea, with the regular motion of its waves, had also much to teach us about the rhythm of poetry. Once again, the old song that the earth and the sea teach us is “*as subtle as speaking*” and “*as lean and changeable as the world*” itself.

Ties are not forgotten at all in the third movement of this final poem. As a matter of fact, this third movement is closely linked to the second one. “*What ties us to time and the world / beside us is fire,*” says the male voice. In the female voice's rendering it reads like this: “*What ties us to time and the world / beside us is INSIDE us.*” The word *fire* uttered by the male voice coincides in time with the word *INSIDE* uttered by the female voice. Like water and earth, fire is another fundamental constituent element of reality. The pre-Socratics knew it perfectly well 25 centuries ago. Time is also invoked here; time and space are the essential

matrices inside which human experience takes place and unfolds. Fire is revealed as the element that ties us (this *us*, by the way, we interpret as meaning *human and non-human beings in this world*) to the world and to time as well. In this context, it is also possible to interpret ‘fire’ as pointing to something beyond itself and its physical being: it could well be a symbol for the driving force or passion beneath all things to be what they are supposed or expected to be – i.e., to fulfil their primordial vocation. If the vocation of, say, a tree is to be a tree, the vocation of a human being is to be a human being – or something to this effect says Bringham in one of his illuminating essays, “The Vocation of Being – the Whole of the Text”. Fire is the living sparkle propelling us forward in this *unending process of becoming* or perpetual metamorphosis which life is. Fire also pushes us forward to achieve our dreams and our authentic being, in Heideggerian terms. This is inextricably linked to the idea of humility, of calling, and of gratitude – the reverence and gratitude we owe to show in the face of universal *being*. In any case, what is genuinely new in this third movement of section V of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* is encapsulated in just a handful of resonant verse lines:

The mountains are younger than birds.
The sea when we lived in the sea
was made of fresh water.
No man is not one of these islands.

SP, pp. 186-187.

This is *a history of the world* in almost no time, or in just a few seconds – in the time it takes the male voice to sing these words aloud on its own, while the female voice remains dumb and attentive to what it has to say. The four key words constellated into this illuminating fragment are *mountains*, *birds*, *sea* and *man*, all of which evoke the four elements which the ancients identified as being constitutive of *what-is*. Mountains are made of earth and fire sometimes (in the case of volcanoes); birds are creatures of air; the sea is the embodiment of wild water; and man is a combination of all four elements. Upon closer inspection, this might be a brief account of the geological/biological history of Japan itself: birds existed before the mountains emerged to the surface of land through seismic movements; the sea was the main source of sustenance (a source of *fresh water*) for the people’s survival in traditional societies; and man is conceived as sprouting from the living soil of the islands that make up Japan. Again, this is only one possible reading of these words, and possibly it is not as far-fetched as it seems, particularly when these words are set against the incantatory ones that the female voice has been intoning for a while so as to punctuate this message:

Not counting, nor naming.
Naming, not counting.
Counting, not naming.
Naming and counting.

These words are not superimposed on the male voice’s, but uttered in isolation by the female voice instead. They look like variations on the same theme, which they might be after all, an exemplification of what could be called *a combinatory logic* like the one we analyzed in “Tzuhalem’s Song” (section XI in *Tzuhalem’s Mountain*), where a handful of words appeared in a number of different combinations that were no random arrangement at all. If we posit that *a* = *counting* and *b* = *naming*, this is the overall resulting pattern: (1) not *a*, nor *b*; (2) *b*, not *a*; (3) *a*, not *b*; and (4) *a* and *b*. The implications are profound and worth analysing:

- (1) *Not counting, nor naming.* This is a celebration of utter silence as the best attitude possible towards reality. At a pre-verbal stage in the history of humankind, there was no need for speech or writing either. There was no need to count possessions and no need to name the things humans found in their surrounding world either. There was only room for amazement in the face of the awe-inspiring beauty of the universe.
- (2) *Naming, not counting.* This is a celebration of language as a means of uncovering essences. Language is a word that we will use in selfishly human terms here, even if we are well aware of and share Bringham's intimation that there are forms of language (mathematical or gestural language, for instance) which are non-verbal, as well as forms of language that are not the prerogative of humans. In other words, humans have no monopoly on language either. Communication is a universal right shared by all beings – and by *being*. However, we cannot avoid thinking in human terms. One is inevitably reminded of Walter Benjamin's philosophical meditation on three kinds of language: (a) *divine language*, which is the demiurgus' word – that of God in the biblical Book of Genesis, where naming is tantamount to creating things by uttering words, so that naming *is* creating things *ex nihilo*; (b) *Adamic language*, or language in a state of purity: though not capable of creating things out of the blue, Adamic words are still close to the things they name and are able to unveil their true essence; (c) *post-Adamic language*, or language fallen from its pristine state, in which words no longer unveil the true essence of things and float as if aimlessly amid in the realm of appearances.
- (3) *Counting, not naming.* This is a celebration of arithmetic as a management and control tool. With the Agricultural Revolution of the late Neolithic man becomes the measurer of all things and the Earth becomes a place whose resources he has an inalienable right to exploit and manage as if they actually belonged to him (those were, after all, God's words in his injunction on the sixth day of creation: replenish the earth and govern the fish of the sea, the fowl of the air and all animals on earth). The management of and greedy control over the resources of the earth by means of farming and ranching ran parallel to the domestication of language through language. Thus, naming is not important anymore; what matters is counting. There seemed to be no need to reach beyond the surface of things into their irreducible core of meaning. In a way, the earth was no longer a sacred place where the realms of the human and the divine were close to one another. Benefit was the last goal: the highest priority was counting one's own benefits derived from generous Earth, even if this entailed a rape of our home.
- (4) *Naming and counting.* This is a celebration of the synthesis of idealism and pragmatism, or, to put it differently, a celebration of the reconciliation or fusion of giving things their right names to uncover their essence, on the one hand, and of counting things to set some kind of order upon the seeming chaos of the world. What is the sense in naming and counting after all?, we may ask. Naming is a way of knowing, of reaching into an irreducible core of meaning at the heart of things (essence), whereas counting gives the impression that it is but the expression of man's obsession with owning, with the management of properties and resources on Earth, which we take to be ours by right. Naming vs. counting, or knowing vs. owning. To borrow once again Don McKay's words, "you don't own what you know", which is a form of saying that we need to feel gratitude and respect for everything the Earth gives us.

The fourth and fifth movements of section V are intensely lyrical and beautiful. In the fourth movement, water and earth are celebrated in simple and moving language. *The book of the world* is written in water and earth, not ink, but water has no words, utters no recognizably human sounds. Earth, by contrast, is words and so can be decoded and interpreted by the inquisitive gaze of human beings:

Water is wordless. Earth
is information. Earth is words.
This too is the logos. A journey on foot
cannot be repeated, just as a story
cannot be recited, only retold.

Naming and counting.

SP, pp. 188-189.

Beneath these words, Herakleitos' words πάντα ῥεῖ can be heard – everything changes, everything is flowing all the time. This is a simple affirmation of the perpetual metamorphosis implicit in what is real. The fluidity of reality is something the old pre-Socratic philosopher took for granted many centuries ago.⁴⁶ Feet are the link uniting the human body to the Earth, and so treading on the ground is tantamount to deciphering the characters written on the surface of the Earth, which is information. Of course, feet are not so dangerous as hands are, or so tells us Bringhurst again. Journeys on foot cannot be repeated in exactly the same conditions, for the feet and the Earth change from one minute to the next. The same applies to oral literatures and stories: every single performance or retelling of a story is unique and irreplaceable. Stories, like the feet or the Earth, are also subject to perennial change, which is part of their charm and complexity as well.

The closing fifth movement is a quiet celebration of the four elements and an invitation for the self to become *one with the world*. The four-point constellation of equations is as follows: water-music, fire-laughter, earth-darkness, sky-quiet/wide/blue. What all four equations underline is the idea of union or communion of the self with the world, as well as the interconnectedness of everything in reality. The basis of all four equations is the four basic elements out of which reality is made – water, earth, air, fire. The second term is always a noun, except for the sky, which is qualified by three adjectives. What the final lesson comes down to is that it is necessary to re-learn the essentials of an attitude of reverence, gratitude and humility towards *what-is*:

Facing the water, be music.
Be still facing fire.
Be laughter!
Be laughter.
One. Two. Three.
Facing the earth, be darkness.
Four. Five.
Facing the sky, be quiet, wide, and blue.

SP, pp. 188-189.

The closing verse lines of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* already prefigure a later complex work by Robert Bringhurst, *Elements*, a long poem in seven sections with drawings by Ulf Nilsen, designed and printed by Russell Maret at Kuboaa Press in 1995. In this case, Bringhurst's

⁴⁶ To Herakleitos, fire is the essential material uniting all things and forms the material principle of an orderly universe, the *logos* through all things are interrelated and all natural events occur. The underlying connection between opposites is precisely a significant manifestation of this *logos*: he asserted that the world exists as a coherent system in which a change in one direction is ultimately balanced by a corresponding change in another. Between all things there is a hidden connection, which is tantamount to positing the persistence of unity despite change, illustrated by Herakleitos' famous analogy of life to a river. So all things are in constant flux, regardless of how they appear to the senses.

words are accompanied by four suites of five drawings by Ulf Nilsen realized in paper (through watermarking, wet-pulp embossing, branding, and letterpress printing) by Russell Maret at the Center for Book Arts in New York during August and September of 1995. Section IV of the poem consists of four smaller sections, each devoted to one single element: air, earth, fire and water. Nilsen's drawings somehow emphasize this very notion of elements by being made through a number of different techniques that are inextricably linked to the same elements being celebrated in the sequence (watermarking and wet-pulp embossing are clearly linked to water, in much the same way branding is made possible by fire). At any rate, this only testifies to the coherence of Bringhurst's thinking and singing. Though far apart from one another by almost a decade, *The Blue Roofs of Japan* and *Elements* seem to be imbued with the same spirit, regardless of whether the former is a complex polyphonic poem for two voices in five sections and the latter is a homophonic poem for one voice in seven sections of no less demanding complexity.

Conversations with a Toad

*A Dialogue for a Toad and Human Beings, or
A Meditation on Being, Time & Ecology*

I · INTRODUCTION

Conversations with a Toad (1987) is the second polyphonic poem, or poem for multiple voices, in Robert Bringhurst's literary career. It remains one of the essential poems in the author's living repertory, as its inclusion in his selected poems of 1995 and 2009 makes explicit. Originally available in a special *livre d'artiste* issued in an edition limited to only 55 copies by Lucie Lambert Editions, it was then made more accessible in two subsequent books – *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995) and *Selected Poems* (2009), which gave the poem the circulation it merits. Of course, this gave a wider audience an opportunity to enjoy this little masterpiece, a long meditative poem in ten parts which explores a fundamental question for the poet – what it means to be alive in a world where the human and the nonhuman are inextricably fused in the living mesh of things. The text remains a true challenge for the reader or hearer, who must pay attention to the subtle nuances of meaning of the words as the poem unfolds in space and in time. As a matter of fact, there is profundity of thought in this complex poem, but there is also simple and elegant language, a terse musicality being spoken through the words with which the poem is woven, and the ancestral voice of a versatile poet exploring a new path – that of polyphony. And there are also the illustrations made by Lucie Lambert: a suite of 11 images that present the toad as if in a state of true metamorphosis, evolving from the realism of the first drawings towards calligraphic brushes that convey the idea of a toad with astonishing economy and elegance. The work is then memorable and inexhaustible at the same time.

Upon a closer inspection of the editorial history of the poem, we learn that *Conversations with a Toad* has known different (three or four) written incarnations over time with the corresponding textual variants. It has been *a work in progress*, a work in the making for a long time. A simple chronological outline of its evolution would look like this:

- (1) “Conversations with a Toad: Excerpts from a Work in Progress”, published in *Border Crossings* (Winnipeg) 6.2 (March 1987): 32. This is the first appearance of the text: three sections (sections III, V and VI) of what the author terms *a work in progress* are published here for the first time. Sections III and VI are revised and section V reprinted in the Lucie Lambert edition that saw the light of day in July of the same year. [See entry C.56 in the bibliography.]
- (2) *Conversations with a Toad*. Vancouver, B.C. and Shawinigan, Québec: Éditions Lucie Lambert, 1987. [25] p. Accordion-fold codex in cloth-covered boards, 26.5 × 34.5 cm. According to the colophon, the edition consists of 55 numbered copies, including the eleven deluxe copies, numbered 1–11. Evidently, fewer than forty copies were bound, including the eleven deluxe. Thus, the regular edition consists of no more than 29 bound copies with the remainder in sheets. All copies are signed by author and artist. The papers were advertised as *bankusa* for the deluxe edition and *kizuki bosho* for the remainder, but in some copies the papers (not easily distinguished) were evidently mixed. Contents: A poem in ten numbered sections, accompanied by eleven woodcuts by Masato Arikushi, from

drawings by Lucie Lambert. [See entries A.33 & A.33a in the bibliography.] Sections III, IX and X (reprinted from the Lucie Lambert edition) were much later published in *Ellipse* (Sherbrooke, Québec) 48 (1992): 113-121, accompanied by French translations by Jacques Brault. [See entry C.61 in the bibliography.]

- (3) “Conversations with a Toad” was again published in a different version in *Descant* (Toronto) 59 (Winter 1987 [published 1988]): 7-14. The whole text was revised from the Lucie Lambert edition. [See entry C.59 in the bibliography.]
- (4) “Conversations with a Toad” was further revised from the Lucie Lambert edition (A.33) – and possibly from C.59 too – in A.47 *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), where it was the opening poem of the collection, and then it was reprinted with minor textual variants at all in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009). Section III of the poem was published in C.72, *The Amicus Journal* 19.3 (Fall 1997): 42, reprinted from A.47. Three years later, some excerpts from the poem were published alongside other excerpts from “Dogen” in B.72, *Poetry Comes Up Where It Can*, edited by Brian Swann. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000: pp. 27-28. Finally, the entire poem was reprinted from A.92 in B.114, *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, 3rd ed., ed. by Donna Bennett & Russell Brown. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2010: pp. 989-1005, alongside “Essay on Adam”, “Leda and the Swan”, “These Poems, She Said”, “The Reader” and “Bone Flute Breathing”, all reprinted from A.92.

As a complete work of art, *Conversations with a Toad* has then gone through three different states, even if three sections of the poem were already published as an anticipation of the entire work in *Border Crossings* in March 1987. Therefore, from now on, we will be referring to only three written incarnations or versions of the text: (1) the 1987 Lucie Lambert edition text, (2) the 1987 *Descant* version, and (3) the *The Calling* (1995) and *Selected Poems* (2009) versions, which are identical. The actual incorporation of three voices takes place only in the third state of the text. It seems to us that the toad’s voice was taken for granted in the first two incarnations of the poem, where the toad is the silent interlocutor (or rather hearer or addressee) of the man’s musings or soliloquies. Thus, in *The Calling*, two voices are present in sections I and IX of the poem: one of them is in roman and the other is in indented italics. Both voices are supposed or expected to speak at the same time. The typographical realization of the Gaspereau edition of *Selected Poems* (2009) is much more agreeable to the eye: one voice is printed in black ink and the other in blue ink. But it seems there is one more invisible voice, speaking its own text, even if it has not been printed on the page. In a short note preceding the text of the poem, the author gives us an important clue for a proper understanding of the work. He says that *Conversations with a Toad* is a polyphonic poem for three voices: *homo sapiens* (black ink), *homo narrans* (blue ink), *bufo boreas* (silent throughout). Whereas *The Blue Roofs of Japan* was a jazz duet or a score for two *interpenetrating voices* in five sections, Bringhamst’s new incursion into polyphony takes on the form of a long ten-part poem for three voices, even if the third, which is the voice of the toad, remains silent throughout the whole poem.

The structure of *Conversations with a Toad* is crystal-clear. If section I is conceived as being a prologue spoken by two voices (both belonging to human beings) and addressed to humans, sections II through X are addressed directly to the toad, who may or may not listen. But this does not seem to matter much; it is not the man or the toad’s concern, for the important thing is that the meditation be spoken aloud for the rest of humankind to listen to the ancestral lessons the toad has to teach solely through its dumb presence. When placed against *The Blue Roofs of Japan*, the new ingredient in *Conversations with a Toad* makes itself discernible: there is in this poem a more acute sense of environmental awareness, an explicit commitment with the idea that it is of the essence that humans learn how to

preserve this Earth. The whole sequence is, thus, an extended, quiet meditation on being and ecology, on time and space, on geological and biological evolution, and on the way humans relate to the nonhuman and the world at large. Relearning gratitude and how to breathe through one's feet, paying attention and due respect to the Earth – this is the primordial lesson the speaking *homo sapiens* and *homo narrans* are trying to deliver through the presence of the silent *bufo boreas* to all those who might be willing to listen.

At this point, it might be wise to go back to the beginning and ask a handful of simple, elementary questions. How did *Conversations with a Toad* come to be produced in the first place? And, for those uninitiated in the world of *livres d'artiste*, who is Lucie Lambert, the final artificer of what remains the most beautiful material incarnation of this poem? In what way do the images produced by the artist and the words uttered by the poet enhance one another? Quebec-born Lucie Lambert is an artist who has been working on the making of *livres d'artiste* since the 1970s. The fruit of a joint-project in which several talented artists were involved, *Conversations with a Toad* was the fifth artbook in her artistic career. In two of her previous art projects she had already produced other remarkable works in collaboration with Governor General's award-winning poets. With prices ranging from \$700 to \$1,700, the market for her work has always been more public than private – it is universities, public art collections and libraries that mostly acquire her unique works, all of them published in very limited editions. All previous works were written in French, so *Conversations with a Toad*¹ was his first English publication, which certainly expanded her audience:

The first artbook was *Frayère* (“Spawning Space”), a limited edition of 35, released in 1976. It contains a series of nine prints presented in a portfolio style with a text by Yvon Rivard. *Le Prince et La Tenebre*, seven etchings in an edition of 48 copies and complemented with a story by François Ricard, followed in 1980; and *Alea*, 10 etchings with poems by Rejean Beaudoin in an edition of 92, was released in 1982. *La Naissance des Nuages* (“The Birth of the Clouds”), another small portfolio of etchings combined with poetry by Jacques Brault, was created in 1984.²

Since the very beginning of her artistic life, Lucie Lambert was determined to present her work in book form, because it gave her images a new dimension and a coherent, compact logic. She usually works on the prints and book design in the first place and then she tries to look for the right text to accompany his images:

Lambert's books are rare because the prints and design of the book come first, then the text is created by talented writers to complement, enhance and expand the artist's vision. The design is coordinated by Lambert and she works with the writers, printmakers and book creators to develop a finished piece of fine art under the editions Lucie Lambert imprint.

She says she chose the *book* as the form for presentation of her work early on in her career because she wanted “a unity, a logic, an integration” of images. She felt that a “bound” collection would show a “rhythm of development ... a sequence that ties together time and space.” The collaboration with poets came about

¹ *Conversations with a Toad* was also a rare, expensive *livre d'artiste*: “Eleven deluxe copies, with a silver miniature sculpture on the cover, top quality paper, and an original drawing cost \$2,000. Forty-four copies without the deluxe accoutrements cost \$1,000.” See Mia Stainsby's review entitled “Humble toad the inspiration for a princely work of art”, published in *The Vancouver Sun*, 6 June 1987: G3.

² See Glennis Zilm's review of *Conversations with a Toad*, published in *Amphora* 73 (September 1988): unpagged “special insert” between pp. 10 & 11.

because she wanted to provide another dimension to her images – a creative vision in a word form inspired by the drawings.³

Needless to say, Lucie Lambert's work is not static at all; it has evolved into the exploration of new paths with the passage of time. Two major influences on the evolution of her work have been the art of Chinese and Arabic calligraphy, which she studied during a three-year stay in Paris in the early 1980s, and the Haida sculpture of the Northwest Coast of British Columbia, to which she was introduced shortly afterwards by Haida artist Bill Reid – a friend and influential man in the life of Robert Bringhurst himself too. From a technical point of view, her work has also evolved towards new forms of expression:

Deux influences déterminantes ont marqué l'art de Lucie Lambert: les calligraphies chinoise et arabe, qu'elle a étudiées entre 1980 et 1983; et la sculpture haïda, avec laquelle elle s'est familiarisée auprès de Bill Reid, à Vancouver, en 1983-1984. On note également une double évolution dans sa pratique de la gravure: après *Frayère* (1976, poems d'Yvon Rivard), où elle avait produit des dessins sur acétate imprimés ensuite à la sérigraphie, elle exécutait pour les trois ouvrages suivants des suites d'eaux-fortes, tandis que les deux derniers titres l'ont amenée au bois grave. Dans le même temps, elle est passée d'un certain paysagisme abstrait (à défaut d'un terme plus juste) à un bestiaire dans le sillage de l'art japonais et de l'art amérindien de la côte ouest du Canada, en particulier pour ses deux derniers livres: *Conversations with a Toad* (avec Robert Bringhurst, en 1987), et *A Thousand Hooded Eyes* (en collaboration avec D. G. Jones, 1991).⁴

Bill Reid, the Haida artist to whom *Conversations with a Toad* is dedicated, is then the personal link that united Bringhurst and Lucie Lambert in the early 1980s. Bringhurst himself had already experience in artistic joint-projects: in 1984 he coauthored *The Raven Steals the Light*, a collection of myths inspired in the trickster figure of Haida mythology, with Bill Reid, who produced magnificent illustrations to accompany the text. That was just the beginning of a long, fruitful friendship: 1992 saw the publication of *The Black Canoe*, an essay on the well-known masterwork by the Haida sculptor which has become a classic in its field; 2001 and 2009 saw the publication of *Solitary Raven*, two different editions of the writings of Bill Reid, accompanied by an introduction and extensive notes on the part of Bringhurst. After Bill Reid and Lucie Lambert, there have been other artists with whom the poet has fruitfully collaborated on new artistic projects. Thus, in 1996 he produced another art book entitled *Elements*, a poem in seven sections accompanied by illustrations by Ulf Nilsen that were printed by Russell Maret at Kubooa Press; and in 2003 he worked with Peter Koch and other typographers, illustrators and printers to produce the monumental book of translations entitled *Parmenides. The Fragments*. To turn to the genesis of *Conversations with a Toad*, the book was somehow made possible by Bill Reid, a friend both the poet and

³ Glennis Zilm's review of *Conversations with a Toad*, *ibid.*, unpagéd insert.

⁴ See Jean-Pierre Duquette, "Écrire l'image", an illuminating essay on *Conversation with a Toad*, published in *Ellipse* 48 (1992): 15-21. The essay focuses on the *livres d'artiste* of Lucie Lambert, including *Conversations with a Toad*. See, in particular, p. 16. The essay is translated into English by Hugh Hazelton under the title "Writing Images", pp. 22-28. This is the English translation of the original French passage quoted above: "Two determining influences that have marked the art of Lucie Lambert are Chinese and Arabic calligraphy, which she studied from 1980 to 1983, and Haida sculpture, to which she was introduced by Bill Reid in Vancouver, in 1983-1984. A double evolution can also be observed in her print-making: in *Frayère*, published in 1976, with poems by Yvon Rivard, she drew directly on transparencies which were then printed on silkscreen; for her next three works, however, she chose to produce a series of etchings; then, in her latest two books, she turned to woodcuts. At the same time, she has moved from a type of *abstract landscape* (for want of a more appropriate term) to a bestiary touched by both Japanese and West-Coast Indian art; this new direction is most evident in her two most recent books, *Conversations with a Toad* (1987), in collaboration with Robert Bringhurst, and *A Thousand Hooded Eyes* (1991), a joint project with D. G. Jones." *Ibid.*, p. 23.

the artist shared at a crucial moment in their lives. It was only fair that the poem, born as a result of Reid's influences on their respective works, should be dedicated to him:

Both Bringhurst and Lambert were working in Vancouver with West Coast artist Bill Reid, to whom this book is dedicated. Lambert came to Vancouver to work in 1983 and, partly because of his influence, was inspired to create the toad images and to work in three dimensional images. [...] Bringhurst was working with Reid on *The Raven* [*The Raven Steals the Light*] when the two began to discuss the collaboration that led to *Conversations with a Toad*.⁵

Lucie Lambert's relation with toads began in 1983, when Bill Reid gave her a piece of wood and asked her "to find the toad in that piece of wood."⁶ That was the true inception point of *Conversations with a Toad*. The book was on display at the Butler Gallery, in Vancouver, from June 11 to 13 in 1987.⁷ That was its official presentation to the world. The book folds out, accordion-style, for a panoramic view, with the illustrations and the text of Bringhurst's poem on facing pages. The technical description is provided by the colophon of the limited edition of Lucie Lambert Editions:

The eleven images were drawn in ink by Lucie Lambert, then cut in wood and printed on *kizuki hosho* by Masato Arikushi in the Sawai Atelier, Vancouver. Thirty-three blocks and forty-three impressions were required to produce the eleven prints.

The typographical design is by Crispin Elsted, who handset Robert Bringhurst's text in Jan van Krimpen's Romulus roman and sloped roman. The text was printed on *kizuki hosho* by Jan Elsted, using an 1850 Super Royal Albion handpress, at Barbarian Press, Mission, British Columbia.

The binding was designed and executed by Pierre Ouvrard at Saint-Paul de l'Île-aux-Noix, Quebec.

There are fifty-five numbered copies, each signed by the author and the artist. Numbers 1 to 11 comprise a deluxe edition, printed on *bankusa* and accompanied by one of the original drawings; the upper cover of this deluxe state is decorated with an inset sculpture cast in sterling silver.⁸

The book was enthusiastically reviewed at the time of its publication as a unique work of art. The only problem was that it was an expensive, limited edition, which dramatically restricted access to the work to just the initiated:

Conversations with a Toad, an Editions Lucie Lambert presentation, is a rare and exciting combination of book-as-art and art-as-book. This limited edition of 11 deluxe copies and 44 "regular" copies is the creation of Quebec-born artist Lucie Lambert, who did the eleven drawings that form the basis of *Conversations with a Toad*. Combine her art with poetry by Robert Bringhurst, winner of the prestigious 1987-88 Guggenheim award for poetry, woodcuts by Japanese artisan Masato Arikushi, typography and printing by Crispin and Jan Elsted of Barbarian Press,

⁵ Glennis Zilm's review of *Conversations with a Toad*, *ibid.*, unpaginated insert.

⁶ See Mia Stainsby, "Humble toad the inspiration for a princely work of art", *The Vancouver Sun*, 6 June 1987: G3: "Lambert, 40, started her relationship with toads about four years ago, when she worked under Haida sculptor Bill Reid for nine months in his studio. "He gave me some boxwood and told me to carve a toad, to find the toad in that piece of wood," she says."

⁷ Mia Stainsby, "Humble toad the inspiration for a princely work of art", *The Vancouver Sun*, 6 June 1987: G3.

⁸ The colophon is lifted from copy number 32/55 of the first edition of *Conversations with a Toad*, consulted at the Rare Books & Special Collections at the University of British Columbia University in the summer of 2010.

and binding by Quebec artisan Pierre Ouvrard and the result is an exciting opportunity for collectors because of the unique combination of quality artists.

Each book contains 11 prints from images originally drawn in ink by Lucie Lambert, then cut in wood and hand-printed on kizuki hosho paper by Masato Arikushi of the Sawai Atelier in Vancouver. The 11 images form a related sequence, ranging from a “realistic” toad through increasingly abstract images to a final form that seems to represent a freed toad spirit. These are complemented by the “conversations” of poet Bringhurst”.⁹

What remains an impressive accomplishment is the juxtaposition, or better fusion, of Lambert’s images and Bringhurst’s words. The interplay of both discourses gives a new dimension to the work as it unfolds: “Les deux discours n’en forment qu’un, en vérité, comme une oeuvre à deux voix où les intonations se fondent en transparence, en jeux d’expression assumant tour à tour la ligne mélodique qui se déploie sans effort, dans une évolution parfaitement accordée.”¹⁰ Jean-Pierre Duquette dwells on the way the drawings evolve from *a stark realism* towards *an abstract stylization* which seems to be ultimately inspired by Lambert’s love and practice of calligraphy: the toad drawn with almost photographic precision in the first pages evolves into a few calligraphic brush strokes that give the *idea* of a toad. Simultaneously, Bringhurst’s text seems to adhere to the hard facts of the real all the time, while travelling back in space and time to the biological and geological origins of the Earth. Or as Glennis Zilm puts it, “While Lambert’s images seem concerned with materialization of spirits as she moves from near realism to potentially abstract, Bringhurst evokes spiritualization of matter...”¹¹. As Jean-Pierre Duquette points out,

Les deux dernières oeuvres parues à ce jour (*Conversations with a Toad* (1987) et *A Thousand Hooded Eyes* (1990)) ont en commun, d’une part, la technique utilisée (dans une certaine mesure), et la thématique. En effet Lucie Lambert travaille ici sur bois. Dans *Conversations...*, nous avons onze gravures à partir de dessins à l’encre, tirées en noir et blanc (noirs, gris d’estompe, lavis) selon la méthode japonaise, et qui ont nécessité la préparation de trente-trois blocs, le résultat final étant le fruit de quarante-trois passages. L’ouvrage se déploie comme les livres japonais (“kizuki hosho”). Une évolution très nette apparaît de la première à la dernière planche, de la grenouille immédiatement reconnaissable dans l’essentiel de ses formes à la tache abstraite qui offre l’idée de la grenouille, presque signe calligraphique. Ce processus de stylisation nous entraîne vers une simplification extrême du dessin, dans un

⁹ Glennis Zilm’s review of *Conversations with a Toad*, *ibid.*, unpagé insert. She adds: “This new book is a folio-size, concertina-fold presentation of 26 pages with board covers overlaid with fine mossy-green cloth and decorated with a Korean hankusa paper label. The deluxe edition contains a small silver toad boss (sculpted by Lambert in boxwood, then molded and cast in silver by Harry Sarber of Vancouver) set into a corner of the cover. Binding was done by Pierre Ouvrard of Saint-Paul de l’Île-aux-Noix, Québec. The 8 ½ × 11 prints are done on Japanese kizuki hosho papers and tipped-in by hand onto the accordion folds; the 10-stanza poetry text, hand-printed on the same papers, is tipped-in on facing pages.” And also: “The prints are the work of Japanese-born woodcut artist Masato Arikushi, under the supervision of Noboru Sawai. Thirty-three woodblocks and 43 impressions were required to produce the 11 prints in *Conversations with a Toad*. The classical Ukiyo-e technique allows a delightful subtlety in shading. Only black ink is used, but by brushing the inks onto the wood with a baren (a shaved bamboo reed), the artisan can exploit the surface of the wood and the qualities of the paper. Arikushi achieved gradations in the tones that give depth and boldness despite the simplicity and ruggedness of line in some of the images.” From these quotations, we gather that Zilm focuses on a detailed description of the book as a work of art or *livre d’artiste*.

¹⁰ Jean-Pierre Duquette, “Écrire l’image”, *Ellipse* 48 (1992): 15. This is the English translation: “The two discourses in effect merge into one, like a piece for two voices in which each intonation melts transparently into the other in artistic interplay, each in turn taking up the melodic line that unfolds effortlessly in perfectly harmonized evolution.” *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹¹ Glennis Zilm’s review of *Conversations with a Toad*, *ibid.*, unpagé insert.

either. I am convinced, though,
Two. Near water, a rock. Where a toad
 that the silences of the toad
had been sitting, an old woman sits.
 are the most important – I mean
She is deaf, dumb and blind. But she hears
 the most meaningful – parts of the poem,
through the soles of her feet, speaks
 filling the dark shells
from under her skirt, and sees
 of the man’s ears and the spaces
through the holes in the palms of her hands.
 between his sentences,

SP, p. 193.

In the context of written poems and stories, a prologue serves a clear purpose: to give the reader/hearer a framework or relevant clues for the right interpretation of what comes afterwards in a particular literary work. Therefore, the speaking voice provides the audience here with some elemental pieces of information concerning the legends on which the subsequent sections of *Conversations with a Toad* are based. Two different and yet related legends are being juxtaposed in section I. In the one, a vermilion-feathered and three-legged crow is said to nest in the sun, whereas the moon is thought to be dwelt by a rabbit, a willow and a toad. This is the kind of mythical account of the coexistence of the sun and the moon up in the sky that one might expect to find in an ancient oral culture, no matter whether on European, Asian or American soil. In the other legend, there are two fundamental ingredients – water and a rock – and, all of a sudden, an old woman is sitting exactly where there had been a toad before, which suggests the kind of metamorphosis present in so many legends around the world. In any case, the old woman is no ordinary woman: she is deaf, dumb and blind, and yet she seems to be alert to everything that is going on around her, and to be responding to the inexhaustible richness of the world with a maximum of intensity – hearing “*through the soles of her feet*”, speaking “*from under her skirt*”, and seeing “*through the holes¹³ in the palms of her hands.*” Possibly she is not exactly human; she might be a goddess or a shaman. Whichever the case, the images that have been constellated in these two legends already evoke tattered visions or fragments from the oral literatures of the native First Nations of North America, and more specifically from the rich cultures of the Northwest Coast in what is nowadays British Columbia. As a matter of fact, the raven and the toad are recurrent totemic animals among the Haida or the Tsimshian, and so they figure prominently in their myths and in their visual art. In addition, the old woman is almost a household name in the poetry of Bringhurst – there is already an old woman in the long poem “Bone Flute Breathing” (first published in *The Beauty of the Weapons*, 1982), in some of the central sections of the third movement in *Tzūbalem’s Mountain* (1982), and in *Tending the Fire* (1985), the exquisite creation myth where the dog’s generosity plays such a crucial role in endowing human beings with all their best attributes. In the early 1980s Bringhurst had already started studying the cultures of the First Nations, whom he considered to be his true ancestors on American ground. *Conversations with a Toad*

¹³ In the Lucie Lambert edition and the *Descant* version, the text says *eyes* instead of *holes*. In addition, the lines of stanzas 2 and 3 are arranged in a slightly different way in these two early incarnations of the poem. In our critical analysis all quotes are lifted from the third state of the text in *The Calling* and *Selected Poems*, where the poem appears in what looks like its final, definitive form. Throughout our essay, textual variants will be noted where relevant in customary form. Of course, in these two earlier states of the poem, the second voice, that of *homo narrans*, is missing.

is therefore rich in subtle allusions to the world of the native people of the land where Bringhurst could at last say he had found a home for himself.

In the second and third movements of section I, light is shed on the possible sources of what the speaking voice calls “these images”. The speaking *homo sapiens* (with clearly autobiographical echoes) has learnt and rescued these fragments or remnants of strange visions from a number of ancestors: “among the Tsimshian and the immigrants – Celts and Chinese.” The subtlety and meaning of these words should not be overlooked. North American Indians of the Northwest Coast, the Tsimshian traditionally lived on the mainland and islands around the Skeena and Nass rivers and Milbanke Sound in what is now British Columbia and in Alaska. Tsimshian is classified as a Penutian language, and the people speak any of three dialects: Niska, spoken along the Nass River; coastal Tsimshian, along the lower Skeena and the coast; and Kitksan (or Gitksan), along the upper Skeena. The traditional economy of the Tsimshian was based on fishing (although they also hunted animals in winter), and the social organization was based on clans and lineages, with each extended family being an autonomous or independent social entity. In this particular context, the Tsimshian are intended to metonymically stand for all the native cultures of North America, whereas *the others* were all immigrants, people coming from afar to invade their pristine land afterwards. This is but one possible interpretation. It could also be that the speaking *homo sapiens* has travelled extensively around the world and learnt stories and legends like the ones evoked in the first movement which contain an irreducible core of truth. What all these myth-making people share is an elemental kind of knowledge: “they don’t know / anything anymore except whatever it is / that everybody knows, and how / to keep silent.” All humans should be endowed with this luggage of elementary knowledge, but people living in industrial societies seem to have forgotten it and no longer know how to keep silent, that is to say, how to listen to the world “through the soles of their feet.” Silence and attention are of the essence if we are to experience what it means to be alive amid so much beauty. The Tsimshian, the Celts and the Chinese – on American, European and Asian ground – have something truly elemental in common: they “carry their other knowledge / shrivelled into undeciphered images, / symbols, souvenirs.” The gradation of these words is no random choice. This other knowledge is the wisdom of their elders in a pre-literate and pre-industrial society, where knowledge of the world was of a very different nature. It was not scientific in the modern sense of the term, but it was not inaccurate either. Arranged into complex and coherent constellations, myths embodied a complex view of the world where there was still room for gods and goddesses and a conception of humans’ relations with the nonhuman characterized by respect, gratitude and common sense. Those myths or images are *undeciphered* for us because we no longer understand the code to interpret them straightaway; they have become *symbols* or stylized simplifications of what used to be a complex mythical ecosystem, or, what is worse, exotic *souvenirs* for the occasional tourist.

At first, the speaking *homo sapiens* intends to speak to other human beings, but then he changes his mind and decides to address the silent toad instead – a much better interlocutor for the *true stories* of his meditations. The “silences of the toad / are the most [...] meaningful parts of the poem”, precisely because they punctuate what *homo sapiens* says throughout this sustained meditation in ten parts, or, as *homo narrans* puts it:

filling the dark shells
of the man’s ears and spaces
between his sentences,
filling his syllables, filling the wrinkled,
stretched and invisible skins of his words,
filling his eyes wherever he looks

and his lungs whenever he breathes.
So the silences of the toad would appear
to be nothing but empty space
if the poem were printed, but
the man in the poem would not know
how to speak it without them.

SP, pp. 193-194.

It is as though the toad were speaking through the lips of *homo sapiens*, pervading every single corner of his whole body (ears, eyes and lungs) and his whole language with a fresh look upon the real world, illuminating his senses, his mind and his heart to utter the words he does utter when faced with the awe-inspiring grandeur of the natural world. Words themselves are conceptualized as being living organisms, covered with wrinkled, invisible skins that are reminiscent of the “*shrivelled and undeciphered images*” which myths have become in industrial societies. As printed on the page, the poem shows two voices in sections I and IX and only one voice in the remaining sections, so that it is necessary to speak it aloud to feel the presence and hear the voice of the toad. Without its presence, the man would not know how to utter the words of this poem, how to deliver an elemental lesson to the rest of humankind.

II

The second poem in *Conversations with a Toad* is a lesson in anatomy in miniature. Strongly reminiscent of an earlier poem like “A Lesson in Botany” (*Bergschrund*, 1975), the speaking *homo sapiens* is looking at the world as territorial recorder and transcribing what he sees in an objective, detached way. The anatomy under scrutiny is that of the toad. First thing is facts, indeed. Throughout three quite symmetrical stanzas, the speaking voice dwells on every single detail of the body of the toad. The resulting portrait or depiction is much more complex than that, though: if the first stanza is a description of the toad’s body, its vital attitude to the world is at the core of the second stanza (the geometrical centre of the poem), and its biological evolution in time is subtly evoked in the third stanza, where the depiction of the toad is brought into completion. The complex textual transformations of this particular poem over time testify not only to Bringhurst’s practice as an exacting self-editor, but also to the fact that this is one of the cornerstones upon which the rest of the sequence is built. Let us have a look at the way the first stanza has changed from one written incarnation to another:

You with so few bones, toad, you must know
what it is to count and bequeath them.
To swallow your own skin. To fetch dinner,
down out of the air and to gobble it,
throbbing. To let in the weather,
taking your temperature from the world.

Lucie Lambert edition, June 1987.

*

You with so few bones, toad, know
what it is to count and bequeath them.
To swallow your own skin. To fetch dinner
down out of the air and to gobble it, throbbing.

To let in the weather, taking
your temperature from the world.

Descant edition, winter 1987.

*

So few bones, toad, you must know
how to count them and give them away.
You can swallow your own skin, and pluck dinner,
still living, out of the air without lifting a hand.
And you let in the weather, taking
your temperature from the world.

Selected Poems, 2009, p. 194.

The differences between the two first states of the text are minor changes related to line arrangement, but the third version varies considerably from the previous ones. The shift is towards a simplification of the language and towards smoothly-flowing verse lines. Three aspects of the toad's body are highlighted in succession: its bones, its tongue and its skin. The austerity of the toad is to be found in its own skeleton, which is almost non-existent because it has very few bones. The speaking voice emphasizes the fact that the toad is ready to give them away generously when the moment comes for the little animal to get rid of its own body. For hunting and feeding purposes, the toad uses a sticky tongue to catch the little insects or animals on which it feeds for its sustenance. These seems to be an efficient elegance in the hunting method of the toad, for it has only to unfold its tongue to catch its prey still alive and flying in mid-air. And, lastly, its rough skin is porous and adapts the bodily temperature of this amphibian to that of the environment, which is expressive of a total communion with the ecosystem where it has got its dwelling place. Thus, the simple toad feels at home wherever it happens to find itself.

If we look up the word 'toad' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, this is what we learn about this most curious of animals:

Toad, any squat, rough-skinned, tailless amphibian of the order Anura, and especially a member of the family Bufonidae. The true toads (*Bufo*), with more than 300 species, are found worldwide except in Australia, Madagascar, polar regions, and Polynesia, though *Bufo marinus* has been introduced into Australia and some South Pacific islands. Besides *Bufo*, the family includes 30 genera, one of which (*Nectophrynoidea*) contains one of the few anuran genera to bear live young. [...] True toads, of which the American toad (*Bufo americanus*) and the European toad (*B. bufo*) are representative, are stout-bodied with short legs that limit them to the characteristic walking or hopping gait. Their size ranges from about 2 to 25 cm (1 to 10 inches). The thick, dry, often warty skin on the back is generally mottled brown. Poison-secreting glands are located on the back and in the warts but are most concentrated in two prominent raised areas behind the eyes, the parotid glands. The poison, which is secreted when the toad is molested, irritates the eyes and mucous membranes of many, though not all, predators. [...] True toads are mainly terrestrial and nocturnal. They frequently remain in fairly small areas, feeding on whatever insects or small animals they can catch with their sticky tongues. Most remain in their burrows in winter and during drought. They breed in water and may migrate 1.5 km (1 mile) or more to a suitable breeding pond. The eggs (600 to over 30,000, depending on species) are laid in two long jelly tubes.

The tadpoles hatch in a few days and transform into adults in one to three months.¹⁴

When Bringhurst's poem is placed against this illuminating entry, it makes perfect sense. Indeed, it is an accurate poetic rendering of the scientific discourse we find in this encyclopedia entry. Toads are austere amphibians: they live in a small territory, feed on little insects or animals they catch with their sticky tongues, have no physical beauty about them (their warty, dry, brown-mottled skin does not make them agreeable to look at), and spend their terrestrial and nocturnal life in quiet solitude (in their burrows in winter and in drought periods). This asceticism is already a lesson *per se*. Toads do not ask much of the world; they need little to lead a decent life and survive. They breathe through their whole bodies, which remain alert to the changes in temperature in their environment, and, unlike humans, they hunt only for their survival, not to impose their control or dominion over their surrounding world. This vital attitude of moral asceticism and almost serene contemplation is explored at the heart of the poem:

Toothless carnivore, unarmed hunter. Tongue
hinged at the lip like a swallowed reflection.
Like one who in preference to speaking
is spoken. Like one who *uneats*
bits of the world – or the whole world: whatever
is already eaten. Who unthinks what others have thought,
unread what is read, unwrites what is written.¹⁵

SP, p. 195.

The stanza opens with a reflection on the hunting method of the toad. A careful look at the textual variants of the two opening lines over time (see footnote) shows Bringhurst struggling with words, looking for *le most juste*. This is the core of the poem, in fact. In its quiet contemplation, this *toothless carnivore* is ready to give itself over to the world generously, and not to exert any violence upon the surrounding ecosystem where it dwells. Speaking, eating, thinking, reading and writing are recognizably human activities, but the toad seems to *undo* all of them with its vital attitude of *non-interference* with the world. The toad would rather be spoken than speak itself; it *uneats* the world that humans and nonhuman creatures alike devour; and *unthinks*, *unread*s and *unwrites* whatever interpretations *others* (i.e., humans) have imposed upon the world over time, thus obscuring its pristine, crystal-clear meaning. In its unmediated relation with the real, the toad reminds us that it is still possible to learn to listen to *being* with open ears and open eyes, and that there is no need to secrete artificial theories, ideas or any kind of intellectual constructs to try to make sense of the world. If the toad can be said to dwell somewhere else apart from its shrinking territory, then it would live in a pre-literate society, where there is no need for writing or reading, where speech is what really matters, and where silence is even better than or preferable to speech.

¹⁴ See entry on 'toad' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 28, pp. 16630-16631.

¹⁵ The second stanza reads as follows in the Lucie Lambert edition: "Toothless, a hunter. Clawless, a carnivore. / Tongue hinged at the lip like a swallowed / reflection. Like one who in preference to speaking / is spoken. Like one who *uneats* / bits of the world – or all of the world. / Whatever is already eaten." It was expanded in the *Descant* version: "Clawless, a hunter. Toothless, a carnivore. / Tongue hinged at the lip like a swallowed / reflection. Like one who in preference to speaking / is spoken. Like one who *uneats* / bits of the world – or all of the world: whatever / is already eaten. Like one who unthinks / what others have thought, who unspeaks what is spoken." And it was further revised and expanded in the third version, which is the one quoted above.

The closing stanza looks for similarities between toads and humans, even if the only similarities found are of a morphological nature. Like human beings, toads have no tail but stout limbs, as suggested by the enumeration in “elbows and pelvis and fingers / and toes”. Their mouth is angular just to meet the needs of a toothless carnivore, and they have renounced water (“*the bug of the water*”) to live on earth, for they are mainly terrestrial (and nocturnal) animals. In celebrating “*the abstemious, / pontifical kiss of the air,*” the speaking *homo sapiens* is somehow drawing our attention to the fact that humans and toads alike are land and air creatures, and that we all are a part of a fluid continuum of life. In the short space of just one stanza, the whole biological evolution of both toads and humans is evoked with the maximum of linguistic economy. Time is also fluid: we move in space and in time, but time also moves through us. Time is cancelled; centuries and millennia are nothing when *being*, no matter whether human or nonhuman, is considered *sub specie aeternitatis* through a completely different prism.

III

Part II of *Conversations with a Toad* concerns the toad as microcosm, the inner geography of its body as well as its projection outwards into the world as it hunts for sustenance; part III, by contrast, explores the larger ecosystem or natural world where the amphibian lives or thrives. In that larger world, populated by an immense richness of nonhuman creatures, the toad is but one tiny part within a grander scheme. “Polyphony is the sound of the coexistence of species, which is what every ecology, global or local, is all about”¹⁶, says Bringhurst in “Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue”, the afterword to *New World Suite No. 3* (2005). The poem consisted of only two stanzas in the Lucie Lambert edition, but in all subsequent incarnations an extra stanza was added to the original composition, whereas the other two stanzas were further revised into their present textual state. As it stands, the poem unfolds throughout three stanzas, the first one being a celebratory catalogue of the birds that share the toad’s terrestrial and airy universe; the second stanza being a meditation on beauty and truth as embodied in the natural world; and the third one being a conclusion on humans’ greedy ways of relating to the nonhuman world. In any case, the poem places the toad within a larger context and dwells on the way it fits in naturally in a world where eating and being eaten are morally acceptable actions that guarantee animals’ survival and the perfect equilibrium of ecosystems.

Paying attention to the world or breathing through the feet – this is what the *homo sapiens* speaking in the poem does in the first stanza. This generic *everyone* or *everyman* is looking at the world as if for the first time, as if he were present at the day of creation, and recording what he sees in a seemingly dispassionate manner. Apart from their being-birds and their attempt at trying to fulfil their vocations of birds, what the owl, the raven, dippers, the ruffed grouse, the heron and kingfisher have in common is a deep sense of belonging and fitting in the world they populate. As the human poetic voice claims afterwards, it is good news that “*no one is able to list everything that exists in the world,*” for instance to record all birds species in a catalogue closed for good. There is a moving naturalness and a spontaneity in everything they do, regardless of any moral connotations, that is simply beautiful and admirable. Bringhurst’s poems are rich in birds; he is an outdoors man and a lover of birds. He loves walking in the woods in solitude and listening to whatever it is that the trees and the birds might have to tell him. What is more, he is always ready to listen with open ears.

¹⁶ See Bringhurst’s essay “Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue”, the afterword to *New World Suite No. 3* (2005), p. 8.

Once again, as in many others of his poems, the author draws on musical analogies to convey the sheer exuberance one feels when confronting the singing of birds as various as the ones celebrated in the first stanza. There is symmetry and there is harmony in the way they fly and in the way they speak their own language. There is also a polyphonic singing. What we might possibly be witnessing in this opening stanza is *an attempt at echolocation* on the part of the poet: giving voice to the variety and richness of *being* as it manifests itself in the amazing diversity of birds. These birds are one with the world surrounding them, of which they are but a tiny part. Thus, their voices mimic nature itself: the ubiquitous raven of the First Nations has “*voices like musselshell, wellwater, wood*” (notice the alliteration here), whereas the dippers have “*voices like water on water.*” Or their silent flight resembles or evokes musical notes: “*the heron flying in whole notes and the kingfisher crossing in dotted eighths / and in quarters.*” If there is any dissonance at all, it is metamorphosed into a beauty of sorts. The singing and flying of birds are expressive of the Heraklitean change inherent in reality, of the non-stop flux of things in the world. Like Herakleitos’ river, they change and yet they remain the same in their *unstoppable quietude*. The reconciliation of *motion and stasis* might be another suitable name for this.

The second stanza is of a more meditative texture or nature. Beneath the words spoken by *homo sapiens*, there are subtle reminiscences of John Keats’ well-known words *truth is beauty, beauty is truth*, lifted from one of his immortal odes – “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. It might sound paradoxical, but beauty inspires awe and terror at the same time. Humans love the harmony implicit in beauty for its own sake; much of what we would call *aesthetic experience* is based precisely on this perception (or apprehension) of harmony, symmetry and elegance inherent in a thing that turns that particular object into something unique. But in this particular context beauty is seen not just as a source of sensorial pleasure and delight, but rather as a means of accessing the truth:

Their beauty bites into the truth.
 One way to fail to be is to be merely
 pretty. But that beauty: it feeds on you; we
 feed on it...

SP, p. 195.

In three verse lines and a half there is such a density of meaning that the poem becomes simply overwhelming at this point, at this semantic hinge located exactly at the heart of the piece. That birds offer glimpses of the truth through their simple exposure to humans’ eyes is a possible interpretation. “*Their beauty bites* (notice the alliteration again) *into the truth,*” as if it were just an incursion into unknown territory, but does not exhaust it completely. Which means that there are other ways or means of touching the truth implicit in what we term *reality*. Birds might be beautiful creatures indeed, because of the seduction of their flight or their singing, but toads are not precisely beautiful animals, if one just thinks for a while of their warty, rough skin, their poisonous glands, or their sticky fatal tongue. However, *homo sapiens* is prompt to remind us that “*one way to fail is to be merely / pretty*” (notice the calculated enjambment here). So the toad might not be the epitome of beauty in the natural world, as birds might be, but possibly they do not fail to *be*, for they are ascetic creatures living in harmony with the world that gives them their home. Whichever the case, universal beauty (*that beauty*) feeds on all living creatures that make up the world and we (human and nonhuman beings) feed on it on our turn. There is no better eulogy one could possibly address to reality other than to affirm that there is an unacknowledged beauty implicit in the world, of gigantic proportions, to which all creatures make a tiny contribution, regardless of how tiny that contribution might be.

Then, the second stanza unfolds towards a moment of revelation, a moment that has got the texture of transcendence. We might feed on beauty, but the toad needs to feed on actual moths if it is to survive at all. The moth that is the toad's dinner is described in detail, in words of intense lyricism. Consider, for instance, this line and a half: "*Nerves spring from his forehead like fernfronds, / like feathers.*" What happens to the moth eaten by the toad is but a natural process within the larger scheme of the natural world, where eating and being eaten are spontaneous gestures made by humans and nonhumans to ensure their survival. Thus, by eating the moth, the toad is actually participating in a larger process of perpetual metamorphosis, whereby the moth's meat is absorbed into the toad itself. This is a form of immortality, or a way of perpetuating the moth's existence under a different guise. In a world of eating creatures that will be eaten sooner or later, no one dies for good then. Everyone is changing into something else, being born into one more resurrection. Life and death are the two sides to the simple coin of life. Therefore, these words come as a revelation, as an elemental lesson that the toad is teaching the speaking *homo sapiens* through its dumb presence:

... He too is transformed.
This is the last life, toad.
 Those who eat will be eaten. That
 is the one resurrection.

SP, p. 196.

In an essay entitled "The Silence That Is Not Poetry and the Silence That Is", collected in his volume *The Tree of Meaning*, Robert Bringhurst thinks about this natural phenomenon quite in depth. Encountering the body of a dead deer on the road prompts the poet to muse on the sacredness of life, on the kind of immortality achieved by the young deer that has been run over and then eaten by birds, and on the meaning of life and death:

In terms of meat, there is not much to a young fawn, but the eagles had opened her up, and the ravens had joined them. I reminded myself that *being buried bit by bit in the guts of birds* is at least as good as going into a hole in the ground, and that *fueling an eagle's flight or the voice of a raven is as fine a resurrection as anyone, human or deer, could hope for.* [...]

What I thought about all the rest of the day, and the day after that, was the gulf of self-regard that we – not genetically, as a species, but by choice, as a society – have erected between ourselves and everyone else, including the deer. I mean the barriers of law and of social convention which assign the lives of human beings a theoretically infinite value while they treat the lives of wild creatures as theoretically zilch.¹⁷ [*Italics mine.*]

In the closing stanza, nonexistent in the 1987 Lucie Lambert edition, the speaking *homo sapiens* dwells on the greedy attitude of human beings towards the world in their management and overexploitation of the earth's resources:

We who kill not to eat but to mark
 our domain – to build and breed, in place
 of what is, what we choose to create –
 have reduced by that much the population of heaven.

SP, p. 196.

¹⁷ See Robert Bringhurst, "The Silence That Is Not Poetry and the Silence That Is", in *The Tree of Meaning, Language, Mind and Ecology*, p. 300.

The subterranean dichotomy is that between killing other animals for survival (which is what the toad does) and killing other animals to affirm one's superiority over the rest of creation (which is what man does). And there is yet another potent dichotomy between the lines: an opposition between artificial *man-made* and spontaneous *nature-made* things. The population of heaven has been reduced as a result of this aggressive assault on Nature on the part of man: too many animal and plant species have died because of our greedy way of relating to the non-human. This is the reason why Bringhurst, upon encountering the corpse of the young deer, has no option left but to meditate on the "gulf of self-regard [...] erected between ourselves and everyone else", including all animals, all nonhuman beings that populate the earth. If life is sacred, how is it possible to pretend that "the value of the deer's life is zero and that of a human life is infinite?"¹⁸ Or, as he puts it elsewhere:

Death is the price of life. It is a fair price, evidently, and if so, we should charge it when we must and pay it in our turn without complaint. But a society happy to kill a billion birds or a hundred thousand cattle in the vague hope of saving a single unspecified human life, or to mow down a whole forest to make one day's worth of newsprint, or to sterilize a river in exchange for some ounces of gold, is a society that, I suspect, has lost its sense of what life and death are for: a society that has lost its admiration and its gratitude for life and death alike.¹⁹

IV

Section IV of *Conversations with a Toad* looks like a philosophical interlude amid the ten-part sequence which Bringhurst's work is. In its concision and precision, it is a jewel-like lyric poem of crystal-clear clarity and utter simplicity. At the same time, it is a short meditation on the nature of the human mind. Bringhurst has always been concerned with exploring the mystery of the mind approaching the raw data the world is sending from all directions all the time. It all comes down to an epistemological problem. Knowledge of the world always begins with an act of paying attention and of perception. It is no wonder that his poems are presided by a perceiving consciousness coming to terms with what we call *reality* and trying to make sense of it. This is one of the fundamental questions that philosophy has asked time and again; no matter whether in the Orient or in the East, 5th century BCE pre-Socratic philosophers and Oriental sages from different historical periods have dwelled on the issue of the human mind. In much the same way they are genetically pre-programmed to speak natural languages, humans as a species are genetically pre-programmed to ask themselves this kind of questions: *What is reality? What is the mind? How do we come to terms with the universe? How do we come to know anything at all? What is the truth?* Paradoxically enough, Bringhurst says that language itself never expected to be asked these questions. Nevertheless, we are prepared to ask them time and again tirelessly in search of the truth. Indeed, the whole history of science and philosophy and poetry is nothing more than a series of attempts at touching the truth in tackling these fundamental questions. For this is precisely what distinguishes poetry from, say history, as Aristotle pointed out in his groundbreaking *Poetics* so many centuries ago. Poetry is concerned with universals, with things that remain the same despite the passage of time, for humans are the same after all in spite of the changes in outward appearance.

Thus, poem IV is essentially concerned with exploring humans' epistemological confrontation with reality, with the role of the perceiving mind in the interpretation of

¹⁸ See Robert Bringhurst, "The Silence That Is Not Poetry and the Silence That Is", *ibid.*, p. 302.

¹⁹ See Robert Bringhurst, "The Silence That Is Not Poetry and the Silence That Is", *ibid.*, p. 302.

what we call *reality*. In the context of the 10-part poem of *Conversations with a Toad*, it is a philosophical interlude. It consists of only two perfectly symmetrical stanzas of six verse lines each. The first stanza strives to achieve a definition of what the mind is through four simple declarative sentences:

The mind is the other. The mind
is a long complication of water. The mind
is time, space and all creatures. The mind
is the world. What we keep in the head,
with its dark facets, this jewel,
is a small, disproportional model.

SP, p. 196.

Let us now analyze every single statement in detail:

- (1) *The mind is the other.* Far from defining the mind as one's own inalienable property, the speaking *homo sapiens* in the poem tries to capture its essence in terms of what it is not. That is the reason why the mind is conceived as being *the other*, i.e. other human beings, other minds, other nonhuman beings, other non-living things in the world where we dwell. This is exactly the opposite of solipsism, i.e. the notion that one lives in his or her own mind and that nothing is real except what one perceives through one's own mind; or, in other words, the dangerous idea that one exists in a sort of isolated sphere, closed on the outside, far apart from all other perceiving consciousnesses. To acknowledge that the mind is the other is a statement of humanity, to begin with: it means to acknowledge that there are creatures other than ourselves out there that deserve respect and attention.
- (2) *The mind is a long complication of water.* We are instantly reminded of *The Blue Roofs of Japan*, where the words "*this music is all about water*" were repeated time and again as an incantation. One of the primordial elements out of which the whole of reality is made, water figures prominently in Bringham's poetry as a symbol of everything that is elemental, primordial, ancestral, and pure. In this declarative sentence the mind is equated to water, but, to our surprise, we learn that it is *a long complication of water*, not just simple water, full stop, which possibly means that the human mind tends to make things complicated. Perceiving reality already entails some process of falsification of the raw data provided by the senses, for humans cannot avoid bringing to this act of interpreting the world a complex baggage of prior experiences, cultural presuppositions, and expectations. Water is simple enough; it does not think. It is transparent, fresh or salt water, it does not lie. If the mind is a long complication of water, then there might be something wrong about it and about the way it interprets the world.
- (3) *The mind is time, space and all creatures.* This all-encompassing view of the mind is ambitious and tantalizing. The mind contains the whole universe in its entirety, including those basic Kantian coordinates that organize all human experience, i.e. time and space. Human experience takes place within time and space; it is unconceivable that any experience could happen outside time or space. Gigantic as it is, the mind contains even these fundamental axes, and also all creatures. The mind is a microcosm then, a miniature replica of the world at large. This makes perfect sense if one thinks about one's own mind: one treasures memories, sensations, emotions, ideas, thoughts, findings, and insights of a whole lifetime in one's own boundless mind. A human being is everything he/she has lived, seen, heard, read, experienced, learnt, loved, or forgotten, and all this is stored in the mind in one way or another.
- (4) *The mind is the world.* This is the logical deduction that stems from a sort of Aristotelian syllogism. If the mind contains all creatures, as well as time and space, if it is *the other* and *a long complication of water*, then the mind is the world in its entirety. It is not simply a

container, it is the world. The equation is now perfect. However, Bringhurst had already essayed similar equations. In *The Blue Roofs of Japan*, a poem rich in metaphors which are equations, the world was a bowl full of tea, a cup of tea one holds in one's hands, for instance.

- (5) *What we keep in the head, / with its dark faces, this jewel, / is a small, disproportionate model.* The mind does not replace or exhaust the many-sidedness, diversity and richness of the world, or of our experience of reality. It is but a small model, a reproduction of the world in miniature. Thus, there are as many such disproportional models in miniature as humans beings have been, are or will be. Experience is always larger than what we might think or say about it. Perception and language are simplifying tools of sorts in our approach to the world. They turn into a manageable form what was mere chaos. And yet the mind is a true jewel.

The second stanza gives the impression of a riddle. "*What we are not is all we can think with*" is repeated twice, which means that it is an essential part of the message the speaking *homo sapiens* is trying to put across to his audience. We are back to the idea of the mind being the other: it is not possible to *think* the world if it is not through the *not-self* and the *non-human*. In other words, it is necessary to forget about oneself and one's own subjectivity to be able to think about the world as such:

What we are not is all we can think with.
In the leaking cup of the skull
we dip up the other. Daily we trade it
for money, for comfort, for power. But what we are not
is all we can think with. To hold and let go
is all we can do with whatever we are.

SP, p. 196.

The metaphor at the core of this stanza equates the *skull* with a *leaking cup*. This is probably intended to suggest that the mind is not omnipotent, not perfect, not 100% reliable. In this cup we *dip the other*. It is possible to say that the mind is a leaking cup and that we dip the others in it because *the mind is water*, as pointed out in the first stanza. It remains unclear whether what we trade daily is one's leaking cup of a skull, our mind, for such banal things as *money, comfort or power*. In "Breathing Through the Feet", the impressive autobiographical essay in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringhurst claims that we live a society where we lose our peace of mind for such absurd things as money and jobs. This is a society which, we suspect, has lost all sense of reality and of what the essential priorities should be. Possibly the toad has an important lesson to teach us humans in its asceticism and austere lifestyle: "*to hold and let go / is all we can do with whatever we are.*" In other words, to be acutely aware of what we are while, at the same time, not forgetting that it might be wise to forget about who we are from time to time to penetrate the essence of the real, uncontaminated by our subjectivity.

V

In Robert Bringhurst's view, a meditation is *a piece of thinking*, or, in German, *ein Denkenstück*; this is what the human mind can do best of all, we suspect. This is especially the case with attentive minds that remain alert to the subtle nuances of the world and are propelled forward to asking fundamental questions about the ultimate nature of reality. And yet, the human mind thinking about the mind, in a narcissistic or self-reflexive act of introspection, is a wonderfully uncanny thing. This was the flesh or meat of the

philosophical interlude on the nature of the mind begun in poem IV, which is resumed and further explored in poem V. But this time the meditation is on the way humans come to terms with the reading and interpreting of *the book of the universe*, and also on such essentials as light, time and space. The whole poem could be said to be concerned with *reading what is* – by the way, this is the title of an illuminating prose meditation by Bringhurst. The world is a place rich in signs and symbols for humans to decipher. What science, philosophy and art have been doing for centuries on end is precisely *reading what is*, i.e. trying to approach the mystery at the core of reality and to render it in recognizably human terms, that is to say in terms understandable to the human mind, through means as diverse as words (both poetic and prosaic), mathematical formulae, musical notation, the dancing of the intellect among words which philosophy is, lines and colours, wood carved or stone sculpted with grace and shapeliness, taxonomies and classifications, topographical maps, time lines, etc. Of course, these are only man-made constructions, tools to render the real more manageable and comprehensible to our minds, but they do not replace or exhaust the real thing. Humankind has spent its whole existence on earth throughout innumerable civilizations reading and interpreting signs; however, not all signs found in the world are of a verbal nature. To borrow Bringhurst's words,

READING IS DIFFERENT FROM LOOKING OR WATCHING. It is listening with the eyes, evaluating signs against a lexicon of memories. We were reading waves and rivers, winds and clouds, the tracks of moose and grouse and hare, long before we started reading words. We were also reading stories with our ears a hundred thousand years before there were any writers writing. The reading we do now – novels, poems, the daily paper– owes its life to that apprenticeship in *paying ecological attention*.²⁰ [*Italics mine.*]

Reading the myriad of signs scattered in reality is a way of listening or *paying ecological attention*. It is an act of humility whereby we acknowledge that we fit in and that we belong among the human and non-human, living and non-living things that populate this world. *Paying attention means that we care*. By contrast, indifference to the world is a form of cruelty, expressive of a cynical view of life; it disregards the infinite value and sacredness implicit in what is real. Poem V of *Conversations with a Toad* opens precisely with an important reminder: the talking *homo sapiens* reminds us that humans living in industrial societies are not able to pay ecological attention any more, for they seem to have forgotten to listen to the world with both their eyes and ears:

My people no longer stare into water
and fire for clues to the future. We no longer
read even the signs in our faces and hands.
Instead we grind lenses and mirrors
to sop up the spilled light of the stars. We decipher
the rocks that we walk on, too, while we loot them.

Toad, as we level the future we make
topographical maps of the past.

SP, p. 196.

Dehumanization is the word that first comes up to one's mind as one reads these words deeply. In a society where the priority is money and jobs, comfort and power, humans

²⁰ See Robert Bringhurst, "Reading What Is", a short prose meditation published in *Reading Writers Reading: Canadian Authors' Reflections*, edited by Danielle Schaub, Edmonton: University of Alberta Press / Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2006: 195.

appear to have forgotten how to read the book of the world, even if its pages remain wide open for us to look into whatever there is to be looked into. No longer do humans look into water or fire in search of potential clues about what the future might bring; and no longer do they even seem to know how to interpret the signs in other fellow human beings' bodies and gestures (faces and hands). All we care about is exploring far-away places through the potent lenses of telescopes that "*sop up the spilled light of the stars,*" while not forgetting the deciphering of rocks while we loot them. Deciphering the meaning of rocks as we tread upon them or the meaning of star light as we observe it through a telescope is not an inherently evil undertaking. It testifies to humans' noble ambitions. Bringhurst himself reminds us that the ultimate vocation of human beings is to learn; to learn means to fulfil one's vocation as human being. It is as simple as this: humans cannot fight the compulsion to understand reality, any more than they can overlook the compulsion to try to be happy in their lives. The pursuit of knowledge and truth is akin to the pursuit of happiness. Everybody wants *to live, to know* and *to mean*. There is nothing wrong about astronomy or geology, so long as the world is given due respect and it is not looted, overexploited, undervalued, misused or abused just for the sake of material benefit. The deadening effect of intellectual enterprises like those of astronomy or geology is that, in their compulsion to know, humans run the risk of forgetting the pre-eminence of the real: looking into the past, analyzing rocks or the human events woven into History, and producing topographical maps do not exhaust the multiplicity, plurality and diversity of the real thing. If the earth is damaged in the process, then what started as a noble enterprise has turned into something of dubious morality. Knowledge and ethics go hand in hand.

In the second part of poem V we are suddenly plunged into a meditation on star light. Light is central to Bringhurst's poetics, and a recurrent motif that he also borrowed from the Modernist master, Ezra Pound, who produced a moving celebration of light in *The Pisan Cantos*. Telescopes serve a very practical purpose for astronomers: they reach where the human eye cannot reach in their observation of stars and planets floating amid space at such immense distances away from the Earth. The telescope is a prolongation of the eye, in much the same way a book is the prolongation of past humans' breathing minds, or the ploughshare is a prolongation of the human arm. However, there is something else to telescopes and what they can accomplish. What the mirrors of telescopes reveal to us is that light is not quite what it seems. It has travelled a long way to reach the Earth, and it is much older than we think. What we see might be but a pale shadow of the pristine, original light that abandoned its home stars long ago. The same applies to the things on Earth: "*things are leaving / and taking their light with them*", which has ominous connotations, for the loss seems to be irreversible. The speed of light is simply amazing, and light moves through time and space with a complete naturalness. Billions of years is what it might take light to reach our amazed eyes when we look up at the sky above us at night, which is a long time on a human scale if we bear in mind that life expectancy is of about 75 years of age. On a different scale, say that of rocks or toads, billions of years are not that much:

Ten billion years seems
long to us, toad, though to you
it is little: a few dozen times
the age of your ancestors' graves
in these rocks. Only two or three times
the age of the oldest rocks we have found.

SP, p. 197.

Biological and geological time do not coincide exactly when we fold them one upon the other. The origins of toads can be traced back in biological time to their *ancestors' graves* in Precambrian time, just as rocks are known to have existed for a longer time, even before human and non-human beings started breathing and walking on Earth. Toads and rocks are therefore ancestral forms of existence, and so they may have much to teach us humans, even if only because they have lived longer than we have. Paying attention to them is then no waste of time; learning to look at them and listen to them with open eyes and ears might be a rewarding intellectual and aesthetic experience. It is no wonder that Bringham has spent so much time in the mountains, in the company of the nonhuman, trying to understand the place humans occupy in the grander scheme of things, where they are certainly not the main characters. As a species, *homo sapiens* is a self-absorbed species that is convinced that man is the measure of all things, though. A look at geological and biological time proves that this is not the case. If life is sacred, then all creatures, living and nonliving alike, have a contribution to make to the harmony and beauty of the world. None is dispensable; none is essential either. And the sum of the parts is always lesser than the perfect *Gestalt* of the whole.

The closing movement and stanza of poem V is a perfect synthesis of light, space and time. The meditation at the heart of the poem has been unfolding towards this point which has got the texture of transcendence too:

What is too quick for our fingers
and tongues to keep up with. The light
outmanoeuvres us. Time and space close over us, toad.
The lock of the sky will turn but not open.
We are where we are and have been here
forever. Longer, that is, than we can remember.

SP, p. 197.

In spite of being endowed with this jewel of a mind, we humans are not able to capture *what-is* once and for all, for good. Reality is always vaster and richer than what we might manage to understand and convey through scientific discovery. Light is faster than our minds; it moves at speedlight, which is faster than the speed of sound. It is also faster than our speech capacity, our faculty to verbalize what we appear to find out about the ultimate essence of things before it vanishes into airy nothingness. The sky (i.e., the universe) will not yield its final mystery: the lock turns but it will not open so easily. On the other hand, time and space remain a true mystery, so that the only thing left for us to say is tautological redundancy: "*we are where we are and have been here / forever.*" We are somewhere in the middle of what is called *space* and also in the middle of a different kind of substance called *time* right now. What came before now and what will come after now is a mystery, for time is not completely apprehensible or understandable by the jewel of our mind. This is the reason why the talking *homo sapiens* in the poem chooses these closing words as an afterthought: "*longer, that is, than we can remember.*" Like toads, we also have ancestors who lived a long time ago, but the memory of a time gone so long ago has somehow abandoned us. It is these ancestors that link us to the past, in much the same way it is our offspring that links us to the future, as Bringham puts it. The poet dwells on time and space as a true mystery in his magnificent "First Meditation on Time", which is quoted in full below as the best possible meditation to place against the meditation enacted in poem V:

As animals, we think we know what space is. We don't just occupy it; we move through it, back and forth and around, and we stake it out as territory and

memorize and defend it. Konrad Lorenz, you remember, says that the experience of navigating space is the biological origin of mind. If he is right, then there's a reason we should think we know what space is. It is our first and maybe only metaphysics.

The birds and bats and dragonflies and fish who fly and swim through space appear to understand it better still. We just walk and crawl and climb around the surfaces of things. Yet we can watch, and even sometimes catch, those flying, swimming creatures, and that has helped us learn to think about spaces we ourselves can only navigate by artificial means.

So we move through space as best we can, and we dream about doing it better, by dancing or flying. But time appears to *move through us* and not the other way around. If time isn't something we can navigate, how could it be something we can really understand?

Perhaps we are actually rooted in time, as plants are rooted in space. If so, we may never know more about time than a spear of asparagus knows about space. And yet we try. We try to move around in time by telling stories, writing histories and novels, composing sonatas and fugues and motets. But how far do we get? All we really seem able to do is grow through a little time the way a stalk of grass or sedge grows through its own height and depth and breadth. We're connected to the past through our grandparents and parents – intellectual and physical – and to the future through our offspring, and that's the way a sedge or a redcedar is connected to different locations in space. If meaning is coming up to someone, thinking is strolling around. And in time, it seems, we can only pretend to go strolling.

Space, the astronomers say, is growing at breakneck speed and has been doing so since the beginning of space and time. Time, it seems, is growing too. But we experience space as something we are somewhere in the middle of. Our relationship to time appears quite different, as if we (and everything else) could never be anywhere except on its frontier, the advancing edge, the crest of the wave. In space you can go home again, and back again; in time it seems you can't. That makes *timelessness* a value, where *spacelessness* is not.

Musicians and mythtellers can, in their way, make spaces from pieces of time, and choreographers and playwrights can also make time out of pieces of space. The results are sometimes rich and lovely works – the motets of Josquin, or Shakespeare's plays – but surely these are maps, portraits, models, not the real thing. And it is precisely because they are models that we can replay them, which we cannot do with history itself. Space is a seemingly endless succession of places which we can in fact revisit, while time is a sequence of places we have lost or not yet found, separated by the one and only, always changing, place where we seem to exist.

In other words, it seems to be like this: space is the unfolding of Being out of itself, while time is the slippage of Being along itself.²¹

VI

A meditation is *a piece of thinking*, and a perfect piece of thinking is usually free of cultural accretions: it is the fruit of a mind thinking deeply about one particular object, emotion or idea, or about a constellation of these, as if for the first time and with a maximum of

²¹ See Robert Bringhurst, *First Meditation on Time*, Vernon, British Columbia: Greenboathouse Press, 2008. Broadside, 25.5 × 53 cm, 76 copies on Zerkall Wove paper. The colophon reads as follows: "Designed and hand set in Monotype Centaur & Arrighi and pressed into Zerkall Book Wove at the GREENBOATHOUSE PRESS in Vernon, BC, early fall, 2008. Limited to 76 copies: 50 numbered copies available for sale, and 26 lettered copies for private distribution, all signed by the author."

intensity. It takes much intellectual stamina to meditate profoundly and well, no doubt, but sometimes the result is as astonishing as poem VI of *Conversations with a Toad*. This time the meditation is on the inexhaustible biological diversity and richness of the world – of the biosphere, to be more precise, that realm of existence where so many teeming forms of life coexist with one another. Thus, the composition opens with a quick look at ancient biological history encapsulated in just two verse lines – “*Your ancestors, toad, were kings / in a world of trilobites, fish, bryozoans.*” – and then it moves forward to an eloquent juxtaposition of the realms of the human and the non-human. The implications are of profound transcendence, inasmuch as the talking *homo sapiens* addressing the toad in the poem finds out an inevitably destructive attitude inherent in the way humans relate to the world. As a result, the tone of the whole piece from beginning to end is overly pessimistic, or simply realistic: as a species, man is mindlessly determined to destroy the only home we have available, on the wrong assumption that he has got an inalienable right to do so as king of creation. Destroying the world is tantamount to *ceasing to have meaning*. If the Earth is destroyed, then one cannot avoid asking questions like these: Where is the human species to find itself a new home? Where else is humankind to breathe, feed and breed? No other species in the world seems to behave in this absurd self-destroying way, trying to disconnect itself from all links to universal *being*, walking with firm step towards the precipice of self-annihilation. In what looks like a state of mind of anguish and desperation, the speaking *homo sapiens* asks the toad these rhetorical questions:

Do you know any stories, toad, of a species
determined, as mine is, to cease to have meaning?
Is it really so onerous, toad, to live
and to die at less distance from being?

SP, p. 197.

Fortunately enough, the world is made up of creatures other than human beings. The biological diversity of this shared home of ours is simply amazing; there is no exhaustive catalogue capable of perpetually updating the record of all the different species of insects that exist or have existed on Earth, for instance. Millions of insects remain *unnamed*, un-catalogued, unclassified, which is a true miracle if we bear in mind that man’s dominion over animals begins with the foundational act of naming them. In our relentless search of order, in our desire to impose order upon the seemingly chaotic richness of the world, naming things or species is an important primordial gesture. Attaching a label to an animal is already a way of accounting for its existence, putting it in the right category, and achieving some sort of temporary peace of mind. Humankind’s obsession with taxonomies and classifications does not exhaust or minimize the huge diversity of living creatures on Earth, though, which is a good reason to be happy:

It is good news, toad: that no one can list
what exists in the world. But not good enough.
Named or unnamed, if it lives, we can kill it.
We owe to the stones
that many chances and that many means
to kill us.

SP, p. 198.

“*If it lives, we can kill it.*” The statement is simple, straightforward and cruel. It seems that nothing will stop man from overexploiting (actually, *raping*) the earth’s resources in his search of money, comfort, power – those banal goals humans set themselves to achieve in

their lives. Bringhurst's message is not just a desperate warning, drawing the reader's attention to a cruel act, it is also a call for us to take up a different attitude, to envision a different way of relating to the world which is respectful and guarantees a sustainable future for all species on planet earth. Thus, in a fundamental essay entitled "Wild Language", included in *The Tree of Meaning*, Bringhurst meditates precisely on this predatory way of ours of relating to the world and suggests other ethically viable ways of participating in the biosphere:

Those who grow up, as most of us have, in industrialized economies and colonial regimes, are encouraged to think there is no other choice than to take control and manage the planet. But there *is* another choice. That choice is to participate in the biosphere, learning enough about it to recognize and accept that we can never be anything more than junior partners: a few million or billion human cells in a brain the size of the planet. Right now those human cells are acting like a cancer, a tumor in the wise, old brain of planet earth.²²

Somewhere else, in an essay entitled "The Silence That Is Not Poetry, and the Silence That Is", also included in *The Tree of Meaning*, Bringhurst reflects on biological diversity as well as on the sacredness of all forms of life, not just human life:

Genetics, molecular biology, comparative anatomy, European cave art, Buddhist tradition, shamanic tradition, the theology of St Francis of Assisi and a thousand other mystics (pagan and Jewish, Christian and Muslim), and a hundred different traditions of Native American narrative cosmology all agree that we and the deer have a lot in common. European and colonial civil law, canon law and the sharia [...] seem to agree with the Book of Genesis that whatever we have in common with the deer just doesn't matter. In ecclesiastical law, at least this has a rationale: the relationship we are supposed to have with God takes precedence over our relationships with other earthly creatures like ourselves. In statutory law, it is not for any apparent reason except that setting ourselves apart, and taking dominion over all the other creatures, is supposed to make us rich in the short term. That it can only leave us destitute in the long term is something we seem oddly determined to forget.²³

The juxtaposition of these two handfuls of live words, originally delivered as part of spoken lectures before an audience, is at least illuminating. In Bringhurst's poetry and prose there is beauty and music, but there is also profundity of thought and ethical commitment to the reality of a world that is changing too fast for the worse nowadays. We mindless humans are determined to destroy our only home and, with it, all forms of life in our desperate race towards self-annihilation. It does not make sense at all, and so the moral duty of the poet is at least to say the words of his insights and meditations loud and clear so that everybody can hear and act accordingly following the dictates of their conscience.

²² See R. Bringhurst, "Wild Language", *The Tree of Meaning*, p. 269. In the same essay, the author dwells on the concept of *the wild* and says: "The wild isn't something to conquer or subdue; it's something to try to live up to: a standard better than gold. Humans are part of it, and in the long run have no choice but to be so." Ibid., p. 268. He defines the biosphere in these moving terms: "The wild is the biosphere: this tiny hollow ball which is the only place in the universe where you or I are free to be what we are." (p. 269) And, finally, he reminds us of this basic principle of bioethics: "... coming back to a basic fact of bioethics: a principle my friend Don McKay has stated very nimbly and simply in six syllables: *We don't own what we know.*" (p. 270) All these statements written in elegantly poetic prose testify, once again, to the absolute coherence of Bringhurst's thinking about being and ecology, about the way humans should start relating to the world if they just realized that there is no other morally acceptable way to behave if we are to preserve life as we know it on Earth.

²³ See R. Bringhurst, "The Silence That Is Not Poetry, and the Silence That Is", *The Tree of Meaning*, p. 302.

Most of us appear to spend our lives in a state of self-absorbed narcissism and egotism; we seem unable to think critically for ourselves; we do not seem to be able either to see what is best for us as a species, for the common good of all creatures on Earth. Thinking is a hard, tiring job, but that is what this jewel of our human mind is primarily intended to do. It is high time that it remained still for a while and thought a way out of what looks like a desperate situation. Nobody seems to care, though; we are that egoistical and greedy.

Bringhurst's poem closes with a short meditation on the different kinds of records, testament or legacy that the earliest (or oldest) living creatures of the world and human beings will leave at the end of time. In beautifully modulated words, the speaking *homo sapiens* speaks of the subtle, modest signs the earliest living forms left on the ground just to say they lived once upon a time, millions of years ago. There is a simple and moving delicacy in the natural *signatures* they have left as proofs of their ephemeral existence upon Earth. Humans are determined to leave a more ambitious legacy and more durable proofs that they have trodden upon Earth: the stone constructions of prehistoric times, the Egyptian pyramids, the Greek and Roman temples and statues, the manuscripts of Tang China or of Renaissance Italy, the poems and novels of all times and human languages, the paintings, sculptures and musical pieces, were all meant to become memorable and testify to humans' grandeur and *achievements* over time. But the talking *homo sapiens* in the poem does not forget humans' *griefs* either: the pain inflicted on other creatures, including the Earth itself; the nonsense of innumerable wars that have "*reduced the population of heaven*"; our greedy little acts of everyday life that make things more complicated for other fellow human beings. The chronicles other humans will read in the future will be full of all this, but it is sad, the thought occurs, that the poem should close with a pessimistic note on the grief we inflict upon one another. There is something ominous about the closing verse line: locusts are a destructive insect, after all, and a poetry spoken by descending locusts ready to destroy whatever they may find in their way does not augur anything good at all. At least we have the music, the parallelism and the quiet meditation of Bringhurst's words:

In the blank rock of Precambrian time
the earliest creatures, too soft to leave fossils,
too light to leave footprints, have left us
old proteins and sugars as signatures. We will leave
chronicles filled with our griefs and achievements,
a poetry spoken by locusts as they descend.

SP, p. 198.

VII

A meditation on *the indestructible sacredness & immortality of being*, on *the precedence of meaning* and on *the existence of truth regardless of humans' actions* – this is what poem VII of *Conversations with a Toad* is all about. That such an intense meditation should be contained in four four-line stanzas is a poetical miracle, a technical accomplishment and a delightful surprise. This kind of composition belongs among the short jewel-like lyrics in Bringhurst's poetic corpus. There is linguistic economy, but there is also intellectual precision, perceptual accuracy, and density of meaning – these are, by the way, all attributes of great poetry, which is meant to be durable, like the sugar and protein signatures left by primitive life forms on Precambrian rocks. Every musical word falls exactly into place; upon encountering every single word on the page, one is under the impression that it is precisely *le mot juste*. There is objective

evidence that this is the case with this particular poem: if we look at the way the text has evolved throughout its three successive states, we learn that (1) in the first stanza the verb *breed* in the final version replaces the verb *feed* of preceding versions of the poem and that (2) the third stanza has changed at several points, and only slightly, as we shall see below. The textual metamorphosis has been kept to a minimum. In any case, the poem remains a concise and resonant statement on the destruction of the world and the persistence of *being* in spite of all obstacles and adversities.

Stanza number one dwells on mortality and immortality as the two sides to the same coin. Death is the price we must pay for life, Bringham says, and it is a fair price we must be ready to charge when the moment comes for us to leave this world. The last life and the one resurrection the poet discovers in the natural world comes down to perpetual metamorphosis: the toad eats the moth and the moth becomes an indistinguishable part of its body; the eagle eats from the overrun body of the deer lying inert on the road, and the deer fuels its flight. Instead of being buried in a hole in the ground, many animals experience this kind of death and this kind of resurrection. Much the same happens in the world of trees: "*Woodlice breed in the fallen alder.*" A dead alder becomes food for woodlice, which feed and breed on it and metamorphose the dead wood into something new in their living cells. The thrush is simply beautiful in a natural way, and *red-shafted flickers* feed on the fallen alder too. "*Uses will form for us too in the end,*" concludes the first stanza. This is possibly meant as a reminder of humans' mortality: when we die, our bodies will be nourishing food for other microscopic creatures and we will dissolve into that gigantic continuum of life, which is indestructible, in which every single thing is connected to everything else. Distinctions between things and creatures are something we make and also pure delusion.

The core of the poem is precisely its geometrical centre. The second stanza is woven with five simple declarative sentences – two of them written in the present tense and three written in the future tense. Truth, meaning and being are the three words constellated into the heart of the poem:

What is is the truth. What precedes it
is meaning. We will not destroy
being, toad. We will not. But I think
we will overreligiously clean it.

SP, p. 198.

What is (i.e., reality or the real or *being*) is the truth, which does not need humans to be able to keep on existing. Before truth, there is only meaning. And meaning is made up of all the things and creatures that are woven into the body of *being*. Time and again, the human mind has directed its own attention to *being*, the heart of metaphysics. The pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, so many thinkers in the tradition of Western philosophy, and Oriental sages of different historical periods have asked the same questions time and again, their insights into *being* are still valuable, a moveable luggage that Bringham has tried to rescue from oblivion and taken with himself wherever he goes. These remnants of visions and tattered fragments of wisdom spoken and thought in exotic languages are a talisman, a personal pharmacopoeia the poet wishes to preserve at all costs. They still remind us of the fundamental questions we should be asking right now, instead of insisting on our determination to destroy the world. But, what are the characteristics of *being*?, we may ask. *Being* is plural, manifold, varied, many-voiced, fluid. Though its outward appearance may be changing all the time, *being* remains serenely the same – it is immutable, eternal, immortal. Therefore, hard as they may try, humans cannot destroy *being*; they are a part of *being* itself,

but not the only ones. In Bringhurst's work, metaphysics is pure physics: *what is* is *what is*, in almost tautological terms. Poetry itself is a property intrinsic in *being*, and humans have no monopoly on *being*, truth, meaning or poetry.

The third and closing stanza dwells on ancestral voices coming from afar. It remains unclear whether these voices are those of the ancient sages (and the First Nations), who knew how to listen to the world with attentive ears and, as a result, how to penetrate into the essence of *being*. Those ancient voices still conceived of the world as a sacred space populated by gods and goddesses. Or these might be the voices of *being* itself, singing and dancing in the world to make itself visible to us, trying to catch our distracted attention. In the Foreword to *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst says that "in the world of bats and birds and human beings, sometimes there is silence, and sometimes there is being calling out to itself in the hope that being is listening". This is what the voices mentioned in the last stanza of poem VII are doing: they are the voices of being calling our attention. On the other hand, the textual variants undergone by this stanza are minimal, and yet they are significant. In the Lucie Lambert edition, the opening line reads: "The voices do seep through us too"; in the text of the *Descant* edition, it reads: "*Yet the voices do seep through us too. Even...*"; in the third, definitive state of the text, the whole stanza reads like this:

Yet the voices still seep through us too. Even
through us, who have long since forgotten:
to pray does not mean to send messages
to the gods; to pray means to listen.

SP, p. 198.

The opening verse line now reads "still seep", which is eloquent enough. We humans living in industrial societies have forgotten to listen to the real, we no longer believe that the world is a place rich in gods and goddesses, and yet the voices *still seep* through us. In the same Foreword to *The Calling*, Bringhurst also speaks of "a lot of homeless gods – who dream of alpine meadows, rivers, rocks and trees and coral reefs and coves – forced to make do for a time with a diet that might consist of little more than sterile earth and poisoned air and water." These are the gods our ancestors believed in, the gods of ancient Greece and Rome, the gods of the Oriental sages, the gods of the First Nations. They all had sharp minds and true stories to tell about what they found out about the ultimate essence of things; their voices are still speaking loud and clear, and the only thing we have to do is listen to what they might have to tell us.

VIII

Poem VIII of *Conversations with a Toad* tessellates three miniature meditations on hands and feet, dreams and rocks, and the mind as a tangible or palpable entity endowed with a peculiar physical texture. But What do these discrete and diverse elements have in common?, one may ask. Upon encountering and reading the poem for the first time, the initial impression is one of seeming heterogeneity, but, upon closer inspection, all three thematic nodes seem to cohere into a perfect, meaningful whole. Thus, the poem consists of three little movements for the mind, and Bringhurst, in fact, seems to be very fond of using this kind of tripartite structure in many of his poems. The first stanza dwells on the difference between hands and feet, which is a recurrent motif in the poet's work. In the author's view, hands are more dangerous than feet, which are inoffensive and much more

respectful towards the world. In treading upon the earth, one's feet become the literal link between our bodies and the world, which is a sort of miracle we tend to overlook. Similarly, in speech and in breathing, the air leaving and entering our lungs in the form of meaningful sound strings or breath is also a link with the air that surrounds the earth. In any case, the equation at the heart of the stanza aligns hands with eyes and feet with ears, and the poet seems to stress the pre-eminence of listening over seeing.

Bringhurst's is a *poetics of hearing what-is* rather than a *poetics of seeing what-is*. For him, *being* is singing and dancing and the best way of approaching its mystery is through one's ears and through one's feet. The notion of *breathing through one's own feet* translates into something like *paying ecological attention to what-is*. This is one of those elementary truths we need to be reminded of from time to time, because, in the industrial and solipsistic society where we happen to live, we humans seem to have forgotten how to pay attention at all. We live in a time when not paying attention is the norm, indeed – we do not have time or patience to listen to our fellow human beings or to the real any more. However, this is not the only wrong thing about our society. The talking *homo sapiens* of the poem claims that nowadays we live in a world where “*we have barely stopped binding the feet / of the women.*” Binding someone's feet, particularly those of women, is an expression of slavery or cruel dominion over *the weaker sex*, so that this could be interpreted as being a call for gender equality, for respect among the sexes. This is one of the reasons why the poetic voice considers, from an ironic standpoint, the possibility of binding men's hands so as to prevent them from binding women's feet. The best option, it concludes, is trying to weight “*them (both men and women) back into frequent touch with the ground,*” so that they will learn to breathe through their feet again. The two closing lines of the first stanza are a celebration of this concept of paying ecological attention:

Like eyes, the hands open and close, squeeze and release.
The feet, like the ears, are always wide open.²⁴

SP, p. 199.

The second stanza is a true enigma; it concerns dreams after all. The whole picture gives the overall impression of surrealistic unreality. Near an enigmatic stream, the

²⁴ Though poem VIII of *Conversations with a Toad* consisted originally of only two stanzas, it was further revised and expanded by one more stanza in the two subsequent versions of the poem. The second stanza remained exactly the same from the beginning, while the first stanza was slightly modified in later versions. In the first Lucie Lambert edition, the first stanza reads as follows: “Toad, instead of binding the feet / of women, shall we muffle the hands / of men? Or weight them / back into frequent touch with the ground? / Like eyes, the hands open and close. / The feet, like the ears, are always wide open.” In the *Descant* version of the text, the vocative addressed to the toad is missing and the stanza reads as follows: “Instead of binding the feet / of our women, shall we bandage / the hands of our men? Or weight them / back into frequent touch with the ground? / Like eyes, the hands open and close. / The feet, like the ears, are always wide open.” In the third version of the text, the opening lines read as follows: “We have barely stopped binding the feet / of the women, toad. Is it true we ought to be binding / the hands of the men? Or weighting them / back into frequent touch with the ground? / Like eyes, the hands open and close, squeeze and release. / The feet, like the ears, are always wide open.” The adverb *barely* in the first line is eloquent enough, for it highlights the fact that women have started only very recently achieving some of their vindications in their search for a genuine emancipation from the yoke of patriarchy. In addition, the two closing lines have been significantly expanded to enhance the opposition between hands and feet. Nevertheless, this is not a feminist, but a humanist reading of these lines; this, we suspect, is the interpretation that Bringhurst wishes himself. Like the author, we believe in humanism, in the sacredness of the dignity and equality of both men and women, regardless of their sex, which is one more physical attribute. What really matters is their being *irreplaceable* humans endowed with dreams and illusions in search of their own true vocation throughout a whole lifetime, and, of course, their uniqueness.

embodiment of the perpetual metamorphosis implicit in reality, are pictures of dreamers who possibly stand for all the visionaries that have existed upon earth. Having cleansed their senses, visionaries are capable of seeing beyond the polished surfaces of objects and reaching into an invisible core of meaning at the heart of things, and they perceive what the others do not even notice. But history teaches that visionaries are only madmen or madwomen, social misfits to the minds of their fellow human beings, and that sometimes they end up being ostracised by society. Those who cannot see with open eyes and ears do not seem to understand visionaries' dreams, even if they are closer to the truth than the majority of ordinary mortals. Seeing ahead of their time, they have learnt something whose existence we do not even suspect. However, this is only one possible interpretation, and it may sound far-fetched or inaccurate. One is inevitably reminded of the cave paintings of prehistoric times, with their stylized representations of humans hunting big mammals, frozen in mid-motion for eternity. The hands that painted those paintings were those of visionaries – ones who still breathed through their feet and touched the texture of the world with non-aggressive, careful hands. The history of humankind is, after all, rich in anonymous visionaries that have not filled chronicles with griefs but with true achievements instead. The closing lines of the stanza appear to shed some more light on the preceding ones:

... Close your eyes, say the rocks,
and dream of things seen in the darkness.
Open your eyes and dream of the sun.

SP, p. 199.

Ancestral rocks, which shared the same Precambrian time with toads, bryozoans and trilobites, hide a primordial wisdom within themselves. The rocks speak a language of their own; humans have no monopoly on meaning or language, according to Bringhurst. Much can be learnt by just looking at rocks deeply, for they are a meaningful part of *the book of the world*. Geologists know how to interpret them, how to decipher the messages imprinted on them by the hand of time. To the uninitiated, rocks might be simply that, dumb rocks that sit in silent self-complacency. In this poem, Bringhurst personifies them and makes them speak to humans though. It comes as a delightful surprise that rocks, of a hard, tangible and stubborn nature, should speak about something so truly volatile and eel-slippery as dreams. They teach humans an elementary lesson: if asleep, they are to pay attention to what they dream of amid the darkness of sleep; if awake, they are to pay attention to what their eyes see and daydream of the sun. In other words, the speaking rocks urge humans to remain alert to reality with a maximum of concentration and attention, for much of the ultimate essence of things is revealed in dreams and wakefulness alike. What humans listen to the rocks saying is that everything is connected to everything else and that *being* is an unstoppable continuum in perpetual flux. The mind, the jewel we treasure in our skull, is a miniature model of the world at large out there. And to the mind turns precisely the speaking *homo sapiens* in the last stanza.

The third stanza was first added to the poem in the *Descant* version of the text, and it was further revised in *The Calling* and *Selected Poems* version. It could stand alone as a separate short lyric, but it does make sense that it should come as the closing stanza of poem VIII, especially after a stanza concerned with rocks and dreams:

The mind is a body, with shinbones and wrists
and roots, milkteeth and wings,
ankles and petals, fins,

feathers and dewclaws, leafstalks and lungs.
It is larva, pupa, imago, sea urchin,
tree. Ripening ideas drop from its limbs.²⁵

SP, p. 199.

The stanza opens with a simple declarative sentence – *The mind is a body* – and then it is followed by a long enumeration of seemingly disparate elements that constitute an exhaustive catalogue of the world. The mind is thus a physical entity, firmly rooted in the real, and so its peculiar anatomy consists of parts of the human body (shinbones, wrists, milkteeth, ankles, lungs, limbs), parts of animals (wings, fins, feathers, dewclaws) and parts of plants (roots, petals, leafstalks). This apparently chaotic enumeration constitutes an accurate catalogue of the world-within-the-human-mind in the end. When this catalogue is placed against poem IV of *Conversations with a Toad*, which is also a meditation on the nature of the mind, we stumble upon this truth: *the mind is the world*, a miniature model or microcosm of the macrocosm – the big world out there. There is room for everything in the mind, for animals and plants alike, as the *in crescendo* enumeration in the penultimate sentence makes clear: “*It is larva, pupa, imago, sea urchin, / tree.*” The enumeration is not random at all: *larva*, *pupa* and *imago* are all stages in the life of an insect, especially one with wings (*imago* is the final and fully developed adult stage, in fact). These are the stages the moth that the toad feeds on goes through, for instance. They are also expressive of the incessant metamorphosis inherent in all living creatures. Apart from the insect in its different incarnations, there is place in the mind for the sea urchin (the small sea creature with a round shell covered with spikes), probably of similar anatomical complexity, and also for a tree. From the tree of the mind drop “*ripening ideas.*” Ideas are the fruits of the mind, which is a tree. The twofold metaphor is beautiful and moving. Once again, it reminds us of the *interconnectedness* of everything in reality. The mind is an all-embracing reality capable of containing the whole of reality within itself.

IX

Poem IX of *Conversations with a Toad* is a complex meditation on the non-human as a prerequisite for communication among human beings. It is a truism to say the humans are social animals, that isolation is unnatural. About 23 centuries ago, in the world of classical Greece, one of the high points of human civilization, Aristotle was convinced that this was the case: *man is a political animal*, he said. Being a social animal means that we humans live in a community with other fellow human beings, and that, inevitably, we need the presence of others to make sense of ourselves and our place in the world. We are in need of bonds – physical, intellectual, emotional – to feel alive and embrace the sense that we fit in a particular scheme of things, that we belong among beings who are not completely dissimilar to us. Speech, the mind and the heart play a crucial role here, in the construction of one’s own human and social identity. Of course, this is a logocentric and anthropocentric interpretation of humans’ social nature, built upon the very foundations of a long tradition of Western thought. What Bringham’s meditation brings to our attention is precisely the importance of the non-human in the interpretation of the human. *We do*

²⁵ In the *Descant* version of the poem, this stanza is slightly different: “The mind is a body, with shinbones and wrists / and roots, milkteeth and wings. The mind / is a body with ankles and petals, with fins, / feathers and dewclaws, petioles, lungs.” In the final version of the text, the enumeration is much more fluid and effective. *Petioles* has been replaced with a much commoner word – *leafstalks*.

need to acknowledge the existence and presence of animals to be able to make coherent sense of ourselves. Only by walking the road of the nonhuman will we be able to make ourselves whole again. This is the fundamental lesson at the heart of this brave piece of meditation for two voices.

Originally conceived for one voice only in the first two textual incarnations of the poem, since the publication of *The Calling* in 1995 this has been a composition for two voices – those of *homo sapiens* and *homo narrans*. The former leads the meditation towards an illuminating conclusion, whereas the latter punctuates the thoughts and words of the other by speaking aloud almost exactly the same words uttered in poem I of *Conversations with a Toad*. These are the opening lines of the poem:

Toad, all the roads from a man to a woman,
a man to a man, woman to man, woman to woman
lead through the nonhuman. This
is the reason, toad, for musicians.²⁶

SP, p. 199.

To put it very simply, there is no way of reaching to the other but by walking the road of the nonhuman. It is no shortcut; it resembles more strolling, going for a quiet walk in the solitude of the woods or the mountains. “The eyes are to the mind what love is to reason”, says Bringhurst. Like speech or the capacity for thought, human love is what makes us genuinely human. It is out of love that the grander achievements of humankind have been born. It is love which makes us empathetically care about the others, their material well-being and their emotional harmony. Love makes things cohere, and this is not utopian or idealistic thinking. This is simply acknowledging or ascertaining what is. Musicians are prototypical in their literal way of coming to terms with the nonhuman through their playing of musical instruments, originally made out of parts of animals:

In this poem a man talks
We speak to each other by means
to a toad. The toad may listen
of the bones and the horns and the bodies
or he may not. That
and bowels of dead animals, plucking
is not the man's concern.
their gutstrings, thumping their bellies, plinking
I suppose it is not the toad's concern
their evened teeth laid out in a row.
either. I believe,

²⁶ In the Lucie Lambert edition, poem IX reads like this: “So it is, toad, that the road / from one man to another lies through / the nonhuman. This is the reason, / toad, for musicians, who speak / through the bones and the horns and the bodies / and bowels of dead animals, plucking / their gutstrings, thumping their bellies, plinking / their evened teeth laid out in a row. // The animals give them their speech and the means / of their thinking, just as the dreamers’ / masks open the doors of their dreams. / The voice is a face. The face is a vision.” There is only one voice speaking in this version and, what is even more significant, it is the musicians, not human beings in general, that are made the protagonists of this journey through the nonhuman toward the genuinely human. In the *Descant* version, the poem opens like this: “So it is, toad, that the road / from one man to another lies through / the nonhuman. This is the reason, toad...”. The rest of the text is exactly the same as that of *The Calling*, but, of course, the second voice, that of *homo narrans*, is also missing here. In the definitive state of the text, the poet elaborates the ways leading from the human to the human through the nonhuman, by considering all possible relationships between men and women.

X

If we look up the word *meditation* in the dictionary, we learn that it is a formal word and that it means at least two different things: (1) the practice of thinking deeply in silence, especially for religious reasons or in order to make your mind calm, and (2) serious thoughts on a particular subject that somebody writes down or speaks. And if we look up the word *thought*, this is what the dictionary, among other things, says: (1) something that you think or remember, (2) a person's mind and all the ideas that they have in it when they are thinking, (3) the power or process of thinking, (4) the act of thinking seriously and carefully about something, (5) ideas in politics, science, etc. connected with a particular person, group or period of history. *Meditation* and *thought* are closely related words; at some point their meanings intersect, especially if we juxtapose sense (2) of *meditation* and senses (2) and (3) of *thought*. Poem X of *Conversations with a Toad* could be said to be a self-reflexive point in the sequence, for it is a meditation on thought. Thought stops for a while, looks deep inside the mind or itself, and this is what it comes up back again to the world with: a handful of words which are attempts at self-definition. No other poem in Bringhurst's ten-part sequence has so stubbornly remained the same since it saw the light of day: only stanza one is slightly changed and one word replaced with another; the rest remains immutable, unchanged.

The poem has got a clearly tripartite structure: the mind moves along three steps in its investigation into the nature of *thought*. The first stanza opens with two enigmatic statements about mountain goats, and these are followed by two possible definitions of *thought*:

In winter the mountain goats think.
In summer they gather. Thought
equals solitude. Toad, is there no other
answer? Thought is the mind walking
the ridges and edges of being, not
the tuned instruments crooning their perfect routines.²⁷

SP, p. 200.

Humans have no monopoly on thought either, no more than on meaning, language or poetry. If it is the animals that “*give us our speech and the means of our thinking*” (see poem IX), then it is only natural that they should speak a language of their own and think in their own way too. The opposition is seasonal: in winter taciturn mountain goats choose to think in solitude, and in summer they gather to celebrate their being alive with their fellows. Two interpretations are close at hand: solitude (and also silence) is the essential prerequisite for deep thinking, or, maybe, one is plunged directly into solitude, even in the middle of a crowd, when one gives oneself over to thinking seriously and intensely about something. Thought is solitude, that is the first equation we find in the unfolding of the poem. The second follows immediately: thought is “*the mind walking the ridges and edges of being*.” The mind is a body and so it has got feet with which to walk. *Being* is the unknown territory explored conscientiously by thought in its excursions towards the peripheral zones that are far away from its very centre. It is summits, high points, and edges that the thought prefers going into. Beauty is difficult and complex, and this is what thought is after. Unlike music,

²⁷ In the Lucie Lambert edition, the line arrangement is slightly different at this point: “... Thought / equals solitude, toad. There is no other / answer. Thought is the mind walking the ridges and edges of being, not / the tuned instruments doing their perfect routines.” And, originally, the word *crooning* read *doing*.

thought does not seek to comprehend *being* through “*tuned instruments crooning their perfect routines.*” Thought takes its chances and runs risks in going into unknown territory of *being*. There might be several possible names for this: pure speculation for its own sake, the pleasure of dialectics, the dance of the intellect among words and ideas, “*ripening ideas dropping from the tree of the mind,*” the task of philosophy in asking fundamental questions. Smoothness, the absence of complexity, is blasphemy, we learn in the first line of the second stanza. The symmetrical and geometrical centre of the poem is precisely the most complex and elaborate of all three definitions of *thought*:

... Thought
is the mute breaking through in the voice.
Like ice going out in the spring,
the voice giving way.
The language dug up by the roots
where thought has been speaking.

SP, p. 200.

There is an amazing density of meaning in this stanza. Thought is trying to find words to convey what is otherwise ineffable, going back in time to a pre-verbal stage of humankind in search of elemental pieces of truth that have not been uttered yet, but are visible out there if we only pay attention. Giving voice to those insights, intuitions, revelation bites is something thought strives hard to do. The mute, the ineffable, the *unsayable* finds its way through the voice (the pre-eminence of speech over writing is taken for granted here again), with a naturalness that resembles such natural phenomena as the ice melting in springtime. At the edges of *being* quotidian language will not do; it must return to a more pristine state as it were. Language is dug up by the roots from the living soil so that thought can make itself discernible in verbal disguise to other minds. This is thought on the edge, on the crest of the wave, making the most of language to communicate its findings or the fruits of its investigations into reality. Pure being always defies verbal definition.

The poem closes with a warning addressed to the toad: humans are determined to cease to have meaning and, in the process, they are about to destroy everything they find on their way. The talking *homo sapiens* warns the toad of the imminence of destruction of the world, while, somewhere between the lines, there is the optimistic message that the persistence of poetry and being is a reality too. Humans’ greed is insatiable and invincible; their hunger and thirst for money, power and comfort is unappeasable, so there is only one thing left for the toad to do: to go away. What is round the corner is a silence that is not poetry, a dead form of silence that breeds no thinking or singing:

Leap, toad. Our invincible
greed, a dead silence, an absolute
absence of meaning, is closing.

SP, p. 200.

New World Suite Number Three

Four Movements for Three Voices

A Garden of Colours: A Meditation on Being, Time & Ecology

I · INTRODUCTION

New World Suite Number Three. Four Movements for Three Voices (2005) is possibly Bringham's most complex polyphonic poem to date.¹ In the new realm of polyphonic poetics, he had the previous experience of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986) and *Conversations with a Toad* (1987), which were conceived as poems for two voices only. Now, the *Suite* incorporated a third voice, a much more complex interpenetration of all three voices, and a lengthy text arranged into four distinct movements, to say nothing of the philosophical and ecological ideas at the heart of the poem. In the essay entitled "Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue", written as an afterword to the definitive text published in a special limited edition of 75 copies by the Center for Book Arts, the author explains the genesis of the poem in detail. He wrote the *Suite* as early as 1990, but it had to wait for a long time, exactly 15 years, to find its perfect typographical realization. Before 2005, Bringham's complex poem had known a previous incarnation in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), which the author did not find typographically satisfying. Much earlier, in 1993, Crispin and Jan Elsted, at Barbarian Press in Mission, B.C., had produced a trial design proof for a projected edition of the same poem which never saw the light of day; and much later, in 2009, Gaspereau Press would publish a more accessible and affordable edition of the text in several colours in the author's new *Selected Poems*, the final third of which is almost completely devoted to Bringham's polyphonic poems. Needless to say, this book gave Bringham's polyphonic poems a wider circulation, for *Conversations with a Toad* and *New World Suite No. 3* had been originally published in limited deluxe editions.

Once again, as in the case of many other Bringham poems, the editorial history of *New World Suite No. 3* is complex. Though, as Bringham says, poetry lives and thrives ultimately in the human voice, this particular poem has known three different printed incarnations over time, apart from an early trial proof. This is the succinct chronology of the *Suite*:

- (1) *Trial design proof for a projected edition of 'New World Suite N° 3'* (A.45). Mission, British Columbia: Barbarian Press, 1993. Broadside, 31.5 × 41 cm. One-page excerpt from the second movement of *New World Suite N° 3*. One copy was printed for exhibit at the Clark Library, Los Angeles, in the fall of 1993. A small number of additional copies are known to exist. The book itself was never printed. A.79, the Center for Book Arts edition, was issued in its stead. In Crispin & Jan Elsted's *Hoi Barbaroi. A Quarter Century at Barbarian Press* (2004), under the heading "The Bibliography Continued: 1988-2004" and the category "B. Pamphlets and Ephemera", there is precisely an entry (B.18) on the TRIAL PROOF FOR 'NEW WORLD SUITE' (1993). It reads as follows: "Robert Bringham. Excerpt from

¹ Mark Dickinson, in a review of *Selected Poems* (2009) entitled "In the Wake of Our Ancestors", published in *The Times* (London), 8 August 2009: *Weekend Review* 12, claims that "Bringham's polyphonic poetry, introduced in the last third of the book, marks another attempt to emulate the world as we experience it, as a bandwidth full of sound and song. In *New World Suite No. 3*, a poem for three speakers set in four movements, he gets around the technical challenge of writing for three voices who speak as a simultaneity by printing their lines in ochre, blue and black, and stacking them into musical staves. One of the most innovative experiments in all of English-speaking poetry, the *Suite* springs off the page in a garden of colour."

New World Suite. 16 by 12 ½ inches. Joanna, printed in blue & black as a broadsheet showing one page, the ‘gutter’ marked by a rule, and a colophon note in red to its left. A few copies printed as a trial proof. The text is printed as a reading ‘score’, the lines set in groups of three (one for each of the voices for which the poem is written), separated by rules. The book itself has not yet been published, but it will appear in the near future. It is planned to have a CD accompanying the book containing a performance of the poem, with readings of other of his work.”² The trial design proof was published in August 1993. The text shows staves 38-45 from the second movement, “Who Is the Fluteplayer?”, of *New World Suite No. 3*. A few years later, in November 1998, the Barbarian Press still announced in quite enthusiastic terms the publication of Bringhurst’s poem on page 15 of the *Barbarian Press Catalogue 1998-99*, included as a portfolio in *Hoi Barbaroi*. The book was said to be still *in preparation*, but it never got published by Barbarian Press:

NEW WORLD SUITE NO. 3: 4 Movements for 3 Voices. Robert Bringhurst.

Our first multimedia production! This continues the experimentation with polyphonic poetics Bringhurst began with *The Blue Roofs of Japan*, which we published in 1986. *New World Suite* adds one more voice, & will be printed in ‘score’ form, with the voices printed on a 3-line ‘staff’ so that it can be read by three speakers. (We are also experimenting with a second printing of the text on facing pages using varied colours and typefaces to suggest dynamics and tempi, but this is not yet certain.) Bringhurst has also provided a substantial prose essay to introduce some of the concepts behind the construction of the work. The book will be presented with a CD of a performance of the piece by Robert Bringhurst and two other speakers; the recording will also include a performance of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* and readings by the poet of some of his earlier work.

- (2) *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970–1995* (A.47). Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995. 256 p. Paper. 14 × 22 cm. ISBN 0-7710-1651-4. Among the contents of these new selected poems is the complete text of *New World Suite N° 3*, which consists of four movements: I: All the Desanctified Places (revised from C.60), II: Who is the Fluteplayer?, III: The Children of Zhuang Zi Confront the Frozen Saskatchewan River, IV: Winter Solstice, Cariboo Mountains (revised from B.37). The text of the poem is published in staves of three lines for the three voices of the poem. In fact, the poem is preceded by brief instructions as to the way the poem is to be approached: the first voice (male) is in bold, the second voice (female) in italic, and the third voice (male) in roman. The lines in each stave are spoken simultaneously, but sometimes the three voices speak in sequence. This is the reason why the spatial arrangement within each stave is also meaningful, for it makes explicit the points at which voices are to measure themselves against the other voices. The full suite was then revised in A.79, the 2005 Center for the Book Arts edition. Some fragments or excerpts from the whole *Suite* had been published earlier in periodicals or magazines: (A) Movement I, “All the Desanctified Places”, had been first published in C.60, *Margin* 10 (1989): 89-92. Later it was revised in A.47 (*The Calling*, 1995), in A.79 (*New World Suite No. 3*, 2005), in B.37 and in C.69. (B) Movement IV, originally entitled “Winter Solstice: Clearwater River”, was published in B.37, *Towards 2000*, edited by Ron Clark & Martha Gould. Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1991: pp 52–55, 73. “Winter Solstice: Clearwater River” was later revised as “Winter Solstice, Cariboo Mountains” in A.47 and A.79. In addition, movement IV was published alongside movement I, “All the Desanctified Places” (revised from C.60). (C) Movement I, “All the Desanctified Places” was also published as “From *New World Suite n° 3*” in C.69, *Poetry Canada* (Kingston, Ontario) 15.2 (1995): 14-15, where it was reprinted from A.47, with a new Preface.

² See Crispin & Jan Elsted, *Hoi Barbaroi. A Quarter Century at Barbarian Press, with Essays by Invitation & a Photographic Essay by David Evans. Bibliography Compiled by Crispin Elsted*, 2004, p. 128. Consulted at the Rare Books and Special Collections at the Library of the University of British Columbia (Vancouver), call number Z232 B197 H64 2004, in the summer of 2010. Among the essays announced in the title are pieces by Simon Brett, Jan Elsted, Sjaak Hubregtse and Robert Bringhurst himself, who contributed the essay “Shouldering Civilization: The Private Search for Public Good”.

- (3) *New World Suite N° 3* (A.79). New York: Center for Book Arts. 2005 [actually 2006]. 4 vols., 28 + 28 + 28 + 20 p. Each volume 21.5 × 31 cm, mounted on (and detachable from) a lectern base 41.5 × 41.5 × 8 cm, opening to 95 × 95 cm. “This edition ... consists of four parts, designed by Robert Bringhurst, housed in a structure designed by Hedi Kyle.... This is the Center for Book Arts 30th Anniversary Publication.... There are 75 copies ... including five artists’ proofs, produced in 2004–2005.”³ [Printed in 2005, bound in 2006.] The contents of the volumes are these: the poem for three voices, reprinted with minor revisions from *The Calling* version (A.47) but redesigned by Bringhurst, in a binding designed by Hedi Kyle – volume 1 (black covers): “First Voice (Viola)”; volume 2 (ochre covers): “Second Voice (Violin)”; volume 3 (blue covers): “Third Voice (Cello)”; volume 4 (black covers) contains an afterword: “Afterword: Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue”, an essay on the creation of the poem as well as a profound meditation on the nature of polyphony, in music and in nature alike [the essay was reprinted in D.128, *Event* (New Westminster, BC) 36.1 (2007): 7-16, and later revised in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing, Twenty Pieces of Thinking* (A.83 & A.90)], Subscribers to the Edition, Center for Book Arts Directors & Staff, and Colophon. Now there are no male or female voices but string instruments instead (viola, violin and cello), standing for the three voices, which are superimposed upon one another and printed in three different colours (black, blue & ochre). The first voice in each case is printed in black at the mid-centre of the line, whereas the second and third voices are printed in blue (raised) and in ochre (lowered) to indicate simultaneity. Not all three voices coincide all the time or exactly at the same time, and so spatial arrangement on the page is also of the essence.⁴

³ The Rare Books & Special Collections of the Library of the University of British Columbia (Vancouver), holds copy no. 30 of *New World Suite No.3*, which we consulted in the summer of 2010. The text of the colophon gives a detailed technical description of the work as book art: “This edition of *New World Suite Number Three* consists of four parts, designed by Robert Bringhurst, housed in a structure designed by Hedi Kyle. // Michael and Winifred Bixler set the text in Monotype at their foundry in Skaneateles, New York. This edition was printed by Barbara Henry on a Vandercook SP-20 proof press (serial 26880) at the Center for Book Arts in New York City. Mirah von Wicht, with the assistance of Jennifer Bantz Biddle, Ana Cordeiro, Nancy Loeber, and Linda Trimbath, constructed the cases and bound the books at Michael Roger Press in Middlesex, New Jersey, at the Center for Book Arts in New York City. // The type is Monotype Dante, designed in Verona in the early 1950s by Giovanni Mardersteig, based on Mardersteig’s detailed study of the work of Francesco Griffo. The initial version of the type was cut by hand in the rue de la Glacière, Paris, in 1954 by Charles Malin. // The paper is Frankfurt Cream, mould made at the Zerkall Mill in the Kall Valley, southwest of Köln, Germany. // This is the Center for Book Arts 30th Anniversary Publication, organized by the Center’s founder, Richard Minsky, with leadership support of David S. Rose, Chairman of the Publications Committee, and executed under the supervision of Alexander Campos, Executive Director. // There are 75 copies of this book, including five artists’ proofs, produced in 2004-2005. // This is copy number 30.”

⁴ In “Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue”, the afterword to *New World Suite Number Three* (2005) and a lucid meditation on the concept of polyphony, Bringhurst explains in detail how the poem has typographically evolved over time in search of a more perfect material incarnation: “*New World Suite No. Three*, which I wrote in 1990, was published in 1995 in the simplest form I could devise. The three simultaneous voices were printed black on white, one beneath the other, in roman, italic and bold: rows of words in three-line staves. The result looked less like a score for strings than like a score for pure percussion. It was easy to see all the words at once but not so easy (even for musicians) to see how the piece might sound. I have waited ten years for this chance to print it differently, believing that with adequate resources I could make the *texture* of the poem more palpable and easier to see without making the text any more difficult to read.

Musicians know the score is not what matters; it’s the music recreated from the score. So they print their scores in parts, to make them easier to use. I wanted to do that with the *Suite*. But in chamber music for *speaking* voices, the parts can’t quite be freed from one another. They depend on one another to keep time.

It seems to me that the heart of this particular poem naturally beats a little faster in some sections than in others. That intuition is all that underlies the tempo markings: *moderato*, *adagio*, and so on. But each of the three voices is timed against the other two and not against anything else. Because there is no metronome, and no fixed unit of mensuration, all three voices must appear in all three parts. The score shows where every phrase *begins* in relation to the phrases that are spoken by the other two voices – but as soon as it begins, the speed of the phrase is up to the speaker. In the rests between the phrases, the speakers wait for and catch up to one another, as people do in conversation. If the interaction of the voices were more precisely controlled

- (4) *Selected Poems* (A.92). Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press. 2009. 272 p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-068-6. Among the contents of these new selected poems is the complete text of *New World Suite N° 3*, with some minor textual variants with respect to A.79, the 2005 Center for Book Arts edition. Once more, three colours are used to represent the violin, viola and cello of the three voices. Lines are centred, raised or lowered as in the 2005 edition of the text; clusters of three lines are numbered within each single movement of the poem. Aesthetically and typographically, this new Gaspereau edition is *legible and affordable*, in Bringhurst's view. If the 2005 edition presented separate scores for all the three voices (three separate volumes), now it is a pleasure to see all three voices superimposed within the boundaries of a single page. The overall impression is one of a garden of colours and a genuine homage to the human voice.

Robert Bringhurst found the inspiration he needed for *New World Suite No. 3*, his 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 realm of music, polyphony is *a formalization or humanization of something that has been invented*, but the source of the invention is ultimately to be found in the real world. 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. Musicians do have much to teach him as well. In the afterword to the 2005 edition of the poem, the author explains in detail how Glenn Gould's *Solitude Trilogy* (1967-1977),⁵ a peculiar documentary as well as a literary landmark in the whole corpus of works made in North America, 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, he was an autodidact: he went through his own crash course on music and explored Gould's experiment with passion in search for nourishing food for his own poems.⁶ But now he was treading on familiar ground: *The Blue Roofs of*

than that, the voices would grow stilted. Then they would have to rescue themselves from stiltedness by turning into song." (pp. 5-6)

⁵ In "Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue", Bringhurst dwells on the importance of Glenn Gould's example for his own polyphonic poems: "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. It was commissioned as a radio documentary, and superficially it is a documentary: ambient sounds and background music play while people talk. What sets it fundamentally apart it is 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. For twenty-five years it circulated only in the form of *samizdat* audio cassettes, illegally made from the radio broadcasts. Now that its author is safely dead, it is sold on CD as an eccentric work of music. That may be one of the things it is, but it is something else as well: a literary landmark. *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*. None of these has ever been included in a literary anthology, nor substantively addressed in a work of literary history. Yet to me this trilogy is one of the most accomplished and 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. As far as I can tell, Gould never gave that issue any thought." *Ibid.*, pp. 10-12.

⁶ In "Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue", he 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 and published a few poems that I described, rather facetiously, as sonatas and chaconnes. 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. I also read the scores of a lot of string quartets, from early Haydn to

Japan and *Conversations with a Toad* had already given him the opportunity to enter an unknown but promising territory. When set side by side with the *Suite*, they are simple polyphonic experiments by comparison. The suite⁷ as a genre provides the poet now with the model: 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 cross-references and echoes from Bringham's previous polyphonic poems. The overall impression is that of a beautifully woven tapestry where the three voices coalesce into perfect harmony in whatever they have to say. 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. The final result is one of not just complexity, density of meaning and profundity of thought, but also of moving music in this most astonishing homage to the human voice.⁸

At least three threads are woven into the heart of *New World Suite No. 3*: (1) polyphony, which is the outward structural device whereby the interpenetration of human voices becomes an imitation of the natural polyphony found in the world, where human and nonhuman voices coexist in space and in time on democratic terms; (2) ecology, i.e. a more acute awareness that the earth is almost on the brink of environmental apocalypse because of human beings' greedy management of the earth's resources in search of money, power and comfort; and (3) philosophy, for a profound meditation on the nature of being, poetry, time, history and human's relations with the world pervades the poem from beginning to end. As a result, all times and places seem to be co-present here and now (hence the geographical references to modern metropolis and ancient sites on the American continent). 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 perfect *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 revolution with Copernicus or Galileo Galilei, tattered visions of urbanscapes and ancient sites of the First Nations of America, mythical accounts of constellations shining up above in the sky, or a vindication of the ecological integrity of breathing Earth, Bringham is offering us a vibrant and tantalizing depiction of the world he lives in, our world, which is one and manifold, 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 subtle and beautiful world of ours. Of

late Shostakovich. This crash course taught me plenty about structure. It did not, however, answer the question of how to print a polyphonic poem." *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

⁷ For the essential characteristics of this musical genre, see the entry on 'suite' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 27, pp. 15968-15969: "Suite, in music, a group of self-contained instrumental movements of varying character, usually in the same key. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the period of its greatest importance, the suite consisted principally of dance movements. In the 19th and 20th centuries the term also referred more generally to a variety of sets of instrumental pieces, mainly in forms smaller than those of the sonata, and included selections for concert performance of incidental music to plays [...] and ballet music."

⁸ In this respect, Bringham 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. The world is after all a polyphonic (and polyglot) place: "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? Which of us hasn't wakened in the spring to the interwoven singing of eight or a dozens species of birds? [...] In normal conditions, humans all inherit what it takes to learn multiple languages, catch multiple voices, and hear through the biological fence." (pp. 9-10)

course, a poem does not exhaust or replace reality and experience, which is always larger and grander than whatever might be said about it. However, only a mind like Bringhurst's, so deeply in love with this Earth and *being* and poetry, was capable of paying this moving homage to this tiny planet floating amid the immensity of the universe. And, though Bringhurst has accomplished much in the short lyric poem, in the dramatic monologue, in the sequence of dramatic impersonations devoted to the Oriental sages and the sequence devoted to the pre-Socratics, in long narrative poems of a mythic quality, it is no exaggeration to say that the *Suite* represents one of the pinnacles or summits in his entire poetic corpus – one work of mythic and gigantic proportions, as the very typographical realization and material incarnation of the poem in a book as an art object in the 2005 Center for the Book Arts edition makes self-evident. In a short note on Bringhurst's poem, Yvonne Korshak and Robert J. Rubin give a detailed description of the 2005 edition, which they describe as *an extraordinary tribute to the human voice*.

In an extraordinary tribute to the human voice, Robert Bringhurst wrote his long poem, *New World Suite Number Three*, for three voices, each corresponding to a musical instrument – viola, violin and cello. The poem is in four movements: I *moderato*, “All the Desanctified Places,” II *andante*, “Who is the Flute Player?,” III *adagio*, “The Children of Zhang [*sic*] Zi Confront the Frozen Saskatchewan River,” and IV *lento* “Winter Solstice, Caribou [*sic*] Mountains.” 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.

With its four parts fully opened, *World Suite Number Three* creates four podia holding the scores for a performance, one for each reader, and one which holds Bringhurst's essay about the creation of the poem and his esthetic purposes.⁹

Music, human voices and maps are all important 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. As in his earlier book *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, disparate elements from all around the world are brought into a coherent whole. This four-part poem is rich in geographical references to places as diverse as ancient sites on the American continent, modern metropolis and names of pitmines. In the afterword essay “Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue”, Bringhurst himself explains which is the exact geographical setting for each of the four movements in the poem:

Maps as well as voices are braided together in the *Suite*. The names of Aztec, Mayan and Inca sites (Tenochtitlan, Tikal, Cuzco, Písaq) 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

⁹ See Yvonne Korshak & Robert J. Rubin, “Robert Bringhurst (1946–): New World Suite Number Three”, in *Beyond the Text: Artists' Books from the Collection of Robert J. Rubin*. Exhibition Catalog, New York: Grolier Club, 2010: 72. In the same short note on Bringhurst's poem, the authors give a detailed technical description of the book, largely based on the information found in the colophon of the book itself: “*New World Suite Number Three: a poem in four movements for three voices*. New York: Center for Book Arts, 2004-2005, 40/75, designed by Heidi Kyle, set by hand in Monotype Dante by Michael and Winifred Bixler, Skaneateles, NY, Frankfurt Cream mould made paper from Zer Kell Mill in Kell Valley, Germany, printed by Barbara Henry on a Vandercook SP-20 proof press at the Center for Books Arts, NY, construction of cases and binding by Mirah von Wicht, bound at Michael Roger Press, Middlesex, NY and Center for Book Arts, NY, signed by Robert Bringhurst, Barbara Henry, Heidi Kyle, Richard Minsky, 17" × 17" × 3", maximum open length 66”.”

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.

Surely this is more cultural layering and folding than a poem and its listeners should ever have to suffer? Possibly so. Yet it is a grossly simplified portrait of the land in which I live. A grossly simplified set of allusions to the damage that has been done here and to the piecemeal richness of memory and tradition that still somehow survives.¹⁰

For Bringham, *New World Suite No. 3* is 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 humility and gratitude in the face of the piecemeal richness of memory and tradition that still somehow survives on the living American soil. It does 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 that stand on exactly the same ground as if in an attempt to salvage whatever fragments of wisdom might help heal the wounds of the whimpering Earth, being raped by the greed of conquerors, not wholly aware of the sacredness of the ground they tread upon nor of the damage and pain inflicted on our only home and *the others* – beings like animals and trees that also have an inalienable right to live peacefully on Earth.

II · THE SUITE

MOVEMENT I · All the Desanctified Places

The first movement of *New World Suite No. 3*, “All the Desanctified Places”¹¹, can be best characterized as being a catalogue of the world in miniature. How is it possible to put the whole world into the space of a just a few pages, even if they are meant to be spoken aloud by three voices uttering their own messages simultaneously? In its overall conception, the *Suite* is subtly reminiscent of Pound’s *The Cantos*, which also brought disparate elements into a many-sided poem that purported to embrace or embody the whole world – all times and all spaces– into a complex, heterogeneous work in progress of a very different texture. Once, Pound dreamed a dream of the total book – one that replaced not the world, but rather one that had plenty of room for the myriad subtleties reality is woven with. As reality is fragmentary and heterogeneous by nature, his *Cantos* were made out of valuable fragments, from whatever tattered pieces of wisdom he could salvage from remote times and spaces. Even if the result was a *homophonic*, not a *polyphonic* poem, he succeeded in conveying a kaleidoscopic view of the world in its many-fold cultural and historical layering. Bringham could be said to be following in his footsteps. *What is is an idea recurrent time* – these are words that are repeated time and again in Bringham’s *Suite*. The message amounts to nothing more than time changes human beings and the Earth itself, and yet there is something that remains the same – humans’ greedy way of relating to the world in

¹⁰ See Robert Bringham’s “Afterword: Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue”, *New World Suite Number Three. Four Movements of Three Voices* (2005), pp. 13-14.

¹¹ Movement I, “All the Desanctified Places”, had been first published in C.60, *Margin 10* (1989): 89-92. Later it was revised in A.47 (*The Calling*, 1995), in A.79 (*New World Suite No. 3*, 2005), in B.37 and in C.69.

their management of resources is one of those recurrent motifs in the whole history of humankind. And also, we are being reminded of this primordial lesson: *being* is one and plural, every single object is the world is distinctly unique and yet is connected to everything else along a boundless continuum of existence. A *monolithic* view of the world is what we would get to hear if Bringhurst's poem were spoken by just one single voice, but there are three interpenetrating voices from the start, offering a *multilayered* view of the world instead. Thus, the whole world (all spaces) and the whole history of humankind (all times) are brought into one single point of maximum density. What all the spaces seem to have in common is that they are *desanctified places*, as the title of the movement itself suggests. *Desanctified* is the opposite of sanctified ('made holy') and so it means that all the places named in the poem are not considered holy anymore, or, in other words, that the living, invisible presence of gods and goddesses is *not felt* by humans anymore. This looks like a world devoid of the presence of the divine, impoverished to some extent, because humans do not manage to see truly what they have before their eyes unless it is something that can be exploited and exchanged for money, power or comfort.

"All the Desanctified Places", movement I of the *Suite*, consists of six clearly identifiable parts which are masterly brought into a coherent whole. The pauses between them are demarcated typographically by Bringhurst himself: (1) staves 1-17, a meditation on being, history, and time; (2) staves 18-41, an invocation of all the desanctified places on Earth; (3) staves 42-60, on the systematic and unethical rape of the Earth in the hands of greedy humans; (4) staves 61-99, a meditation on the plurality of worlds and of being, and on the destruction of the world and the persistence of being and beauty; (5) staves 100-116, on the pleasure of being physically alive in a world which is a perpetual feast and on the return to mother Earth's lap upon one's death; and (6) staves 117-128, on singing being back into visibility. The themes threaded into the heart of the poem are various and complex, and so our interpretation does not exhaust the richness of Bringhurst's work at all. Thus, this is just a gross simplification of the gist at the core of the longest of all four movements in the suite. At least, we hope it gives an idea of the thematic unfolding of this first *moderato* part of the suite. In what follows, a detailed analysis of each of these six parts within the first movement of the *Suite* aims at elucidating the structure and meaning of each single cluster of staves spoken by the three voices in the poem. This is a suite for string instruments, and so each voice stands for a viola, a violin or a cello, respectively; the notes they play and the words they utter are not dissonant at all. They are rich in denotations and connotations that testify to the absolute coherence of Bringhurst's poetic thinking. Here and there echoes can be heard from *The Blue Roofs of Japan* and *Conversations with a Toad*, the two polyphonic poems that augured the arrival of this new poem into tradition. To borrow the author's own words, when a new work sees the light of day and is ecologically salutary, then the canon inhales and makes welcome room for the newly-arrived poem.

1 · Staves 1-17

"All the Desanctified Places" opens with a brief but intense meditation on *what is* and on time in the first three staves. The underlying thinking beneath or between the lines is closely related to Hegel's philosophy of history. Each voice propounds a different definition of *what is*; they might seem contradictory, but, in essence, they share the same Hegelian spirit. These are the three voices speaking simultaneously:

1 **What is is what has happened, Hegel says,**

Who cares

2 **and what has happened is what is**

what Hegel says? What happens is what is.

3 **spread out through time.**

What is is what is timeless caught in time.

The three definitions of *what is* juxtaposed in these opening lines are these: (1) *What is is what has happened / and what has happened is what is / spread out through time*; (2) *What happens is what is*; and (3) *What is is what is timeless caught in time*. Now, Hegel had a sharp mind and he knew how to pay attention to fundamental questions to which Western philosophy has turned time and again. What did German philosopher Hegel thought about time and History? In the context of his philosophy of history¹², Hegel presupposed that the whole of human history is a process through which humankind has been making spiritual and moral progress and advancing to self-knowledge. History is not chaotic, but has a plot instead. Every single event falls into place; nothing happens by chance or out of the blue. The philosopher's task is then to discern what this plot is exactly like. Some historians have found its key in the operation of natural laws of various kinds, but Hegel's attitude rested on the faith that history is the enactment of God's purpose and that human beings had now advanced far enough to descry what that purpose is: it is the gradual realization of human freedom. Time, and History with capital letters, is then the relentless unfolding of the human spirit in its unimpeded march towards freedom, following God's blueprint, as it were. To turn to the three definitions of *what is* quoted above, it does make perfect sense to affirm that (1) what has happened belongs to the realm of the past and the past is real because it is complete, finite and finished in itself; that (2) what happens in the present is what is real, unfolding itself in a perpetual present that knows no limits and no precedents and no consequences; and (3) that *what is* is that which is eternal, immutable, the core of unchangeable meaning at the heart of what does change from one minute to the next. The third is then the more perfect of all three definitions, for it brings change and immutability together into one simple definition spoken by a female sensibility.

¹² For more basic details concerning Hegel's thought on the philosophy of history, see the entry devoted to the philosopher in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 13, p. 7407 in particular. "The first step was to make the transition from a natural life of savagery to a state of order and law. States had to be founded by force and violence; there is no other way to make men law-abiding before they have advanced far enough mentally to accept the rationality of an ordered life. There will be a stage at which some men have accepted the law and become free, while others remain slaves. In the modern world man has come to appreciate that all men, as minds, are free in essence, and his task is thus to frame institutions under which they will be free in fact."

“All the Desanctified Places” explores then the arrival of the earlier settlers in the New World. *“They were coming / like sprung prisoners, / beating their own ears / into ploughshares.”* The ambiguous personal pronoun *they* becomes clear-crystal as soon as we keep on reading forwards. One thinks of the pilgrims, the founding fathers, Christopher Columbus and all the early settlers that emigrated from Europe to America in search of better life conditions. With them they also brought much havoc and destruction to the New World and its dwellers. That is what the first voice speaks aloud, as if *in medias res*, whereas the second and third voices are more specific about the human types or specimens that set foot on the American continent: farmers, shopkeepers, slavers and Quakers strongly opposed to violence and war, workers, freeloaders, thieves, policemen and women. The whole social spectrum seems to be represented in the long enumeration. They came and keep coming, because America is the Promised Land where all dreams may come true; it is the New World, as opposed to the Old World of Europe. The heart of this second part is, however, a new attempt at defining what history is: *“The rhythms / of history are the rhythms / of buying and selling, obeying / and forcing, instead of the rhythms / of giving and bearing”*, says the violin, the female voice. This female sensibility looks reality in the eye and this is the stark truth it confronts: history is not what Hegel, safe in the idealism he embraced, said it was; the pure facts of history are precisely governed by oppression of the weak in the hands of the stronger, by money and purely material transactions, by the brute force of rule and slavery, not by a compassionate understanding of what it means to be human and humane towards one’s fellow human beings. That is what the truth is and so *“which rhythms should we humans listen to,”* asks the female voice. Maybe it is high time that we started being good to one another, being empathetic toward other people’s dreams and illusions. Our fellow human beings’ happiness increases our own happiness; nothing is left *en route*, nothing is wasted, no time is lost. The common good, the well-being of most human beings – this is what we all should be striving for. There is a sensible ethical dimension inherent in this proposal. It is possibly related to the feminine compulsion to take care, to look after, to protect, to give warmth and protection. By contrast, the third (male) voice affirms that *“history / is the savior of nature, time / the savior of space.”* These are nihilistic words: history is what saves man from the savage state of nature and plunges him into a social life governed according to institution-made rules by which everyone is expected to abide.

This first cluster of staves (1-17) closes with a reflection on what the pilgrims or settlers left behind in the Old World. Many of them chose to think of themselves as being the chosen people to start a New Eden or Jerusalem in America. Whether they believed themselves to be chosen by God to found a new more democratic or just society or not, the point is that when they set foot on the new continent, they were unable to see what this pristine world had to offer them. To begin with, it was already populated, by human and nonhumans alike, but these immigrants of European descent, who were not native to this living soil, only saw how much profit they could take from the vast expanses of land, rivers, lakes and woods they found there. They were *“fleeing Copernicus, fleeing from Galileo,”* says the first voice. Why these two astronomers and men of science committed to unveiling the truth inherent in reality? Basically, they were visionary men, endowed with sharp minds, well aware that there was a true plurality of worlds, which is what Bringhurst’s polyphonic poem celebrates. It might be illuminating to remember the essentials of their contributions to the scientific revolution that took place at the beginning of the Modern era.

Nicolaus Copernicus (b. Feb. 19, 1473, Torún, Pol. – d. May 24, 1543, Frauenburg, East Prussia [now Frombork, Pol.]), is the Polish astronomer who proposed

a heliocentric (or sun-centred) model of the universe¹³. After long hours of passionate study devoted to a detailed study of the arrangement of heavens, he claimed that the planets have the Sun as the fixed point to which their motions are to be referred; that the Earth is a planet which, besides orbiting the Sun annually, also turns once daily on its own axis; and that very slow, long-term changes in the direction of this axis account for the precession of equinoxes. He propounded his definitive theory¹⁴ in *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium libri vi* (“Six Books Governing the Revolutions of the Heavenly Orbs”), published in 1543, the year of his death. The Church declared these findings anathema and heresy, because there was no way of explaining how a transient body like the Earth, filled with meteorological phenomena, pestilence, and wars, could be part of a perfect and imperishable heaven like the one postulated by Aristotle. It was not until Kepler that Copernicus’s cluster of predictive mechanisms would be fully transformed into a new philosophy about the fundamental structure of the universe.

For his part, Galileo Galilei (b. Feb. 15, 1564, Pisa [Italy] – d. Jan. 8, 1642, Arcetri, near Florence), the well-known Italian natural philosopher, astronomer, and mathematician, made fundamental contributions to the sciences of motion, astronomy, and strength of materials and to the development of the scientific method. His formulation of (circular) inertia, the law of falling bodies, and parabolic trajectories marked the beginning of a fundamental change in the study of motion. His insistence that the book of nature was written in the language of mathematics¹⁵ changed natural philosophy from a verbal, qualitative account to a mathematical one in which experimentation became a recognized method for discovering the facts of nature. Finally, his discoveries with the telescope revolutionized astronomy and paved the way for the acceptance of the Copernican heliocentric system. As for his decisive telescopic discoveries, Galileo taught himself the art of lens grinding¹⁶, and produced increasingly powerful telescopes. With the help of these telescopes of his own devising, he drew the Moon’s phases as seen through the telescope, showing that the Moon’s surface is not smooth, but rough and uneven instead. He also hit on what now looks like a truism: the telescope showed many more stars than were visible to humans’ naked eye. These discoveries, which Galileo explained in *Sidereus Nuncius* (*The Sidereal Messenger*), were earthshaking, because they undermined Aristotelian cosmology: the absolute difference between the corrupt earthly region and the perfect and unchanging heavens was proved wrong by the mountainous surface of the Moon, for instance.

Galileo was confirmed in his belief that the Sun is the centre of the universe and that the Earth is a planet, as Copernicus had argued. Galileo’s conversion to

¹³ For more details on Copernicus’s discoveries, see the entry on ‘Copernicus’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 7, pp. 3912-3916. See, in particular pages 3912-3913 on the heliocentric hypothesis.

¹⁴ Before propounding the definitive version of his heliocentric model, Copernicus published *Narratio prima* (1540 and 1541, “First Narration”) in collaboration with the 25-year-old Georg Rheticus. Copernicus’s theory provided a singular method for ordering the planets and for calculating the relative distances of the planets from the Sun. Rheticus compared this new universe to a well-tuned musical instrument and to the interlocking wheel-mechanisms of a clock. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, p. 3915.

¹⁵ In a work entitled *Il saggiaiore* (*The Assayer*), published in 1623, a brilliant polemic on physical reality and an exposition of the new scientific method, Galileo discussed the method of the newly emerging science, arguing: “Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it.” See the entry on Galileo in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 11, pp. 6266-6269. See, in particular, p. 6268.

¹⁶ In section V of *Conversations with a Toad*, Bringhamurst dwells precisely on humankind’s millennial impulse to explore the universe beyond the Earth’s boundaries. “We no longer / read even the signs in our faces and hands. / Instead we grind lenses and mirrors / to sop up the spilled light of the stars.”

Copernicanism would be a key turning point in the scientific revolution. However, the Church would not tolerate such a heresy. The Inquisition banned technical and theological works that it considered to be heretical, among them Johannes Kepler's *Epitome of Copernican Astronomy*, and Copernicus's own 1543 book, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium libri vi*, was suspended until corrected. Galileo was admonished "not to hold, teach, or defend" the Copernican theory "in any way whatever, either orally or in writing." Though he then published an important book, *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo, tolemaico e copernicano* (*Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems, Ptolemaic & Copernican*), finished in 1630 and published in Florence after going through censorship in 1632, he was pronounced to be vehemently suspect of heresy, was condemned to life imprisonment and made to abjure formally by the Inquisition. But he spent the rest of his life in solitude, doing research on the sciences of motion and strength of materials. As opposed to Aristotle's, Galileo's approach to cosmology is fundamentally spatial and geometric. Furthermore, he saw there was no point in interpreting biblical passage as if they were scientific statements of any kind.

In any case, settlers who left Europe and headed towards the New World were fleeing Copernicus's and Galileo's findings, which is to say that many of them were narrow-minded, conservative, incapable of seeing beyond the surface of things. They refused the idea that *what is (being)* is bigger than history, for *being* is indestructible, invincible, immutable:

14 refusing the news that what is

refusing, not choosing, they came –

came with them.

15 is bigger than history. Time

though some of them chose, and still choose

And when they arrived,

16 is the earth and the sky turning imperfect circles,

to believe they are chosen.

they kept running.

17 not God on his tall parade to the end of the line.

Time is the sky and the earth, dancing.

History is no more than a mechanical succession of events linked by a cause-effect relationship, whereas time is more mysterious at heart. Two new definitions of time are formulated at the end of the first part of Movement I of the *Suite*, by the first and second voices in the poem respectively. According to the first definition, history is no master plan designed or governed by God, and time is the imperfect circles implicit in the dance of the earth and the sky, which is a subtle reference to Copernicus's and Galileo's astronomical findings. The second definition embraces directly a mythical explanation: "*Time is the sky and the earth, dancing.*" There are echoes here from *The Blue Roofs of Japan*: "*the earthy asymmetry of the world*" and "*the world with its welcome imperfections,*" we read in section I. Fear is the only piece of luggage emigrants took with them into the New World. Once there, they kept fleeing, but their fear was with them all the time.

2 · Staves 18-41

The second part of Movement I opens with a long incantatory litany of names of places – Cuzco, Technotitlan, Acoma, Kitwancool, Písac, Tikal, Chaco Canyon, Ttanuu, Frijoles, Gila. What all these geographical spaces have in common is that they are ancient Aztec, Mayan, Inca, and North American sites or settlements – places once populated by the people native to the land. They were not coming from beyond the sea, fleeing from the beginning of the modern era of scientific discoveries; they had lived in the New World long before the immigrants set foot on their continent. Furthermore, they had something else in common: the same spiritual sense of belonging to the earth and among the other living and non-living creatures that lived in it; the same ability to see the world as a sacred place where gods and goddesses and spirit beings lived in the mountains, in the trees and rivers, in the animals and in the sun itself; and a similar sense of reverence and gratitude for everything the earth gave them for their sustenance and survival. In other words, they all could breathe through their feet and pay the world the ecological attention it deserved from them in exchange for what they received in abundance. Whatever fruits they collected or whatever animals they killed, they did so just for survival in a world where eating and being eaten was part of a natural cycle. They did not destroy, however, just for the sake of destruction, or to replace natural things by man-made artificial things that deteriorated the ecological equilibrium of the world.

The relentless passage of time and the devastating effects of colonization erased much of the pristine legacy of all these aboriginal peoples. What the speaking voices of the poem now record as they listen to the desolate landscape is the result of the devastation: "*the churches squat on the ruins*" (stave 19), a most subtle reference to the impact of Christianization and the civilizing mission the white man saw it was his duty to fulfill in the New World; and "*visitors gnawing at the moth-eaten light / with mechanical eyes*" (staves 21-22), mere tourists unable to really hear, see and understand what these ancient sites represent. "*Whole towns are trussed up in the webs / of our fences and parking lots, / guardrails, turnstiles, interpretive signs.*" (staves 23-25), which suggests the artificiality of modern cityscapes and of man-made interpretive labels imposed on these ancient sites. Because so many layers of artificial signs have been superimposed on the original sites, there is now no way of reaching to the pristine truth these people were able to touch and breathe: "*The truth predigested in place, like a caught / moth, through the alchemical weight of our hands*", says the second voice, and "*The truth is broken like bread / in our hands*", says the third voice. Modern man is further removed from this form of organic truth old people could experience firsthand on this same ground called the New World. Hence, in his vindication of the immense value of the oral literatures of North America, Bringhurst has complained time and again that most

Americans are tourists in what has been their homeland for centuries. They are not aware that the ancestral legacy of their world is older and richer than they think, including an amazing range of oral literatures composed in many different languages that seem to be overlooked by university curricula, literary histories and so-called official institutions.

Set side by side with the names of these ancient sites, located along the American continent, are the names of modern cities or metropolis – Denver, Los Angeles, Vancouver, Toronto, Boston. Though far apart in time and in space, all these places constellated by the poet into his *Suite* become one and the same: all places are one, co-present or simultaneous in time and space in a polyphonic literary work that sings of *what is* as being “*what is timeless caught in time.*” Bringham is here following admiringly in the footsteps of another Modernist master, T. S. Eliot, who, in section V, “What the Thunder Said”, of *The Waste Land* (1922), said: “What is the city over the mountains / Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air / Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal.”¹⁷ The same sense of unreality pervades the staves where the three speaking voices visit the desanctified places of the modern urban spaces. What they record is the negative effects of pollution in modern cities and the deadening effects for the soul of humans. Echoes from the theme of life-in-death and death-in-life, which is pervasive in Eliot’s literary landmark, are also heard between the lines. In this respect, staves 28-36 bring to the reader’s/hearer’s attention at least three fundamental issues: (1) the advance of pollution in modern cities is now unstoppable and fatal: “*the motorized spirochetes*¹⁸ *move on their cancerous business, / the tumors of asphalt and neon enlarge*” (first voice), illuminating words from which we deduce that humans are the cancer or tumour damaging the Earth itself; (2) the urban scenery is a space dominated by death: “*the living are dead and the dead pretend / to be living*”, says the (female) second voice in the form of an epiphany-like moment of revelation, having spoken aloud a long litany of names of different places; and (3) there is a certain kind of beauty in cities when seen from the distance, from an aircraft, for instance: “*Hour by hour the tumors enlarge, / and their beauty is visible from the aircraft*¹⁹, / *like that of bacilli seen through the microscope in the lab*”, claims the third voice, which reminds us of humans’ desire to see into things far away in the distance (macroscopic realities) through

¹⁷ See T.S. Eliot, *Selected Poems*, London: Faber and Faber, 1982, p. 65.

¹⁸ ‘Spirochete’ is the name of a group of bacteria that are damaging to humans. See the entry on ‘spirochete’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 26, p. 159691: “Spirochete, also spelled spirochaete, any of a group of spiral-shaped bacteria, some of which are serious pathogens for humans, causing such diseases as syphilis, yaws, Lyme disease, and relapsing fever. [...] Spirochetes are characteristically found in a liquid environment (e.g., mud and water, blood and lymph).”

¹⁹ These words on the beauty of the Earth as seen from the distance inevitably remind us of the opening words of the first (female) voice, Schroeder’s, in Glenn Gould’s *The Idea of North* (1967), the first part of the *Solitude Trilogy*: “I was fascinated by the country as such. I flew north from Churchill to Coral Harbour on Southampton Island at the end of September. Snow had begun to fall and the country was partially covered by it. Some of the lakes were frozen around the edges but toward the centre of the lakes you could still see the clear, clear water. And flying over this country, you could look down and see various shades of green in the water and you could see the bottom of the lakes, and it was a most fascinating experience. I remember I was up in the cockpit with the pilot, and I was forever looking out, left and right, and I could see ice floes over the Hudson’s [*sic*] Bay and I was always looking for a polar bear or some seals that I could spot but, unfortunately, there were none. 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, and the further north we went the more monotonous it became. There was nothing but snow and, to our right, the waters of Hudson’s [*sic*] Bay. Now this was my impression during the winter, but I also flew over the country during the spring and the summer, and this I found intriguing, because, then I could see the outline of the lakes and the rivers and, on the tundra, huge spots of moss or rock – there is hardly any vegetation that one can spot from the air... (*fade*) It is most difficult to describe. It was complete isolation, this is very true...” As in Bringham’s *Suite*, there are several interpenetrated voices, speaking simultaneously, in Gould’s polyphonic work and so the words quoted above have been excerpted from what looks like a nonstop flow of human voice, for Gould’s work is also a moving tribute to the human voice.

telescopes, or deep inside the material texture of things (microscopic particles) through microscopes. “*The distance that brings / what we do into focus / shrinks and increases...*”, says the first voice eloquently. In any case, quoting isolated clusters of words or sentences from Bringham’s poem does not do justice at all to the complexity of the work as a whole. It is indeed very difficult to quote isolated fragments from the *Suite* because the voices are inextricably linked to one another in what they say. All three voices have their separate agendas, as it were, but they have got a contribution to make to the global message that progressively unfolds throughout the poem.

This second part closes with a new juxtaposition between the ancient sites on American ground and the modern metropolis of asphalt and neon. Some odd words may need elucidation, in fact. “*The path / from the kiva²⁰ is empty*” says the first voice; “*The roads between city and country are filled. / The way out and back from the vision / is empty.*”, says the second voice. Among the Pueblo Indians, the kiva is a sacred space for rituals; at its very heart resides the tribe’s connection with the Earth in the form of a simple hole excavated in the ground, symbolic of the people’s origin. Visions of things unseen were possible in the kiva as the male members of the tribe gathered for their rituals, but nowadays those visions have vanished for good and the path leading to the kiva is not trodden by humans anymore. By contrast, the asphalt roads linking little villages and towns with the big cities are filled with cars taking people from one place to another. The conceptualization of space is completely different now: the Pueblo Indians needed only to be reminded that they belonged to the Earth in that simple hole in the centre of the rounded kiva, a representation of the earth itself in miniature. Modern humans spend their time running from one place to another (and they keep running), though they do not know exactly where they are heading towards any longer. Urbanscapes are dehumanized spaces to which even animals do not dare come close: “*Four-wheeled kachinas²¹ live year around in the town. / Therefore the deer remain dead, / and the pronghorn are spooked by fences.*” Kachinas were ancestral fertility spirits among the Pueblo Indians. They acted as intermediaries between the realms of the human and the divine, and they made themselves visible in the traditional rituals where the men of the tribe would wear their masks and be temporarily transformed under their influence. In the modern urban world, there seems to be no rooms for kachinas (they are motorized as well) and the American antelope found from Alberta to northern Mexico, the pronghorn, is scared to death by the fences humans build to protect themselves from the

²⁰ See the entry on ‘kiva’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 16, p. 9278: “Kiva, subterranean ceremonial and social chamber built by the Pueblo Indians of the southwestern United States, particularly notable for the colourful mural paintings decorating the walls. The traditional round shape of the earliest kivas contrasts with square and rectangular forms common in residential Pueblo architecture. [...] A small hole in the floor of the kiva (sometimes carved through a plank of wood, sometimes dug into the earth) served as the symbolic place of origin of the tribe; the Hopi word for this element is *sipapu*. Although a kiva’s most important purpose is as a venue for rituals, kivas can also be used for political meeting and casual gatherings of the men of the village. Women perform their rituals in other venues and rarely enter kivas. Kiva murals depict sacred figures or scenes from the daily life of the tribe. The style of these paintings tends to be geometric, with an emphasis on straight rather than curved lines and with the entire mural laid out in a linear pattern around the walls. The murals are painted on adobe plaster with warm, colourful pigments made from the rich mineral deposits of the area. Old murals are frequently plastered over in order to paint new designs on top...”

²¹ See the entry on ‘kachina’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 15, p. 9005: “Kachina, Hopi *qacina*, in Pueblo Indian religious practice, any of more than 500 ancestral spirits often associated with fertility who act as intermediaries between the human and the divine. Kachinas reside with the tribe for half of each year and allow themselves to be seen by the community of the men who perform a traditional ritual while wearing kachina masks. The being depicted on the mask is thought to be present with the performer, temporarily transforming him. Kachinas are also depicted in small, carved-wood dolls, which are presented to children both as playthings and as devices to teach the identities of the kachinas and the symbolism of their costumes. The identity of the spirit is depicted primarily by the applied color and elaborate feather, leather, and, occasionally, fabric ornamentation of its mask.”

wild. Humans feel no longer at home, or so it seems. The natural world has to be subdued, dominated, controlled, domesticated, reduced to comprehensible human terms, even if this implies destroying it in the process. And history is now defined as “*a clock ticking, a blade / sliding between the earth and our shoes*” (staves 40-41) – i.e., history is the progressive alienation of humankind with respect to the world of the non-human. That blade prevents humans from breathing through their feet, from feeling their ancestral link to the Earth. Since the time of the late Neolithic in Mesopotamia, man’s odyssey on earth has been one of relentless conquest and egoistic management of the planet’s resources. The shift from a society of hunters and gatherers to one of herders and farmers had profound implications in our way of relating to the world. The domestication of animals through ranching, of plants through farming, and of language through writing was the expression of the conviction that man had an inalienable right to stand on the summit or pinnacle of creation and to dominate over all other creatures. Progressively, over the centuries, the world ceased to be a sacred place where humans and gods could live side by side in acceptable harmony. *The other* (the wild) became a menace, something to be subdued and exploited. The story of this overexploitation of the earth’s resources is precisely the concern of the third part of Movement I of the *Suite*.

3 · Staves 42-60

In the third part of Movement I of the *Suite*, readers/hearers are plunged into the middle of the Amazonian Basin, with its gigantic rain-forest and immense river. “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,”²² says Bringhurst in the afterword essay to *New World Suite No. 3*. The Amazon is thought to be the lung of the entire world, because there are still enough trees there, untouched by humans’ greedy hands, giving us the oxygen we need. But the thematic concern of staves 42 through 60 is precisely the systematic rape of the earth’s resources in the hands of man. The male first and third voices stress the fact that the planet is almost on the brink of environmental apocalypse, precisely because of humans’ mismanagement and abuse of the earth’s richness: “*All over the world, the earth / is tortured for money.*” Widespread deforestation (the systematic cutting of trees for the making of paper and other related products) and mineral extraction in pitmines (the systematic rape of the earth’s entrails in search of metal and mineral till they are empty) are only two instances of man’s abuse of the earth’s generosity. Thus, the first voice speaks of “*the ashes still warm and the blood still fresh / in the logging slash, and the featureless mud / of the goldfields pulped with a high-pressure hose*” (staves 43-45), while the third voice speaks of “*rivers going bankrupt*” in the Amazon because so much unbearable pollution. This spot on earth is no longer the pristine place it used to be; man’s greed is invincible, his advance unstoppable.

With the realistic statements of the male voices contrasts vividly the intense lyricism of the female voice. First, it speaks of the mother of rivers (the Amazon) as having “*thousands of rivers for mothers,*” and then it dwells on the different ways of torturing the earth and everything in it that humans have devised over time: *homicide* (the killing of humans by humans), *genocide* (the killing of whole human communities by humans), *fluvicide* (the killing of rivers by humans), *terricide* (the killing of the earth by humans), *matricide* (the killing of the mother by a son or a daughter), *parricide* (the killing of the father by a son or a

²² See Robert Bringhurst’s “Afterword: Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue”, *New World Suite Number Three. Four Movements of Three Voices* (2005), pp. 13-14.

daughter). They are all variations on the same theme: they are all forms of killing. The invention of words like *fluvicide* and *terricide* is based on a relationship of analogy with the others. All of them are of Latin origin; all of them have something in common: the agent of the act of killing is always a human being. It is very sad, but it is nonetheless the truth. The female voice is puzzled by these euphonic words and wonders what they mean “*when we say them,*” as if to suggest that we humans are not well aware what they mean, as if we were absolutely carelessly in our handling of words in our voice. “*This is not history,*” proclaims the first male voice, as if he were to abjure its own humanity (as if thinking to himself “I do not want to be human anymore if this is what it means to be human”); “*This is the whipped / earth ceasing to whimper, / closing her mask.*”, says the third male voice without hesitating for a microsecond.

The real, *what is*, is visible most of the time if we dare open our eyes and ears, but “*In our presence / the real is frequently speechless.*” *Being* speaks its own language, for humans have no monopoly on meaning or language even they pretend they do. Meaning is prior to language and to speech, for *every single thing in the world wants to mean something* – otherwise, it would be a blank space, devoid of sense, floating aimlessly amid the world. Language allows humans to communicate with one another (that is what it is essentially meant for), but also it allows them to verbalize their own findings and insights into the ultimate nature of reality. This is one of the reasons why language is most quintessentially itself in poetry or in philosophy or in science, because there we see language in a state of purity and precision, striving hard to be itself and to capture the essence of what we see, what we touch and what we hear in the world. However, *being* turns speechless in our presence, especially if we bear in mind that humans tend lately to come close only to those things from which they can draw a material benefit. The real becomes opaque, dumb, speechless in the presence of humans, which is uncomfortable to it. However, the real (*being*) is one, indestructible and immutable, but also plural and mortal at the same time, even if this may sound paradoxical:

52

What is is an idea

What is is an idea recurrent in time

53 **recurrent in time, not**

and there is no end to it:

What is keeps repeating. What is

54 **your apocalypse, not your jihad,**

not your apocalypse, not your jihad,

is an idea recurrent in time.

55 not Armaggedon. What is is mortal

and not Armaggedon.

56 but plural.

What does that mean, Armaggedon?

The death of what is is the wet dream

It is no random choice or happy coincidence at all that the words *apocalypse*, *jihad* and *Armaggedon* should be tessellated here into a meaningful whole. *Apocalypse* and *Armaggedon* are both words used in the Bible (the holy book for Christians and, in part, for Jews), whereas *jihad* comes from Islam. All three have something fundamental in common, apart from their being lifted from the discourse of religion: they are words that evoke catastrophic or extreme situations that involve some kind of violence. Thus, *apocalypse* is *the end of the world* as described in the book of Apocalypse in the Bible (though it also means, more neutrally, “a situation causing very serious damage and destruction”), and *Armaggedon* refers in the Bible to *a battle between good and evil at the end of the world* (or, in general, “a terrible war that could destroy the world”). By contrast, *jihad* in Islam means *a spiritual struggle within yourself to stop yourself breaking religious or moral laws*, and it also denotes *a holy war fought by Muslims to defend Islam*. This is what the dictionary teaches us about the precise meaning of these words. (One has to be careful and precise when handling words, either orally or in writing. *Littera scripta manet*, said Horace some 20 centuries ago, but *spoken words also remain*.) Now, *what is* has nothing to do with war, struggle or violence. “*What is is an idea recurrent in time*,” even if it is mortal and plural. Regardless of humans’ wars and attempts at imposing their own religious creeds on one another throughout history, *being* keeps on existing in unity and diversity. That *being* is plural means that it takes on or assumes different guises: all things, living and non-living, in this world are distinctly unique, and yet they are a constituent part of a boundless continuum of existence. The pre-Socratics knew this elemental truth. However, *being*, in the perishable forms of existence it leads, is mortal too. Deep at its irreducible core, *being* survives in spite of the passage of time, though. “*The death of what is is the wet dream / of impotent men and of overdosed children, / starved for the sight of the bright knife of the world...*”, says the third voice in the poem. The knife stands for money, power and comfort for greedy human beings. Sensible and sensitive members of the species *homo sapiens* that are aware that they belong among a larger scheme of things (that has been unfolding over time and that will keep being recurrent over time) understand that being is invincible and that we are an indistinguishable part of it.

4 · Staves 61-99

The fourth part of Movement I of the *Suite* concerns memories of a village in northern Manitoba (staves 61-75) and dwells on the concept of the plurality of *being* and the plurality of worlds (staves 76-99). The little village in northern Manitoba is the setting of what begins as a meditation on the perpetual torture of the earth everywhere. The long litany of

geographical places begun in part 3, where names of ancient sites on the American continent turned up side by side with names of modern big cities and names of pitmines, still goes on to encompass the world in its entirety: *“In Brazil... Indonesia... in the Philippines... / Chile... Ontario... Manitoba... / the limbs and the stumps / of people and trees,”* says the third voice. Rape of the earth is universal. To make this even more explicit, in a place called “God’s Narrows” children are seen playing tag in ditches, amid heterogeneous masses of rubbish, *“dodging the corpses / of dogs and the used plastic diapers / and Kleenex and kotex and broken machines.”* The contrast is dramatic enough, for children pursue their innocent games amid the debris of a civilization that knows of nothing but systematic mismanagement of the planet’s resources. The material misery in which these children (and their parents, we presume) live is further enhanced by the simple fact that for their basic necessities they depend on food that *“has come 2000 miles in bottles and cans”*, on bread, *“the colour / and odour of old snow,”* brought to them in cellophane, on music coming from Tennessee, and on stories that emanate not from the living soil of their own land but are collected instead in a book *“from a place without caribou, moose, wolf, lynx”* or *“without a whiskeyjack, black spruce, beaver or bear”* (the Holy Book or Bible), which urges them to believe in another world, in an afterlife. The second (female) voice summarizes the ineffable misery in these moving words:

*Weaned from the earth, we are fed
on the eggwhite and sugar of visions
of life after death in a different world,
not on the meat of the knowledge that this
is that different world.*

“*Dead words*”, says the third voice. This is what these people are being fed on. Instead of being taught how to enjoy this life on earth, they are made to believe in the delusion of an afterlife in an afterworld, when we all know there is no world other than this one. That is nourishing food, the meat of true knowledge, not the sugar of unreal visions. However, the true heart of the fourth part of the first movement is found in staves 76-99, which contain a profound meditation on the plurality and indestructibility of being. In the service of clarity in our critical analysis, we will divide the meditation into five fundamental and inextricably linked ideas which are all expressed by the three speaking voices simultaneously:

- (1) The plurality of worlds looks like an indisputable truth, but each speaking voice offers a different point of view. Thus, the first (male) voice affirms with (self-)confidence and absolute conviction: *“I do not know how many / worlds, past, present and future, exist. / I know there are many.”* This means that the world is plural, not monolithic, and that there are innumerable worlds because the same world we live in is changing all the time, has not ceased changing since the beginning of time. The second (female) voice is more tentative in the way it tackles the matter and so asks several rhetorical questions (*“How many worlds? / With how many faces? / And how many trees, / full of how many voices?”*), which are an expression of gratitude and humility in the face of the awe-inspiring grandeur of the world. Finally, the third voice goes straight to the heart of the matter by vehemently affirming that there is no other world than this Earth of ours: *“Are there many worlds? / I know, / nevertheless there is no other world / than this, with its different faces, its trees / full of voices, its eyes like trap doors. / There is no other world.”*
- (2) Humankind’s capacity for destruction is invincible and its hunger unappeasable. *“What is it not what we have built; / it is what we have not yet found time / to destroy”*, says the first voice in words that are strongly reminiscent of section VI of *Conversations with a Toad*: *“It is good news, toad: that no one can list / what exists in the world. But not good enough. / Named*

or unnamed, if it lives, we can kill it.” The dichotomy at the heart of the *Suite*’s words is between man-made things and natural things, but also between humankind’s amazing capacity for creation and destruction alike. Creating is always a passionate act that involves attention, care and love, and it takes time to accomplish great deeds; destroying, by contrast, is the result of an irrational impulse and the expression of hate. Humans’ desire for power, money and comfort makes them forget that they are inflicting an unbearable pain on many others – on the living creatures with which we share the earth: “*This hunger for life / everlasting will kill us. And kill / many others. Trout, mountain hemlock, / deer, mice, deer.*”, says the first voice again.

- (3) *Being* is indestructible, though, and beauty will manage to survive somehow, in spite of humankind’s attempts at destroying the world. Again, the first voice argues: “*Being will be here. / But this beauty that visits us now will be gone.*” These words recall these other words from section VII of *Conversations with a Toad*: “We will not destroy / being, toad. We will not. But I think / we will overreligiously clean it.” And yet, with vital optimism, the second (female) voice is convinced that “*This beauty, like all beauty, / is mortal, but beauty will be here.*” We cannot kill beauty any more than we can kill being. Even if it is ephemeral, the idea of beauty, the original and the real, will always survive in one way or another. Bringhurst’s words are then a hymn to the persistence of *being* in spite of the destruction of the world and a moving celebration of the mortal beauty that pervades the whole earth, with its *welcome imperfections* and *earthly asymmetry*.
- (4) *What is* is one and many at the same time, i.e. *being* is plural. “*We are one, even though / we are many. / The size of the heart / is the number of creatures.*”, says the second (female) voice. Everything (every single creature on earth) is connected to everything else along a continuum of existence. The first voice essays another variation on the same idea: “*The number of ideas of being / is many, though not beyond counting. / The size of the mind / is the number of species of creatures.*” The size of the heart and of the mind is boundless, immense, for it must encompass all living creatures, the others, for life is sacred, and that is out of the question. Again, the third voice affirms the same: “*The size of the mind is the number / of species of creatures.*” It is good news that no one can list what exists in the world, said the voice of *homo sapiens* in section VI of *Conversations with a Toad*. And the first voice now affirms: “*And I do not know how to measure / the depth and extent of what is in the world.*” The richness of the world is inexhaustible, almost beyond counting, and words fall short of accomplishing an exhaustive taxonomy or classification of everything that exists.
- (5) The real is also invisible and is populated by gods. “*What we cannot see must be / equally many. Zero and one are two instants, two gifts, not two answers.*”, says the second voice. And the first voice claims: “*I think that when counting the gods, zero and one / are two answers equally useless.*” And the third: “*How many gods can you name? That is the size / of your view of the world.*” Not everything that truly matters is visible. *L’essentiel est invisible aux yeux*, says Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in his classic *The Little Prince*. That the world is a sacred space was a truism for ancient peoples who still breathed through their feet, and also for visionaries and mystics of all times. Bringhurst says that gods are homeless nowadays, wandering without home or destination in our world. We humans choose not to see their presence in all natural elements (mountains, trees, rocks, rivers, oceans, animals, the sun, the sky) any more, and we are impoverished as a result. But our incapacity to see them does not preclude or cancel their existence. The realm of the invisible is full of gods and goddesses that want to be seen or felt by us humans. Maybe if we cleanse our senses and our will, we might be able to *see*. How many gods are there?, we may ask. To say that there is none (zero) is to deny the existence of what we cannot see, which is logically or rationally indefensible. To say that there is only one god is probably the result of our cultural upbringing in a community of monotheistic religions like Christianity, Islam or Judaism. To say that there are innumerable gods and goddesses wherever you turn to look is the expression of polytheistic belief found among ancient civilizations that were truly prepared to acknowledge the sacredness of the real and to believe in what their eyes could not see in the realm of the visible. The size of

our view of the world depends then on the degree to which we are prepared to see the divine in the minutest details of this rich and inexhaustible world of ours – a miracle of beauty and perfection.

5 · Staves 100-116

In its conciseness and lyricism, the fifth part (staves 100-116) constitutes a tribute to the beauty implicit in life and in death too. First, the emphasis is laid on the fact that we humans live in an irreplaceable world. The first voice insists that “*What is is an idea recurrent in time*”, which is a way of acknowledging once again the persistence of *being* in a world systematically under attack or in peril. “*What is is the timeless caught in time*,” the female voice said in previous parts. Now, the speaking voices hit on the insight that the world is unique and beautiful in every single way: “*There are no blueprints / or duplicates elsewhere*” and that “*Descriptions / and photographs will not do for rebuilding the world.*” The experience of *what is* cannot even be fully grasped or captured through the medium of songs or stories. Precisely at this point the poem turns *meta-poetic* for a while: it becomes a probing reflection on the nature of poetry. All three interpenetrating voices speak aloud almost exactly the same words, and thus they converge into one meditation which consists of three little steps for the mind:

- (1) The nature of stories. “*The stories are maps*”, say both the second and third voices. Maps are a formalization or humanization of something which is real – the world with its earthy asymmetry, with its manifold imperfections, with its subtle geographical accidents, and with its mountains, valleys, rivers, lakes, seas and oceans. Maps do not exhaust or replace reality, they put it into a manageable piece of paper and make it understandable or comprehensible in purely human terms. Being a gross simplification or a stylization of the world, maps are not completely reliable, and yet in Bringhurst’s words in the *Suite*, maps hide a wealth of meaning. If stories are conceived as being maps, then they are maps of the real and shed light on it. Mythmaking is a universal compulsion, found in oral literatures all around the world, but myths are not naïve stories dealing with relations and interactions between creatures – living and non-living, or human and non-human – sharing the same world. Like science or philosophy, mythology is a complex ecology of thought that penetrates the essence of reality, that seeks to understand and account for what humans find in the grandeur of a world which is a true mystery. If by *stories* the speaking voices of the *Suite* mean *myths*, for instance the myths told by the Haida mythtellers Ghandl or Skaay and transcribed by the linguist John Swanton in Haida Gwaii more than a century ago and translated into English by Bringhurst in his trilogy on Haida oral literature almost one century later, then it does make perfect sense to claim that stories are maps that help us navigate through and across and into the real. In their concern with universals, myths are accurate, coherent and musical renderings of *what is*.
- (2) The nature of songs. According to the first voice, “*Songs are not maps, / they are caches and trails.*”, and “*Song is edible / thought but not seedgrain,*” according to the second voice. Songs are a pleasure to eat, they taste good on one’s own tongue, but they are not maps of the real. What they offer us instead is *caches and trails*, ways of finding alternative ways of reaching into the real or ways of touching *what is*. If stories are myths tessellated into a coherent *Gestalt* called mythology, then songs are poems, things made by the heart and the mind of humans too, but of a very different nature. There is edible thought that you can suck out of a poem, which is made of words and something else. Poems give us useful partial clues and intuitive insights into reality, but *not a total map of what is*. That is something that only myths seem to be able to accomplish. But we humans do need the music and the nourishing pleasure than song, like dance, can and does give us.

- (3) The role of singers. “*The singers / bring in the hands of their voices / thought like dried meat / and thought like the light it is given / by water and oil.*” Poems are more the product of oral composition than of writing – that is an essential conviction of Bringhurst’s. Poems are born in the human voice and truly themselves when spoken aloud by a single voice in monophonic poems or, even better, by several voices in polyphonic poems like the *Suite*. Singers or poets are visionary humans, i.e. they can see into recesses of reality that most people would simply not notice or pay attention to. Poetry begins in an act of humble attention and wonder in the face of the mystery of *what is*. If there is no curiosity, no act of primordial attention, then poems do not have a true chance to be born. Therefore, poets are singers who handle thought with their own voices, and it is in the hands of their voices that they bring with themselves the gift of what they have found. Bringhurst himself spend a period of his life near Tzuhalem’s Mountain and what he could salvage from his firsthand experience of solitude amid the mountains was, among other things, *Tzuhalem’s Mountain*, a sonata in three movements and a present for his readers. Poems are his gift to the world, he says in one of the prose statements accompanying one of his poetry books. The thought he brings in his poems does not replace real experience (for life is most itself when lived in the first person); it is dried meat, still nourishing to our exhausted bodies, though. But he also brings “*thought like the light it is given by water and oil*” – sharp ideas about the real, rendered into naked words, unadorned, with the simplicity of water or oil.

The closing staves (110-116) of the fifth part celebrate the pleasure of being physically alive in a world humans can see, hear, touch and enjoy in its inexhaustible richness. When death comes, humans dissolve into mother earth with the perfect naturalness with which one must approach death, the fair price one must pay for having lived on earth. The first (male) voice speaks in these terms:

I return to the earth’s lap
all that remains of all she has given me: meals
for the eye, the belly, the hand – and what held them:
ruined meat,
the crazy panpipes of the bones
that sang when certain women touched me
and when I touched the world.

With moving humility, the male voice speaking here gives everything back to the earth, for nothing truly belongs to him, not even the meals that have nourished him throughout his life – the nourishing food for his senses – and not even whatever is left of the *ruined meat* of his old body and of the bones that sang when he was being loved by women or when he was loving the world through touch. The bones are an important recurrent motif in Bringhurst’s poetry, and so is the metaphor by which he equates them to musical instruments (*panpipes* in this case). They are the innermost solid part of humans, or, in other words, bones are to the human body what stones or rocks are to the earth. If you are able to feel the presence of the world from deep inside your bones, then you are truly responding to the real with an astonishing maximum of intensity. The same sense of humble gratitude echoes in the words of the second (female) voice: “*I too must return to the earth’s lap, with all / she has given me. Even my children are hers.*” Even her most precious belongings, her children, belong to the earth and so she is ready to give them back. And the third (male) voice says: “*The mind like a mildew jewel, / muscles and bones / crazy for women, crazy for sunlight, / and eyes crazy for water, trees and stones.*” He too must return to the earth’s lap all that is left of him: the jewel-like mind with which he loved the world, the muscles and bones of his tired body, a body that loved women and all the elemental delights in the world – light, water, trees and stones. These are the simple ingredients out of which Bringhurst makes his own poems – “*this music is all about water,*” said one of the voices in *The Blue Roofs of Japan* – and the ones he celebrates with gratitude too.

6 · Staves 117-128

If the fifth part concerns the distinction between songs and stories as well as humans' return to the earth's lap upon death, then the sixth part dwells on a mysterious song that is hidden somewhere – under the sea, under the seacliffs, under the mountain – and that has to be sung back again into visibility or audibility. What this song might be is a mystery at first, but then it makes itself discernible and understandable. It is the song of *being* singing itself audibly for all humans to hear. Now the three voices speak aloud exactly the same words, but the words are arranged differently in their score for a live performance. A subtle reference to the descendants of the early settlers who set foot on the New World is found in the opening clusters of lines: "*The children of those who cross over / the water must wander.*" and "*Their children's children / must swim through the ground.*" Which possibly means that they are still wanderers in what has been their homeland for centuries now and that they are forced to swim unnaturally through the ground, and not in water, because they are still unable to see and understand the mystery implicit in this vast land which America is.

Then the core of this little piece of music is a lyrical tribute to the song of *being*. There is a song that is elusive and tries to evade humans' presence, probably because they do not longer know how to listen to it with due respect and gratitude. It seeks to hide itself wherever it might not be found by the inquisitive and destructive hands of men. With the passage of time it has receded into the corners of the world; each of three speaking voices provides a different location – under the seacliffs, under the sea, under the mountain, back into the hills. Now this song is to be found only in those remote hills, and when the song sings, the hills dance. This happens only when no one is looking, but humans do still have a chance to join the hills in their dancing, if the hills are happy and they dance too. Curiously enough, it is the female voice that unveils the existence of this song, and of "*the story that tells where to find it,*" for songs are caches and trails and stories are maps of the world. "*But there is a song I thought you should hear,*" says the female voice, and then she goes on:

122

and a story that tells where to find it.

I thought I remembered a song and a story.

123 Year after year the song sinks deeper

I thought you should hear it.

124 under the seacliffs. Year after year

The song has gone under the seacliffs.

The song has gone under the sea. [sinks in in SP]

125 **it sings itself farther back into the hills.**

Year after year it sings itself farther

And year after year

126 **And the hills dance,**

under the mountain. And year after year

it sings itself farther back into the hills.

127 **but only when no one**

we dance it back out again.

The hills dance **[And the hills dance in *SP*]**

128 **is looking.**

If the hills dance, we dance too.

only so long as no one is watching.

There is a redeeming sense of hope in the closing staves of Movement I, in spite of the title, “All the Desanctified Places”. It might seem that the Earth is on the brink of ecological apocalypse, that humans do not care about the well-being of earth itself any more, but there is still a chance to redeem ourselves by preserving our only home, by relearning to listen to the inaudible song of *being*, which wants to be heard amid so much dissonant noise.

MOVEMENT II · Who Is the Fluteplayer?

The second movement of *New World Suite No. 3* is set in the Hopi country. Counted among the Pueblo Indians, the Hopi have lived for centuries in northeastern Arizona in what looks like a hostile environment. Since 1882 they have lived in what is called the Hopi Indian Reservation, which is included within the greater Navajo Reservation. The word *hopi* means ‘peaceful, mannered, civilized, polite people’, and, unlike the Navajo, the Hopi are indeed a peaceful, sedentary people that adapted to the harsh, dry environment of their land in relative seclusion for a long time, in spite of the Spanish explorers’ first skirmishes into their territory. They learnt to live from whatever the earth had to give them in the form of corn (the bread of life to the Hopi) for farming and animals for ranching and hunting. Life was always a hardy struggle for existence, with water as a scarce and precious essential, and so rain-making rituals were fundamental to the Hopi’s survival. Given the richness of Hopi culture in general, it is no wonder that Benjamin Lee Whorf, the famous linguist, should have paid attention to their language. In the 1930s Whorf seized the

characteristics of the verbs of the Hopi language to illustrate the so-called “Whorfian hypothesis”: language closely governs our experience of reality. The Hopi language frames the way in which the Hopi talk about their universe. The same holds true, in Whorf’s view, for all individual languages and people around the world. Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset was also convinced that this was the case: our mind perceives the world through the unique prism of our language, which strongly conditions the way we perceive reality. Strong roots have ensured that the tree of human language be able to grow innumerable branches over time. The roots of the tree is the universal faculty genetically ingrained in human beings to learn to communicate through one or several human languages, and the branches are the languages spoken by all humans throughout the history of all the different civilizations that have existed and will exist upon Earth. Robert Bringhurst himself would speak of *the tree of meaning* instead, not of *the tree of language*, because meaning is larger than language, and communication is not the sole prerogative of humans. Everything in this universe *means* – i.e., participates in the gigantic reservoir of meaning and wants to make itself discernible to the others in one way or another.

In their intellectual and emotional confrontation with the world, the Hopi resorted to mythology to impose some kind of order on the universe. Like science or philosophy, mythology constitutes another invaluable tool when it comes to tackling and making sense of the complexities of reality. Subject to surface changes and stable as to the irreducible core of meaning at its heart, the living mythology of the Hopi is deeply ingrained in the fabric of their everyday life. The foundations of their mythology are simple enough: everything has a being or spirit of its own, every form of life is sacred, and everything is connected to everything else in the indestructible spiritual unity of all animate life. As we shall see below, echoes from the Hopi’s mythology are heard between the lines in the second, *andante* movement of Bringhurst’s *Suite*. Consisting of two distinct parts, the overall plan of the whole movement is crystal-clear from the start. On the one hand, the first part (staves 1-20) resonates with powerful echoes from the Hopi’s worldview – a universe made of such elemental things as mountains, people, animals, trees, birds and gods – and recreates a mythical account of the origins of humankind (a creation myth or cosmogony) in which the earth marries first the sky and then the sea, which is strongly reminiscent, for instance, of other such cosmogonies as the one related by Hesiod in his *Theogony* in ancient Greece. On the other hand, the second part (staves 21-52) is more complex in that it juxtaposes three closely connected stories that tell of a constellation in the sky, of a primordial darkness somewhere in the underworld dreaming or thinking of all the creatures on Earth, and of the marriage of the sun and the moon. In the end, we learn that the flute player is no other than the trickster Coyote, one of the sons to the sun and the moon along with the twins (the little war gods). Throughout the whole movement, the language is kept simple, musical and lyrical; the thought is profound, and the commitment to giving voice to a necessary ecological awareness that finds its ancestral roots in the way the Hopi related to Mother Earth is plain. That is but one of the many lessons the Hopi can teach us if we dare listen, if we have got the time and the inclination to cleanse our senses and our will.

1 · Staves 1-20

In the opening staves of “Who Is the Fluteplayer?” we are plunged in the middle of a recognizable landscape, that of the country of the Hopi, located in northeastern Arizona. In the framework of the mythical worldview embraced by the Hopi, the whole universe is teeming with spirits and beings that participate in the unbroken unity of all life. As in the case of so many native American people, mythology is crucial for the Hopi and storytelling

is a precious and rare gift found only among talented individuals in a society organized in matrilineal clans. A mythology is a complex constellations of myths, rich in symbolical meaning and sharp as a knife in their capacity to penetrate the essence of the world. Thus, mythology is the carrier and preserver of the most immaterial part of tribal culture, an ecology of living thought and a complex prism through which the people sees into the real, which is both visible and invisible. To the Hopi, everything in the world is alive: to them the unseen world is peopled with a host of beings and everything in nature has its being or spirit. Their belief in the unity of all life and in an animate universe is simply astonishing and admirable. Communion with nature has brought the Hopi to an absolute reverence for the wisdom of the past as preserved in their legends and myths, to a reverent attitude concerning the sacredness and wisdom of trees, clouds, sunlight, and starlight, as well as to a vibrant faith in the subtle order pervading the whole world. These firm beliefs keep the Hopi in harmony with the universe. However, this invaluable body of unwritten literature, born out of oral roots, remains largely unexplored or unknown to academia. It constitutes the very ancestral and pristine precedents of all literature produced on the continent, even if the literatures of European descent written in America since the times of the white man's colonization of the New World have ignored them for a long time as extravagant outpourings of primitive people amazed at the mystery and grandeur of natural phenomena.

In this respect, Robert Bringhurst has vindicated the irreplaceable value of the oral literatures of North America, not just in such seminal essays as *Native American Oral Literatures and the Unity of the Humanities* (1998) or *Prosodies of Meaning: Literary Form in Native North America* (2004), but also in his own work as a translator of Haida oral literature. Bringhurst's interest in Haida culture dates back to his arrival in Vancouver and he has been studying the Haida language on his own since about 1980. In his monumental trilogy devoted to the art of the Haida mythtellers, he produced an in-depth study of Haida literature in *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World* (1999) and he translated the work of Ghandl (*Nine Visits to the Mythworld. Ghandl of the Qayabl Llaanas*, 2000) and Skaay (*Being in Being. The Collected Works of a Master Haida Mythteller. Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay*, 2001). For this purpose, he used the Haida stories collected by American linguist John Swanton during a ten-month visit to Haida Gwaii in 1900. In any case, he needed to gain a firsthand knowledge of the primeval native literatures that had emerged from the living soil where he lived. It could have been any other native language of the many spoken in British Columbia, any other body of oral literature, but in Haida Bringhurst found an invaluable corpus of work that had been ignored for almost a century as well as a rigorous and respectful transcription on the part of Swanton:

“When I found myself living in Vancouver, I wanted to learn more about the native cultures that own this country,” says Bringhurst, who describes the new translations as a more responsible follow-up to *Raven Steals the Light*, a collection of adaptations of Haida stories he co-wrote with Bill Reid in 1984. “I live in this country and I need a tradition to live in. The imported tradition is all very nice, but it's not enough. It doesn't connect me with this place.

“I stayed with Haida largely because of Swanton. He was very respectful and he got a whole literary culture written down on pieces of paper at a time when people thought native Americans didn't have anything to say. And he got names. There's no pretense that these are anonymous folk tales; they're only anonymous if some ass didn't write down the names of the storytellers and Swanton wasn't that kind of guy.” [...]

“I know it sounds suspect whatever way I describe it: If we’re trying to do it for their sake, we’re terrible do-gooders and should get the hell out. If we do it for our sake, we’re in danger of being thieves. But this is the real Canadian literature. It’s oral and belongs to people who don’t speak English or French and who aren’t represented in the libraries and the university curricula. Restoring it is an important task. It has to be done and I’m just trying to do my bit.”²³

If the size of the mind and the heart is the number of species of creatures, then the mind and the heart of the Hopi is truly great. If the size of their view of the world is measured in terms of the gods and goddesses they can number, then theirs is a huge world populated by spirit beings like the Spider Woman or Earth Goddess (Mother Nature), spouse of the Sun and mother of the twin war gods, the figure of the trickster Coyote, or the *kachinas* (supernatural beings in charge over aspects of the natural world, representing anything from rain, animals, stars to the spirits of dead ancestors, and acting as intermediaries between the divine and human realms), all prominent in Hopi mythology. Earth Goddess is particularly relevant in Hopi mythology; she is represented by the *sipapu*, i.e., the literal opening dug in the floor at the centre of the *kiva* (the round ceremonial chamber) standing symbolically for the womb of Mother Earth and representing the hole through which humankind originally emerged from the underworld. The origin or emergence myth of the Hopi claims a common origin for all humans in the interior of the earth, out of a region of darkness and moisture. Fleeing a world of misery and pain where some individuals became disobedient, these early obedient humans managed to escape to a higher plane by climbing a hollow reed or cane that Spider Grandmother caused to grow into the sky, emerging in the fourth world at the *sipapu*. This is then the fourth plane or world on which humankind has existed; all previous three worlds were either destroyed with their wicked people in them or left behind in total chaos. It is said that the emergence was accompanied by singing, possibly by the magic twins, the two little war gods, or by the mocking bird. The hole was never closed and all the germs of living things kept coming out of it into the world aided by some spirit being.

Bringhurst’s evocation of Hopi mythology is done with astonishing linguistic economy in just a few staves (1-10). Thus, to the Hopi there is room in this world for the peaceful coexistence of such elemental things as mountains, sheep, deer, pronghorn, birds, trees, humans and gods. When living creatures die, they are thought to dance “*in their white masks on the polished floors / of the western lakes*”, whereas “*the lords of the mountains*” go to die to the eastern mountains, where the healers, probably the medicine men or shamans of the tribe, dream in solitude. The *white masks* are reminiscent of those much more colourful masks worn by priests in ritual dances where they metamorphose themselves into any of the *kachinas* or spirit beings that populate the world. “*It is silent, except for the bluegreen songs of the birds*”, says the second (female) voice. Like many primitive people, the Hopi believe that when a bird sings, he is weaving a magical spell, and so they have their own songs for grinding the corn, for weaving their blankets and baskets, for planting, for hunting and even for war. The spatial arrangement of the birds and the roots of trees in the world is no random choice: “*Four storeys up are the homes of the birds. / Four storeys down / are the trees’ roots*”, says the second voice, while the third voice insists on the same idea by simply reversing word order. “*In the four directions are oceans*”, says the first voice. The choice of the number four is no happy coincidence either; it is possibly meant as a subtle reference to the fact that this is the fourth world or plane on which the Hopi have lived according to their

²³ See Chris Dafoe’s article entitled “Robert Bringhurst: in ink and paper”, published in *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 24 June 1995: C1–2. The article is based on an interview conducted in Vancouver in April 1995, with reference to the publication of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995).

creation myth. What is truly dissonant and unexpected in this idyllic picture of the world is the presence of pollution ruining the roots of trees: "*Poisons / percolate into them all.*" Nowadays, the Hopi make a living from the natural resources of their environment, but certain companies are granted permission to drill their land in search of oil or gas, or even coal, in exchange for money. We might think that the respectful, ecologically friendly way of relating to their world in the old days has now been replaced by the greedy exploitation of machines and pollution. In the Hopi country, as in the pitmines and deforested Amazon Basin, humans' greed is invincible. It is on its way to becoming one more desanctified place like the ancient sites and modern metropolis mentioned in the first movement of the *Suite*.

In staves 11-20 a mythical account of the origins of humans and animals and plants is given in intensely lyrical language. We are back in the realm of beginnings, for this is a creation myth in miniature, a cosmogony reminiscent of many other cosmogonies found in different cultures around the world. In Christianity this account is found in the Book of Genesis, where God creates the whole universe and everything in it in only six days. The first and second voice are now in charge of pushing this narrative forwards, whereas the third voice keeps on repeating the words of the first and second voice in staves 1-8 almost literally or *verbatim*. The interpenetration of the words of the second (female) and first (male) voice brings a perfectly musical account of the origins of humankind:

Second voice:

The earth was married to the sky,
but he was cold, and so she left him.
She lives now with the sea.
Her sons and her daughters, by both these fathers,
are persons.
Daylight cooks us,
little by little, day by day.
You are cooked, but deer, bear
douglas-fir, the earth, the sun
and snowstorms all stay raw.

*

First voice:

The earth was married to the sky,
but he was cold.
Persons are cooked, and persons are raw.
Cooked persons keep their forms
and uncooked persons change them.
Deer, bear, douglas-fir, the earth, the sun
and snowstorms, for example, all have roots
in the cool darkness. They stay raw.

18 verse lines are sufficient to recreate the essentials of a cosmogony. The earth marries the sky and bears children, but then she leaves the sky because it is cold and bears new children with the sea. Interestingly enough, the sons and daughters of the earth by both the sky and the sea are all called *persons*. Upon closer inspection, one finds that these persons are meant to include both humans and non-humans, which does make sense in the Hopi's view of the world as the expression of an animate unity of life. Therefore, there are two kinds of persons: *cooked persons*, whom daylight cooks progressively through exposure to the sun, and *uncooked or raw persons*, among whom are animals, trees and even snowstorms having their

roots deep inside the cool darkness of the underworld. Furthermore, cooked persons are said to keep their forms stable, whereas uncooked ones are endowed with an astonishing capacity for metamorphosis. In any case, Earth is seen as the mother and origin of all things and creatures, human and non-human alike. An indestructible bond between all creatures and their Mother Earth is acknowledged from the start. As in Hesiod's *Theogony*, Mother Earth is thought to be the feminine principle out of which life springs into existence through her union to the masculine principle embodied first by the sky and then by the sea. *Terra matrix* is reminiscent of Gea, whereas the sky is reminiscent of Uranus, whose genitals Cronos castrates and throws into the sea. The Hopi's is a society of matrilineal clans where women play a crucial role, and so the feminine is prominent in their own myths.

2 · Staves 21-52

The second part of "Who Is the Fluteplayer?" is a bit more complex in the way it tessellates three mythical accounts: the existence of what looks like a knife-shaped constellation up in the sky (staves 21-26), a catalogue of all the creatures on Earth born out of darkness' thinking (staves 27-37), and the story of the marriage of the sun and the moon (staves 38-52). All three stories are subtly interconnected to one another and also to the preceding staves in the first part of "Who Is the Fluteplayer?", as we shall try to demonstrate. To begin with, they are meant to evoke the complex mythological substratum upon which the Hopi built or based their everyday life and conception of the world – a view of the world in which everything is sacred and is charged with the utmost significance. The attitude of the Hopi towards the world is one of utter respect, reverence and gratitude, all of which are values that seem to have been forgotten in *the desanctified places* listed in the first movement of the *New World Suite No. 3*. In addition, the myth of creation told in the immediately preceding staves is somehow resumed firstly in the story of a constellation that is prominent in the sky (the first husband of Mother Earth), and secondly in the way all creatures emerge out of the wet moisture of the underworld, from the womb of the earth. The story of the marriage of the sun and the moon brings the circle to completion and perfection, as it reminds us of the annual calendar by which the Hopi organized their propitiatory rituals and celebrations at decisive moments of the year to ensure rain-making and the fertility of the land from which they made a living.

A number of clues scattered in the opening staves (21-26) lead us to think that the first verse lines concern a mythical account of a constellation whose shape resembles that of a knife. Among the clues are the fact that the knife itself is placed in the sky and that its heart and its eye are stars. But this is only one possible interpretation. Once again all three voices are torn apart from one another for the sake of a practical critical analysis:

First voice:

In the sky is a knife made of stone with no handle.
The morning star is its eye.
The heart of the earth is not in the sky.
The eye of the earth is open,
but it is hidden.

*

Second voice:

It flies
 like a bird.
 The earth's heart beats
 in the motionless stone.
 Thought is light.
 The world's thought is called the sun.

*

Third voice:

The heart of the knife
 is the evening star.

The language used by Bringhurst in this passage is simple and lyrical, and yet the meaning is difficult to pin down. This is gnomic poetry. Both the sky and the earth are somehow endowed with a heart and an eye. The eye of the stone knife of the sky is the morning star; its heart is the evening star. The handle is missing, and yet “*it flies like a bird.*” By contrast, the earth’s heart is not in the sky, but somewhere underground, beating “in the motionless stone”, and the earth’s eye is open, but hidden, so that we humans cannot see it. This eye that remains open recalls the *sipapu*, the hole on the floor at the centre of the *kiva* that symbolizes the womb of the earth, out of which all creatures emerged and keep on emerging into life. But acknowledging that the earth has its own eye is possibly only a way of personifying it so as to remind us humans that breathing earth is also a living creature in its entirety and so we should not be torturing it for money. Two metaphors at the heart of what the second (female) voice says highlight the importance of the sun among the Hopi: as a giver of warmth and light, the sun is revered as the king in the sky, as the world’s thought, for thought is light. As opposed to the darkness of the womb of the earth underground, the sun could be conceived as being the true eye of the sky, and its light, essential for all living creatures on Earth, as the earth’s darkness’ dreams come true or materialized in the realm of the living. Staves 27-37 concern precisely the catalogue of living creatures that are born out of the thinking of darkness underground, in the womb of the earth. “*The darkness is thinking. / Behind the earth’s back, hiding from thought / under rocks, in the roots and leaves / of trees is thinking.*”, says the first voice. What darkness is thinking is the inexhaustible repertoire of living things in the world. In this context *thinking (of) creatures is tantamount to creating them out of the blue* as it were, in much the same way God’s utterance of names in the Book of Genesis entailed the creation of the things named. At this point of the II movement of the *Suite* all three voices join and the coalescence of ideas, sound and rhythm is perfect, particularly in staves 33-37, where the names of species of creatures living on Earth are spoken in sequence, not simultaneously as in preceding or subsequent staves:

33 **Magpie.**

Wolf.

Whitetail.

Cottonwood.

34

Mule deer.

In summer at sunset:

Oriole.

	Ponderosa.	Cougar.
35	Pronghorn.	Aspen.
	<i>In winter at sunrise:</i>	
	Bobcat.	And macaw.
36	Douglas-fir?	The mountain
	<i>In winter at sunset:</i>	
	Stellar's jay. [<i>Stellar's</i> in SP]	
37	sheep?	
	<i>The world's thought is called</i>	
	<u>Ha!</u> Coyote. [<i>no italics</i> in SP]	

The size of the mind and of the heart is the number of creatures or species of creatures in the world, said all three voices in the first movement of the *Suite*. This fundamental idea is resumed in these staves, which embrace all creatures on earth – trees, mammals, birds. The size of the Hopi mind and heart is astonishing, for it acknowledges the existence of the others (animals and plants that share the world, the only world that there is) with humans. These are the thoughts of darkness' thinking, and the words have a definite order and rhythm that makes this a memorable enumeration within the poem. The catalogue goes on and on with pleasing variation, as it were, emphasizing the vast diversity of life forms on earth. Also, the second (female) voice is in charge of punctuating the whole catalogue with temporal references – summer or winter at sunrise and at sunset – which somehow prefigure the myth of the marriage of the sun and the moon in subsequent staves.

Staves 38-52 tell the story of the marriage of the sun and the moon. Their marriage recalls that of the sky and the earth, because "*The sun is married to the moon. He doesn't touch her.*" Similarly, the earth was married to the sky, but she left him because he was cold. However, the sun cannot touch her, not because he does not want to, but rather because he cannot touch her. They are not able to share the same sky at the same time because of the succession of day and night, or as the third voice puts it: "*These are the chief equations describing the motions / linking the heart and thought of the world.*" The heart is in the motionless stone, or somewhere underground, in the bosom or womb of the earth (symbolizing the darkness of night), whereas the world's thought is the sun up there in the sky (symbolizing the benign warmth and protection of daylight). Thus, earth and sky are reunited in the daily rotation of the Earth upon its own axis, which brings about the alternation of day and night and governs the motions of the sun and moon across the sky. Upon closer inspection, this mythical story of the marriage of the sun (masculine) and the moon

(feminine) accounts for a natural phenomenon that was awe-inspiring for the Hopi, who would always pay attention to the sky, with the sun, the moon, the stars and the clouds. Rain-making rituals were of the essence to ensure good crops and the survival of the community. The myth is a living reality to the Hopi, after all. And what about the sea, the second husband of the earth? Well, salt is thought to be the sun's elder sister, probably because the sun sinks into the sea waters on the horizon when it sets, and "*His grandmother lives / in a blue house near a dark beach littered with shells. / He visits her there in midsummer at dawn.*", right at sunset, when the moon is about to go up in the night sky.

The sun and the moon have their own children: the clown, who is the trickster Coyote, who comes in summer, and the twins, who are the two little war gods ("gamblers and soldiers") and come in winter. These are the words spoken by the second voice:

The clown of summer discovered the flute,
and he is the raw person whose picture you see
on the face of the motionless stone
where the heart of the earth beats.
There he is playing his flute, and here we are dancing.

So the flute-player is Coyote, a raw person, capable of changing his form and appearing to humans under a number of guises. Coyote, the trickster of Native American tales from California, Southwest, and the plateau region, is perhaps the most widely known of the trickster figures. In the Pacific Northwest the trickster is the Raven, Mink, or Blue Jay – each of whom is also viewed as a transformer figure, responsible for bringing the ordered world out of Chaos, and a cultural hero, credited with transmitting the skills of survival, such as fire making, from the gods to humans. Wisakedjak, anglicized to *Whiskey Jack*, is a cultural hero trickster of the Eastern Woodlands. Another is Nanabozho (the Hare), who in the Southeast is called Rabbit and who became identified with African Hare trickster as Brer Rabbit.²⁴ In any case, like the first movement, the second movement of the *Suite* also ends with dancing: whereas in the former it was the hills that danced alone when nobody was looking, or humans that danced with the hills, here humans dance to the rhythm of Coyote's flute-playing.

MOVEMENT III · The Children of Zhuang Zi Confront the Frozen Saskatchewan River

Movement III of *New World Suite No. 3* "adopts the voices of Chinese immigrants to Saskatchewan", Bringham claims in his own Afterword to the poem. "*Snowcloud, darkness, snow*" – these are the three linguistic strokes with which the poet describes the setting. "*The truth is, there is no horizon.*" From the Hopi country of Arizona we move upwards into the north, for geographically speaking the reader/hearer is now plunged into the middle of a different space – that of Saskatchewan covered in snow with the river frozen – and a different moment in history – the moment when Chinese immigrants are heading towards Saskatchewan in the very heart of Canada. The children of Zhuang Zi are the Chinese immigrants themselves, and the poet has chosen to call them by the name of one of the greatest poet-philosophers China has known over the centuries. The choice is no random, of course, because much of the meditation enacted at the heart of this part of the *Suite* owes much to the Chinese sage's insights into reality and to his concept of the so-called

²⁴ See the entry on 'trickster tale' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 28, p. 16787.

dao. Like the Pre-Socratics or the mythtellers of the native oral literatures of America, Zhuang Zi belongs among the great ancestors whose wisdom is still relevant today, whose lessons must still be attentively listened to with open ears. Thus, this third movement is an *adagio*, which means that the heart of the *Suite* is beating more slowly somehow, as if to evoke the heavy steps of the immigrants making their way through the vast expanses of the Saskatchewan prairie covered in snow. Also, the predominant tone from beginning to end is purely meditative, which might well account for the choice of a slower pace. The three voices speaking in this part of the poem are dramatic impersonations of those of the Chinese immigrants themselves – the first voice speaking in the first person, and the second and third voices giving voice to reported speech, as it were.

Bringhurst's entire oeuvre is marked by the serious and ambitious aim of getting at a profounder apprehension of *being*. The essence of *being* is something that can be approached from many different directions, but science, philosophy and poetry probably remain the three sharpest tools in the hands of humans in their intellectual confrontation with reality. Now, writing poems on the nature of *being* is no common practice nowadays. The result is complex, demanding and intellectually satisfying poems, especially for those concerned with finding poems which are not mere subjective or narcissistic outpourings of the private or solipsistic self. Reality is always much more complex and interesting than humans – this seems to be one of the elemental convictions with Bringhurst. Hence, the whole movement entitled "The Children of Zhuang Zi Confront the Frozen Saskatchewan River" sets out to explore the elemental concepts of *being* and *truth*. Written with astonishing craftsmanship, this *adagio* is a profound meditation on *what is* and *what is not*, on the objective nature of reality, on the epistemological possibility of ever reaching a core of irreducible meaning at the heart of the world, and on the ethical implications or corollaries implicit in acknowledging that *being* is an unbroken unity that comprises a continuum of existence ranging from the humble grass on the ground to the ever-shining stars up above in the sky. Three elemental clusters of ideas or threads are woven into the polished verbal structure of this investigation into the nature of *being*:

- (1) The nature of *what is* and *what is not*. The exploration of *being* begins with two complementary statements, spoken by the first and second voices in the poem: (a) "*What is not is not hidden*" and (b) "*What is / is not hidden, although it is hiding*." It is significant that the statements are not spoken simultaneously, but in sequence, which highlights the specific epistemological weight of each statement. *What is* and *what is not* are the two inseparable sides to the same coin; they are aspects of *being* and *non-being*. *What is not* is the invisible, or that which is not easily or explicitly seen, but it is not hidden. We humans do not seem to be able to see *what is not* any longer; our inquisitive gaze stops at the surface of things, does not dare cross the threshold that leads into the core of the real. Similarly, *what is* is not hidden either, though it is hiding, i.e. it is elusive, it tries to flee humans' perception. In the closing staves of the first movement of the *Suite*, the three voices spoke of a song which was perpetually singing itself further back into the hills, under the seacliffs, under the sea, away from humans. That was the song of being. *Everywhere being is singing* (the title of one of Bringhurst's two prose collections), but we have fallen from a pristine state in which communion with the world was still possible. As a result, we feel that *being* is mute to our ears and invisible to our eyes. "*Truth is one thing*", says the second voice, and "*The sky / and the earth, like the truth, are one thing*," says the third voice. Truth means that humans are able to *get closer to the innermost recesses of being*. However, if *being* is dumb and invisible to us, then the truth is unapproachable or unattainable for us too. Truth is not many-sided but one single entity, a perfect circle, according to the second voice, but it is also the marriage of the earth to the sky (even if the sky is cold and so the earth decides to leave him and marry the sea, as the account of the myth in the II Movement of the *Suite* reads), a reconciliation of opposites into a single unbreakable entity. "*Add us also, the sum is still smaller than two*,"

adds the second voice, which means that if humans are added to the sky and the earth (and all the creatures, living and non-living, on Earth) reality is still one, the truth is one thing, *being* is one. This is pure metaphysics grounded in the real, physical world. That this is the case is further enhanced by staves 7 to 9, a special interlude where the focus is on a pun, a word-game: “*Watch your step. / And I did so and tripped, and he laughed. / Not your foot, but your step, he said.*” An idiom is interpreted on a literal basis, which leads to misunderstanding.

- (2) The interconnectedness of all things in the universe & the inescapable path or Dao. “*Nothing can stray. There is / no way of leaving the path. / What you are is what is. It runs / all the way through. The grass / and the stars are your innermost nature.*”, says the first voice with great enthusiasm. And the third voice adds: “*The snow underfoot and the stars / in the sky are your nature.*” The statements spoken aloud by the two voices emphasize the unity of *what is*, the unbreakable continuum of existence that embraces the grass on the earth and the stars in the sky, thus bringing about the true marriage of both spaces. Nothing can stray because everything fits and falls into place in the grander scheme of things that governs the universe. This is good news and it resonates with echoes from Zhuangzi’s teachings. Who exactly was this Chinese sage? Zhuangzi or Chuang-Tzu’s original name was Zhuang Zhou (b. c. 369, Meng [now Shangqiu, Henan province], China – d. 286 BCE). Not much is known about the details of his life²⁵. He is said to be one of the earliest interpreters of China’s early Daoism and his work (*Zhuangzi*²⁶) is considered as one of the fundamental texts of Daoism, even more comprehensive than the *Daodejing*, wrongly attributed to Laozi²⁷ (the first philosopher of Daoism) for a long time. Laozi, however, is better known as the reputed founder of a way of life that became known as Daoism. Zhuangzi’s teachings had a decisive impact on the development of Chinese Buddhism as well as on landscape painting and poetry. The core of his teachings is that insight into reality comes with the realization that everything in life is both dynamic and continuous; this is what he called the Dao²⁸ – the unity of all things, the ultimate substratum that is found beneath all

²⁵ For further details on his life and character, see the entry on ‘Zhuangzi’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 30, pp. 18193-18194: “In spite of his importance, details of Zhuangzi’s life are unknown. The “Grand Historian” of the Han dynasty, Sima Qian (died c. 87 BCE), incorporated in his biographical sketch of Zhuangzi only the most meager information. He was a native of the state of Meng, his personal name was Zhou, he was a minor official at Qiyuan in his home state. He lived during the reign of Prince Wei of Chu and was therefore a contemporary of Mencius, an eminent Confucian scholar known as China’s “Second Sage.” And: “Zhuangzi appears as an unpredictable and eccentric sage who seems careless about personal comforts or public esteem. His clothing is shoddy and patched, and his shoes have to be tied to his feet with string in order to keep them from falling apart. Nevertheless, he does not consider himself to be miserable, only poor.” (p. 18194).

²⁶ “Zhuangzi is best known through the book that bears his name, the *Zhuangzi*, also known as *Nanhua zhenjing* (“The Pure Classic of Nanhua”). At about the turn of the 4th century BCE, Guo Xiang, the first and perhaps the best commentator on the *Zhuangzi*, established the work as a primary source for Daoist thought. It is composed of 33 chapters, and evidence suggests that there may have been as many as 53 chapters in copies of the book circulated in the 4th century. It is generally agreed that the first seven chapters, the “inner books”, are for the most part from the hand of Zhuangzi himself, whereas the “outer books” (chapters 8-22) and the miscellany (chapters 23-33) are largely the product of his later followers. A vivid description of Zhuangzi’s character comes from the anecdotes about him in the book’s later chapters.” See entry on ‘Zhuangzi’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 30, p. 18194.

²⁷ See entry on ‘Laozi’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 16, pp. 9569-9570: “Laozi (fl. c. 6th century BCE?, China), legendary first philosopher of Chinese Taoism and alleged author of the *Tao-te ching* (*Lao-tzu*), wrote a book in two sections of 5,000 characters, in which he set down his ideas about the *tao* (literally “Way”, the Supreme Principle) and the *te* (its “virtue” or “power”): the *Tao-te ching*. The *Tao-te ching*, however, cannot be the work of a single man; some of its sayings may date from the time of Confucius; others are certainly later; and the book as a whole dates from about 300 BCE. The name Lao-tzu seems originally to have designated a type of sage rather than an individual.”

²⁸ The concept of dao is truly complex. For further details, see the entry on the ‘dao’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 8, pp. 4322-4323: “Dao, in Chinese philosophy, a fundamental concept signifying “the proper way” or “heaven’s way”. In the Confucian tradition, *dao* signifies a morally proper path of human conduct and is thus limited to behavior. In the rival school of Daoism, the concept takes on a metaphysical sense transcending the human realm.[...] One aspect of the Dao, however, can be perceived by man, namely,

things, circulating through the whole universe. Whatever we say about the Dao is not the Dao, which has no beginning and no end, no true demarcations, limitations or boundaries. The Absolute Dao thus defies verbal definition, but language can make suggestions that may lead to an intuitive understanding of this fundamental reality. Life itself is conceived as being the perpetual metamorphosis or transformation of the Dao, in which there is no good or evil, no better or worse. Everything changes and yet everything remains the same somehow. Virtuous humans are free from the bondage of circumstance, personal attachments, tradition and the need to change this world. They allow things alone to follow their own natural course and do not value one situation over another. The wise man is an unattached man and knows of no bonds of any kind whatsoever²⁹. When placed against Zhuangzi's concept of the Dao, Bringham's words that "nothing can stray" make perfect sense: everything falls into place in a process of perennial metamorphosis in a world whose ultimate *being* remains the same though. This is a world in which the invisible exists, including a host of gods and goddesses, even if humans cannot see them: "The gods come, unseen, to drink / at the thought's edge.", says the second voice. The world is still a sacred place where there is room for the realm of the divine alongside with the realm of the human. Gods thrive on humans' mildewed jewel of a mind, at whose edge they drink directly from the water of our thinking.

- (3) Education of humans' emotions. The closing staves of the third movement of the *Suite* speak of emotions and of what surrounds them. The elemental lesson concerning emotions seems to be spoken by the Chinese grandfather mentioned in previous staves, possibly a new incarnation of the old Zhuangzi. It is possible to entertain several emotions at once, "each in due measure," and yet it is necessary not to lose sight of one simple fact: that emotions are surrounded by the stark boundless reality of an objective world, also called "an empty space or a boundless space," which is nonetheless the core, the important thing, for all three voices. The stars in the sky and the snow underfoot remain tangible things of this world, whereas emotions are not tangible, palpable, or straightaway visible. This does not mean, of course, that they are not essential in human communities. The capacity for empathy – the insight into the simple truth that our self does not end exactly where our skin ends – is what makes us truly human and humane, but a wise or virtuous human being knows how to control those emotions while keeping an eye on something larger than

the visible process of nature by which all things change. From an observation of the visible manifestation of the absolute Dao, it is possible to intuit the existence of an ultimate substratum that is the source of all things. Awareness of this process then leads toward an understanding of the Absolute Dao. Daoists view life and death as simply different stages, or manifestations, of the Absolute Dao and consequently advocate a life in accord with nature. The serenity of such a life stands in sharp contrast to the life of public service advocated by Confucius." See also the entry on 'Daodejing' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 8, p. 4323: "The dao consists, in essence, of "nonaction", understood as no unnatural action rather than complete passivity. It implies spontaneity, non-interference, letting things take their natural course: "Do nothing and everything is done". Chaos ceases, quarrels end, and self-righteous feuding disappears because the Dao is allowed to flow unchallenged and unchallenging. Everything that is comes from the inexhaustible, effortless, invisible, and inaudible Way, which existed before heaven and earth."

²⁹ "The complete relativity of his perspective is forcefully expressed in one of the better-known passages of the *Zhuangzi*: "Once, I, Zhuang Zhou, dreamed that I was a butterfly and was happy as a butterfly. I was conscious that I was quite pleased with myself, but I did not know that I was Zhou. Suddenly, I awoke, and there I was, visibly Zhou. I do not know whether it was Zhou dreaming that he was a butterfly or the butterfly dreaming that it was Zhou. Between Zhou and the butterfly there must be some distinction. This is called the transformation of things." The relativity of all experience is in constant tension in the *Zhuangzi* with the unity of all things. When asked where the Dao was, Zhuangzi replied that it was everywhere. When pushed to be more specific, he declared that it was in ants and, still lower, in weeds and potsherds; furthermore, it was also in excrement and urine. This forceful statement of the omnipresence of the Dao had its parallels in later Chinese Buddhism, in which a similar figure of speech was used to describe the ever-present Buddha (Buddhist scholars, especially those of the Chan [Zen] school, also drew heavily on Zhuangzi's works). Zhuangzi was par excellence the philosopher of the unattached man who is at one with the Dao." See the entry on 'Zhuangzi', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 30, p. 18194.

his/her own subjectivity. The real exists in an objective manner; it is out there, and we are part of it.

17 **Two emotions at once,**

where, and from whom could one hide?

can stray.

18 **three, even four -**

The stars in the sky

Two emotions at once, three, even four,

19 **each in due measure.**

and the snow underfoot

but each in proportion inside you, he said. [*in due measure within* in SP]

20 **That is good order, of course,**

are the facts of the matter.

That is good order, my grandfather said.

21 **but a space without boundaries**

But the empty space

22 **surrounds them.**

What surrounds us is boundless, he said.

that surrounds those emotions

23 **And that space**

It is empty,

is it, he said.

24 is the core.

and that is the core.

That is the core.

MOVEMENT IV · Winter Solstice, Cariboo Mountains

Movement IV of *New World Suite No. 3* is *lento*, which means that the heart at the core of the poem is beating more slowly now. In the afterword to the 2005 edition of the poem, Bringham tells us that this movement is “based on a mid-winter walk in central British Columbia” and that it “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.”³⁰ The spatial setting or location of the poem is British Columbia, home to the poet, with its mountains rich in caribou lying naked before the immensity of the Pacific Ocean. And the temporal framework is winter solstice, a magic moment of the calendar when daylight is scarce and humans get to know the longest night of the year. Bringham is an avid outdoor man, who feels at home amid the mountains that have given him spiritual nourishment and literary inspiration time and again throughout his life. Having been raised in a number of different places and having travelled widely as an adult, the mountains seem to be always there in the background. It is in the mountains where some of his most memorable characters (Moses and Jacob) find a space for spiritual self-confrontation; it was the solitude of the mountains that gave him the gift of *Tzubahalem’s Mountain* in 1982; and it is mountains that figure prominently in such fundamental pieces of the Bringham corpus as the early “Song of the Summit”. But the poet is not just someone 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 those pictures in the sky, posing a truly fascinating scientific puzzle. He mentions Orion and Prajapati, but there are other constellations at the heart of this movement, associated to at least two clearly identifiable stories lifted from Greek mythology. What both seem to have in common is humans’ fascination with the stars in the sky, which is ubiquitous in all civilizations since antiquity. In this respect there is an astonishing density of meaning between the lines, which are otherwise marked by utter simplicity and lyrical elegance.

The three speaking voices are perfectly interwoven into the fabric of this part of the poem, so that the same cluster of messages is being repeated over and over again, thus creating an incantatory tapestry of musicality and ideas. The movement opens with a brief meditation on the mystery implicit in the sun’s motion across the sky, as well as on the profound implications thereof: “*The sun burns to the ground and is kindled again, / teaching the one lesson deeper than hunger.*”, say the first voice and third voices. What “*the one lesson deeper than*

³⁰ See Robert Bringham’s “Afterword: Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue”, *New World Suite Number Three. Four Movements of Three Voices* (2005), pp. 13-14.

hunger” might be is easy to discern if one pays attention to what happens to the sun as it crosses the sky from sunrise to sunset. It seems as if it were to die for good, and yet it rises up over the horizon once again every morning, giving us their warmth and light. The central death and life dichotomy is at the core of the meditation: the desire to live, which is greater than mere survival, is always deeper than hunger. What follows this elemental truth the poetic voices have stumbled upon is the tessellation of two constellations and two myths lifted from Greek and Indian mythology. Constellations are made of stars, like the sun itself. Even if they are light years away from the Earth, they still hold an irresistible fascination for human beings. 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:

3 **In the night sky, Orion,**

Orion, the old god, disguised as a deer, is out

deeper than hunger.

4 **disguised as a deer, is out stalking Aldebaran,**

stalking Aldebaran, the doe, his daughter, forever.

5 **the doe, his daughter, forever.**

Arcturus is spearing the Great Bear

Arcturus, spearing the Great Bear of heaven, sees

6

of heaven. He sees in her eyes, now and always,

in her eyes, now and always, the eyes of his mother.

What are Orion, Aldebaran, Arcturus and the Great Bear? The simple, straightforward answer is that they are constellations or stars within constellations. But they hide a wealth of meaning in the semantic layers deep inside. 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). But it might be advisable to start at the beginning. Let us focus on Orion and Aldebaran in the first place. A prominent constellation located on the celestial equator and visible throughout the world, Orion³¹ is also referred to as “The Hunter” and is one of the most conspicuous and

³¹ See the entry on ‘Orion’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 21, p. 12477: “Orion, in astronomy, major constellation lying at about 5 hours 30 minutes right ascension (the coordinate on the celestial sphere

recognizable constellations in the night sky. It is named after Orion, the hunter in Greek mythology. The outline of the silhouette is discernible to the naked eye: there are the three prominent, bright stars in a row known as the “Belt of Orion”; surrounding the belt at roughly similar distances are four bright stars that represent the outline of the hunter’s body; and descending from the belt is a smaller line of three stars known as the “Hunter’s Sword”. In the wider map of the sky, Orion is fighting Taurus (the bull), accompanied by two other major surrounding constellations, Canis Major and Canis Minor, his two hunting dogs. Orion can be easily seen in the night sky from November to February of each year (late fall to winter in the Northern Hemisphere, late spring to summer in the Southern Hemisphere), and so it is perfectly accurate that Bringhurst should have seen the constellation at some point near the winter solstice.

But, beneath the constellation, there is a mythological figure called Orion. In Greek mythology Orion (Ὠρίων) was a giant huntsman whom Zeus placed among the stars as a constellation after his death. Different stories about Orion are told by ancient sources, recording, among other incidents, slightly different versions of his birth somewhere in Boeotia, his visit to Chios where he met Merope and was blinded by his father (Oenopion), the recovery of sight at Lemnos, his hunting with Artemis on Crete, and his death either by the bow of Artemis or by the sting of the giant scorpion (which became the constellation Scorpio), and his subsequent elevation to the heavens. The earliest record of Orion in Greek literature is found in Homer’s *Iliad*, where he is described as a constellation (lines 486-489) and the star Sirius is mentioned as his dog (book X, 29), and in the *Odyssey* (Book V, line 283), where he appears as a great hunter whose shade Odysseus sees hunting in the underworld during his visit to the realm of the dead. In the *Odyssey* he is also mentioned as a constellation, as the most handsome of the earthborn, as the lover of the goddess Dawn, and as slain by Artemis. In Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (lines 598, 623), Orion is also mentioned as being a constellation, one whose rising and setting with the sun is used to reckon the year. The entry in Ovid’s *Fasts* for May 11 is a poem on Orion’s birth, but this is just a tiny part of the whole story of his life.

There is no extant literary version of his adventures comparable to that of Jason or Perseus or Heracles, for instance. Although a few lines are devoted to Orion in both Homeric poems and in the *Works and Days*, most of the stories about him are recorded in incidental allusions and in fairly obscure later writings. The surviving fragments telling of Orion are dispersed here and there. The legend of Orion was first told in full in a lost work by Hesiod, probably the *Astronomy*. This version is known through a work of an Hellenistic author entitled *Catasterismi*, on the constellations, which provides a long summary of Hesiod’s tale on Orion. According to this account, Orion is the son of Euryale, daughter of Minos, King of Crete, and Poseidon, the god-sea. He could walk on the waves because he learnt how to do it from his father. Thus, he walked to the island of Chios, where he got

analogous to longitude on the Earth) and zero declination (at the celestial equator), named for the Greek mythological hunter. Orion is one of the most conspicuous constellations and it contains many bright stars. One of these, Betelgeuse (Alpha Orionis), a variable star, is easily distinguished by its reddish colour. The total brightness of Rigel, in the hunter’s leg, when measured over all visible light, is greater than that of Betelgeuse. The third brightest star in the constellation is Bellatrix. Orion’s girdle, or belt – consisting of three bright stars – lies nearly on the celestial equator. His sword, south of the belt, contains the great Orion Nebula, visible to the unaided eye, an emission nebula containing hundreds of young stars. Faint extensions of this nebula fill almost the whole constellation.” Orion is mentioned in the Bible three times – Job 9:9 (“He is the maker of the Bear and Orion”), Job 38:31 (“Can you loosen Orion’s belt?”) and Amos 5:8 (“He who made the Pleiades and Orion”)–, which testifies to the fascination the constellation has held for humans’ imagination since antiquity. It is also mentioned in Horace’s *Odes*, in Homer’s *Odyssey* (Book 5, line 283) and *Iliad*, and in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (Book 1, line 535). The *Rig Veda* refers to the Orion constellation as Mriga (“The Deer”).

drunk and attacked Merope, daughter of Oenopion, the king of Chios. The father blinded Orion in vengeance for what he had done to his daughter and drove him away. Then Orion arrived in Lemnos, where the lame smith-god, Hephaestus, had his forge and decided to help him. He told his servant, Cedalion, to guide the blinded hunter to the uttermost East, where Helios, the sun, would heal him and restore his sight. Sitting on the giant's shoulders, Cedalion took Orion to his destination and he recovered his sight. Afterwards, Orion returned to Chios to take vengeance on Oenopion, but the ruler managed to hid underground and escape his wrath. The hunter then travelled to Crete, where he hunted with the sylvan goddess Artemis and her mother Leto. In the course of the hunt, Orion threatened to kill every beast on earth. It seems Mother Earth objected and sent a giant scorpion to kill him and punish his hybris.

Orion dies of the scorpion's sting. After his death, the goddesses asked Zeus to place Orion among the constellations in the sky, where he is seen being chased by Scorpio, the constellation representing the scorpion that killed him. In another version of Orion's death, Eos, the Dawn, falls in love with him and takes him to Delos where Artemis kills him with her arrows. In yet another version, Apollo objected to his sister Artemis' love for Orion, and, seeing him swimming with just his head visible, the god challenged his sister to shoot at that mark, which she hit, killing Orion. The goddess shoots Orion only after being tricked by Apollo into thinking him a sea monster – she then laments his death and searches for Orion in the underworld until he is elevated to the heavens. There are two different versions about the way Artemis killed Orion, either with her arrows or by producing the Scorpion. Artemis is given various motives. One is that Orion boasted of his beast-killing and challenged her to a contest with the discus. Another is that he assaulted either Artemis herself or the maiden Opis in her band of huntresses. Orion is connected to several constellations in the sky. In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Orion chases the Pleiades themselves. It is said that the Pleiades met the hunter Orion in Boetia, and he fell in love with them. He chased them for five years until they were changed into doves. Zeus took pity on them and changed them into stars. They are a constellation up in the sky since then. In addition, Canis Minor and Canis Major are his dogs, and Orion pursues Taurus, the bull. The fruitless chase of Orion after the Pleiades takes place in the constellation called Taurus and is meant to represent the Pleiades' appearance over the horizon right before the reappearance of Orion.

What about Aldebaran? Aldebaran³², also called Alpha Tauri, is a reddish giant star in the constellation Taurus lying 65 light-years from Earth. With an apparent visual magnitude of 0.85, it is one of the 15 brightest stars, and a big one – its diameter is 44 times that of the Sun. It is accompanied by a very faint red companion star. The star was once thought to be a member of the Hyades cluster, but in fact Aldebaran is 85 light-years closer to Earth. The name *Aldebaran* is Arabic and translates literally as “the follower”, presumably because this bright star appears to follow the Pleiades or Seven Sisters in the night sky. Now, in Bringham's poetic rendering, Orion, disguised as a deer (The *Rig Veda* refers to the Orion constellation as Mriga, “The Deer”), is stalking Aldebaran (the doe, his daughter), which is precisely the brightest star in the constellation Taurus. Both Orion and Aldebaran are related to the Pleiades, for these two constellations appear to follow the Seven Sisters. The Pleiades are no ordinary stars and are among the nearest star clusters to Earth. They are the most obvious ones to the naked eye in the night sky, especially in winter in the Northern Hemisphere and in summer in the Southern Hemisphere. It is no wonder that they have been known since antiquity to cultures worldwide. In Greek

³² See the entry on ‘Aldebaran’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 1, p. 325.

mythology, the Pleiades (Πληιάδες)³³ are the seven daughters of the Titan Atlas and the Oceanid Pleione: Maia, Electra, Taygete, Celaeno, Alcyone, Sterope, and Merope. They all had children by gods (except Merope, who married Sisyphus), and they were companions of Artemis, the sylvan goddess. The Pleiades eventually formed a constellation. One myth recounts that they all killed themselves out of grief over the death of their sisters, the Hyades. Another explains that after seven years of being pursued by Orion, the Boeotian giant, they were turned first into doves and then into stars by Zeus. Orion became a constellation too, and continued to pursue the sisters across the night sky. They are mentioned by Hesiod in *Works and Days*, where Orion chases the Pleiades, and by Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

What about the Great Bear and Arcturus? In astronomy, Ursa Major is Latin for “Greater Bear” and refers to the Great Bear, a constellation of the Northern Hemisphere, at about 10 hours 40 minutes right ascension (the coordinate on the celestial sphere analogous to longitude on the Earth) and 56° north declination (angular distance north of the celestial equator). It was one of the 48 constellations listed in *The Almagest* by the famous astronomer Ptolemy³⁴ in the 2nd century. It was referred to in the Old Testament (Job 9:9; 38:32) and mentioned by Homer in the *Iliad* (xviii, 487). The Greeks identified this constellation with the nymph Callisto, who was placed in the heavens by Zeus in the form of a bear together with her son Arcas as “bear keeper,” or Arcturus; the Greeks named the constellation Arctos, the she-bear, or Helice, from its turning around Polaris, the Pole Star. The Romans knew the constellation as Arctos or Ursa. In Greek mythology, the story of the nymph Callisto is a sad one. The longest extant account of the myth is found in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book II, lines 405-530. The story of Callisto (Καλλιστώ) is an Arcadian myth. According to some authors, Callisto was a nymph of the woods; according to other authors, she was king Lycaeon’s or Nictetus’ daughter. She had made up her mind to remain a virgin her whole life and spent her days hunting in the woods and hills in the company of Artemis’ maiden huntresses. Zeus falls in love with this young, beautiful nymph of Artemis. As a follower of the virgin goddess, Callisto had taken a vow to remain a virgin too, as did all the nymphs of Artemis. But to lure her into his embrace, Zeus cunningly approaches her under the disguise of the sylvan goddess while she was separated from the train of virgin nymphs. Her pregnant condition was discovered some months later while bathing with her fellow nymphs and the goddess, who, enraged, expels her immediately from the group. Then poor Callisto gives birth to Arcas, later called Arcturus. To avenge her wounded pride, Hera, Zeus’ jealous wife, transforms the nymph into a bear. While in bear form, and 16 years later, Callisto encounters her son Arcas hunting in the forest. Seeing her son after so long, she went forth to embrace him. However, not knowing that the bear was his mother, Arcas was about to shoot his bear-mother with a javelin, when, to avert the tragedy Zeus hurled them both into the sky and placed them among the stars as the constellations Ursa Major and Ursa Minor³⁵,

³³ See entry on ‘Pleiades’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 22, p. 13329.

³⁴ “Ptolemy cataloged eight of the constellation’s stars. Of these, the seven brightest constitute one of the most characteristic figures in the northern sky; the group has received various names – Septentriones, the Wagon, Plow, Big Dipper, and Charles’s Wain. For the Hindus these seven stars represented the seven Rishis (or Sages). Two of the constellation’s stars, Dubhe and Merak, are called the pointers because the line Merak-Dubhe points to the Pole Star.” See entry on ‘Ursa Major’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 29, pp. 17213-17214. The earliest descriptions of the Greek skies are found in Aratus’ poem entitled *The Phainomena* (275 BC), Hipparchus’s *The Commentary* (147 BC), which tells us that Aratus’s poem is for the most part a copy of work by the same title of Eudoxus (366 BC), and Ptolemy’s *The Almagest* (c. 150 AD).

³⁵ This is Ovid’s original account of the catasterism (the metamorphosis into stars) of both mother and son in *Metamorphoses*, Book II, lines 496-506: “Ecce Lycaoniae proles ignara parentis, / Arcas adest ter quinque fere natalibus actis; / dumque feras sequitur, dum saltus eligit aptos / nexilibusque plagis silvas Erymanthidas

respectively. And Arcturus³⁶, also called Alpha Bōotis, is the brightest star in the constellation Bōotes and one of the five brightest stars in the night sky. Arcturus is next to Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, for, to be more precise, it lies in an almost direct line with the tail of Ursa Major; hence its name, Ἀρκτοῦρος (“Guardian of the Bear”), derived from the Greek words ἄρκτος (bear) and οὔρος (“watcher or guardian”).

This is all the wealth of background information that has been condensed in staves 3 to 6 in Bringham’s “Winter Solstice, Cariboo Mountains”. By juxtaposing two constellations and two myths together (the Orion and Ursa Major myths), 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. Furthermore, movement IV of *New World Suite No. 3* also anticipates Bringham’s *Ursa Major. A Masquerade for Actors and Dancers* (2003 and 2009), which is a long poem in five acts that explores the story of the bear-woman in Greek and Cree mythology, as recorded by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* and by Leonard Bloomfield in *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree* (1930), respectively. Even if myth is at the core of movement IV of the *Suite*, there are at least three more threads of lyrical singing in the remaining staves:

- (1) “*The stars and the darkness glide at one speed, / going nowhere to everywhere, or the reverse, and returning.*” or, to put it differently, “*The stars and the darkness / glide at one speed, / going everywhere, nowhere, or both, / and returning.*” These two variations on the same theme are spoken by the first and third voices at different points in the poem, and they come right after each of the myths presented at the core of this fourth movement of the poem – after the Orion myth, in staves 7-8, and after the Ursa Major myth, in staves 20-23. Both variations are somewhat an expression of humans’ amazement at the grandeur of the universe one feels in the presence of the stars shining up in the sky. It is no wonder that Aretus, Ptolemy, Hipatia and so many ancient Greek philosophers, astronomers or thinkers should share this same sense of amazement in the face of the awe-inspiring beauty of the night sky. Stars still remain a scientific puzzle, and we humans are said to be dust fallen from stars, if we bear in mind what the Big Bang theory says about the primeval explosion out of which the whole universe was born so long ago. The truth is that humankind has not ceased raising its amazed eyes in the direction of the starlight, which looks young or fresh new, and is tremendously old for it has had to travel a long distance for a long time to reach our eyes. The fact that the distance of stars is measured in terms of light-years (i.e., the time it takes their light to traverse a certain distance) is itself a puzzle to the human mind. Light emanating from stars travels in all directions across the universe, *going everywhere and nowhere*, for eternity, because there might never be an end to its travelling. We wonder if starlight reaches a point in space or in time where it decides to come back to the celestial body from which it departed. It remains a genuine mystery to the layperson. Constellations,

ambit, / incidit in matrem, quae restitit Arcade viso / et cognoscenti similis fuit: ille refugit / inmotusque oculos in se sine fine tenentem / nescius extimuit propiusque accedere aventi / vulnifico fuerat fixurus pectora telo: / arcuit omnipotens pariterque ipsosque nefasque / sustulit et pariter raptos per inania vento / inposuit caelo vicinaque sidera fecit.” (p. 94) And this is the literal translation into English: “And now Arcas, Lycaon’s grandson, had reached his fifteenth year, ignorant of his mother’s plight. While he was hunting the wild beasts, seeking out their favourite haunts, hemming the Arcadian woods with his close-wrought nets, he chanced upon his mother, who stopped still at sight of Arcas, and seemed like one that recognized him. He shrank back at those unmoving eyes that were fixed for ever upon him, and feared he knew not what; and when she tried to come nearer, he was just in the act of piercing her breast with his wound-dealing spear. But the Omnipotent stayed his hand, and together he removed both themselves and the crime, and together caught up through the voice in a whirlwind, he set them in the heavens and made them neighbouring stars.” (p. 95) See Ovid in Six Volumes, vol. III – *Metamorphoses* in Two Volumes, I (Books I-VIII), translated by Frank Justus Miller, 1st edition 1916, 2nd ed. 1921, reprinted 1971. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press & London: William Heinemann Ltd.

³⁶ See entry on ‘Arcturus’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 2, p. 825.

those puzzling pictures in the night sky, have been a true source of inspiration for innumerable civilizations over time. Myths to account for their existence are the work ancient peoples produced to make sense of the universe for themselves, and they remain a gift to subsequent generations. Art (literary and pictorial works of art, in particular) has turned for inspiration time and again to this inexhaustible reservoir of knowledge that has been preserved in the form of jewel-like myths. Mythopoeic thinking is a respectful way of acknowledging the fact that humans fit in, that they belong into the grander scheme of things in the universe. It is also a gesture showing humankind's gratitude for existing amid such astonishing beauty.

- (2) *"The wolves speak / to the moon on behalf of the mountain."* Wolves are said to howl at the moon, especially when there is a full moon shining in the night sky. Here they are personified, as they are endowed with the speech capacity. The occurrence of this seemingly enigmatic statement makes sense in the wider context of the Orion and Ursa Major myths. Like the stars making up these constellations, the moon shares the night sky with them, even if it is only a satellite, a different kind of celestial body devoid of light of its own. The moon is important in ancient mythologies worldwide. In this particular context, it is closely connected to Artemis (or Diana in Roman mythology), the sylvan and virgin goddess with whom Callisto used to hunt in the woods before being cunningly seduced by Zeus. The wolves are reminiscent of Callisto's supposed father, king Lycaon, who was turned into a werewolf by Zeus. The story goes like this: once Arcas, Callisto's son, was born, Zeus decided to hide him in an area of Greece known as Arcadia, in his honour, just to prevent jealous Hera from taking revenge upon him. During one of the court feasts held by Lycaon, he decided to test Zeus' omnipotence and see if he could distinguish between animal and human meat. Thus, Arcas was placed upon the burning altar as a sacrifice to the gods and challenged Zeus to make him whole again. The king of the gods became enraged and made his son whole again, but in anger he changed Lycaon into a wolf, the first werewolf. But why should wolves speak to the moon on behalf of the mountain? Being inanimate, mountains cannot speak, they are absolutely mute stone, and so their dwellers, wolves, spend their nights howling at the shining moon for them.

"Year after year, we who have traded our voices / for words circle back to the pool / of alkaline silence to listen." This is a central statement in movement IV of the *Suite*; repeated twice at two different points in the poem (staves 11-13 and 23-26), these words are charged with an extra amount of meaning. It is also metapoetic in nature, for it seems that the *we* speaking these words is probably meant as a reference to the figure of the poet. Poets raise their eyes to the night sky (which is what the metaphor *"the pool / of alkaline silence"* stands for) and listen attentively to the stories and fundamental lessons the constellations in the sky have to teach them. The voices of ancient myth-tellers have now been replaced by words, those with which we try to touch the mystery implicit in the visible and invisible world. Constellations in the sky tell us humans something about our pristine origins – fallen stardust, that is what we are. They also remind us of the myths our ancestors used to make with their own minds and voices in their intellectual and emotional confrontation with the world and the mystery implicit in it. Human affairs have changed much down here, on Earth, but *"the pool of alkaline silence"* remains almost the same, a mute witness to all that has happened and keeps happening among mortals. It is no happy coincidence that all three speaking voices in Bringham's *New World Suite No. 3* should all conclude with the same words: *"... circle back to the pool of alkaline silence to listen."* Listening to *being* is a fundamental action going on in many Bringham poems, and *being* makes itself particularly felt or visible or audible in the night sky. The *Suite* comes to an end with a celebration of mystery, the mystery of *what is*.

New World Suite No. 3 is possibly the most complex of all of Bringham's polyphonic poems. Structured around four movements for three voices, it is a probing

meditation on being, History, myth and ecology. It is also a most accomplished vindication of the need for humans to take care of and preserve the irreplaceable, fragile beauty of this Earth, our only home and our only world. That the *Suite* is an anticipation of *Ursa Major* (2003 & 2009), Bringhurst's latest polyphonic poem, is already palpable in the closing movement of this poem, a complex tapestry concerned with exploring the myth associated to Callisto and Arcturus. For Bringhurst's poetry has got the simplicity and perfection of a circle. It has got a precious coherence that gives the impression that his oeuvre is just one single poem of gigantic proportions and inexhaustible beauty. And yet, the most impressive thing about Bringhurst's ambitious polyphonic poems is that they can stand next to the beauty of the world, from which they ultimately stem to honour the intricacy, delicacy and harmony of the living mesh of things. As Bringhurst himself puts it in his afterword to the *Suite*,

Polyphony in the strict musical sense is an invention, just as optical perspective is in painting, but like many inventions (or like all) it is really a formalization and humanization of something uninvented. It's an indoor version of something found outdoors, in the nonhuman world. That original and natural polyphony is something we take part in whether we're conscious of it or not.

The dawn chorus of songbirds and the evening chorus of frogs are instances of natural polyphony. And then there are those moments when the songbirds and the corvids and the leopard frogs and crickets coincide. Polyphony is the sound of the coexistence of species, which is what every ecology, global or local is all about. It is the music of separate but simultaneous voices in which every voice contributes but no voice is in charge. Is that a political metaphor? Maybe so. But it's a metaphor found in nature, not a fancy I invented. Take that metaphor away, and you will have no life, no world, no species left. No Athens, no Jerusalem, no Paris; no Sierra, no Yosemite, no Yukon.

To put it another way, polyphonic art is a kind of audible counterpart to the symbiotic interrelations of bumble-bees and roses, hummingbirds and honeysuckle, eagles and salmon and coastal redcedar, lichenized fungi and their algae, caribou and reindeer lichen, red squirrels and Douglas-fir: creatures who enlarge each other's lives by following agendas of their own.³⁷

³⁷ Bringhurst, "Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue", *New World Suite No. 3* (2005), pp. 8-9.

Ursa Major

Towards the Polyglot Polyphonic Poem: Myth, Ovid and the Cree Elders

INTRODUCTION

It was out of sheer love of language and myth – of everything that is universal and human – that Robert Bringhurst composed the polyphonic poem entitled *Ursa Major. A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers & Dancers* in 2003. Bringhurst’s polyphonic adventure had started early in his literary career with the publication of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986). Then *Conversations with a Toad* (1987) and *New World Suite No. 3* (1995) would naturally follow in the steps of that early polyphonic poem, seeking new paths for an audacious form of experimentation. With *Ursa Major* polyphony reached a climactic apex in the poet’s hands, for it did not only bring several voices together into the telling of a universal myth – that of Ursa Major, the constellation presiding the night sky in the northern hemisphere –, but also several cultural traditions and languages, both modern and classical. The overall impression is that of a palimpsest, the perfect embodiment of what intertextuality means, for *Ursa Major* is a brilliantly paratactic poem, bringing together living threads from several cultural traditions and mythologies – Graeco-Roman (Mediterranean) and Cree (Amerindian). *Ursa Major* is then a polylingual polyphonic poem of a tremendous energy, beauty and intricacy. Several voices speak at the same time, and they do so in several languages (Latin, Greek, Cree and English), so as to tell a collaborative version of a moving story that turns out to be universal, common to many cultures around the world. Originally published in 2003, *Ursa Major* was later republished in subsequent textual incarnations and revised in a new edition also by Gaspereau Press in 2009. Summarily, this is the editorial history of the poem:

- (1) A.69 *Ursa Major: A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers and Dancers*. Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau Press, 2003. 96 p. 19 × 28 cm. ISBN 0-8032-1328-X. Contents: Script of a work commissioned by the choreographer Robin Poitras and first performed by her company New Dance Horizona, Regina, Saskatchewan, in March 2002. With an afterword by Peter Sanger. The poem was reprinted in part in B.100, *Gaspereau gloriatur: Liber beati anni decimi*, vol. 1: Poetry, edited by Michael deBeyer, Kate Kennedy & Andrew Steeves, Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau, 2007: 23-35. Contribution: Scene 2 from *Ursa Major* (A.69).¹

¹ In “Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue”, the afterword to *New World Suite No. 3* (2005), Bringhurst explains the genesis of *Ursa Major* in detail: “In 2001 a dance company in Saskatchewan commissioned me to write a spoken score on the theme of the Great Bear. The major indigenous language in Saskatchewan is Cree, and some compelling stories are told in Cree about the relations of humans and bears. I thought it would be interesting to set one of these against the story of Zeus and Callisto. So in *Ursa Major*, which I wrote in the winter of 2001 and 2002, there are six speakers speaking four languages: English, Greek, Latin and Cree. (I could have done without the Latin, except that no ancient Greek version of Callisto’s story survives. The only substantial classical version we have is the one in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.)

Only three or four of the six speakers speak at a given time in *Ursa Major*. One of these is usually the translator, whose task is to give an immediate English rendering – not always perfectly accurate – of everything said in Latin or Cree. This may sound needlessly complex, but transactions this elaborate occur on a daily basis – not just at the UN, but in hospitals, laboratories, clinics, refugee camps, and countless other places around the world where urgent stories mingle. When *Ursa Major* was first performed, in Regina in 2002, it did not seem to me to cause the audience undue strain.

When I published *Ursa*, in 2003, I had the benefit, once again, of an editor and publisher willing to break some ground. As with *The Blue Roofs of Japan*, we printed the full text twice, but not on facing pages. It appears first in a linear form, one voice at a time, like an ordinary stageplay. This is easy to read but disguises the texture completely. The second version is the voice map. It replicates the texture but is difficult, at least for

- (2) A.91 *Ursa Major: A Masque for Speakers and Dancers*. 2nd edition. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press. 2009. 96 p. 12.5 × 20.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-060-0. The poem is revised from A.69. The voicemap is printed in five colors. The afterword by Peter Sanger is omitted in this edition.
- (3) A.92 *Selected Poems*. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press. 2009. 272 p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-068-6. A section entitled “Ursa Minor” contains the monologues and choruses from *Ursa Major* (2009): I · Arcturus, II · Arcturus & Chorus, III · Chorus, IV · Arcturus, V · Split Chorus [revised from *Ursa Major*], VI · Chorus, VII · Split Chorus, VII · Chorus, IX · Chorus.

As published originally in 2003, *Ursa Major* consisted of a preface by Robert Bringhurst, a masque in five scenes telling the story of Ursa Major (the score is given in both linear form and as a voice map printed in different colours), a series of notes on the sources of the text, and a thoughtful afterword by poet and critic Peter Sanger. It is a pity that this afterword should have been omitted in the second 2009 edition. Any critical analysis of the poem must begin with a consideration of Bringhurst’s own reflections on his own work in his Preface. At least two essential aspects are worth considering: first, the actual oral genesis of *Ursa Major*, a piece commissioned by a choreographer for performance by her company², and second his brief but illuminating meditation on the polyphonic and polylingual nature of the poem:

Most of the text of *Ursa Major* is meant to be spoken rather than sung, but I am interested in the ways in which speech can be musical, and in the ways in which music can speak. The speaking voices here make use of several musical devices or techniques. One of these, employed by Hera (and realized superbly in the first performance by Davida Monk), is retrograde motion. Hera, that is, speaks some of her lines both forward and backward. A more essential tool, employed throughout the work, is polyphonic speech. By that I mean, two or more voices often speak at once, though they have different things to say. The voices intertwine with one another, but their separate agendas prevent them, on the whole, from falling into a reciprocating, linear exchange. There is as a consequence little or no conventional dialogue. Where the polyphony is *antiphonal*, the voices alternate, like traffic at a four-way stop. Where it is *sustained*, the voices do not pause for one other; their crossing is continuous, like traffic on a cloverleaf or overpass. The polyphony throughout *Ursa Major* is *sustained* unless specifically marked otherwise.

This is something Bringhurst had already accomplished in *New World Suite No. 3* with astonishing mastery. However, whereas the *Suite* braided three different voices at the same

the uninitiated, to read. In the map, all the voices are superimposed on the page as they would be in performance. Since no more than four voices speak at a given time, four colors are enough, and no one voice is given prominence, though the translator always stays in the background, as translators should. Three different writing systems are used. The English and Latin are set in the Latin alphabet – varying as need be between roman and italic – and the Greek is set in Greek. The Cree is set in two ways, in Latin letters and Cree syllabics, because both those systems have their devotees.” *New World Suite No. 3* (2005), pp. 12-13.

² “This text was commissioned by the choreographer Robin Poitras for performance by her company New Dance Horizons, based in Regina, Saskatchewan. Chiyoko Szlavnic joined us from Berlin to create the musical score, and the sculptor Jon Noestheden, who constructed the stage properties and crucial portions of the set, produced a kinetic work of visual art for the verbal score, the choreography and the soundwork to move through and to rest in. // Rehearsals began in Regina in March 2002, and the first performances took place at the end of that month, with Davida Monk in the role of Hera, Philip Warren Sarsons in the role of Arcturus, Seema Goel in the role of Ovid’s Daughter, Patricia Colbert-Houle in the role of the Translator, Floyd Favel Starr in the role of Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw’s Son, Robin Poitras in the silent role of Callisto, Krista Solheim in the silent role of Moon Woman, Chihiro Beppu in the silent role of the Star Bearer, and myself standing in for the Celestial Janitor. I’m grateful to all these colleagues – especially to Robin, Davida and Philip, who contributed in many ways to the refinement of the script, and to Floyd, who has more to teach me every time I see him.” See Bringhurst’s prologue to *Ursa Major*.

time, all of them speaking English simultaneously at some points, now Bringhurst manages to bring together up to four voices speaking different languages, for this is a polylingual poem. The beautiful musicality of *Ursa Major* is thus achieved via the simultaneous voicings of several languages: Greek, Latin, Cree and English words are juxtaposed side by side. To Iain Higgins' mind, *Ursa Major* is "a relational hymn in which the separate multilingual voices (Latin, English, Greek, Cree) disappear into the mostly sustained sonic "shoom" of vocal counterpoint." Of course, the text is given twice: first in "linear form" and then as "a voice map", which is "in its utter "illisibility" a post-structuralist's dream, and there is no little pleasure to be got pouring over its complex text with its several alphabets."³ With his characteristic wry humour, the author points out that polyphony should not be a problem or come as a surprise to the hearer, for we do live in a multilingual world after all and our ears are tuned to hearing many voices speaking simultaneously, overlapping, colliding into one another all the time:

The polyphony here is also very often polylingual. This is not, I think, a problem, despite the fact that theatre-goers and readers equally fluent in English, Latin, Greek and Cree appear to be in short supply. This is a masque, not an exam. What I ask of its audience, either in text or in performance, is merely a willingness to watch and think and listen. All of us are practised, after all, at living in a multivocal, multilingual world. We have no choice. No other sort of world exists.⁴

"A score and a performance are of course two different things, each ideally indebted to the other", says Bringhurst in his Preface. As a matter of fact, *Ursa Major* was originally conceived as being a multimedia work,⁵ combining words, dancing, singing and all the ingredients implicit in a choreography in time and in space. However, the only thing we have now left is words – the score of a performance⁶ that took place on two occasions in Saskatchewan in March 2002. We do not even have the ghostly traces of recorded form. "Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to know how such a polyglot polyphony might sound, and this beautiful book is limited by the lack of a CD recording of a performance", says critic Iain Higgins.⁷ *Ursa Major* remains a beautifully designed book,⁸ a handsome art object, a perfect artifact, and a typographical challenge for both Andrew Steeves of Gaspereau Press and Robert Bringhurst, an expert typographer himself:

³ See Iain Higgins' review of *Ursa Major*, entitled "Bear Bones", published in *Books in Canada* 33.2 (March 2004): 42.

⁴ See Bringhurst's prologue to *Ursa Major*.

⁵ George Elliott Clarke says that "the drama was and is multimedia, fusing words, music, dance, and a "kinetic" set." See his review entitled "Bringhurst's *Ursa Major* shines brilliantly", published in *The Chronicle Herald* (Halifax), August 10, 2003: C7.

⁶ In "Late at the Feast", his excellent and perceptive afterword to the 2003 edition, Peter Sanger says: "The best commentary upon Bringhurst's *Ursa Major* can only be its performance. Of the seven choreographies out of which it is made, only one can be offered by a printed text with some accuracy – the choreography of its words, of its Latin, Greek, English and Cree. The other six choreographies at work in the masque, and audience, can be registered only glancingly, if at all, on the page." (p. 77)

⁷ Iain Higgins insists on the fact that a *silent reading* of the score is not enough: "In fact, *Ursa Major* is limited by the lack of a DVD, since Bringhurst's book is more than a text; it is the verbal score for a symmetrically shaped five-act masque whose performance involves dance, costume, scenery, music, and song (the two main speakers are offstage). [...] For without experiencing a performance it is next to impossible to feel the work's effects or think seriously about the concerns it embodies or enacts, including those of selective cultural cross-breeding and appropriation, and myth as opposed to history." See Iain Higgins' review of *Ursa Major*, entitled "Bear Bones", published in *Books in Canada* 33.2 (March 2004): 42.

⁸ George Elliott Clarke points out: "Andrew Steeves runs two or three of four languages together in painstakingly exquisite passages, using various densities of ink, and the work is introduced by a dramatic woodcut illustration of a bear's heard by Wesley Bates." See George Elliott Clarke, "Bringhurst's *Ursa Major* shines brilliantly", *The Chronicle Herald* (Halifax), August 10, 2003: C7.

Part I displays the voices consecutively as a form of playscript for ease of reading, while Part II is a voice map [...] which braids the voices as they would intertwine with each other in the polyphony of performance. This is the core of the book and the most visually appealing: four languages, three alphabets, three typefaces (plus two screens of them) pattern the page. Interesting musical devices are also used such as retrograde recitation where words are spoken in reverse order from their first appearance.⁹

At the heart of Bringham's masque is the universal myth of Ursa Major, the familiar constellation also known as the Great Bear or the Big Dipper. One and the same myth unfolds into full bloom in the poem, though two stories from two different cultural traditions (Graeco-Roman and Cree) are being told by different voices.¹⁰ This is a recurrent characteristic of Bringham's poetics, which is fond of cultural syncretism. The poet is interested in salvaging valuable remnants of vision (tattered fragments of wisdom) from the past, from different cultures, traditions and languages. Time and again he assumes the persona of someone else, for instance in his Pre-Socratic sequence, or in the poems on the Oriental sages, or in his early biblical pieces, in search of an irreducible core of meaning that still makes sense today. Thus, Bringham has made use of two types of sources for his poem: (1) Greek and Latin sources, particularly Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (book II), the only surviving substantial source for the story of Callisto (a bear myth) in the western classical tradition according to Bringham himself, and (2) Cree sources, particularly the story entitled "The Bear-Woman", included in Leonard Bloomfield's classic *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree* (1930).¹¹ What we get is a beautiful tessellation of stories which leaves no room for improvisation and nothing *en route*. As Peter Sanger puts it, "Bringham's masque is a performative act of re-collection and collaboration. Throughout its five scenes, it brings into collaboration and re-collection four languages, two traditions of myth (the Mediterranean and the Amerindian), and all the arts (poetry, music, sculpture, painting, and architecture)."¹² In fact, by bringing together the Cree, Roman and Greek mythologies into one beautiful *Gestalt*, Bringham is underlining the universality of stories about Ursa Major, the great bear constellation, while at the same time emphasizing the universality of certain human concerns. According to Peter Sanger, *Ursa Major* is a poem about human knowledge, about that which is worth knowing and preserving throughout time across human cultures, but it is also a poem about desire, that most elemental of human impulses:

⁹ See Brian Henderson's review of *Ursa Major*, entitled "Poet on Point", in *Canadian Literature* 186 (Autumn 2005): 117-118.

¹⁰ In a review of *Selected Poems* (2009) entitled "In the Wake of Our Ancestors", published in *The Times* (London), 8 August 2009; *Weekend Review* 12, Mark Dickinson writes: "Composed for six speakers working in four languages – Cree, Greek, Latin and English – *Ursa* brings two classic stories into the same orbit: Ovid's retelling of Arcturus and Callisto, the basis for the Great Bear constellation, and Bear Woman, a Cree story by the mythteller Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw about a hunter who falls in love with a woman who is not what she appears to be. [...] These gathered traditions, Bringham reminds us, are tools through which people millennia apart have tried to understand where they are and what they are doing."

¹¹ In note no. 2 on the sources of *Ursa Major*, Bringham points out that: "The story told by Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw's Son is one of many that Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw himself told to Leonard Bloomfield at Sweet Grass Reserve, Saskatchewan, in 1925. It is published as "The Bear-Woman" in Bloomfield's *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree* (Ottawa, 1930). I have added a transcription into West Cree syllabics, updated Bloomfield's meticulous romanization, and corrected a couple of obvious minor errors but made no other changes to the Cree. While the English version spoken by the Translator owes much to Bloomfield's own translation – and much to the advice of another fine scholar, H.C. Wolfart – it should not be misconstrued as a precise and literal rendering."

¹² Peter Sanger's Afterword to *Ursa Major* (2003), p. 79. On the deliberate, careful selection of Graeco-Roman and Cree sources for the making of *Ursa Major* on the part of Bringham, Sanger says that "In *Ursa Major* the narrative structure – within which its lyrics are spoken, sung, chanted – is explicit. It is polyphonically composed within each scene and from scene to scene in sequences of very deliberately chosen narrative sources. There is nothing improvisational about the masque's schema." (p. 81)

“It’s also about the transformations of desire – betrayal, bitterness, loss, passion, yearning – so central to myths (transformations of gods and humans to animals and vice versa and living creatures to shiny bits of firmament).”¹³

Ursa Major is not just a complex tessellation of stories from different cultural traditions in several languages (in that it retells two myths of the bear constellation using a Cree story, as told by the blind, illiterate mythteller Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw to Leonard Bloomfield in the summer of 1925, and Ovid’s Callisto myth as recorded in Book II of his *Metamorphoses*), but also a rich tapestry braided with translations and original poems by Bringhurst. As George Elliott Clarke puts it, “This performance work – part original translations, part original poetry – merges Greek, Latin, Cree and English, literally, cascading and colliding together, voices and languages in a deft orchestration of polyphony.”¹⁴ In this respect, Bringhurst might be following once more in Ezra Pound’s steps:

Like Ezra Pound, the enraged inventor of modern poetry in English, who imported into our tongue the classic clarity and concision of Chinese ideograms, Egyptian hieroglyphics, Latin, Cree [*sic*], French, Italian and even old Anglo-Saxon, Bringhurst – much saner and more humane than Pound – has been busily remaking Canadian poetry for more than 30 years by borrowing forms and ideas from multiple language and cultural traditions, especially those of First Nations peoples.¹⁵

In *Ursa Major* Robert Bringhurst is poet, linguist, typographer, cultural historian, and translator all in one: a man seriously committed to his vocation as poet who relishes the very materiality and universality of the word, of language, and of myth. The simplicity, clarity and elegance of his language is what makes this poem in five scenes truly fascinating. George Elliott Clarke speaks of its “singing simplicity”: no matter whether in the Cree renderings, or in the Latin translation of Ovidian hexameters or in the translations from fragments originally composed in classical Greek, the clarity shines through Bringhurst’s words. His is a singing poetry, one that sings with simplicity, clarity and conviction. And this is a polyglot polyphonic poem, which is a huge accomplishment.¹⁶

SCENE I · Metamorphosis One

In *Ursa Major*, Robert Bringhurst tells the story of the Great Bear constellation in an astonishing original way. As pointed out above, *Ursa Major* is an intricate, beautiful polyphonic poem that was performed as a choreographed piece of drama by the New Dance Horizons company in Saskatchewan in March 2002. A gigantic tessellation of stories

¹³ Brian Henderson’s review of *Ursa Major*, “Poet on Point”, *Canadian Literature* 186 (Autumn 2005): p. 117.

¹⁴ George Elliott Clarke, “Bringhurst’s *Ursa Major* shines brilliantly”, in *The Chronicle Herald* (Halifax), August 10, 2003: C7.

¹⁵ George Elliott Clarke, *ibid.*, C7.

¹⁶ In “Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue”, Bringhurst draws an interesting distinction between bilingual books and polyglot books: “Bilingual books, with one language on the recto and another on the verso, can be a joy to handle and read. Two is a number at home in the standard codex form of the book, just as it is in the eyes and ears of readers, and in their feet and shoes. Polyglot books, containing three texts or more, are a problem of a different order. People have tried for two thousand years to make them work in codex form – with sometimes interesting results – but in general polyglot texts are more at home in separate books or in the scroll, which can be opened as much or little as you please: to a spread of one page or of five. *The Blue Roofs* was easy to put in a book because the two voices really asked for nothing that the familiar bilateral book could not conveniently provide.” *Ibid.*, p. 5.

and songs and chants in several monumental tongues of epic proportions, the poem tells several versions of the Great Bear creation myth concurrently in Greek, Latin, Cree and English – i.e., two classical languages of prestige rescued from the very cradle of the Western civilization, one of the living languages of the First Nations of North America, and a modern *lingua franca*. There is no room for improvisation at all in this well-wrought complex, polyglot piece of choreography, or *radically ecological structure*, as Peter Sanger calls it in his Afterword to *Ursa Major*. The sources Bringhurst uses are mainly Graeco-Roman and Cree. From a number of heterogeneous sources emerges a rare, precious unity called *Ursa Major*, a long poem/play structured in five scenes. Translations (not always literal) from the Greek, Latin and Cree occur side by side with original poems by Bringhurst. The overall impression is one of absolute coherence: translation and original pieces merge into one another with total assurance and naturalness. Of course, this is not the first time Bringhurst handles mythological materials from Graeco-Roman provenance in his poetry. Such poems as “Death by Water” (on the death of Narcissus), “The Better Man” (on the sad story of Orpheus and Eurydice), or “Leda and the Swan” (on the rape of the young woman by Zeus again) are all good examples of what Bringhurst can accomplish when handling classical myths from antiquity.

Ursa Major consists of five scenes, at the beginning of which Bringhurst gives a detailed description of the speakers and dancers taking part in the action, as well as careful instructions as to the way voices are to interact with one another in their collaborative telling of the Ursa Major myth. Thus, in Scene I there are four speakers (Ovid’s Daughter, Translator, Hera and the Celestial Janitor) and four dancers (Star Bearer, Callisto, Hera and Moon Woman). Ovid’s Daughter’s and the Translator’s voices (in Latin and English, respectively) are simultaneous. “To these, the third voice (Hera’s) is soon added; then briefly, a fourth (the Celestial Janitor’s). Toward the end of the scene, Hera is speaking alone”. To sum up, three different languages concur in the telling of the Ursa Major myth – Latin, English and Greek – in Scene One; up to four voices speak simultaneously at some points in this scene. Typographically speaking, two different script systems are displayed in different colours on the page layout. Thematically, Scene One of *Ursa Major* explores the first, fundamental myth at the core of the poem: the myth of Callisto as retold by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, Book II, lines 401-541. As Bringhurst himself points out in note 1 at the end of his book, “The lines spoken by Ovid’s Daughter (and translated, not always reliably, by the Translator) come from book 2 of the *Metamorphoses* – the only surviving classical source of any substance for the story of Callisto.” Bringhurst is prompt to emphasize that his translation from the original Latin Ovidian text is not literal; in this he might be following the example set by Pound himself in his “Homage to Sextus Propertius”, which was no literal rendering at all in the eyes of some classicists of the time. In his Afterword to *Ursa Major*, Peter Sanger provides an excellent summary of the myth:

One version of the fuller story (there is another elsewhere in *Ursa Major*, as we shall hear) can be quickly told. According to Ovid, Callisto was one of a company of nymphs attending the goddess Diana (or Artemis, to use a Greek name), sister to Apollo, during Diana’s life as a huntress in Arcadia (translatable from the Greek as bear-country). Zeus, returning from extinguishing the fire caused by the fall of Phaeton, which almost consumed the universe, sees Callisto and falls in love or lust, with her. He changes himself into the form of Diana, embraces the unsuspecting Callisto, then changing back into his own form, rapes and renders her pregnant. Callisto tries to conceal her pregnancy from Diana, but her condition becomes public when Diana forces her to strip and bathe in a spring. Diana banishes Callisto for losing her virginity. Alone, in the woods of Arcadia, Callisto gives birth to a son, Arcturus. Hera, Zeus’ wife, takes revenge upon Callisto after

the birth by turning her into a she-bear. Lycaon, Callisto's father, raises Arcturus. As a she-bear, Callisto lives for fifteen years in solitude, afraid of humans, of gods, of her fellow beasts, until Arcturus accidentally discovers her while he is hunting. She recognizes him, pausing to gaze at him before fleeing. Arcturus construes her pause as aggression, not knowing it is love, and prepares to spear her. Zeus then intervenes to change both into stars. Hera's revenge is to secure from Neptune and Tethys, Neptune's wife and mother of the main rivers in the Universe, the promise that neither Arcturus in Boötes nor Callisto in Ursa Major will ever be able to conceal themselves below the levels of the waters of earth.¹⁷

What Bringhurst does not say about the way he handles the original Ovidian text is that he is tessellating illuminating fragments into the living fabric of his own poem, as if he had managed to salvage them from a badly damaged papyrus roll. Of the over one hundred verse lines Ovid devotes to the Callisto myth, Bringhurst quotes 28 lines or portions of lines lifted from the Latin text. The same Latin words from Book II of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* appear in scenes 1, 3 and 5 of *Ursa Major*, delivered by Ovid's Daughter and accompanied in scenes 1 and 5 by Bringhurst's translation into English, voiced in slightly delayed polyphonic overdraft by an actor-dancer designated the Translator. Peter Sanger meditates on the fragmentary nature of the Latin text as handled by Bringhurst in *Ursa Major* and comes to an astonishing conclusion:

Bringhurst's use of Ovid, therefore, offers the Callisto myth in a radically fragmentary form, characterized by abruptness, unassigned pronouns, and unexplained relationships. The effect is as if we were reading all that remains of a text recorded on a badly damaged papyrus roll. They are fragments of beauty, strangeness, bitterness, violence. They invest us with the sense of being part of a myth working at the limits of endurable human knowledge. But they are, nonetheless, fragments. They exist as such in *Ursa Major*, because Bringhurst wishes us to see and hear (who now can understand spoken Latin?) that the immediate, cultural tradition of which they are part exists only in the most damaged, intercepted form in the modern world.¹⁸

That all we find in opening section of Scene One is a handful of resonant Latin words accompanied by a magnificent translation into English does not necessarily mean that there is no logic to the way Bringhurst has arranged the Ovidian fragments to form a whole. At least five distinct parts are discernible in this pattern:

- (1) The first cluster of Latin words (lines 405-408 of Book II of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) provides the physical setting where the story of Callisto takes place, a land in ancient Greece called Arcadia, literally "bear country". Etymologically speaking, 'Arcadia' comes from 'Arcas' (Ἄρκας), the name of Arcturus, Callisto's son, as a child, whereas 'Arcturus' (from *arktos* + *ouros*) means literally "guardian of the bear". The simplicity and elegance of Bringhurst's rendering of the original Latin shines through lines like these: "He gave the land back all its wild grasses, gave the tree limbs / to the trees. He gave the country life again..." Bringhurst uses repetition and parallelism to obvious effect here: they build on a moving musicality surrounding an idyllic setting where there appears to be no room for any form of violence, where nothing wrong might come to happen.
- (2) The second cluster of Latin words (*Metamorphoses*, Book II, lines 412-416) describes the nymph Callisto with an astonishing linguistic economy, in just a few brush strokes, as seen by the king of the Olympian gods and goddesses, omnipotent Zeus. It is only natural that the setting of the story should be Arcadia, for the story of Callisto (Καλλιστώ) is an

¹⁷ See Peter Sanger's Afterword at the end of *Ursa Major* (2003), pp. 84-85.

¹⁸ Peter Sanger's Afterword, pp. 83-84.

Arcadian myth. According to some authors, Callisto was a nymph of the woods; according to other authors, she was king Lycaon's or Nicteus' daughter. She had made up her mind to remain a virgin her whole life and spend her days hunting in the woods and hills in the company of Artemis' maiden huntresses. But one day, Zeus saw her and fell in love with her. Assuming Artemis' appearance to approach her cunningly, he was welcome by unsuspecting Callisto but then he revealed his true self, made love to her and rendered her pregnant. The poor nymph tried to conceal her secret and shame from Artemis and the accompanying virgin nymphs as long as she could. In Bringhurst's fragmentary but masterly rendering, the emphasis is laid on the spontaneous naturalness of her costume and hair-dressing ("her dress just wrapped around and pinned, / a white cord knotted in the hair she never combed") and on her virginity: Callisto is depicted as being a virgin huntress carrying "a spear or a bow in her hand: / one of Moon Woman's warriors". Of course, Moon Woman is Artemis (or Diana), daughter to Zeus and sister to Apollo, the sylvan virgin goddess among the Olympians. And Callisto is part of the goddess' retinue of virgin nymphs, roaming the woods and the hills, ignorant of men's company.

- (3) The third cluster (*Metamorphoses*, Book II, lines 438, 464) focuses, on the one hand, on the horrible shame Callisto must endure after having been raped by Zeus, while she cannot avoid loathing the woods that know her secret, and, on the other hand, on Artemis' anger at discovering Callisto's pregnancy (while all the nymphs are bathing together in a cool pool completely naked) and on the subsequent banishment of the ashamed nymph, away from their company, as a punishment for breaking her vow of chastity. What is left unsaid by the masque's words in their fragmentary, allusive ways is eloquent in itself. The rape has been omitted altogether, although Callisto's shame in the face of what has happened gives the reader an idea of the horror. The Latin verse line "huic odio nemus est et conscia silva" becomes "Then she hated the flowers and trees that had seen it and felt it" in Bringhurst's rendering. Reading these words, one is inevitably reminded of "Leda and the Swan", another of Bringhurst's poems dwelling on Zeus and his intercourse with simple mortals. The physical violence accompanying the rape by Zeus is not overtly stated but indirectly evoked via the reference to the psychological state of mind of poor Callisto. What is indeed explicit is the dialectic violence conveyed by the words ascribed to Artemis as she finds the truth about Callisto's pregnancy and banishes her away from her presence: "Get away from here," *Moon Woman* said. *Don't pollute the sacred pool!*" The words with which the goddess dismisses poor Callisto will give plenty of food for thought for Arcturus' moving meditations on the relationships between immortal gods and mortal humans in scenes 2 and 4 of *Ursa Major*. How is it possible for love to pollute the sacred waters of Artemis' pool when Callisto is only the victim of Zeus' sexual assault? What is left for simple humans to do in the face of the overwhelming presence of gods and goddesses that are immortal and powerful? In any case, what is simply astonishing about Bringhurst's achievement here is that he manages to juxtapose just two single Ovidian verse lines to convey Callisto's shame and Artemis' rage at discovering the loss of virginity on the part of the nymph, who had sworn a vow of chastity.
- (4) The fourth cluster of Latin words (*Metamorphoses*, Book II, lines 474, 477-480, 483-485) shows Hera, Zeus' wife, taking revenge on poor Callisto as she discovers that she has given birth to Arcas, an illegitimate son to her husband. Hera, who had not been slow to realize her husband's infidelity, is determined to take revenge on the nymph. This is exactly the point in the story of Callisto at which the jealous wife transforms the beautiful Callisto into a horrible she-bear. Hurling insults, she grabs Callisto by her hair and pulls her to the ground. As Callisto lies spreadeagled, dark hairs begin to sprout from her arms and legs, her hands and feet turn into horrible claws and her beautiful mouth which Zeus had kissed turns into gaping jaws that utter only ugly growls. In Bringhurst's rendering, the crucial moment of Callisto's metamorphosis into a growling bear is conveyed in such moving lines: "When she lifted up her arms / to beg for mercy, they were already dark and turning shaggy, / fingers shrinking into toe and growing long, sharp claws..." Deprived of human speech, she cannot but produce horrible meaningless noises: "What erupted from her throat / was just a rough noise, a

storm wind whipped in the pit of her belly.” However, her mind remained exactly the same (“mens antiqua manet”, says the Latin fragment), which means that the she-bear has still got a human mind and a human heart deep inside: “*Yet her mind stayed just the way it was...*”, says the Translator with perfect simplicity.

- (5) The fifth cluster of Latin words (*Metamorphoses*, Book II, lines 494-495, 500, 501, 502-504, 506-507) shows Callisto roaming the Arcadian woods as a she-bear, but still with a human mind, for fifteen years and encountering her son Arcturus quite by chance. Once a huntress herself, she was now pursued by hunters, she was now terrified of other bears and of wolves in the mountains, even if her own father, Lycaon, had been himself turned into a wolf by Zeus after he had dared to test and mock Zeus’ omnipotence by giving him cooked human flesh. One day she comes face to face with her son, Arcturus. *Incidet in matrem*, says the Latin with astonishing economy: “*by chance he met his mother*”, translates Bringhurst in to English. This is a truly climactic moment in the story of Callisto. The she-bear recognizes her son and tries to approach him, but he backs off in fear, not knowing “*what spooked him*” about those eyes “*that didn’t blink and never left him*”. He would have speared the bear, not knowing it was really his mother, had not Zeus intervened by sending a whirlwind that carried them up into heaven, where the omnipotent god transformed Callisto into the constellation Ursa Major and Arcas into the constellation Boötes and placed them side by side as shining bits of light on the firmament for eternity.¹⁹ So, fortunately, though Arcturus nearly kills his mother, Zeus intervenes on time and makes both mother and son constellations in the night sky: “*caught them up and spun them through the nothingness / and set them in the sky beside each other, made them into constellations.*” *Sidera fecit*, says the original Latin. That is the end of the metamorphosis as told by Ovid in Book II.

That this is the most familiar version of Callisto’s story is no doubt due to Ovid’s pre-eminence as a storyteller in his magnificent *Metamorphoses*, but there were other versions in antiquity, some of them older than Ovid, even if they have been preserved only in the form of tattered but resonant fragments. One of these fragments Bringhurst salvages from classical Greek in the second movement of Scene One, which juxtaposes Hera’s song, overlapping the Latin and its translation into English, and the Celestial Janitor’s words, “chanting polyphonically with Hera as he sings her into place”. Hera’s song goes like this: “*Καλλιστώ κατέπεφνεν ἀπ’ ἀργυρέοιο βιοιο... / ... ἀπ’ ἀργυρέοιο βιοῖο ... / Καλλιστώ, Καλλιστώ ...*” Bringhurst translates it in English as follows: “*Callisto killed with a silver bow / with a silver bow / Callisto, Callisto.*” In some accounts of Callisto’ story, she is said to have been killed by Artemis herself with a shot of her silver bow, perhaps urged by the wrath of jealous Hera, as a punishment for breaking her vow of chastity. And this is precisely what

¹⁹ In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book II, lines 496-506 is the original account of the catasterism (the metamorphosis into stars) of both mother and son: “*Ecce Lycaoniae proles ignara parentis, / Arcas adest ter quinque fere natalibus actis; / dumque feras sequitur, dum saltus eligit aptos / nexilibusque plagis silvas Erymanthidas ambit, / incidit in matrem, quae restitit Arcade viso / et cognoscenti similis fuit: ille refugit / inmotosque oculos in se sine fine tenentem / nescius extimuit propiusque accedere aventi / vulnifico fuerat fixurus pectora telo: / arcuit omnipotens pariterque ipsosque nefasque / sustulit et pariter raptos per inania vento / inposuit caelo vicinaque sidera fecit.*” (p. 94) And this is the literal translation into English: “*And now Arcas, Lycaon’s grandson, had reached his fifteenth year, ignorant of his mother’s plight. While he was hunting the wild beasts, seeking out their favourite haunts, hemming the Arcadian woods with his close-wrought nets, he chanced upon his mother, who stopped still at sight of Arcas, and seemed like one that recognized him. He shrank back at those unmoving eyes that were fixed for ever upon him, and feared he knew not what; and when she tried to come nearer, he was just in the act of piercing her breast with his wound-dealing spear. But the Omnipotent stayed his hand, and together he removed both themselves and the crime, and together caught up through the voice in a whirlwind, he set them in the heavens and made them neighbouring stars.*” (p. 95) See Ovid in Six Volumes, vol. III – *Metamorphoses* in Two Volumes, I (Books I-VIII), translated by Frank Justus Miller, 1st edition 1916, 2nd ed. 1921, reprinted 1971. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press & London: William Heinemann Ltd.

this constellation of ancient Greek words appear to evoke. In note 4 Bringhurst tells us about the source of these words:

Hera's song is the only line concerning Callisto in the surviving remnants of Greek epic. Though likely genuine in itself, it has been shorn of all context, preserved in isolation in a tongue-in-cheek assortment of quotations known as the *Certamen* or "Contest of Homer and Hesiod."

And in note 5, Bringhurst informs us that "The lines the Celestial Janitor chants in scene 1, as a summons and reply to Hera's song – and which Hera finally translates into English in scene 3 – are taken from the first book of the *Iliad*." This is Bringhurst's majestic rendering into English of the Greek lines: "*The god of light descended like the darkness, with a flock of arrows keening / at his shoulder. He was trembling with anger. / He kneeled far back from the ships and nocked an arrow and took aim, / and the silver bow started its heart-stopping scream...*" These lines show Apollo, Artemis' brother, shooting arrows at the Achaeans in anger, with consummate dexterity, in the Trojan war. For he is not just the rational god of science, music and poetry; his anger and fury are also proverbial.

The third movement of Scene One of *Ursa Major* shows Hera "speaking over the Latin and its translation, then singing in Greek, then speaking in retrograde motion, then singing again." She is addressing poor Callisto in anger just on the point where she is about to transform her into a bear:

You whore, you bore my husband's son
to spite me, didn't you? You'll pay me though.
You'll pay for that right now.

adimam tibi namque figuram ...

I'll pull your hair
and squeeze your eyes.
You'll be a bear.
You'll fraternize
with bugs and worms and prairie dogs.
You'll fart and stink
and poop your clothes
and spend the winter buried in the ground.

These are the words Bringhurst ascribes to the jealous wife as she takes revenge on poor Callisto, as soon as she learns of his husband's infidelity. What is so astonishing about these lines is the plain, colloquial language used by the goddess to speak to Callisto. The violence and aggressiveness implicit in the words come as a surprise, for one does not expect Olympian goddesses (their queen, for that matter) to speak like this. Hera is giving full vent to all the anger she holds in her chest, and poor Callisto is the inevitable target of her malicious words. The Latin words *adimam tibi namque figuram* have been earlier translated into English as "*I'll drive the beauty out of you.*" And this is precisely what Hera does by metamorphosing the nymph into a growling she-bear: she deprives her of all her mortal beauty, of human speech and of all other human attributes, while ostracizing her to the company of sylvan animals. Like all bears, she will have to spend the cold winter "*buried in ground.*" One thing remains intact though inside her: *antiqua mens manet*, said the original Latin text, which means that her mind is still that common to all human beings. On the other hand, musicality is achieved here through a very simple device: Bringhurst has Hera repeat exactly the same words quoted above in retrograde motion (i.e., in reversed order),

which at first may sound a bit awkward to the reader. The scene closes with Hera singing her Greek song, fading “to silence and darkness.”

SCENE II · Arcturus Awakens

Scene Two of *Ursa Major* is a complex scene. Now the speakers are Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw’s Son,²⁰ the Translator, Arcturus and the Celestial Janitor; the dancers are Callisto, Arcturus, Hera and Moon Woman. Once again, Bringhurst provides detailed instructions as for the way polyphony is to work in the scene: “The first three voices are simultaneous. Late in the scene, a fourth voice (the Celestial Janitor’s) is added. At the end of the scene, the first two voices cease, then the third, so the Janitor speaks his last lines alone.” Up to four voices will be speaking their messages simultaneously, each going separately on their own agenda while at the same time contributing to the collaborative undertaking of telling the Ursa Major myth. And two completely different languages are threaded into the living fabric of this amazing polyphonic, polylingual poem: Cree and English. Writing in Cree was also a typographical challenge in the making of *Ursa Major*: Bringhurst is using both the syllabic and romanized form of the language. Of course, nowadays there is a short supply of readers (or theatre-goers) equally practised in classical Greek, Latin and Cree, as the author humorously pointed out in his Preface to the poem. And yet the poet wants the reader to look at and listen to the original linguistic texture of an old story as it was told to Leonard Bloomfield in the summer of 1925 and included in *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree* (1930). In note 2, Bringhurst gives the details concerning the source of the Cree story that is the beating heart of scenes 2 and 4 (about one half is told in each scene):

The story told by Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw’s Son is one of many that Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw himself told to Leonard Bloomfield at Sweet Grass Reserve, Saskatchewan, in 1925. It is published as “The Bear-Woman” in Bloomfield’s *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree* (Ottawa, 1930). I have added a transcription into West Cree syllabics, updated Bloomfield’s meticulous romanization, and corrected a couple of obvious minor errors but made no other changes to the Cree. While the English version spoken by the Translator owes much to Bloomfield’s own

²⁰ Bringhurst contributed an entry on Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw to W.H. New’s *Encyclopaedia of Literature in Canada*: “Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw (Coming Day). Plains Cree mythteller; b in present day west-central SK, c 1850, d Sweet Grass Reserve, SK, Nov 1935; son of Capasîsis (Down Low) and her husband Napatê Kîsik (On One Side of the Sky). A more literal translation of his name (which is linked to that of his father) is ‘One Who [Kâ], Being the Sky (or Being Daylight) [kîsikâw], Comes Inside [pîhtokêw].’ In the summer of 1925, on the Sweet Grass Reserve, he dictated 33 stories or narrative poems and a few short songs to the linguist Leonard Bloomfield. These texts were published in Cree with Bloomfield’s English translations in 1930 and 1934. Eighteen of the tales are *âtayôhkêwin* (stories set in myth time); the others are *âcimôwin* (stories set in historical time). They range from very simple to marvelously intricate in structure, and when set out clause by clause, in the form now generally preferred for printing Native American oral literature, many run to 1,500 lines or more. [...] He learned the art of telling myths from older hunters, including his grandfather Kaskitêwimaskwa (Black Bear), his uncle Nîsotêw-mostos (Twin Buffalo), and also his father until the latter’s death, while fighting encroaching Europeans, in 1885. He lived a hunter’s life himself when he was young, and with others of his people, he endured the difficult shift to an agricultural and sedentary life that came with the establishment of the Treaty Six reserves in 1884. When he was blinded, probably by smallpox near the end of the 19th century, his memories of the older world flourished, and he stood back from the new. [...] Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw remains as inexhaustible on paper as Bloomfield said he was in person. In the now very large and rich published body of Cree literature, he is still the major author.” *Ibid.*, pp. 571-572. The entry is authored by Robert Bringhurst and Heather G. Hodgson.

translation – and much to the advice of another fine scholar, H. C. Wolfart – it should not be misconstrued as a precise and literal rendering.²¹

So Bringhurst has salvaged a precious text from a classic in its field, Bloomfield's compilation of Cree stories, corrected minor errors in the linguist's romanization, and translated directly from Cree – one of the vernacular languages spoken in North America that is now as a rule forgotten by academia as sustaining a living body of literature. All literature is oral at its roots, reminds us Bringhurst time and again in the many essays and meditations he has devoted to the native oral literatures of North America. There is an immense body of literary texts, mostly transcriptions recorded by linguists, anthropologists and ethnographers awaiting careful edition, translation and critical elucidation. They are buried, and almost completely forgotten, in archives in libraries across North America. Bringhurst has visited them time and again to make amazing discoveries: to his astonishment, he has found the welcome gift of literary texts of impressive quality. In an enlightening essay entitled "What Is Found in Translation" (included in his prose compilation *Everywhere Being Is Dancing*), Bringhurst reminds us that translation should serve three basic social functions: one is that of keeping our links with the past, so that we need to go back to such classics as Plato, for instance, to keep in our minds their useful insights into the essence of things; another is that of keeping cultures (and languages) in touch, informing people of their neighbour's achievements; and the third one, which is usually forgotten, is that of making discoveries – i.e., finding out texts that have not yet been given the attention they deserve and sharing the discovery with other fellow human beings as to enlarge their perception and size of the world.²² Bringhurst is well aware that any consideration of the literary legacy he has received from his ancestors must begin with an appreciation of the literary history of the land where he happens to live and which he calls *home*. He has been readjusting his mental map of the literary world where he lives for a long time, paying attention to the oral literatures of over a hundred languages of the First Nations of North America.

As in the case of the translation from Ovid's Latin, now Bringhurst is also prompt to point out that his version of "The Bear Woman" should not be "misconstrued as a precise and literal rendering" of the original Cree story. That it owes much to Bloomfield's

²¹ In note 3, Bringhurst adds: "John D. Nichols kindly proofread and corrected my syllabic version of the text – but as Cree readers will notice, the spelling in both syllabic and romanized form is still nonstandard and archaic [...] This is the dialect Bloomfield heard the Sweet Grass elders use for formal narrative in 1925." In the early 1920s Bloomfield began his classic work on North American Indian languages, contributing the first of many descriptive and comparative studies of the Algonquian family. For his part, Peter Sanger, in the Afterword to *Ursa Major* (2003), points out that "The second main source used in *Ursa Major* is, as Bringhurst acknowledges in his notes, Leonard Bloomfield's *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree*, a substantial book of nearly 350 pages issued as Bulletin 60 in the Anthropological Memoirs Series of the National Museum of Canada. Scene 2 of the masque contains the first half and scene 4 the second half of a story told to Bloomfield while he was collecting linguistic material on the Sweet Grass Reserve near Battleford, Saskatchewan, in the summer of 1925. Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw (anglicized as Coming Day), "a blind old man" to use Bloomfield's words, reputed by other Sweet Grass Cree to know more traditional stories than any other member of the band, told Bloomfield the bear-woman story that Bringhurst quotes and translates. Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw was, in fact, the chief contributor to Bloomfield's collection. Fifteen of its thirty-six stories were of his telling. Each, incidentally, ends with the words (or a slight variation upon the words): "That is the end of the sacred story." (p. 85)

²² See "What Is Found in Translation" (included in his prose compilation *Everywhere Being Is Dancing. Twenty Pieces of Thinking*, p. 75. In the same essay he dwells on what could be termed *Weltliteratur*, his omnivorous literary canon: "What I need as a human being is a picture of the whole of human history. And what I need as a practicing writer is a picture of the whole of human *literary* history. I need a picture rich in local detail but also with a sense of shape. Like the globe beside my desk, it should give me a sense of how large and various, but also how finite and fragile, are the time and space of the species to which I belong." *Ibid.*, p. 87.

literal transcription of the story is evident when we place Bringhurst's poem against the linguist's rendering, which is worth quoting in full:

Once upon a time a man lived all alone and never saw any people, being all alone in that place. When he had slept at night, in the morning he went hunting. Whenever he saw buffalo, he killed them. He would take a tongue and a thigh-bone and go home, and when he reached his dwelling, he would prepare his meal, and when he had eaten, he would gather firewood. So night would come upon him. As he stayed thus by himself, at last he felt lonesome. When daylight came and he as usual went hunting, again he killed a buffalo. He went home; he took a little to eat.

When he was near his dwelling place, he saw a great pile of firewood by his tent. He wondered about it; "It must be that someone has come," he thought. He was glad. When he entered, he saw nobody, though it was plain that someone had swept the place. He was sorry that he saw no one. He stayed there. "How is it that there is no one here?" he thought. Lo, there where he sat, he found some moccasins. He was very glad, thinking, "A woman perhaps is the one who came here. In the morning I shall hunt; I shall try to come upon her when she is here, if she comes again," he thought.

At daybreak he quickly went off to hunt. Again he killed a buffalo. He took the tongue, the ribs, the kidneys, and a thigh-bone. Then he went home, thinking, "I shall come in time to find her there." He kept running.

When he got near his dwelling, he saw a little smoke, and a great pile of firewood. When he entered, eagerly he looked about: he saw no one. He was very sorry that no one was there. Then, as he went about his cooking, soon he found some moccasins. He picked them up and examined them; they were very pretty.

"Probably it is a woman has been coming here," he thought; "Now all the harder I shall try to find her here. Early in the morning I shall go," he thought.

After eating, he lay down to sleep. He got up early; without eating he went forth to hunt. In a short time he killed a buffalo; and when he cut it up, took the ribs and the kidneys and went home. He ran as he went. When he was close to his dwelling, he saw much smoke rising from his tent. He was very glad thinking, "Perhaps she is there."

When he got there and entered, lo and behold, there sat a very handsome woman on his settee. He sat down there, and she smiled at him as he looked at her. It appeared that she had already done the cooking. Without delay she took off his moccasins and put others on his feet, and she washed his hands and face. Thereupon she gave him to eat, and they took their meal. Oh he was very glad.

Thus spoke that woman: "Why do you bring so little meat?"

"Oh," said the man, "I did not think anyone was here; that is why I brought only a little," he said; "But whence do you come?" he asked.

"A long ways from here we dwell," she answered. "Please, when you hunt, bring much meat; they are in want of food," she said, "my father and his people."

"Very well," said he.

So he hunted every day. In time he killed many buffalo. The woman worked a great deal, preparing the food.

When they had a large amount of it, "Suppose we go to my father's place," said the woman; "They are very hungry."

"Very well," said the man.

"Tomorrow," she said.

"But what are we to use to carry things?"

"Oh, there will be some way we can manage," she answered.

Then, when they ate in the morning, "Go on ahead," she told her husband; "Then you will set up some sticks at the place where we are to camp; from that place you will go hunting," she said to her husband.

So, when they had eaten, the man set out. And the woman made ready, laying their belongings and their food supply in a row. Then, when she had got ready, she went along, stepping each time upon their bundles of food; and when in this wise she set out, not a trace was there of their supplies of food. So then she walked on. Toward nightfall she found the sticks that were set up in the ground; there she made camp. Then she kicked the ground, there lay their tent. Then she took the tent and set it up. When she had set it up, inside again she stamped the ground: on that spot fell their belongings and their supplies of food. Then she went inside and cooked their meal.

There, when the man came back and saw their dwelling, "How did she do it?" he thought concerning his wife. When he entered, there she was, smiling at him. He looked about and saw all their belongings and their supplies of food. He wondered greatly at what she had done.

Thus spoke she: "Tomorrow we shall come to where my father's people stay. They are in great want of food," she said.

So when day broke, early they arose. When they had eaten, they made ready.

"Help me," said the woman; "Since you have been thinking, 'How does she do it?' you shall know how I do," she said.

"Yes," answered the man.

Accordingly they made ready by laying in a row their possessions and their stored meats. When he watched his wife, as she went forth and stepped on one after another of their bundles, he saw nothing at all there.

So as they walked on, he marvelled greatly at what his wife had done. Then, as they walked on, towards evening they saw smoke rising from a wood ravine; when they came in sight of that place, the woman's younger sister came forth.

She cried: "Splendid!" My elder sister is bringing a great store of meat!"

So they went on and came to the house.

The old man called out: "Splendid!"

When the woman opened the door and, as she entered, stamped repeatedly, then into the lodge fell their stored meats and their belongings. Then when the old woman went on to pick them up, she greatly rejoiced, thinking, "So now I shall eat." The old man gave thanks: "Thus I had it in mind, daughter, when 'Go there,' I said to you, 'where my son-in-law dwells alone,'" said the old man.

There he stayed then. When he had been there a long time, and spring had come, then he knew that she, the woman, as it seemed to him, whom he had to wife, was a bear, and that also the old man and the old woman were bears. And he was sorry that he could not always be with them.

That is the end of this sacred story.²³

Though Bringhurst's version of "The Bear Woman" owes much to Bloomfield's, it is a completely different text. His is a poem of perfect beauty, rich in musicality and echoes from the original Cree, whose simplicity manages to shine through Bringhurst's English words. There is no room for ornament, for superfluous adjectives or convoluted structures. Simple literary devices such as repetition (of key words, phrases or sentences, and ideas) will do to keep the ancient flavour of the story originally told in a Cree reserve in 1925 by a blind, illiterate man to Leonard Bloomfield. Myths were of the essence to the Cree²⁴, one of the major Algonquian-speaking North American Indian tribes, whose domain included an immense area from east of the Hudson and James bays to as far west as Alberta and the Great Slave Lake in what is now Canada. Originally inhabiting a smaller nucleus of this area, they expanded rapidly in the 17th and 18th centuries after engaging in the fur trade

²³ Leonard Bloomfield, *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree*, Ottawa: National Museum of Canada Bulletin, 60 (Anthropological Series, 11), 1930, pp. 59-61.

²⁴ See the entry on 'Cree' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 7, p. 4065, for basic information on this native people.

and acquiring firearms. Wars with the Dakota Sioux and the Blackfoot and severe smallpox epidemics, notably in 1784 and 1838, reduced their numbers significantly. For subsistence they relied basically on hunting, fowling, fishing and collecting wild plant foods. Though they frequently hunted hare, it seems that they preferred hunting larger game such as caribou, moose, bear, bison and beaver. This partly accounts for the presence, in “The Bear Woman”, of a hunter hunting buffalo and of a woman who turns out to be a bear herself.

The plot of the story is simple enough and can be easily summarised. A man lives alone by himself and spends his days hunting buffalo. From the hunted animals he takes only little meat to take home and eat. Suddenly, he starts feeling terribly lonely, but keeps going hunting though. One day he returns home from hunting only to find out that someone has been in his home, doing the household chores, sweeping the floor, piling a stack of firewood by the house. But he is sad as he sees there is no one inside. He finds only a pair of good moccasins and starts thinking that maybe there has been a woman. He is determined to find her, and so he leaves home early in the morning to go hunting and comes back home only to sadly find out once again that there is no one. However, one day he comes back and finds a beautiful woman sitting on his seat. She takes care of him, gives him food to eat and asks her to bring more meat next time he goes hunting, for her family is terribly hungry. From that point on, the man spends his days hunting all the time while the woman spends her days preparing the food they are to take to her family. Then, one day they set out on a journey to her land. The man is surprised to see how she manages to take all the bundles of gear and provisions with her without apparently making any effort at all. All she has to do is stepping on every bundle of food, and it all will come up exactly at the place where they camp for the night. Finally, they arrive to her parents’ home. Her sister, her father and her mother are all extremely happy to see that the woman has brought them food to eat. To the man’s surprise, what he thought was a woman turns out to be a bear, and so are all the members of her family. He is horribly sad because he cannot stay with them anymore.

The story is told in two halves, in scenes 2 and 4. The first half finishes exactly at the point where the man asks the unknown woman where she comes from. The second half concludes with the man leaving the bear family with a broken heart full of sadness. But what does this story have to do with the Ursa Major myth, or with Ovid’s account of Callisto in Book II of *Metamorphoses*?, we may ask. The counterpart of Callisto, the beautiful nymph transformed into a she-bear by jealous Hera upon the discovery of Zeus’ infidelity in the classical story as told by Ovid, is the bear woman in the Cree myth. But now the movement has been reversed as it were: the protagonist in the Cree story is a woman that turns out to be a bear, whereas in Ovid’s story an innocent woman falls prey to Zeus’ assault, is repudiated by the virgin goddess Artemis, and is eventually turned first into a horrible she-bear by his furious wife and then into a constellation (Ursa Major) by Zeus himself. What is common to both stories is that two worlds or realms – that of the immortal gods and that of mortal humans – interact with one another in astonishing ways, and it seems that it is always humans that take the worst part with them at the end of the story: Callisto is condemned to roam aimlessly the woods and mountains for 15 years till she finally meets her son Arcturus, whereas the man of the Cree story is forced to abandon hopelessly broken-hearted a world of bears (spirit beings) where he does not seem to fit in at all. Desire is also at the core of both stories: it is a savage form of desire that prompts Zeus to approach Callisto and rape her and render pregnant; it is, by contrast, a tender form of desire that prompts the hunter to help the stranger by hunting buffalo nonstop to get food for her hungry family. It is in the middle of nowhere, amid the solitude of the woods or the mountains, be it in ancient Arcadia or in the vast Canadian expanses of land,

that both stories have their setting. Both Callisto and the Cree hunter are ultimately outsiders, solitary hunters living on the fringe of society that come face to face with powerful beings, whose presence is too overwhelming for human standards. Both spend their time in the company of trees, rivers and mountains. Both suffer from unendurable pain in the end. However, there is a radical difference between Callisto's story and the bear woman story, as Peter Sanger explains in these words:

The narrator of the bear-woman story in *Ursa Major* is Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw's Son. His counterpart in scenes 1, 3 and 5 is Ovid's Daughter. Thus, both the Cree and Graeco-Roman myths are being transmitted within the masque as family property, in accordance with Amerindian practice. The masque honours that propriety. But there is a notable difference between the two bundles of transmitted materials. Ovid's Daughter speaks in fragments. Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw's Son transmits his myth in full. Paradoxically it is the Ovidian written version that breaks apart in performance, while the Cree myth, crucially transmitted at the juncture between the traditional and the modern by an illiterate storyteller as blind as Homer, endures as an integrity.²⁵

So Ovid's story is told by his Daughter in a fragmentary form, whereas the Cree story is being told by Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw's Son, the original storyteller's son, in full, as an integrity. The contrast is that between fragmentation and unity, even if both are transmitting their bundles of words as valuable family property. As suggested above, desire is at the centre of *Ursa Major*, and so is knowledge. Myth allows human beings to gain valuable knowledge of the world and the mystery implicit in *what is*. Myth is not science or philosophy, but it remains a potent tool of knowledge in our intellectual confrontation with the world. Peter Sanger claims that knowledge is of the essence in Bringhurst's poem, for Arcturus, like his grandfather Lycaon or like the hunter of the Cree story, wants to know, seeks to know an atom of irreducible truth:

... the presence of the Sweet Grass myth in *Ursa Major* implies that the tensions and releases inherent in the masque's polyphonic structures indicate that its prime subject is the nature of knowledge. The masque is about the ways in which human beings may come to know what is of most value for them to know.²⁶

If myths are *ecological structures of knowledge* as passed down from one generation to another, then it is only natural that Bringhurst, concerned with universals, should have tessellated here two stories concerned with a bear-woman and with the way mortal humans relate to immortal gods in Mediterranean and Amerindian mythologies. What humans learn from their first-hand experience and encounter with the gods and goddesses of another realm is that their presence is irresistible and overwhelming at the same time, and that the presence of gods and goddesses cannot be endured for long, for their power is simply consuming for mere mortals – “*You can have what you want, but you can't have it for long*”, and “*nulla potentia longa est*,” reads the text. And yet there is something moving about the closing lines of the Cree story in Scene Four:

... *kâ-kîskéyihthak wâkayôsh kâ-wîwit*
 ... he knew that he was married to a bear,
ôh îskêwah k-étéyihthak,
 who seemed to him to be a woman,
ôbi mînah kîsêyiniwah nôtokésîwan wâkayôsh ês ôbi.

²⁵ See Peter Sanger's Afterword to *Ursa Major* (2003), p. 86.

²⁶ Peter Sanger, *ibid.*, p. 86.

and the old man and old woman were both bears.
Ēkwab mihtátam êká tabkib ta-kib-wicéwât.
And he was sorry he could stay with them no longer.

The Sweet Grass myth ends with an epiphany or revelation with the texture of transcendence: it closes with its hunter-protagonist's discovery that his wife, her sister, and their parents are all bears. Peter Sanger suggests that "By transforming themselves into human beings they are giving the hunter care, honour, love; and by expecting him to trust and to follow his wife's instructions, they teach him to know the stricken nature of his former, aimless, egocentric solitude." If at the myth's end the hunter is "sorry that he could not always be with them" it is because he knows both that there is a more complex and finer state of existence than solitude, and that there are matters which exceed his ego's mastery."²⁷ Similarly, Arcturus is looking for an illuminating form of knowledge. It is no happy coincidence that Scene Two should be titled "Arcturus Awakens". In the second movement of scene 2, Arcturus is able to tell his own version of his own mother's story, his own bear-woman story. He speaks in sustained polyphony over the Cree and its translation into English. Curiously enough, he does not even use the proper names of the characters involved in the story – Zeus, Callisto, Artemis and Hera. According to Peter Sanger, Arcturus "speaks in the unexalted vernacular of Canadian prairie English. Arcturus literally (as the title of scene 2, "Arcturus Awakens," indicates) becomes conscious of the day-world of the present, carrying the past with him, across a divide."²⁸

Arcturus revisits the bear-story in four distinct parts throughout his monologue. What is so moving about his own version of the bear-story is that he speaks with perfect colloquial naturalness and spontaneity. It does come as a nice surprise that such a detached and yet moving account of the Ursa Major myth should be voiced in everyday language. Sometimes poetry is found where one least expects to find it. After all, for Bringhurst poetry is not restricted to words; there is nothing inherently poetic about words and poetry has nothing quintessentially to do with words. That is one of the elemental convictions of Bringhurst's. In any case, at the heart of Arcturus' own meditation on the way gods and goddesses relate to simple mortals is an awakening to a new form of consciousness. The four movements for the soul punctuating the unfolding of the poem focus on Zeus, Artemis, Hera and Callisto's catasterism (i.e., her metamorphosis into a constellation), respectively. Callisto, the innocent nymph, is somehow trapped in the middle of a dangerous triangle pervaded by love and hate so intensely that there seems to be only one way out. The monologue opens with the simple fact that gods always manage to have their own way, while the poetic voice draws an elemental distinction between "*the ones in the sky*" (immortal gods and goddesses) and "*the ones on the ground*" (mortal human beings), which is to say between the realm of *the atemporal or immutable* and the realm of *the temporal or changeable*. The two opening stanzas give voice to Arcturus' quiet resignation in the face of what has happened and cannot be changed in any way:

Perfectly simple. One of the ones in the sky
wanted one of the ones on the ground.
And got what he wanted, as usual. Then
couldn't keep it. If they can't, who can?

What a way to find yourself a mother.
But what other way is better?
You can have what you want but can't have it for long.

²⁷ Peter Sanger, *ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁸ Peter Sanger, *ibid.*, p. 87.

That's the rule.

There is something gnomic and portentous about the verse line “*You can have what you want but can't have it for long.*” It resonates with echoes from the Latin “*nulla potentia longa est*” (*no power lasts for long*), quoted in Scene One from Ovid’s Callisto story in Book II of *Metamorphoses*. Nothing is bound to last for long; everything is ephemeral and so it is bound to vanish into nothingness any moment in time. This is inevitably sad because we are well aware that what has happened once is irrevocably lost forever, because time does not go back, it flows forward inexorably, and nothing or no one can stop its flowing. Arcturus is painfully aware that he is the result of Callisto having been raped by the king of the Olympian gods. “*What a way to find yourself a mother,*” he says with an astonishing degree of emotional detachment. In between the lines the lingering message seems to be that not even gods can make love last forever, and if they cannot keep it, who can? Certainly, not humans, because, unlike gods, we are perishable and imperfect. Zeus fell in love (*in lust*, says Peter Sanger) with Callisto, but once he raped her and rendered her pregnant, he completely forgot about her – he directed his attention somewhere else.

In the second movement for the soul in Arcturus’ monologue, the focus is on Artemis. Ovid’s account of the story makes clear that Artemis banishes Callisto away from the company of her virgin huntresses as soon as her pregnancy is made public²⁹. They are bathing naked in a pool and Callisto’s secret is unveiled to the astonishment of everyone present. Arcturus emphasizes not just the violent reaction on the part of Artemis as she learns about Callisto’s secret (she has broken the vow of chastity sworn to the goddess), but the impurity implicit in the nymph’s pregnancy. Artemis chases her out because “*she was impure,*” says Arcturus. He further elaborates on this idea: “*Being a mother, you see, is impure. In some people’s / thinking. Love is pure but loving isn’t. Even thinking / about loving isn’t pure, in some people’s thinking.*” There is nothing pure about motherhood, about giving birth to another living human being; there is nothing pure about loving either, even if love as an abstract concept is thought to be pure. What a strange paradox, one might think.

The third part of the composition is devoted to the jealous wife, Hera, taking revenge on Arcturus’ mother after learning of Zeus’ infidelity. The target of her anger is poor Callisto again. She transforms her into a growling bear, depriving her of her beauty and of all human attributes (except for the human mind, “*antiqua mens manet*”). As a result of this pitiless attack, Callisto ends up spending her days inside the ground, “*and that was where / she really did become a mother. That was where / she bore her child.*” And in the closing, fourth part, an eloquent contrast is set up between Hera, “*who hated her so much / that she wanted to bury her in the ground*” and Zeus, who loved her enough and “*wanted her / up in the sky.*” Zeus intervenes to change Callisto into a constellation in the night sky, just in time to prevent Arcturus from spearing his own mother in the woods. Zeus “*lifted her into the sky*” and made her into a constellation discernible from the ground to mortal eyes surrounded

²⁹ See Ovid in Six Volumes, vol. III – *Metamorphoses* in Two Volumes, I (Books I-VIII), translated by Frank Justus Miller, 1st edition 1916, 2nd ed. 1921, reprinted 1971, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press & London: William Heinemann Ltd. See pages 91 and 93 for the detailed account of this scene: “Nine times since then the crescent moon had grown full orb’d, when the goddess, worn with the chase and overcome by the hot sun’s rays, came to a cool grove through which a gently murmuring stream flowed over its smooth sands. The place delighted her and she dipped her feet into the water. Delighted too with this, she said to her companions: “Come, no one is near to see; let us disrobe and bathe us in the brook.” The Arcadian blushed, and, while all the rest obeyed, she only sought excuses for delay. But her companions forced her to comply, and there her shame was openly confessed. As she stood terror-stricken, vainly striving to hide her state, Diana cried: “Begone! And pollute not our sacred pool”; and so expelled her from her company.”

by darkness. The closing lines of the monologue are indeed a meditation on the excess of light in modern cities, or on light pollution, which refers to any night-time artificial light shining where it is not actually needed. Though a mortal herself, Callisto managed to survive in the firmament in the form of shining bits of light called Ursa Major, but humans will not see her unless they are in a place dark enough. Arcturus appears to suggest that humans commit an act of *hybris* in wanting their mortal places on the ground to be as bright as those up above in the sky:

If you live on the ground
you can see her. Not from your cities, of course,
but from out on the prairie.
The ground is getting awfully bright these days.
In fact, it looks as though the people on the ground
want their places on the ground to be as bright
as anything in heaven.

In the third part of Scene Two, Arcturus continues his monologue without interruption and a new voice is added – that of the Celestial Janitor, “speaking in antiphonal polyphony with Arcturus”. Their voices are threaded harmoniously, in much the same way the sky and the earth are married to one another. We learn to look at the sky as if it were the earth, and the other way around, to look at the earth as if it were the sky itself. In other words, the sky is *earthed* and the earth is *skied*. Now Arcturus’ voice resembles that of a shaman treading on mythical ground:

Once upon a time, you know, the sky
was absolutely dark. Dark as the ground.
There were no stars.
Did you know that?
Did you know
that all those stars were people once?
People loved and hated by the ones who never die.
And on their way to turning into stars,
they turned into animals and plants.
Those stars are the plants and animals
of the sky.
They used to be people
who lived on the ground.
You know what else?
The plants and animals
of the ground used to be people who lived in the sky.

This is an extended meditation on the sky and its dwellers. Going back to a primordial darkness where there were no stars in the sky, Arcturus meditates on the simple fact that darkness is common to the sky and the earth, those universal elements present in so many cosmogonies around the world. The sky and the earth resemble one another much more than we will ever know; things are not quite what they seem to be. Stars were added much later, once gods and goddesses (“*the ones who never die*”) started to meddle in human affairs. Simple mortals were made into stars by loving and hating gods, and by becoming stars they became the plants and animals of the fields of the heavens. Ursa Major, Ursa Minor, Boötes or Orion are good instances of this. What comes as unexpected revelation is that the plants and animals on the ground are “*people who lived in the sky*”, that is to say gods and goddesses, immortal spirit beings *embodied* in recognizable forms to the human eye. Arcturus’ extended monologue ends with a reference to her mother, “*dancing on the yellow*

wall of heaven.” The immortals in the sky live only *in* and *through* the mortals on the ground: they eat what humans eat without eating anything at all, feel what humans feel without feeling. Curiously enough, humans think *them*, think “*everything that they think, / without thinking*”, which means that they do not make any effort at all to think the flesh song of the earth with all its teeming living forms (stones, water, mountains, trees, flowers...). The thoughts of the immortals are the things we know to exist in this world. But, paradoxically enough, gods and goddesses would no exist if humans did not eat or feel for them. Arcturus is proud to announce that Ursa Major / Callisto is “*a woman of both worlds, / with no escape from feeling or from thinking.*” Though transformed into a bear, she still preserved a human heart and a human mind; now that she is a constellation, eternal and immortal like the ones of the sky, she cannot avoid participating in both realms. In the face of it all, Arcturus awakens to a new form of consciousness. As Peter Sanger puts it, he is after a new form of knowledge:

That kind of knowledge is what the masque’s Arcturus looks for and finds. In *Ursa Major*, he inhabits all the times of his life and transformations; he is what he was, what he is as we listen to him speaking, and what he will become. He lives in Arcadia and on the Sweet Grass Reserve in Saskatchewan and in the constellation Boötes. The lights shining forth at night from the Cree communities spread from Alberta across Saskatchewan, to western Ontario, which Hera names in scene five (Star Blanket, Bearskin, Piapot, Calling Lake, Smallboy, Pakashan, and so on), are stars in the constellations of Arcturus’s present earth, an earth which he learns to see as sky, a sky he learns to see as earth. In the Ovidian myth, Arcturus, not knowing his own mother, prepares to kill her. Turned into a star, he can only follow her constellation in diurnal revolution around Polaris. In *Ursa Major*, while remaining a dancer in the round of celestial necessity (what has happened, happens), Arcturus is, nevertheless, apart from it, earthed in the possibilities of other myths, poetry, life.³⁰

In the meantime, the Celestial Janitor has been invoking the four classical elements: “*Grandmother earth, / grandfather fire, / grandmother water, / and grandfather air.*” Both he and Arcturus have taken the reader/hearer back to an elemental world of essentials, to a time where cosmogonies take place. The core of his message is found in these illuminating words, placed exactly at the geographical centre of this collaborative meditation:

*We are at home only so long
as we are inhabited,
alive only so long as we are lived in
by the places where we are.*

Being pervaded by the *genius loci*, breathing through our skin pores, we acknowledge that we humans fit in as a tiny part in a grander scheme of things of overwhelming beauty and delicacy: this is what it means to *be inhabited* by the places where we happen to live in any moment in time. Then, the Celestial Janitor proceeds on forward to chanting the incantatory litany of basic ingredients the earth is made of: *aluminum, calcium, iron, potassium, manganese, sodium, silicon, zinc*. One word per line, acquiring a specific weight of their own, while the Janitor appears to relish their very texture on his tongue, because “*earth at its purest / is crystal and metal.*” These words are lifted from “Earth”, one of the poems in the ambitious Bringhurst sequence entitled *Elements* (1995), a meditation on earth, air, fire and water, on the irreducible elements the whole cosmos is made of. The ingredients the earth is made of are nothing more (and nothing less) than the thoughts of the god:

³⁰ Peter Sanger, *ibid.*, p. 87.

*All those inorganic proteins:
the orthogonal, hexagonal,
simple, symmetrical,
latticed, rotational
thoughts of the gods,
that twist with their milk-smooth
faces and crystalline edges
in the breasts of human beings.*

SCENE III · Metamorphosis II

Scene Three of *Ursa Major* is a transition scene in the whole design of the poem. The speakers are Ovid's Daughter, the Translator, Hera and the Celestial Janitor; the dancers are Callisto, Hera, Moon Woman and the Star Bearer. Robert Bringhurst gives again detailed instructions as to the way polyphony works in this particular scene: "Three, then four simultaneous voices. At the end of the scene, Ovid's Daughter is the first to fall silent, then the Celestial Janitor and the Translator, leaving Hera the last word." Placed at the geographical centre of the Ursa Major story, the scene consists of three clearly distinguishable parts, even if up to four voices speak simultaneously. In the first part, we get to hear once again Ovid's account of Callisto's story as told in Book II of *Metamorphoses*. Ovid's Daughter speaks the Latin words and the Translator speaks over the Latin, with a slight delay, in English. What Bringhurst gives us is, however, a carefully fragmentary account of the story in which all the essentials are noted down though. The monumental lives of the epic tongues Bringhurst is dealing in make themselves felt in a peculiar way in the opening movements of scenes 1, 3 and 5, where Latin leads the way and the rest of languages follow, and in the opening movements of scenes 2 and 4, where it is the Cree language that gives voice to the moving bear woman story, one of the sacred myths of this important North American indigenous people. In the second part of Scene Three it is Hera, the jealous wife, that dances and sings in classical Greek, in sustained polyphony with Ovid's Daughter and the Translator, but "Three times she suddenly interrupts Ovid's Daughter, the Translator and herself to speak in piercing English". She sings two familiar handfuls of resonant Greek words: one lifted from the extant fragment preserved in isolation in *Certamen* or "Contest of Homer and Hesiod", telling of Callisto being killed with a silver bow (probably Artemis' bow), and another lifted from Book I of the *Iliad* which the Celestial Janitor chanted as summons and response to Hera's song in Scene One. And in the third part of Scene 3, which is new, it is the Celestial Janitor who speaks in Greek, "over Ovid's Daughter's continuing Latin and Hera's closing song". At this point the Translator stops translating from Ovid's Latin and turns to Greek. In note 5 at the end of *Ursa Major*, Bringhurst informs us that "The lines the Janitor speaks in Greek in scene 3 (which the Translator renders directly) are from two anonymous astronomical texts: the *Catasterisms* and a commentary on the *Phainomena* of Aratos."

If the opening movements of scenes 1 and 3 provide the reader with a fragmentary account of Ovid's Callisto story, now Bringhurst rescues two constellations of Greek words from two anonymous astronomical texts, the first one from *Catasterisms*, we presume, and the second one from a commentary on Aratos' *Phainomena*. Constellations, those curious pictures in the sky, have been a fascinating scientific puzzle to humans since antiquity. Written around 150 CE, Ptolemy's *The Almagest* described the traditions concerning constellations widespread among the Greeks. These traditions had been popularized in the famous poem *The Phainomena*, by Aratos (275 BCE). The great astronomer Hipparchus's sole surviving book, *The Commentary* (147 BCE), tells us that

Aratos's poem is for the most part a copy of a work with the same name by Eudoxus (366 BCE), which no longer survives. These books held the earliest descriptions of the Greek skies, and in them the constellations are already fully formed. Whereas in the case of Ovid's Latin and the blind storyteller's Cree bear-woman story Bringhurst does not give a precise or reliable translation (as he himself explains in the notes), now the poet offers a literal rendering of both fragments into English. They look at Callisto's story from a fresh perspective, as it were. This is the first fragment:

ταύτην Ἡσιόδός φησι Λυκάονος θυγατέρα
 Hesiod says she was the Wolf Man's daughter,
 ἐν Ἀρκαδίᾳ οἰκεῖν,
 living in Arcadia,
 ἐλέσθαι δὲ μετὰ Ἀρτέμιδος
 a member of Artemis' band,
 τὴν περὶ τὰς θήρας ἀγωγὴν
 travelling the game trails
 ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσι ποιεῖσθαι....
 out there in the mountains....

The *she* mentioned in these lines is of course Callisto. She is said to be the Wolf Man's daughter, that is to say Lycaon's daughter. Lycaon was King of Arcadia and he was transformed by Zeus into a wolf, thus becoming the first werewolf. He is Arcturus' grandfather, whom he celebrates in an accomplished monologue in Scene Four ("Arcturus Dreams"). A full account of Lycaon's story is found in Book I of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.³¹ After Zeus seduced Callisto in the woods and rendered her pregnant, Lycaon, pretending not to know of the matter, decided to take revenge on the king of the gods and test his power. Lycaon wanted to know if Zeus was able to distinguish between animals and human meat. So, according to the Hesiodic *Astronomia* (Ἀστρονομία), he had the baby Arkas (Callisto's son by Zeus and his own grandson) cut up and served to him as food on the table. According to Ovid's account, it was a hostage's body that he had cut up and served as soup. Whichever the case, Zeus could smell the difference from afar and transformed the Arcadian king into a wolf as a punishment. In any case, in Scene 4 Arcturus gives a detailed account of the full story. The rest of the first Greek fragment gives us the essentials concerning the nymph Callisto: she lives in Arcadia, she is a virgin huntress in the retinue of Artemis (the Moon Woman, one of the sky who spends part of her time on the ground), and she spends her time hunting in the solitude of the mountains.

The second handful of Greek words identifies explicitly the constellation Boötes, placed next to Ursa Major in the night sky, as Arkas, Callisto's babe son, seen as the Bear-warden. Transformed into a bear and set among the stars, Callisto, the bear-mother of the Arcadians through her son Arcas, became Ursa Major. The other constellations appearing close together in the sky are Ursa Minor and Boötes. Significant to astronomical observers since antiquity, Arcturus, also called Alpha Boötis, is one of the five brightest stars in the night sky, and the brightest star in the northern constellation Boötes. It lies in an almost direct line with the tail of Ursa Major (the Great Bear), and next to both Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. Hence its name, derived from the Greek words for "bear guard" – from *arktos*

³¹ In his afterword to *Ursa Major* (2003), Peter Sanger says of Arcturus's grandfather, Callisto's father, Lycaon, King of Arcadia, that "Bringhurst's original source for his story is the first book of the *Metamorphoses*, where Lycaon, contemptuous of Zeus and confident he can show how limited Zeus's knowledge really is, kills a hostage, stews and roasts portions of the hostage's body, and serves that meat to Zeus. His plan is to reveal his trick and shame Zeus after Zeus has eaten. Zeus knows what Lycaon has done even before the meat is placed on the table. He turns Lycaon into a wolf." (p. 87)

(bear) + *ouros* (watcher, guardian). So the constellation lying next to Ursa Major is actually Arkas, “*the son of Callisto and Zeus, / who lived in the country of the Wolves*”, i.e. in Lycaon’s Arcadia. The whole fragment is worth quoting in full, because the simplicity of the original Greek shines through Bringham’s masterly rendering into English:

περὶ τοῦ Βοώτου τοῦ καὶ Ἀρκτοφύλακος ...
 As for the Cowherd or the Bearguard ...
 περὶ τούτου λέγεται, ὅτι Ἀρκάς ἐστιν
 they say that he is actually Arkas,
 ὁ Καλλιστοῦς καὶ Διὸς γεγονώς·
 the son of Callisto and Zeus,
 ὤκησε δὲ περὶ τὸ Λύκαιον.
 who lived in the country of the Wolves.

Scene Three closes with Hera’s ironical commentary. Breaking off her song, she says “with a knowing laugh” these words: “*That’s not the only thing they say.*” Indirectly she is suggesting that there is something else to Callisto’s story that is being left unsaid, particularly Zeus’ infidelity, which prompts her to take revenge on poor Callisto and turn her into a growling bear, ostracised and condemned to roaming the woods in solitude for 15 long years.

SCENE IV · Arcturus Dreams

A typically majestic and dedicated piece of work by Robert Bringham, *Ursa Major* is a poem of such ambitious magnitude and scope that one cannot but stand immobilized and awe-stricken in its very presence. Now it is the turn for three languages – Cree, Greek and English – to be woven into a complex tapestry that reminds us of Bringham’s fondness for cultural syncretism. There is no doubt that *Ursa Major* is an elaborate multicultural artefact that betrays the consummate mastery of the poet in handling literary materials and sources as diverse as a Cree story dictated to linguist Leonard Bloomfield in the summer of 1925 by a blind man called Kâ-kisikâw-pîhtokêw, and a handful of Greek words lifted from a work entitled *Certamen* or “Contest of Homer and Hesiod” that evoke the figure of Callisto in a beautiful though fragmentary way. Against these ancient words originally spoken in such epic languages as Cree and classical Greek, the poet juxtaposes his own consummate renderings into English as well as original poems voiced by Arcturus and the Celestial Janitor that are in themselves a moving meditation on the Ursa Major myth. Though not overtly political in its intent, *Ursa Major*, Noah Richler suggests, “is writing that quite defiantly denies our present, or at least (and subversively) implies that it is fleeting, and its principal languages are either “dead” or relegated to a political hinterland.”³² By placing Cree, one of the First Nations’ languages, at the very centre of Scene 4 Bringham is making a political as well as a literary statement having to do with the way the academia overlooks the vernacular languages and literary traditions that once sprang from the living soil of North America. But, by placing Cree next to classical Greek, the author seems to be implying that a poet with a sense of vocation and a serious commitment to poetry cannot but make an effort to know the literary history of human beings worldwide if he is to make a serious contribution to an ongoing tradition that leaves nothing *en route*. This demands of him that he make the necessary readjustments to his own mental literary map of the world,

³² See Noah Richler’s review of *Ursa Major*, “He Aims for the Stars”, published in *The National Post* (Toronto), July 10, 2003: B1-2.

that he pay attention to literary traditions that remain silenced and are still awaiting their turn to be made visible to the wide world of educated readers.

Scene Four, “Arcturus Dreams”, is no doubt a perfect jewel-like scene in itself. It appears to consist of three distinct parts, even though the voices merge into one another naturally to produce a coherent *whole* endowed with a complex, resonant polyphonic texture. The speakers are Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw’s Son, the Translator, Arcturus, the Celestial Janitor and Hera; the dancers are Callisto, Arcturus, Hera and Moon Woman. In the first part, Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw’s Son speaks in Cree while the Translator translates his words into English *sotto voce*, with a slight delay. The telling of the sacred bear woman story begun in Scene Two is now resumed, so that what the reader gets to hear now is the second half of the story. In the second part of Scene 4, Arcturus speaks a moving monologue on his grandfather, Lycaon, in sustained polyphony with Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw’s Son and the Translator. In the third part of the scene, the Celestial Janitor starts speaking his own meditation on the stars that make up Ursa Major “as soon as Arcturus has spoken, in sustained polyphony with Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw’s Son and the Translator.” This meditation is followed by Hera singing to herself her song in Greek (briefly joining the Celestial Janitor) and the closing lines of the Cree bear story. In what follows, we shall focus on the critical analysis of the second and third parts of Scene 4.

Arcturus’ monologue offers a new or fresh perspective on Callisto’s story. The whole composition consists of four movements for the soul, only the first of which concerns the nymph herself. In the opening lines, Arcturus gives voice to his own sense of astonishment with perfect naturalness: “*But what would a girl be doing out hunting?*” The mountains, the solitary woods, are not the right place for a young, beautiful woman, he seems to imply. In fact, the stanza depicts Callisto as a sylvan huntress, ease at home among the living creatures of the woods, while the poetic voice draws a distinction between “*earth women*” – i.e., mortal, perishable, vulnerable, bleeding women – and “*sky women*” – i.e., immortal, eternal, powerful, non-bleeding goddesses. Callisto has little in common with these supernatural creatures from the sky who live temporarily on the ground. Artemis herself is a clear illustration of what it means to be one of the sky: she is the Moon Woman, silently present throughout *Ursa Major*, a permanent presence in the night sky and an agile huntress on the ground. What is made perfectly clear is that goddesses are not restricted by the purely material demands of their bodily functions: they do not need to eat, they do not bleed, they do not suffer any form of pain, they do not die. Why, then, should Callisto spend her days in the company of Artemis’ retinue when not even their blood is the same? Humans have red blood, whereas those of the sky have got a vegetal kind of blood. The lines offer a perfect string of similes embedded in a parallelistic structure:

No, they say that their blood is like sap from a poplar,
white as snow, clear as water, and sweet,
like the annual blood of the maple....

Movements 2 and 3 of Arcturus’ monologue have as their subject matter the story of Lycaon, King of Arcadia and father to Callisto (hence grandfather to Arcturus). The literary source for Bringhurst’s account of Lycaon’s story is Book I of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Already in Scene 3 the poet had anticipated the same subject in just a handful of Greek words he rendered literally into English. Here, the emphasis is first placed on Lycaon’s curiosity and hunger for knowledge. He is an avid man, “*riddled with questions*,” in search of answers to innumerable doubts, and so the second movement of Arcturus’ meditation opens with a seemingly endless string of questions regarding the distance separating the sun

from the earth, the flatness or roundness of the earth itself, the roundness of the sun, the changes of the moon phases, the very nature of the gods, and the place humans occupy in the grander scheme of things:

Are the gods
really gods? And are human beings special to the gods,
or like the gods? And are human beings special to the gods,
or like the gods in any way? He was riddled with questions.
He wanted most of all to know how earth people –
humans – fit together with the others.
If the gods are really gods, is the flesh of men and women
any different in their eyes than venison and berries?
He wanted an answer to that.

The tone of these verse lines is incantatory, an auditory effect certainly brought about by repetition itself. Lycaon was concerned to find out about the ultimate nature of the immortals, about the way they related to mere mortal human beings, but he wanted to test the limits of Zeus' knowledge above all, particularly after he learnt of what the king of the Olympian gods and goddesses had done to his daughter Callisto, whom he had rendered pregnant. Immortal gods and goddesses do not eat or drink. They are not constrained in any way by such genuinely human necessities. "*The aroma of the food / is all they're after. You eat it for them.*", says Arcturus. It is through humans that gods eat or feel or have a truly genuine existence, as it were. However, out of *hybris* Lycaon decided to mock Zeus by serving him human meat for food, just to see if he could tell animal from human meat. The story is well-known and rendered in astonishing colloquial terms in the third part of Bringhurst's piece:

Anyway, my grandfather thought it would be good
to test the father of the gods, to see if he would notice
any difference – or would care about the difference –
between goat soup and human soup. He chopped up
a Greek boy and put him in the kettle.

Of course, Zeus could smell the difference from afar ("*That's my dad!*", Arcturus celebrates enthusiastically) and would not forgive the king's daring action. Lycaon's challenge is truly an effrontery to Zeus, and so he transforms him into a wolf, the first werewolf. The tone of the language employed by Bringhurst is reminiscent of the language used in the English rendering of the Cree bear story: it is simple, of an almost gnomic quality, and imbued with almost mythic resonances. There are echoes here of Callisto's metamorphosis first into a growling bear by Hera and then into a constellation by Zeus, as recounted by Ovid and translated into English by Bringhurst in Scenes 1 and 3 of *Ursa Major*:

He gave my mother's father four long legs
and fangs and fur and a curly tail. He changed
his flesh and bones. From that day on,
my mother's father was a wolf.

The closing movement of Arcturus' meditation explores the way gods relate to human beings. The incantatory rhythms of this last stanza partly account for the title of Scene 4, "Arcturus Dreams". If in scene 2 Arcturus awakens to a new penetrating vision of the truth about Callisto's story (hence his personal version of the myth), in scene 4 the young man starts dreaming and speaking as if he were a shaman, endowed with an astonishing capacity to see into things transcendental. As Peter Sanger suggests, "By the

scene's end, he has freely entered a freshened, visionary cosmic world unlike the stagnant one in which the stuttering text of Ovid at the masque's beginning had left him stranded. Like a dreaming shaman, his eyes closed, Arcturus in flight has entered the palingenesis of a renewed cosmology."³³ This is the moment of revelation Arcturus the shaman experiences with rare and precious intensity: he comes to an awareness that humans can do familiar activities with the gods – they can eat or sleep with them, and even bear their children – but they are dangerously close to a point where they can be metamorphosed into sentient or non-sentient beings by the gods any time they want to. Notice, by the way, the gradation *in crescendo* employed to obvious effect by the poet: mere mortals are “*a breath away / from being rocks and trees and wolves and deer / and bears and stars and darkness.*” It all depends on the whimsical volubility of the omnipotent, immortal gods and goddesses of the sky: it is up to them to decide if they will turn humans into mute rocks, sentient trees, any mammal, constellations on the firmament, or simple darkness (which might well stand for oblivion). The tone is melancholy throughout these verse lines, as if the experience of getting to know the truth were painful in itself:

Humans can eat and sleep with gods,
and bear their children. Still, they can be just a breath away
from being rocks and trees and wolves and deer
and bears and stars and darkness. Just a breath away
from deathlessness, and just a breath away
from all that darkness in between the stars.

In the ancient Greeks' eyes, the human race was at the mercy of a set of capricious and man-like deities such as Greece had inherited from Homer, gods whose malice could continue to pursue its victims even beyond the grave. The ruling powers of the universe concern themselves intimately with human or mundane affairs; they cannot help it. The belief that humans are the playthings of powerful deities may seem to put them in a very humble and pitiable position indeed. Thus, humans might earn the favour or the enmity of gods with their acts. At the hands of gods and goddesses, Arcturus meditates, humans may become either immortal forever, even if they must pay a high price for it, or obscure figures interspersed in the “*darkness in between the stars,*” condemned to utter oblivion. Callisto becomes immortal in the form of a constellation up above in the sky the very moment Zeus transforms her into Ursa Major, visible to many human cultures since antiquity, and discernible to the naked human eye in the Northern Hemisphere. Close by lie Ursa Minor (the little cub or Arkas) and Boötes, where Alpha Boötis is Arcturus (the grown young son), the bear-guardian. These stars are the plants and animals of the sky, if we do look at it with open or alert eyes, as Arcturus did in Scene 2. In this respect, Peter Sangers says something really illuminating about the fact that Ursa Major is a complex ecological structure:

Ursa Major is a radically ecological structure. It proposes that the distinctions and dismissals which enable a technologically driven society to regard itself as having reached a state of infinite equilibrium are suicidally false. Such distinctions are predicated between humans and animals, between the temporal (or the temporary) and the eternal, between the profane and the sacred, between the animate and the inanimate, between an egocentricity conceived as normative and a state which, significantly, no language sharing roots forms with Latin has created from the plural form of *ego*: the word *nos*, or *we*. Call this state ‘noscentric,’ and consider it to include all things sentient and (perhaps) insentient. As for the dismissals that a technologically driven society requires, they involve what Hölderlin meant when he

³³ Peter Sanger's Afterword to *Ursa Major* (2003), p. 88.

spoke of the gods. In *Ursa Major*, earth is skied and sky is earthed. Bones and stars are nothing if not mineral. Terrene or stellar, we share a common feast of sand and stone, of gold and lead.³⁴

The third part of Scene Four closes with the Celestial Janitor's meditation on the stars that make up the constellation Ursa Major³⁵. Being the third-largest constellation, Ursa Major is undoubtedly one of the most familiar star patterns in the entire night sky. It is made up of seven stars that form the rump and tail of the bear, while the rest of the animal is comprised of fainter stars. The opening two stanzas have been lifted and revised from the piece IV.3 (a meditation on fire) in Bringhurst's *Elements* (1995; revised 2008). They draw an exhaustive anatomy of the constellation. Merak and Dubhe are called the "Pointers" because the line Merak-Dubhe points to the Pole Star, "*where the Cub is still sucking what once / was the nipple of heaven*" (meaning Arkas). Dubhe comes from the Arabic *al-dubb* ('the bear'), and Merak comes from the Arabic *al-maraq* ('flank or groin'). In addition, Alioth, Mizar and Alkaid are other stars in the Ursa Major constellation: they the Great Bear's "*throat, not her rump and her tail.*" Second in line along the tail is the wide double star Zeta Ursa Majoris, the two members of which are called Mizar and Alcor. The name Alioth is applied to the next star along the tail, Epsilon Ursae Majoris. Alkaid lies at the tip of the bear's tail.³⁶ On the other hand, Arcturus, namely Alpha Boötis, is the brightest star in the constellation Boötes. It lies in an almost direct line with the tail of Ursa Major (the Great Bear); hence its name, derived from the Greek words for "bear guard". Had not Zeus

³⁴ Peter Sanger's Afterword to *Ursa Major* (2003), p. 80.

³⁵ See the entry on 'Ursa Major' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 29, pp. 17213-17214. "Ursa Major (Latin: "Greater Bear"), also called THE GREAT BEAR, in astronomy, a constellation of the Northern Hemisphere, at about 10 hours 40 minutes right ascension (the coordinate on the celestial sphere analogous to longitude on the Earth) and 56° north declination (angular distance north of the celestial equator). It was referred to in the Old Testament (Job 9:9; 38:32) and mentioned by Homer in the *Iliad* (xviii, 487). The Greeks identified this constellation with the nymph Callisto, who was placed in the heavens by Zeus in the form of a bear together with her son Arcas as "bear keeper," or Arcturus; the Greeks named the constellation Arctos, the she-bear, or Helice, from its turning around Polaris, the Pole Star. The Romans knew the constellation as Arctos or Ursa. Ptolemy cataloged eight of the constellation's stars. Of these, the seven brightest constitute one of the most characteristic figures in the northern sky; the group has received various names – Septentriones, the Wagon, Plow, Big Dipper, and Charles's Wain. For the Hindus these seven stars represented the seven Rishis (or Sages). Two of the constellation's stars, Dubhe and Merak, are called the pointers because the line Merak-Dubhe points to the Pole Star. Five stars of the constellation form an associated group with common proper motion, but Dubhe (the upper pointer) and Alkaid (the last star of the tail) have no connection with the others. Stars in other parts of the sky have been found to belong to the same cluster; Sirius, for example, is a stray member of it."

³⁶ "Two stars in the bowl of the Dipper called Dubhe and Merak (Alpha and Beta Ursae Majoris) are popularly termed the Pointers because a line drawn through them points to the north celestial pole. Dubhe's name comes from the Arabic *al-dubb*, 'the bear', while Merak comes from the Arabic word *al-maraq* meaning 'the flank' or 'groin'. At the tip of the bear's tail lies Eta Ursae Majoris, known both as Alkaid, from the Arabic *al-qa'id* meaning 'the leader', or as Benetnasch, from the Arabic *banat na'sh* meaning 'daughters of the bier' – for the Arabs regarded this figure not as a bear but as a bier or coffin. They saw the tail of the bear as a line of mourners (the 'daughters') leading the coffin. Second in line along the tail is the wide double star Zeta Ursae Majoris. The two members of the double, visible separately with keen eyesight, are called Mizar and Alcor. They were depicted as a horse and its rider on the 1524 star chart of Peter Apian, apparently following a popular German tradition. The name Mizar is a corruption of the Arabic *al-maraq*, the same origin as the name Merak. Its companion, Alcor, gets its name from a corruption of the Arabic *al-jaun*, meaning 'the black horse or bull'. This is the same origin as the name Alioth which is applied to the next star along the tail, Epsilon Ursae Majoris. The name the Arabs used for Alcor was *al-suba*, which Paul Kunitzsch translates as meaning either the 'forgotten' or 'neglected' one. Delta Ursae Majoris is named Megrez, from the Arabic meaning 'root of the tail'. Gamma Ursae Majoris is called Phad or Phecda, from the Arabic word meaning 'the thigh'. In addition to the famous seven stars of the Plough or Dipper there are three pairs of stars that mark the feet of the bear." See <http://www.ianridpath.com/startales/ursamajor.htm>, consulted on 20 September 2011.

intervened, he would have nearly killed his mother with a spear, unaware that the bear in front of him was actually his mother. Hence the reference in the poem to “*the point of a spear*” being bitten by the Cub, Arkas the babe. All in all, three constellations (Ursa Major, Ursa Minor and Boötes) are invoked in these lines:

She is stretching her neck and her tongue
to Arcturus, her son, who is clutching
the butt of the spear: Arcturus the man,
who is Arkas the cub, who is biting the spear
that is piercing the throat of his mother the Bear.

The closing stanza of this meditation on the stars that make up Ursa Major becomes a moving reflection on the nature of fire. After all, stars are shiny bits of fire on the dark firmament at night. At this point, the poem turns more philosophical, as Bringhurst applies the name ‘fire’ to very different kinds of realities:

- (1) “*Things that exist but do not have a substance –/ mind, for instance – are usually fire.*” The mind is conceived of as being fire, probably because it illuminates the dark recesses of reality in its relentless search after the truth. It was the so-called *αρχή* or ultimate principle of reality for Herakleitos. The mind is also intangible, invisible, unknowable; it remains a true mystery, like fire itself, which has always held an irresistible fascination for human beings of all places and all times.
- (2) “*As for history, that nightmare, / it is fire.*” Fire is associated here to History, the relentless and pitiless unfolding of events over time governed by the whims of tyrants and greedy men. Humankind’s history is marked by greediness, nonsense, violence, war and destruction, and so it is a form of self-consuming fire. However, “*What is bigger than history,*” said one of the three voices in *New World Suite No. 3* (Movement I, staves 14-15). *Being* is bigger than history, and it is indestructible.
- (3) “*As for what you call technology, / it offers you the wherewithal / to cook the feast, the guest, the host, / the dining hall, the whole shebang.*” Technological advance in the hands of man has contributed to increasing the torture and pain inflicted upon Mother Earth. In this context, Bringhurst’s words are a vindication of a new environmental awareness. The poem closes with an invocation to all four elements and to two well-known trickster figures (coyote and raven) to cleanse our senses, restore us our common sense, and save the world from our own greedy manners: “*Earth, water, air, fire, coyote, raven, bathe us. / Clean our bones.*”

Stars and constellations have exerted an appealing attraction among humans of all times and historical periods. Philosophy and science were born of the desire of knowledge in the face of the awe-inspiring grandeur and beauty of the universe. The word *κόσμος* meant ‘order’ and order is after all a beautiful thing to human eyes. The most notable thing about the universe is the order it displays in events on a cosmic level like the movements of sun, moon and stars. There is an inevitable aura of divinity still clinging to stars that the rationalistic or scientific outlook has not yet managed to dispel in people’s minds. That we should still raise our eyes and direct them towards the shiny bits and pieces of light shimmering in the night sky testifies to the endless fascination stars hold for us humans. It also accounts for the attention given to the heavens by the very first thinkers in the cradle of Western philosophy: Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes, among others, would lift their eyes to the heavens and tried to produce a systematic and scientific account to explain what their eyes saw for them. That 2,500 years later Bringhurst should have decided to compose a literary work of art on the constellation of Ursa Major comes as no surprise; it is a palpable proof that humans have not changed as much as we might think at first sight.

SCENE V · Metamorphosis III

Latin, Greek and English are the languages that find a luminous and spacious room for themselves in Scene 5 of *Ursa Major*. The speakers are Ovid's Daughter, Hera, the Celestial Janitor and the Translator; the dancers are Callisto, Hera, Moon Woman and the Translator. As for the polyphony, "The first two voices are simultaneous. As Ovid's Daughter concludes, a third voice (the Celestial Janitor's) joins the conversation. The Translator joins them momentarily." In any case, six parts are discernible in Scene Five, "Metamorphosis III", the last scene in *Ursa Major*. It is a truly complex tessellation of fragments from a wide range of literary sources once again. First comes Ovid's account of Callisto's story in Latin, with no translation into English this time. It is followed in the second part by Hera's vengeful song. According to Peter Sanger, "In scene 5 of *Ursa Major*, the last scene, it is the manipulative, slightly spiteful, condescending, trans-Atlantic accented voice of vindictive Hera which, in concert with the voice of the Celestial Janitor, celebrates a cosmos in which the day-lit reality of earth and the night-lit mythology of sky are co-inherent."³⁷ In the third part, both Hera and the Celestial Janitor speak in sustained polyphony: Hera keeps on giving voice to her irrepressible anger, while the Janitor celebrates earth's composition in an exultant hymn of cosmic dimensions. In the fourth part, the Translator speaks in intermittent but not antiphonal polyphony with Hera and the Celestial Janitor, first in English and then in classical Greek, addressing the minimal elements out of which the whole universe is made. From this point onwards, the scene becomes more and more fragmentary as it were. The fifth part shows Hera and the Celestial Janitor, this time speaking in antiphonal polyphony: whereas Hera mentions an endless litany of names of places associated to the world of the Cree, the Janitor keeps on celebrating the basic constituents of which gods' and humans' bodies are made. The sixth, final part closes with the Celestial Janitor's last meditation on the elements and on *Ursa Major*, shining up there in the night sky.

The first part of Scene 5 concludes with Ovid's Daughter Latin words on the metamorphosis of Callisto and her son into shining constellations in the night sky by Zeus: "*sustulit et pariter raptos per inania uento / inposuit caelo uicinaque sidera fecit.*" Immediately afterwards come Hera's words, first singing her fragmentary song on Callisto being killed with a silver bow in classical Greek and then speaking aloud in English. The overlapping of Ovid's words and Hera's song and poem is eloquent in itself: whereas Ovid celebrates Zeus' intervention averting the tragedy on behalf of Callisto, nearly-killed by her own son Arcturus, Hera's spiteful words remind us of a different version of the story, according to which it was Artemis (probably urged by Hera's wrath) who killed the poor nymph upon learning of the shame she had brought on her own company of virgin huntresses by breaking her vow of chastity to the moon goddess. And then Hera addresses Zeus with ironical and irreverent words to remind him of Artemis' reaction as Callisto's pregnancy was made public: "*My darling Zeus, how sweet of you / to make them into stars. / But you remember what your daughter said.*" Then Hera switches back to Ovid's Latin: "*nec sacros pollue fonts.*" Bringhurst's instructions are precise at this point: "Hera's speech, again, is timed so that her speaking of this Latin line falls just after the same line spoken by Ovid's daughter." These are the Latin words spoken by Artemis when Callisto stands naked before her and her virgin huntresses and her shame is visible to everyone present. With those words Artemis expels poor Callisto from her company. Those Latin words in the imperative translate into English as "*She said, Don't pollute the sacred pool!*": as though motherhood or loving were

³⁷ Peter Sanger's Afterword to *Ursa Major* (2003), pp. 88-89.

impure, as Arcturus put it in Scene 2, whereas love in the abstract were not. Hera's spiteful poem goes on like this:

That sacred pool now
is the whole ocean, all the seven seas.
That chubby little sow
will never have another bath,
or ever bathe her baby either.
They can wash themselves in air
or lick each other silly
for all I care, but they won't pollute the water.
There he is, and there he has to stay,
his cub teeth fastened to the sky's breast,
fastened to the nipple of the world,
the star that never moves.

The literary source for Bringham's poem is again Book II of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Lines 508-530 tell of how Hera was now even more enraged to find her rival Callisto glorified among the stars.³⁸ In line 521 Hera complains overtly: "*esse hominem vetui: facta est dea!*" ('she whom I drove out of human form has now become a goddess'). Enraged that her attempt at revenge had been frustrated, she appealed to her foster parents Tethys and Oceanus, gods of the sea, and persuaded them never to let the bears in the sky bathe in the northern waters, thus providing a poetic explanation for their circumpolar positions. Hera asked Tethys to keep them in a certain place, so that the constellations would never sink below the horizon and receive water. Hence, as seen from mid-northern latitudes, the bear never sets below the horizon.³⁹ In Bringham's version of the end of Callisto's story, Hera uses spiteful words full of anger to refer to the bear mother and the bear child. Hera's language is colloquial, which again comes as a surprise when uttered by the queen of the Olympian gods and goddesses. Arkas' teeth must remain fastened to the sky's breast, to "*the nipple of the world,*" to "*the star that never moves*" (the Pole Star), for eternity, and neither mother or child will ever be granted permission to touch the sea waters. That is the punishment Hera asks of Oceanus and Tethys as a personal favour to avenge Zeus' infidelity and his intervention on behalf of Callisto and her son.

In the third part of Scene 5, Hera continues her poem without interruption and the Celestial Janitor starts speaking in sustained polyphony with her. Hera repeats exactly the

³⁸ These are lines 508-517 in Ovid's account: "Intumuit Iuno, postquam inter sidera paelix / fulsit, et ad canam descendit in aequora Tethyn / Oceanumque senem, quorum reverential movit / saepe deos, cusamque viae scitantibus inquit: / "quaeritis, aetheriis quare regina deorum / Sedibus huc adsim? pro me tenet altera caelum! / mentior, obscurum nisi nox cum fecerit orbem, / nuper honoratas summo, mea vulnera, caelo / videritis stellas illic, ubi circulus axem / ultimus extremum spatiumque brevissimus ambit." In English: "Then indeed Juno's wrath wax hotter still when she saw her rival shining in the sky, and straight went down to Tethys, venerable goddess of the sea, and to old Ocean, whom oft the gods hold in reverence. When they asked her the cause of her coming, she began: "Do you ask me why I, the queen of heaven, am here? Another queen has usurped by heaven. Count my word false if tonight, when darkness has obscured the sky, you see not new constellations fresh set, to outrage me, in the place of honour in highest heaven, where the last and shortest circle encompasses the utmost pole." See Ovid in Six Volumes, vol. III – *Metamorphoses* in Two Volumes, I (Books I-VIII), translated by Frank Justus Miller, 1st edition 1916, 2nd ed. 1921, reprinted 1971. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press & London: William Heinemann Ltd, pp. 94-97.

³⁹ This is the original Latin text (Book II, lines 527-530): "at vos si laesae tangit contemptus alumnae, / gurgite caeruleo septem prohibete triones / sideraque in caelo stupri mercede recepta / pellite, ne puro tinguatur in aequore paelix!" In English: "But do you if the insult to your foster-child moves you, debar these bears from your green pools, disown stars which have gained heaven at the price of shame, and let not that harlot bathe in your pure stream." Ibid., pp. 96-97.

same words of her poem (quoted above), but this time in retrograde motion, to achieve a rare form of musicality. For his part, the Celestial Janitor celebrates the very physicality of the earth, focusing on the bare essentials or elements that make up the earth: “*Earth / at its purest is crystal and metal.*” He uses exactly the same words spoken by him in the third part of Scene 2 of *Ursa Major*. What we get to listen to is a litany of incantatory elements that are conceptualized as being the “*thoughts of the gods*” that are to be found “*in the breasts of human beings.*” The world is thought into existence by the gods, but those thoughts are truly embodied in physical entities that do a find an echo in humans’ minds and hearts. The verse lines are short, marked by strong enjambment and an endless litany of adjectives that try to capture the nature of what is seemingly ineffable *per se* (gods’ thoughts):

*Aluminium, calcium, iron, potassium.
Inorganic proteins.
The orthogonal, hexagonal,
simple, symmetrical,
latticed, rotational
thoughts of the gods
that twist with their milk-smooth faces
and crystalline edges
in the breasts of human beings.*

In the fourth part of Scene 5, the Translator starts “speaking softly at first, but growing louder and shifting step by step toward incantation as she moves from English to Greek, in intermittent but not antiphonal polyphony with Hera and the Celestial Janitor”, as Bringhurst’s instructions make clear. Her words are fragmentary, as if they had been salvaged from a papyrus roll badly damaged by the passing of time. In note 3 at the end of *Ursa Major*, Bringhurst informs us that “Incidentally, the Greek forms used by the Translator in the final scene are vocatives. She is speaking *to*, not *of*, the classical four elements”.⁴⁰ This piece of information is relevant enough, for the poetic voice speaking these words enumerates basic constituents found in the world (they are the *alphabet* in which the book of the world is written, but also *dust* or nothingness in the end, for everything is subject to perpetual metamorphosis and perishable in one way or another) and then shifts to Greek to address air, earth, fire and water, which are thought to be the four classical elements in many cultures around the world since antiquity. These are bundles of medicinal words, crystal-clear constellations of words instead of stars that evoke the atemporal and immutable realm of essences that remains the same forever despite the flux of appearances:

Hydrogen ...
carbon ...
alphabet ...
dust ...

⁴⁰ Bringhurst’s love of linguistic precision (which betrays his serious sense of vocation for poetry) is also made manifest in note 3, where he provides essential bibliographical references related to the accurate pronunciation of the Greek and Latin words tessellated into the living texture of *Ursa Major*: “Those performing the text might strive (as we did in Regina in 2002) for equal historical authenticity in pronouncing the Greek and Latin. There is useful information to this end in W.S. Allen’s *Vox Latina* (Cambridge, 1965; 2nd ed. 1978) and *Vox Graeca* (Cambridge, 1968; 3rd ed. 1987) and in W. B. Stanford’s *The Sound of Greek* (Berkeley, 1967).”

ἄερ ...
 χθών ...
 πῦρ ...
 ὕδωρ ...

Spoken by the Translator, these two fragments resemble Sappho's poems as preserved in a fragmentary fashion over time. There is a form of elemental poetry implicit in them, even if they look like simple enumerations or catalogues. But they do embody valuable and indispensable information. If we had to do with just a handful of words, these would be probably the least dispensable of all. They remind us that the sky and the earth are one and the same thing for a very simple reason: the alphabet in which both are written is the same, one made of invisible particles that confirm our intimation that everything forms part of the complex, living mesh of things.

In the fifth part of Scene Five, Hera speaks "in phrase-to-phrase antiphonal polyphony with the Janitor". For his part, the Celestial Janitor speaks in antiphonal polyphony with the goddess. Visually displayed on the page, the words spoken alternately by Hera and the Janitor look also as luminescent jewel-like words rescued from oblivion, from an ancient time long past. The typographical layout on the printed page is appealing in itself to the reader's eye; as a score for performing voices, the pattern makes itself discernible in an astonishing way to the attentive hearer. Whereas Hera enumerates a list of what looks like proper names related to places of the Cree tribe living in the Saskatchewan prairie, the Janitor dwells on the differences that set the immortals (those in the sky) apart from the mortals (those on the ground):

Star Blanket,	Bearskin,	Piapot,
<i>The voices</i>	<i>of the gods</i>	<i>are water;</i>
Calling Lake,	Smallboy,	Pakashan,
<i>Ours</i>	<i>are air;</i>	<i>their bodies</i>
Sucker Creek,	Lucky Man,	Moosomin,
<i>fire;</i>	<i>ours</i>	<i>are water.</i>
Waterhen,	Little Pine,	Sweet Grass,
<i>Gods</i>	<i>have hearts</i>	<i>of air,</i>
Thunderchild,	Cumberland,	Onion Lake,
<i>but ours</i>	<i>are earth.</i>	<i>Their thought</i>
Potato River,	Day Star,	Pasqua,
<i>is earth,</i>	<i>and ours</i>	<i>is fire.</i>
Little Black Bear,	Sakimay,	
	White Bear....	

In these lines, the Celestial Janitor compares the voices, bodies, hearts and thought of gods and humans. Time and again throughout our thesis it has been claimed that Bringhurst's metaphysics is a physics firmly embedded in the real. The language sings with moving simplicity in the form of straightforward declarative sentences where the verbs *be* and *have* recur all the time. Whereas gods are said to be endowed with water voices, fire bodies, air hearts and earth thought, humans are seen as being equipped with air voices, water bodies, earth hearts and fire thought. Upon closer inspection, it turns out that all four classical

elements are present in the very composition of immortals and mortals alike. On the one hand, it does make sense to say that the gods' voices are made of water, for water is found in the rivers, seas and oceans of the world, through which gods speak their own presence. Or to say that their bodies resemble fire in their evanescent, immortal condition, that their hearts are air (voluble, whimsical, incapable of truly feeling human emotions), and that their thought is earth, for their thinking brings the things of this world into existence, as it were. On the other hand, it does make sense to give humans voices that are pure air emanating from their lungs and modulated by their speech apparatus, to say that their bodies are water (which is scientifically true, for water is the principal component in our bodies), to give them earth hearts (fond of earthly beauty and pleasures), and to affirm that their thought is fire, a flame seeking to illuminate the dark recesses of reality, because we humans need and want to know. "*Are gods any different from humans?*," Callisto's father (Lycaon) wanted to know, "*riddled with questions*" as he was. It seems that they have much more in common than it might appear at first sight. Gods need humans as much as humans need gods – that is the simple rule. Greek gods eat, feel and think though humans themselves. This partly accounts for their meddling or interfering with human affairs on earth.

Immediately after these verse lines spoken in antiphonal polyphony, both Hera and the Janitor return to sustained polyphony, as they move towards the closing of Scene 5:

All those fires on the coal black prairie,
In the aspens and the spruces,
 every night forever more, forever more, forever more.
the larches and birches,...

Hera directs the reader's / hearer's attention towards the shiny bits of fire on the firmament, i.e., the constellations made up of stars that were once mortals living on the ground and that have now turned into the plants and animals of the sky. The "*fires on the coal black prairie*" is a beautiful metaphor to refer to the enigmatic pictures formed by stars in the night sky, but they also remind us that the sky above is a replica of the earth below, or the other way around: that, like Arcturus awakening and dreaming, we should learn to look at the sky as if it were earthed, and to look at the earth as if it were skied. Hera's last words in *Ursa Major* are once again the handful of fragmentary Greek words that tell of Callisto being killed with a silver bow. It seems that the vengeful queen goddess is incapable of forgiving a sin that the poor girl did not commit alone. And in sustained polyphony with Hera, the Celestial Janitor gives voice to the closing lines of *Ursa Major*, which are lifted from IV.4, a meditation on water lifted from Bringhurst's *Elements* (1995, revised in 2008). The meditation consists of two perfect stanzas that testify to Bringhurst's perfect command of his *materia poetica* and over the English language. The first stanza dwells on the eternal metamorphosis that brings all four classical elements together: "*In the aspens and the spruces, / the larches and birches,...*"

... earth is climbing a ladder of water
 and water a ladder of air,
 and air is climbing a ladder of fire,
 and fire descending a stair
 of air and water into the earth
 that is reaching and climbing with tiny hands
 a ladder knotted of water, fire and air.

The idea occurs that the earth (with its nourishing minerals) is travelling together with water up the roots of the trees (aspens and spruces, larches and birches), that the water

travels up the limbs and into the upper leaves of the trees, that the air liberated from the leaves is travelling further upwards into the sky with its shiny bits of fire (stars). The whole process is repeated the other around: the nourishing light shed by the stars of the sky (including our Sun) travels downwards through the vast expanses of air till it reaches the water of the rivers, seas and oceans of the world, as well as the earth. All four elements are thus connected to one another for eternity. There is no way of interrupting the perpetual flux, the perennial metamorphosis.

The second stanza in the Celestial Janitor's meditation (and last verse lines of *Ursa Major*) focuses on the Ursa Major myth again. Callisto, the she-bear wounded by her own son Arcturus in the mountains, "climbers up the spear shaft, / shinnies up the tree, / transforming earth and water, fire and air, / to fire and air and earth and water." She who was a hunter in Artemis' retinue is now being hunted by Arcturus. As soon as Zeus transforms her into a constellation in the night sky to avert the tragedy, she becomes a part of the grander scheme of things on a cosmic level: she keeps a human mind and a human heart (*antiqua mens manet*, said Ovid in his Latin), and yet she who was a mere mortal is now turned somehow immortal and still belongs to both realms (the divine and the human). Her blood is turned into the water and snow of the gods and goddesses of the sky (the sap of poplars). She keeps on lighting the night sky to remind those on the ground that the gods are not far away, and that the whole world is in a state of perpetual flux:

air transforming into air and earth to earth
and fire to fire and water to water
and blood to water and blood to snow
and hunter to hunted and breath to air
all over and over and over again.

And this is the end of *Ursa Major*, an ambitious polyglot polyphonic poem for several voices, composed in several languages that collaborate to tell the universal myth of Ursa Major as embodied in the story of Callisto and of the Bear Woman. By juxtaposing different literary traditions (Greek, Latin, Cree), Bringham manages to create a magnificent tapestry that is a pleasure to read. Like *New World Suite No. 3*, this work is also a technical accomplishment on the part of the poet, a beautiful art book and a moving tribute to the human voice. However, a poem for several voices printed on a page contained in a book is half alive or half dead. As Bringham suggests, "a poem is most itself when it is spoken, as a life is most itself when it is lived and a piece of music most itself when it is played. The printed text should be as fine as it can be, but it should never be the final incarnation. A book must be a place where things begin."⁴¹

⁴¹ "Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue", *ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

PART V

Mapping New Territory

Elements

Of Earth, Water, Air & Fire

INTRODUCTION

Elements is a quiet meditation in seven parts on the ultimate material nature of *being*, and a work rich in moments of singular linguistic energy and deep thinking. But *Elements* is also a very special art book, the fruit of a collaborative venue in which Robert Bringhurst worked with Norwegian artist Ulf Nilsen and printer Russell Maret to produce a unique artifact. As in the case of Bringhurst's collaborative project with Lucie Lambert on *Conversations with a Toad* (1987), the poet's words are accompanied by the artist's four suites of images illustrating the four classical elements – water, earth, air and fire – found in ancient civilizations worldwide. Both words and images are the jewel-like contents of a beautiful artifact designed and printed in a fine edition by Maret. First published in 1995 in a very limited edition of only 20 copies by Kuboaa Press, it was later revised in a new incarnation of the text in 2008. Some fragments or portions of the poem were published in the complex polyphonic and polyglot poem *Ursa Major* (1st ed. 2003 and 2nd ed. 2009) and also in *Selected Poems* (2009), in the section entitled “Ursa Minor”, which consists of the monologues and choruses lifted from *Ursa Major*. As is common practice with Bringhurst, the poem has inevitably changed over time. It does come, though, as a surprise that it should not have been included in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995) or in *Selected Poems* (2009) in full. The editorial history of the poem can be best summarized as follows:

- (1) First textual incarnation of the text. A.49 *Elements*. Text by Robert Bringhurst; drawings by Ulf Nilsen; designed and printed by Russell Maret. New York: Kuboaa Press. 1995. [17 + 21] p. 24.5 × 24.5 cm. Contents: poem in seven sections – I. One-Room School; II. Prayer; III. A Periodic Table; IV.1 [air]; IV.2 [earth]; IV.3 [fire]; IV.4 [water] – with four suites of five drawings by Ulf Nilsen realized in paper (through watermarking, wet-pulp embossing, branding, and letterpress printing) by Russell Maret. The text is printed letterpress on loose unnumbered sheets with title page and colophon page contained in a cloth-covered box. Each suite of illustrations is also contained in a box. The five component boxes and a loose title page are contained in a larger box “[D]esigned, printed and housed ... by Russell Maret in an edition of 20 signed & numbered copies, plus 5 artist's proofs.... All printing was done at the Center for Book Arts in New York City during August and September of 1995.” There was also a prospectus for this first edition: A.49a Prospectus for *Elements* (A.49). Riverside, Connecticut: Kuboaa Press. 1995. [8] p. 13.5 × 22 cm. Contents: §IV.1 [air] from A.49, with one drawing from the water suite by Ulf Nilsen.
- (2) § IV.1 [Air] was reprinted in A.69, *Ursa Major: A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers and Dancers*. Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau Press, 2003. 96 p. 19 × 28 cm. ISBN 0-8032-1328-X. Contents: Script of a work commissioned by the choreographer Robin Poitras and first performed by her company New Dance Horizona, Regina, Saskatchewan, in March 2002. With an afterword by Peter Sanger. This work was reprinted in part in B.100 and revised as A.91: *Ursa Major: A Masque for Speakers and Dancers*. 2nd edition. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press. 2009. 96 p. 12.5 × 20.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-060-0. The voicemap is printed in five colors and the afterword by Peter Sanger is omitted from this edition.
- (3) Second textual incarnation: The whole work was revised as a poem in six sections in C.81 “Elements”, in *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* (New York / Abingdon,

Oxfordshire: Routledge) 76 (= 41.1, May 2008): 80–85. Section I of the original poem, entitled “One-Room School”, has been omitted here, and the remaining sections have been slightly revised, though section IV.3 seems to have been heavily revised. In our critical analysis below, all textual variants will be accounted for in customary form.

- (4) Some of the original poems from *Elements* were later published in A.92 *Selected Poems*. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press. 2009. 272 p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-068-6. Thus, the section entitled “Ursa Minor” consists of monologues and choruses lifted from *Ursa Major* (2nd edition, 2009) – I · Arcturus, II · Arcturus & Chorus, III · Chorus, IV · Arcturus, V · Split Chorus, VI · Chorus, VII · Split Chorus, VIII · Chorus, IX · Chorus.

It is no wonder that a poet like Bringham, concerned with fundamental questions and with exploring the ultimate nature or essence of things, should have produced a poem like *Elements*, about the basic constituent elements that make up the whole world. The title itself, reminiscent of Euclid’s classic on geometry *Elements*, points to this concern with essentials. If Bringham’s metaphysics is a form of physics with a firm grasp of the material world, then *Elements* is expressive of this subterranean conviction underlying his entire work. The *Elements* sequence belongs among the poet’s overtly philosophical poems – the Pre-Socratics (*The Old in Their Knowing*) and the Oriental sages (*The Book of Silences*) sequences. Like them, *Elements* concerns *being* and its constituent elements. Grinding down the world into its simplest essential parts, this is what the poet comes up with: a seven-part meditation on the basic elements out of which the whole world is made. The result is a collaborative meditation in which everything falls into place, as the description of the 1995 art book itself makes clear:

ELEMENTS has been designed, printed and housed in boxes by Russell Maret in an edition of 20 signed & numbered copies, plus 5 Artist’s Proofs. The contents are a collaborative meditation on the elements of air, earth, fire & water between Norwegian painter Ulf Nilsen, Canadian poet Robert Bringham and Maret. The papers are Abaca (text), Cotton (air), Silk (water), Abaca-Cotton (fire) and Belgian Linen-Cotton (earth), all of which were made especially for this edition at Dieu Donné Papermill in New York City. The techniques employed to achieve Nilsen’s images are watermaking, letterpress printing, branding and wet-pulp embossing. The text is printed letterpress from 12 point Gill Sans Medium, cast monotype by Michael & Winifred Bixler in Skaneateles, New York. All printing was done at the Center for Book Arts in New York City during August and September 1995. There are a total of six boxes in the portfolio: four are covered in Japanese book cloth, one is made of African and Honduran mahogany and one of burned and patinized copper. The printer was assisted by Nathan Johnson, Ida Lorentzen, Lou Hicks, Peter Haas, Sterling Roper, Barbara Mauriello, Paul Smotrysts, Mie Yim and Peter Koch.¹

The poet’s words and the artist’s images coalesce into a profound singing of those four elements that are ubiquitous in a number of cultural traditions. In the Western world, the concept itself of the existence of four classical elements stems from Babylonian mythology. In a text entitled *Enuma Elis*, composed between the 18th and 16th centuries BCE, the four cosmic elements described include sea, earth, sky and wind. In ancient Greek thought, the

¹ Description lifted from copy number A.P. 2 (artist’s proofs) consulted at the Rare Book & Special Collections of University of British Columbia Library in Vancouver on 23 July 2010. The loose unnumbered pages of Bringham’s text consist of cover (p. 1), description (p. 2), author’s name (p. 3), I: ONE-ROOM SCHOOL (pp. 4-8), II: PRAYER (p. 9), III: A PERIODIC TABLE (p. 10), IV.1 [air] (pp. 11-12), IV.2 [earth] (pp. 13-14), IV.3 [fire] (pp. 15-16), IV.4 [water] (pp. 17-18).

four classical elements (earth, water, air and fire) date from pre-Socratic times and occur along a fifth element or quintessence, called *aether*. It was Plato who, in his dialogue *Timaeus*, first identified these elements as being pre-Socratic in origin. In their concern with the so-called ἀρχή (the first principle or ultimate origin of all things), the pre-Socratics looked at the world with sharp eyes in their search for essential constituents. Thus, for Thales water was the first principle of reality, Demokritos spoke of *atoms*, Empedokles (ca. 450 BCE) called these basic constituent elements “the four roots” (ρίζωματα), and Plato used the term ‘element’ (στοιχείον) to refer to the smallest units or basic building blocks of matter. Later on, in his *Physics*, Aristotle claimed that four elements (earth, air, fire and water) make up everything under the moon (the terrestrial region) and he added *aether* as the quintessence (*fifth essence*), reasoning that whereas the four elements were earthly and hence corruptible, the heavenly or celestial sphere with its stars, which was immutable, must be made of a different unchangeable heavenly substance. Thus, in the realm of Earth, all bodies were made out of combinations of these four substances, whereas heavenly bodies beyond the Moon were made of a fifth substance, called *quintessence*. This conception of the four elements persisted well into the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and it had a profound influence on European culture and thought.² Let us listen to Aristotle’s words in a handful of quotes lifted from his *Physics*:

- (1) *Physics*, Book I, chapter 1, 184a 10-16: “In all sciences that are concerned with principles or causes or elements, it is acquaintance with these that constitutes knowledge or understanding. For we conceive ourselves to know about a thing when we are acquainted with its ultimate causes and first principles, and have got down to its elements. Obviously, then, in the study of Nature too, our first object must be to establish principles.”³
- (2) *Physics*, Book I, chapter 1, 184b 15-26: “Well, then, there must be either one principle of Nature or more than one. And if only one, it must be either rigid, as Parmenides and Melissus say, or modifiable, as the Physicists say, some declaring air to be the first principle, and others water. If, on the other hand, there are more principles than one, they must be either limited or unlimited in number. And if limited, though more than one, they must be two or three or four, or some other definite number. And if they are unlimited, they must either be, as Democritus held, all the same kind generically, though differing in shape and sub-characteristics, or of contrasted nature as well. The thinkers who inquire into the number of ‘absolute entities,’ again, follow the same line. For the first question is whether the constituents of which things are composed are one or more than one; and, if more than one, are they limited or unlimited? So they, too, are inquiring whether there is one principle or ultimate constituent, or many.”⁴
- (3) *Physics*, Book I, chapter 1, 187a 12ff: “We turn now to the Physicists. There are two schools of them. Those of the one school reduce existence to unity by positing a single underlying substance – whether one of the familiar three, or a something that is denser than fire and rarer than air – and arrive at a plurality by conceiving all else to be generated from it by condensation and rarefaction. [...] The other school, to which Empedocles and Anaxagoras belong, start from the first with both unity and multiplicity; for they assume an

² In modern science there are *elementary particles*, which are not made of other particles, and *composite particles*, which are made of other smaller particles. In the framework of quantum mechanics there are three classes of elementary particles – quarks, leptons and gauge bosons –, which are subdivided into several categories or types for their part.

³ See Aristotle, *Physics* (in two volumes) translated by P. H. Wicksteed and F. M. Cornford, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, London: William Heinemann Ltd., Loeb Classical Library, 1980, vol. I, p. 1.

⁴ Aristotle, *Physics*, *ibid.*, p. 15.

undistinguished *confusum*, from which the constituents of things are sifted out. But they differ in this, that Empedocles supposes the course of Nature to return upon itself, coming round again periodically to its starting-point; while Anaxagoras makes it move on continuously without repeating itself. Moreover, he assumes an unlimited number of distinguishable substances, from the first, as well as an unlimited number of uniform particles in each substance; whereas Empedocles has only his four so-called elements. Anaxagoras appears to have based his conviction that the primal substances are unlimited in number on his uncompromising acceptance of the dogma, common to all the Physicists, that ‘nothing can come out of what does not exist.’ This made him declare that originally ‘all things existed together’ and explain that genesis was nothing more than the modification induced by setting them in order; whereas the same dogma made the others attribute genesis to transforming combination and resolution.⁵

- (4) *Physics*, Book II, chapter 1, 192b 8-11: “Some things exist, or come into existence, by nature; and some otherwise. Animals and their organs, plants, and elementary substances – earth, fire, air, water – these and their likes we say exist by nature.”⁶

In *Elements*, Bringham revisits the classical model of Greek affiliation in the Western tradition, while not forgetting the contributions of modern scientific theories. In fact, he studied Physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), so he has got an accurate firsthand knowledge of the matter. *Elements* is then a philosophical poem, a meditation on the four classical elements, on the purely material structure of *being*, or, in other words, on the nature of the world and its tiniest constituents. It consists of seven parts in the 1995 edition and of six parts in the 2008 revised edition, where the opening section has been omitted altogether. For our critical analysis, we will turn back to the original text, though the later version will also be invoked where textual variants are relevant. In the first edition of the poem, sections I, II and III are meant as a sort of extended prologue on the ultimate material nature of the world, whereas sections IV.1, IV.2, IV.3 and IV.4 are devoted to an in-depth meditation on each of the four classical elements – air, earth, fire and water, respectively. In any case, elements are a recurrent motif in Bringham’s entire poetic corpus. In his literary universe, the world is made of such simple things as light, stones, water, silence, air, mountains, breath, blood, and bones. These are only instances: “*In the high passes the stones turn, / tuning the air,*” says the speaking voice in section IV (“Body, Speech and Mind”) of *Tzūbalem’s Mountain* (1982); “*This music is all about water,*” says one of the speaking voices in section II of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986); “*My people no longer stare into water / and fire for clues to the future,*” says *homo sapiens’* voice in section V of *Conversations with a Toad* (1987).

A MEDITATION ON ELEMENTS

I · ONE-ROOM SCHOOL

“One-Room School”, the opening section in *Elements*, anticipates some of the poems included under the heading “The Physics of Light” in *Selected Poems* (2009), particularly pieces like “Hick & Nillie” or “Demons and Men”. In that section there are poems that look like dialogues, strongly reminiscent of Socrates’ mayeutics as a way of gaining access to reliable knowledge of reality. “One-Room School” takes on the form of a dialogue

⁵ Aristotle, *Physics*, *ibid.*, p. 41 and p. 43.

⁶ Aristotle, *Physics*, *ibid.*, p. 107.

between a teacher and a student. What is peculiar about the setting is that it is a school with one room or class only, and that the whole curriculum is concerned with exploring the ultimate nature of reality or *being*. There is only one world and so there is only one school. Or maybe the whole world is a big one-room school where humankind must come to terms with reality in its intellectual confrontation with *what is*. The body and the senses (the organs of sensory experience) are of the essence in humans' primary epistemological encounter with the world, but at a higher level, the mind and speech turn out to be of paramount importance. In tackling the nature of the world, humans cannot do without words, the whole thinking process happens in the realm of language, which, like the world itself and our experience of it, is in a state of perpetual change. Words help us verbalize our insights into reality, our intuitive discoveries about any single thing in the world, and dialogue, in the broader sense of the word, remains a powerful tool in the construction of human knowledge over time. The history of humankind on earth is nothing but an inexorable search after knowledge and truth. Knowledge is a specifically human construct, whereas truth is something beyond ourselves that *appears* to us or that overwhelms us all of a sudden. There are several paths that might point the way to knowledge – art, science and philosophy among them.

In the very cradle of Western philosophy, Socrates and Plato knew that to philosophize was the art of dialectic – the art of using words that were sharp as knives to penetrate the essence of the real, to go beyond the polished surface of objects, and to reach a core of irreducible meaning at the heart of things. In his classic *After Babel. Aspects of Language & Translation*, George Steiner reflects on the Platonic dialogues and comes to the conclusion that “the use of the dialectic as a method of intellectual chase stems of the discovery that words, stringently tested, allowed to clash as in combat or manoeuvre as in dance, will produce new shapes of understanding.”⁷ Dialogue as a means of accessing the truth concerning the ultimate constituent elements of reality is the device Bringham makes use of in “One-Room School”. The poet is following closely in the steps of Socrates, who helped his students to give birth to his own ideas through the so-called mayeutic method. Socrates' mayeutics was a way of encouraging people to think for themselves, critically, with a lucid mind. The whole composition could be seen as consisting of several distinct parts. These are the opening lines of poem I:

- A simple question to begin the day.
What is? Suppose we take apart the world.
 Suppose we disassemble everything
 that is, down to invisible flakes and crumbs,
 and then we disassemble those, and then
 we catalogue the essences we find.
 Then, to test our findings, we can try
 to build the world again, just as it was.
 How many parts of being are there,
 and how many does it take to make a world?
 One? Two? Three? 2.8? 3.2? Four?
- One half should be enough.
- One half of what?
- Of anything. And everything that is
 can be remade by recombining
 that one half so it keeps on dreaming

⁷ George Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language & Translation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975 (1st edition) and 1992 (2nd edition), p. 23.

of the other.
 — Which doesn't exist?
 — Which needn't exist.
 — But the dream of it does.
 — One half alone is one by another name,
 and one is not the answer. We need two.
 — What are they?
 — Positive and negative,
 male and female, being and nonbeing.

The teacher begins the lesson of the day with a simple question – *what is?* – and encourages the student to consider the possibility of grinding the world down into its tiniest constituent parts to see what the essences at the bottom of everything are. He is talking of simple elements or irreducible particles, of the fundamental *parts of being* necessary to make a whole world. How many primary constituents of things are there? A few elements, or an infinity of atoms? The answer is not simple at all. Four is probably the simplest answer to this question, for, since antiquity, reality is thought to consist of earth, water, fire and air (even if there was no consensus among the pre-Socratics as to what exactly were those parts of *being* and which was the most fundamental of them all). However, other possible answers are suggested from the start:

- (1) Maybe one half of anything should be enough to remake every single thing in the world. By rearranging its constituent elements, it is possible to make one half “*keep on dreaming / of the other.*” There are subtle Platonic echoes here: humans are said to be halves split from an original whole entity and so they spend their whole lives looking for their corresponding half to make themselves whole again.
- (2) Maybe one half is not enough and we actually need two: positive and negative, male and female, being and nonbeing. The whole world is structured around dichotomies like these, which could also be seen as pairs of Blakean contraries or opposites, and *without contraries there is no progression*, as the Romantic poet himself said. Yes and no are also among those fundamental dichotomies, but *yes* is strangely connected to *money*, which is a fiction we find convenient to use in human transactions.

But these two options do not exhaust the wide range of possibilities that are further explored in “One-Room School”:

- (3) There might be no final *Gestalt*, only fragments scattered everywhere. “*There are no elements. The world / is a burst of hurtled fragments / scattering, with no place left to land.*” This means that maybe there are no basic units or constituent parts of *being*, arranged according to some kind of logic into everything we know exists in the world to make a coherent whole. The universe is nothing more than fragments moving or flying in all directions at supersonic speed, into the boundless limits of the unknown. Or maybe these words are meant as a reference to the fact that everything is in a state of Heraclitean perpetual change and motion – protons and neutrons and electrons moving around a centre or nucleus at the heart of atoms.
- (4) *What is* consists of a combination of chemical elements from an accurately systematized taxonomy. “*Hydrogen, helium, lithium, sodium, / nitrogen, oxygen, chromium, zinc....*”: the world consists of a discrete catalogue of elements that are perfectly systematized in the so-called periodic table, an accurate, scientific rendering of the chemical components out of which all matter is made. Credited to the Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleev, who developed a version of the now-familiar tabular presentation in 1869, the periodic table of elements provides a useful framework to classify, systematize, and compare many of the different

forms of chemical behavior. There is a total of 118 known chemical elements, organized by selected properties of their atomic structures and presented in increasing atomic number (i.e., the number of protons in an atom's atomic nucleus) under 18 groups and 7 periods. These elements are arranged into seven categories, hence the reference to seven suits of cards: "God's playing cards, laid out in seven suits: / $2 + 8 + 8 + 18 + 18 + 32 + 32 = 118$, / with only 12 or 13 left to find." The 12 or 13 left to find are the elements that the scientific community has not found yet. There is a subtle echo beneath Bringhurst's words here pointing to Einstein's notion that God is playing dice with the universe. *Un coup de dès*, said French poet Stéphane Mallarmé in a very different context. What uncanny feeling if God were playing cards with the world, if randomness or mere chance were central to the very conception of the cosmos, which humans think is order or harmony incarnate. "What is a deaf man playing solitaire, / unable to finish the game, because / the cards keep spilling off the table," says one of the two voices taking part in this philosophical dialogue. These words convey a sense of awkward impotence in the face of some deaf man playing cards all by himself, who does not know exactly how to manage the cards.

- (5) *Being* is like a tree, and it does make perfect sense to the human mind. "The ingredients of being form a tree / and not a pyramid – and not a house of cards." It is not inanimate stone blocks or cards that provide the best metaphor for the shape the ingredients of *being* assume. By claiming that "the ingredients of being form a tree," Bringhurst makes use of an organic metaphor in his attempt to grasp the nature of *being*. Everything in this tree-shaped being is endowed with a life of its own and is bound to perish sooner or later. A ticking clock is relentlessly going its own way beneath the universe, but here *being* is conceived of as "A glassless hourglass with leaves instead of sand." *Being* is life and death, presence and absence, growth and decay. Or *being* is a gigantic clock measuring not seconds or minutes, but the alternation of life and death, the succession of human lives on earth. There are profound and tantalizing literary echoes in these words that can be traced back to Homer's *Iliad* (Book VI, lines 144-149), where human lives are conceptualized as being leaves.⁸ If we place Bringhurst's reflection against this *topos*, then there is, of course, no definite number of leaves or human lives, which are in a state of perpetual renewal, "because the upper leaves keep falling / off the branches as soon as they are formed," through a natural process of growth and decay. Life and death are the two inseparable sides to the same coin. The second voice involved in this dialogue claims that leaves do not simply fall off, "they fall apart," which is only apparently meant as an allusion to the fact that everything turns back to mother earth's lap upon its extinction. If existence is a boundless continuum made of the same ingredients, then it is only natural that every single thing in the world should turn back to this primordial and indivisible matter. But, upon closer inspection, we learn that those leaves that fall apart (regardless of whether they are or not a perfect metaphor for all the human lives hanging from the tree of life) can also be deconstructed into "electrons, mesons, / muons, neutrons, pions, protons..." which are minute particles of particles, identified by modern science, units smaller even than Demokritos' atoms, which the Greek sage believed to be indivisible.

⁸ This is the original Greek text of the *Iliad* (Book VI, lines 144-149): "Τὸν δ' αὖθ' Ἱππολόχοιο προσηύδα φαιδίμος υἱός: / "Τυδεΐδη μεγάθυμε, τίη γενεὴν ἐρεεῖνεις; / οἷη περ φύλλωνή, τοίη δὲ καὶ ἀνδρῶν. / φύλλα τὰ μὲν τ' ἄνεμος χαμάδις χέει, ἄλλα δὲ θ' ὕλη / τηλεθόωσα φύει, ἔαρος δ' ἐπιγίγνεται ὄρη: / ὡς ἀνδρῶν γενεὴ ἡμῶν φύει ἢ δ' ἀπολήγει." And this is the translation into English: "Then spake to him the glorious son of Hippolochus: "Great-souled son of Tydeus, wherefore inquierest thou of my lineage? Even as are the generations of leaves, such are those also of men. As for the leaves, the wind scattereth some upon the earth, but the forest, as it bourgeons, putteth forth others when the season of spring is come; even so of men one generation springeth up and another passeth away." See the *Iliad* (in two volumes), with an English translation by A.T. Murray, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1924 (rpt. 1978), p. 273. And in Nicolo Valla's Renaissance Latin translation: "Quasim gente rogas? Quibus et natalibus ortus? / Persimile est foliis hominum genus omne caducis / Quae nunc nata uides pulchrisque, uirescere ortus / Autumno teniente cadunt, simul illa perurens / Incubuit Boreas..." Quoted by Ezra Pound in his essay entitled "Early Translators of Homer", included in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 257.

The meditation on the ingredients of *being* is ubiquitous in the history of humankind. And sure enough, Western philosophy has no monopoly on the question of *what is*. Born in a place named Kaundakunda in south India in the 2nd century CE, Kundakunda is a celebrated Jain scholar and the composer of spiritual classics. His proper name was Padmanandi and he was a sage who, like all sages, meditated about fundamental questions with a sharp mind. His own philosophizing about the elements of which *being* is made appears to be encapsulated with astonishing economy in just a few verse lines:

— Kundakunda says there are just six.
 The first is time, which takes up time
 instead of space. The other five are density
 and breath, unfixity and fixity,
 and space, which takes up space instead of time.
 There are six kinds of compounds too, he says.
 They are (1) water; (2) shadow; (3) earth;
 (4) all the sensible invisibles,
 like sound and smell and heat and light; (5) all
 matter that entraps a moral legacy;
 (6) the one kind of matter that does not.

The Greek model posits the existence of the four classical elements, but Kundakunda sets a model which embraces six different basic ingredients – time, space, density, breath, unfixity, fixity – and six types of compounds: water, shadow, earth, sensible invisibles, “*matter that entraps a moral legacy*” and matter that does not. This makes a total of 12 ingredients that are not, strictly speaking, small blocks of matter, but something else. In our Western frame of mind, *time* and *space* are those Kantian axes within which all human experience takes place and so they are elements of a kind. *Density* has purely material connotations, but *breath* points to the fact that there are both animate and inanimate (living and nonliving) creatures in the world. *Fixity* and *unfixity* suggest that there changeable and unchangeable things. As for the compounds, *water* and *earth* are familiar enough, but *shadow* takes into account the existence of light and its effects upon objects in the world. The so-called *sensible invisibles* denote things (sound, smell, heat, light) that can be perceived through senses other than sight, or not primarily through the eyes. Categories 5 and 6 are probably meant as a reference to the sphere of human values, though we are not sure of this. In any case, 12 ingredients seem to be too many for the other voice participating in this philosophical dialogue. Two is enough, 12 is spun from two, “*Yes and no say all that you can say / and all that anyone’s ever said,*” and “*all the things you say can still be said / by passing through a battery of switches / that only know two choices: on and off.*” Being and non-being, on and off, life and death, yes and no, light and darkness – we live in a world of elemental opposites. The whole lifetime of a person moves from darkness to light and back to darkness again.

From the speculation on the basic constituent elements of reality, Bringham’s meditation moves forward to a meditation on *what is* in itself. At this point in the poem, the thinking is profound and is given voice through gnomic poetry. Two threads of thinking are woven into the following verse lines. First of all, the two speaking voices in the poem consider the possibility that *what is* is “*just a system of representation.*” If it *is* a system of representation, then one might wonder what it represents. Well, the system represents itself: it is a mirror not held up to the world but to itself, so that what we get to see when we look into the nature of that mirror is *being* looking at itself, or, in other words, *being* in a state of purity. *Being* is self-contained, autonomous, unpolluted, narcissistic, as it were. It exists regardless of whatever might lie outside itself:

— And what does the system represent?

- *What is*. That is, itself and nothing more.
- *What is* is always looking in the mirror?
- *What is* is a mirror looking at itself.
- Or looking at us.

And yet, one of the voices acknowledges that the mirror that *being* is is also looking at us. The first person plural object pronoun *us* is possibly meant as a reference to all creatures (living and nonliving alike) that make up the world. This interpretation becomes more and more plausible as one moves forward in the unfolding of the mayeutic process at stake in the subsequent lines. *What is* is not just a self-reflective or self-referential mirror, but also a language spoken by all sentient and non-sentient beings. “*What is* is a language, not a message,” and it is spoken by everyone, everything, no one and nothing. In reflecting and speaking the world, *being* is the speaker and the spoken: it is the language as a tool of communication and the message uttered, it is the words and the spoken, but also the unspoken and the unspeakable – that which defies verbal definition. There is no way of keeping apart *what is* from who speaks *what is*. *Die Sprache spricht*, says Heidegger; *das Sein spricht auch*, says Bringham too:

- Everything that *is* speaks Being’s language,
and as soon as someone speaks it, what it says
is something more than what it is.

In the closing movement of “One-Room School”, the emphasis of the meditation is laid once again on the possibility of even taking the world apart into identifiable minimal units, constituent blocks or elements. If *what is* is a language (speaking itself), then the elements the world consists of must be the equivalent of words, or, to put it differently, the *lexicon* of a gigantic language that somehow manages to overcome the division among living and nonliving beings that the biblical Babel episode brought about so long ago. And the immense set of words of that language are combined with one another through the mechanisms of *syntax*, which establishes sense relations and produces larger sense units. If the lexicon is the elements themselves, then the syntax is the *interconnections* of those elements. If interconnections produce meaningful entities, then those entities must also be related to everything else through interconnections of a higher order (*interconnections of interconnections*):

- Can we or can we not identify
the elements...
- The lexicon and syntax?
- ... and interconnections of elements
that add up to the world?
- Don’t stop there.
- Interconnections of interconnections
of elements are necessary too.

In the end, everything in the universe is related to everything else. A long sequence of rhetorical questions dwells on the changeability of the world: maybe it adds up, it multiplies, subtracts, subdivides, or it is born and dies. Like language itself, the world is in a state of perpetual flux, but *being* remains the same, indestructible, forever. It just *persists*. The ultimate nature of elements remains an inscrutable mystery:

— These elements you speak of,
are they fragments? Are they wholes?
— And is there
anything except enlightened nature
in a stone, a stream, a candleflame, a breath?

— Or time and space?
— Or density
or emptiness?
— Or growth?
— Or death?

The constituent elements that are the lexicon of the world might be fragments or wholes. It does not matter much in the end. The poem closes with a long list of questions that do not await a simple answer. *Stone, stream, candleflame* and *breath* already evoke the four classical elements – earth, water, fire and air – that constitute the subject matter of sections IV.1, IV.2, IV.3 and IV.4. All these four entities populating the world are representative of the whole spectrum of existence and contain nothing more than “*enlightened nature*”, – i.e., mouthfuls or handfuls of *being* condensed into the unique things or objects there are in the world. They might contain nothing more than time, space, density, emptiness, growth or death. Maybe there is not much to existence on earth after all: there is life and there is death, and nothing in between. In this context, human life is a journey from darkness to light and back to darkness again, or a journey from darkness to darkness across vast expanses of light.

II · A PRAYER

The second poem in Bringhurst’s *Elements* is a moving prayer addressed to the four classical elements, which are the ancestral grandparents of everything that exists in this world. From a purely structural point of view, this short composition could be viewed as consisting of three distinct parts: the first one is a simple, straightforward invocation addressed to the elements, followed by a brief but intense meditation on the nature of the self; the second part, the semantic hinge located exactly at the geographical centre of the poem (in italics in the 1995 edition and in roman in the 2008 revised incarnation), dwells on the relationship between self and place; and the third part is a celebration of all four elements, our only home available to us humans, even if we are inevitably exposed to them. The rhythm throughout the whole composition is a kind of litany-like incantatory musicality. Linguistically, it is achieved through the use of subtle parallelism and simple declarative sentences where the verb *to be* is palpably predominant. This is, of course, no random choice. The resulting poem is reminiscent of the oral literatures of North America in many respects and it is amazingly rich in what looks like mythical echoes.

In the face of the beauty and grandeur of the world, the perceiving self goes back in time to the realm of pristine origins and what he/she finds there are earth, fire, water and air, seeking to combine with one another to bring about the whole world as we know it to be. This is a kind of pagan cosmogony, as there is no governing or omnipotent consciousness here presiding the whole act of creation, as is the case with the biblical book of Genesis. Thus, the poem opens with a simple vocative: “*Grandmother earth and grandfather fire / and grandmother water and grandfather air.*” Earth and water are feminine principles, whereas fire and air are masculine principles – by the way, this is reminiscent of the

marriage of Gea (earth) and Uranus (sky) in Greek mythology at the beginning of time. The reader or hearer of the poem is thus plunged back into an elemental world of basic ingredients, where the human is not necessarily at the centre of the universe. In fact, there are among the elements “no eyes, no mouths, no fingertips, no ears.” This is no anthropocentric cosmogony. In this particular context, the self is something else:

The self is neither element nor recipe.
The self is just *what is* as it splits and turns; [no italics in the 2008 text]

it is the face assumed by one
to face what seems to be another.

The concept of ‘self’ is a peculiarly egoistic human concept. We humans are quite self-absorbed in this respect. It is inextricably linked to one’s own personality, to the core of meaning inside oneself that is perpetually in Heraclitean flux. Nothing stays the same. Like the world or like language itself, humans also change from one second to another. Therefore, the self is defined as being “*what is* as it splits and turns.” However, it is also defined as being the face one takes on to face *the other* in our relation with the world, which includes our fellow human beings and non-human creatures as well. “*Toad, all the roads from a man to a woman, / a man to a man, woman to man, woman to woman / lead through the nonhuman,*” said the voice of *homo sapiens* in section IX of *Conversations with a Toad* (1987). And also: “*The animals give us our speech and the means / of our thinking.*” Placed amid a world of elemental constituents, human beings establish a set of complex relations with the others – animals, stones, trees, light, silence, air, place. If we allow all these elements to cleanse our senses and invade our mind and body, then we are in a position to say we fit in, we belong among the grander scheme of things, we feel we are at home at last:

*We are at home only so long
as we are inhabited,*

*alive only so long as we are lived in
by the places where we are.*

Place is of the essence. It is the *genius loci*, or the spirit of the place, that ultimately pervades the existence of human and nonhuman beings. When a perfect communion is set up between the perceiving and thinking human being and the surrounding place, we can be said to be alive, pervaded as we are by the place where we find ourselves at a particular moment in time. Furthermore, the speaking voice in the poem is subtly urging the reader to try and find this unmediated communion with the world in which we are truly alive. In much the same way the language of *being* speaks human and nonhuman beings, places inhabit human and nonhuman beings as well. The resulting feeling emanating from an awareness that we are being inhabited by the surrounding space brings about peace of mind and a precious serenity. We are at home.

In the closing four stanzas of “Prayer”, there is a moving celebration of all four classical elements as the *materia prima* or primordial matter out of which the whole fabric of life is woven:

Darkness of earth, light of the fire,
rise of the air, fall of the water. That is all.

The air and earth, water and fire
that scour and feed and bathe and reclaim us.

Our one and only refuge is the elements
to which we are exposed.

Air, earth, water, fire, be here
to rebuild what we destroy.

Earth is darkness, the darkness deep inside the earth thinking the thoughts of the world (thinking all the living and nonliving creatures on earth); fire is light, pure luminosity, incandescence; air rises up in the verticality of the sky; and water falls down from heaven in the form of rain, trying to find its way into the innumerable streams, rivers, lakes, seas and oceans of the world. Those are the basic ingredients. They surround us, cleanse us, remind us time and again that we belong to them. But, even if we are aware that they make up our only home and that there is no world other than this, we keep on stubbornly destroying what they so lovingly construct in such a spontaneous and natural manner. Like poetry, *being* persists, even if humans manage to destroy the outward appearance of the world in their systematic rape of the earth's resources. "*All over the world, the earth / is tortured for money*", said one of the three voices at some point in movement I of *New World Suite No. 3*. "We don't own what we know", or *knowing is not owning*, says Don McKay in relation to this respectful environmental ethics that Bringham shares in full. Hence, the poem closes with an invocation addressed to the elements and a moving plea for help to rebuild what we destroy so mindlessly.

III · A PERIODIC TABLE

The third poem in *Elements* is a short jewel-like lyric, and also a reinterpretation of what the periodic table of elements is. In its 2008 material incarnation, the text of the poem was slightly modified, though the revisions are minor ones: the names of the groups are not in italics and the opening two lines are arranged differently. In any case, the whole composition consists of only nine short verse lines and tessellates a handful or clusters of nouns around no verbs at all. This is a poem about essences, after all, about what one finds when one takes the world apart and sees what its constituents elements are, and so it consists of a simple enumeration. Whereas the familiar periodic table systematizes all the known 118 chemical elements found in the world, this new and ambitious periodic table reduces the whole universe, which is manifold and complex, to five simple groups and twelve categories. But, what is the logic beneath this new arrangement of the elements out of which the real is made?, we may ask. This is it:

First group:
is and isn't.
Second group:
animal; vegetable; mineral; bird.
Third group:
mountains; rivers; places; stars.
Fourth group, fifth group:
two transfinite series:
hungry ghosts and nonreactive gods.

The first, elemental group consists of *being* and *nonbeing*, or, in other words, *what is* and *what isn't*. Both are real, both exist, as if they were the two sides to the same coin. The second group comprises humans, animals, plants and minerals. Mineral is the odd one out, for, unlike the rest, it is not a living creature. The third group comprises geographical accidents on earth (mountains, rivers, and places in general) and the stars up above in the sky. All of

them are made of the four classical elements: mountains are earth; rivers are water; places are a combination of earth, water and air; and stars are light and fire. The fourth and fifth groups do come as a surprise to readers' expectations: they are transfinite series, which means that they are not infinite or boundless, but comprise entities that are beyond the purely material world. There is something uncanny about the *hungry ghosts* of the fourth group, possibly meant as a reference to the dead or to the spirits of the dead, experiencing a deep hunger for life. The fifth group is that of the gods and goddesses still populating *all the desanctified places* on earth. They are there, even if we no longer see them. Gods are *nonreactive* because they are made of a completely different substance that does not actually mix or combine with other known chemical elements on earth. To Aristotle's mind, they would be made of aether instead, and not of the four corruptible elements.

IV.1 · AIR

After the three opening sections in *Elements*, the reader crosses the real threshold into the heart of the poem. Once the elements have been addressed and invoked as a whole in the cosmic classroom and in the prayer, and noted down in the new periodic table in the three preceding sections, it is due time to concentrate on each of the elements. The author relies on the classical Greek model that propounds the existence of only earth, air, fire and water as the basic constituents of reality. Everything that exists in this world is the fruit of a combination of all these in different quantities and arrangements. The first meditation on the four classical elements focuses on air. Air is difficult, almost invisible, and also vital for living beings. We need air to breathe and to keep on living. It surrounds us all the time without our noticing it, for there is no way of directly seeing, touching or tasting air through one's eyes, hands or tongue. We can only indirectly hear it in the form of wind, and we can smell it in the form of scents, but it is otherwise untouchable and invisible in many respects. The whole composition consists of eight stanzas and possibly of five clearly identifiable parts. The following critical analysis focuses on each of these movements for the mind.

Breathing is a fundamental activity we humans perform we do not know how many times per minute. It is something we do unconsciously, automatically, naturally, but it keeps us alive in the realm of the living air. The inner lungs inhale air and get whatever nourishment they need for the human body in the form of oxygen, and then they expel the carbon dioxide generated in the whole process. The outer world is a gigantic lung, and so breathing is our most elemental link to the world outside and to the others, for all living creatures on earth share the same reservoir of air:

To breathe is to be breathed,
to give up the ghost and receive it again,
to belong to the shared and exterior lung,
rich with its livery of sunlight–
rose petals, icicles, willow leaves, waves–
or shrivelled and cringing.

If *speaking is to be spoken* by language itself, then *breathing is to be breathed* by the big lung of the world. That big lung is no extra or addition, it is a space shared with all the living and nonliving creatures of the world. As such, it is characterized by a rare exuberance and the manifold manifestations of earthly beauty. Hence the seemingly chaotic enumeration we find in the closing lines of the first stanza – rose petals, icicles, willow leaves, waves. What all these things seem to have in common is their joyful existence and motion surrounded

by air. It is air that touches the rose petals, that freezes water into icicles, that whispers through the willow trees, that pushes sea water into motion to form waves and spindrift. The same richness is palpable in the second stanza (and movement) of the poem, which is a celebration of the different living manifestations of air in the form of wind (blue, black, copper, striped, white and desert wind) and a moving celebration of air as “*emptiness, brightness, gull’s wing, darkness, / lark song, whisper, stillness, winter gale...*” Air is the realm of emptiness for it is untouchable, but it is also the realm through which light and darkness pervade the world, the invisible force that keeps the gull’s wing floating as if suspended on nothingness, and the medium through which birdsong, human whispers, silence and the fierce fury of a winter gale reach to our ears. These are all instances of what air can accomplish or make possible.

The third stanza deals with the chemical composition of air, with “*the sacred, simple alphabet of air.*” In this simple lesson in the anatomy of air, we learn that this element consists of other simpler chemical elements. The natural realm of air is the atmosphere itself, the layers of gases surrounding the planet, retained by Earth’s gravity. They make possible and protect life on Earth by warming its surface through heat retention and reducing temperature extremes between day and night. The atmosphere is called simply air when used to refer to breathing and photosynthesis, which is also a form of breathing. Air suitable for the survival of terrestrial animals and plants is nowadays known to exist only in Earth’s troposphere, and so it is a precious, vital element. Vast as the universe is, no suitable air is to be found anywhere else, and so this is the only livable world possible to date. The chemical elements that humans inhale are different from the ones they exhale after taking all the nutriment the air provides their bodies with:

The sacred, simple alphabet of air–
N₂, O₂, Ar, Ne, He, CO₂ & CH₄ . . . – [and in the 2008 text]
into which, moment by moment, we pour
the alphabet shit and the alphabet piss
that is left from cooking and eating
our alphabet steak, brewing and drinking
our alphabet beer – CO, SO₂, NO₂,
HCl, HF, H₂S, H₂SO₄. . . . [the blank space after this line is omitted in the 2008 text]

In this basic atmospheric chemistry lesson, Bringhurst uses the chemical notation or symbols so as to describe the gases we inhale and exhale while breathing. Basically, air is mainly composed of nitrogen (N₂), oxygen (O₂) and argon (Ar), which constitute the major gases of the atmosphere. But it also contains small quantities of the so-called *trace gases* such as neon (Ne), helium (He), carbon dioxide (CO₂) and methane (CH₄), as well as small amounts of other gases and a variable amount of water vapor (H₂O). What humans exhale in breathing – “*the alphabet shit and the alphabet piss / that is left from cooking and eating / our alphabet steak...*” – are such gases as monoxide (CO), sulfur dioxide (SO₂), nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), hydrochloric acid (HCl), hydrogen fluoride (HF), hydrogen sulfide (H₂S), and sulfuric acid (H₂SO₄). This is just to remind us that, in such a simple act as breathing, air gives us generously the gift we need to keep on living, and what we give air back is but the waste gases we no longer need in our bodies.

The fourth and longest movement of the poem is concerned with language, writing and speech. It seems to us that this is the true heart or core of this meditation on air. The air is rich in voices, probably those of our ancestors, but also of other living and speaking creatures in the world, for humans have no monopoly on meaning or language at all. That all (living and nonliving) creatures on Earth want to *mean* something seems to be a truism at this point of our critical analysis of *Elements*. “Everything that *is* speaks Being’s language,”

says the speaking voice in “One-Room School”. Ours is a polyphonic world in which every single thing speaks a language of its own, shared with the members of its own species. But there is a universal language, *Being’s language*, which is spoken by everyone and by everything. Communication is of the essence when we come to think of life on earth; if beings did not communicate with one another, they would be bound to wander perpetually as isolated spheres with no bonds or connections with their fellow creatures. A world of isolated monads is a disquieting idea. If everything is endowed with meaning, then everything is a sign in the complex mesh of living things or in the multilayered fabric of life, which is a web of subtle interconnections. However, *homo sapiens sapiens* tends to think of language in quite restrictive human terms, and this meditation is basically concerned with human language:

Language is shaped air, a sign
that cannot be seen. What you see on the page
is writing, not language:
the visible sign of a physical gesture,
the tangible sign in confined space
of a sign that cannot be captured—
though it can be tortured, like others.

According to George Steiner, “Language [...] is the most salient model of Heraclitean flux. It alters at every moment in perceived time.”⁹ But in his personal meditation on the nature of language, Bringham has chosen to focus on one simple physiological fact that is usually overlooked or taken for granted: language is air emanating from one’s lungs and finding its way back to air, which is the exterior lung of gigantic proportions. If language is *shaped air*, then the preeminence of speech over writing is out of the question. Writing is something else; strictly speaking, it is not natural or spontaneous, but a cultural artifact. Scripts have been devised over the centuries to try to capture what otherwise would vanish forever into nothingness. In this respect, in his beautiful essay *The Solid Form of Language. An Essay on Writing and Meaning* (2004), Bringham reminds us that writing is a technique, a tool humans use to preserve what is originally eel-slippery and evanescent sound into durable solid form. When spoken aloud, words are droplets of semantic air, or mouthfuls of air charged with meaning, and, when written down on a page, they are handfuls of letterforms that were born with the Neolithic agricultural revolution. The development of farming and ranching brought about a domestication of the land and of animals, in much the same way that writing brought about a domestication of language. Both processes were simultaneous or parallel in time. Cultivated land prefigures the written page, and the marks left by the ploughshare on the ground prefigure the letterforms beautifully arranged on the page. In our critical analysis of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986), we dwelt on this issue in depth. May it suffice here just to remember that writing was born to fulfill very pragmatic purposes in the management of earth resources in the Neolithic and that it is subsidiary in relation to speech. It is the spoken word that comes first and then it is the turn for the written word to leave a more or less permanent or durable record of an idea, feeling, intuition, insight into the essence of things. In the beginning, language was wild and speech was the natural gesture of humankind. Writing entered the scene afterwards, as a visible, tangible and solid manifestation of what was volatile, invisible and fluid by nature. Like other signs in the world, spoken words are also susceptible of being tortured. Everywhere the earth is tortured for money, says one of the speaking voices in *New World Suite N° 3* (2005).

⁹ George Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language & Translation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975 (1st edition) and 1992 (2nd edition), p. 18.

Once shaped air abandons one's own lungs, there is usually someone close at hand to capture the meaning embedded in that mouthful of air that has just come out from one's lips. With writing, the addressee is not present, words may lead to confusion and misinterpretation because they are divorced from the body that originally uttered them. This is one of the reasons why Plato was so reluctant to trust in written words: the genuine, pristine idea is in the living, spoken word; written words are half alive, or half dead. Bringham's meditation on speech dwells precisely on the purely physiological aspects surrounding the production of sounds:

The gestures of speech
are performed in the darkness
by heart and by throat,
palate and nostril and larynx and lung.
What you see are the ploughmarks
of carbon and lead and tin and antimony,
tilling the windowbox of the page.
What you hear, when you hear,
is the echo of air against air.

If the gestures of writing are performed by the pen-holding hand, then the gestures of speech are performed by the speech apparatus. It is in the darkness of the human chest that the air coming out of the lungs is modulated and shaped by the larynx, the vocal chords, the hard and soft palate (uvula), the tongue, the teeth and the lips. Meaningless air travels a long way to become shaped sound wholes charged with semantic meaning. In speech, air also travels from the realm of darkness of the human body out into the realm of light. In this sense, every time we open our mouths to utter a single word, the miracle happens: through a strange alchemy *homo loquens* metamorphoses what is shapeless air into the meaningful *Gestalt* of articulate sounds, capable of conveying messages to the hearer. It is good news to learn that all of us are genetically preprogrammed to learn to do so without much effort. What the reader sees in writing is rows of letterforms “*tilling the windowbox of the page*”; what the hearer hears when addressed orally is “*the echo of air against air*,” – i.e., lung air shaped into meaningful units to be deciphered by the attentive hearer. Like speaking, hearing should also be a gesture of gratitude and respect towards *what is*. Precisely, the meditation on air closes with a sort of mythical account in miniature. There is a sort of stubborn consistency inherent in the remaining elements, because earth, water and fire are visible, touchable, palpable in one way or another, but air seems to be invisible. At the beginning of the very life of Earth, our planet and our only home, earth was kidnapped forming a whole (Pangaea), water was imprisoned in seas and oceans and rivers, fire was “*cut and packaged*,” and air, “*the invisible element, / was the last one to be free*.” It took a long time for the earth to be able to produce its own atmosphere, a work in progress for eons of time. We should be grateful for all the trouble it took herself to give us breathable air.

IV.2 · EARTH

Unlike air, earth is a palpable, touchable, visible and solid element. It is also ubiquitous in civilizations worldwide as the ultimate mother of everything we know to exist. In a number of mythologies it is conceptualized as being a feminine principle, Mother Earth, from whose bosom all creatures are born into the realm of light. But in Bringham's seven-part poem *Elements*, earth is not meant exclusively as a reference to our planet, but also as one of the four basic constituent elements of reality. It is difficult, though, to keep both

concepts apart; at some points in the poem they seem to coalesce into one single thing. Hence, Bringhurst's meditation on the second element out of which everything in the world is made is an exhaustive catalogue of all the possible manifestations (or allomorphs) of earth. The opening stanza is precisely an enumeration of the tangible incarnations of earth:

To stand, to sit, to step is to be held.
To think is to behold
all the facets of the diamond, the allomorphs of earth:
pebble and boulder and bedrock,
podzol and hardpan, lava and sand,
hornblende, quartzite, feldspar, marble, coal,
basalt, granite, sandstone, shale,
clay, copper, potash, gabbro, loam,
obsidian, schist, dust . . .

If *to breathe is to be breathed*, then *to stand, sit or step is to be held* by Earth's gravity, which prevents us from floating aimlessly into outer space. To think is to behold the manifold variety and richness of earth itself as visible in all its allomorphs. The earth itself is conceived of as being a valuable diamond – our solid and irreplaceable home. *Allomorphs* is an interesting word at the heart of the first stanza, for it produces interesting concentric ripples of meaning. Literally, an allomorph is *one possible form of a particular morpheme*. Now, life is written in the alphabet of the four basic elements, which are words, and these elements consist of even smaller units or particles or manifestations, which are the equivalent of morphemes with all its variants (allomorphs). The message is crystal-clear: the book of nature is written in a language that can be deciphered and understood. What follows this reflection is a long enumeration of the different forms (allomorphs) that earth assumes or takes on – sand, lava, coal, obsidian, basalt, dust – throughout its chameleonic existence. "*Soils and rocks are earth with its cheeks / full of water and air,*"¹⁰ adds the speaking voice in the poem. This is a reminder that the abundance of water on Earth's surface is a unique feature that distinguishes the "Blue Planet" from others in the Solar System. Our planet combines earth, air and water in perfect harmony. The Earth's hydrosphere consists of all water surfaces in the world, including oceans, inland seas, lakes, rivers and underground waters. This water fills the cheeks of earth.

The second stanza dwells on the chemical composition of earth: "*Earth at its purest is crystal and metal, / the luminous shadow, in hiding but gleaming.*" The shining crystal and metal that earth is made of are a form of irresistible and beautiful luminosity found in the bosom of our home earth. By the way, these words recall those of an earlier poem in the Bringhurst corpus, "Poem about Crystal", which already showed the poet's fascination with the pure physicality of the world. The author is absolutely precise about the chemical elements earth consists of: earth is composed mostly of iron, oxygen, silicon, magnesium, sulfur, nickel, calcium and aluminum, as well as small trace amounts of other elements. What is simply astonishing and movingly poetic is that, to Bringhurst's mind, these are "*inorganic proteins, / the orthogonal, hexagonal, / simple, symmetrical, latticed, rotational / thoughts of the gods*". Everything we know exists upon earth is the product or fruit of the gods' thinking and their thoughts manage to find their way into "*the breasts of human beings*".

The third part of this meditation on earth explores the amazing abundance and rich diversity of the Earth's terrain, which varies greatly from place to place. It is known that

¹⁰ Three verse lines instead of two in the 2008 incarnation of the text: "Soils and rocks / are earth with its cheeks / full of water and air."

about 70% of the Earth's surface is covered by water, and much of the continental shelf is below sea level. This submerged surface has mountainous features, including a globe-spanning mid-ocean ridge system, as well as undersea volcanoes, oceanic trenches, submarine canyons, oceanic plateaus and abyssal plains. Bringhurst chooses to focus on the remaining 30%, which is not covered by water and consists of mountains, hills, deserts, plains, plateaus, valleys, and other geomorphologies (*allomorphs of earth*). The poet mentions some of them just to give an idea of the exuberance and richness of Earth: the anonymous, common names of “*drumlin, esker, moraine, coulee, / cwm, cliff, pingo, talus, cave,*” as well as “*the deserts and steppes, escarpments and valleys,*” and the proper names “*Chomolungma, Dibé Ntsaa, Denali, Tian Shan,*” mountains and hills scattered across the planetary geography. It is not only a matter of diversity; the planetary surface is in a state of perpetual change and undergoes reshaping over geological time periods because of tectonics and erosion. The surface features built up or deformed through plate tectonics are subject to steady weathering from precipitation, thermal cycles and chemical effects. Glaciations, coastal erosion, the build-up of coral reefs and large meteorite impacts also act to reshape the landscape. Hence the reference, for instance, to *moraine* (i.e., a mass of earth, stones, etc. carried along by a glacier and left when it melts), to *drumlin* (a very small hill formed by the movement of a glacier), to *esker* (a long narrow area of small stones and earth that has been left by a large mass of ice that has melted), or to *cwm* (a round hollow area in the side of a mountain). All of them are specific geological terms that add rigour and intellectual precision to Bringhurst's cataloguing of the earth's diversity.

The closing movement and stanza celebrates the existence of stones as a tangible piece of *being*. In words reminiscent of Gertrude Stein's well-known *a rose is a rose is a rose*, Bringhurst sings of stones as if they were fragile, delicate bites or bits of reality:

A stone is a stone is a stone
is a laundered and rock-hard and graspable
piece of what is. Beneath it, the bones
and petroleum – earth
turned into flesh turned into earth
turned into flesh turned into earth again –
are resting and waiting their turn.¹¹

What there is beneath visible rock is bones and petroleum, undergoing their slow metamorphosis, waiting their turn to come back to the earth surface in one way or another. Bringhurst's words have amazing telluric connotations about them: the flesh and bones of living creatures return to the earth's lap, spend eons of time down there in the bosom of Mother Earth, undergo a complex metamorphosis, and the whole cycle goes on forever and ever.

IV.3 · FIRE

Section IV.3 of *Elements* is an intensely lyrical meditation on fire. Of all the seven parts in this sequence, it is the poem that has undergone more profound changes in its subsequent 2008 incarnation. We all know that fire is the rapid oxidation of a material in the chemical process of combustion, releasing heat, light and various reaction products. The flame is the visible portion of the fire and consists of glowing hot gases. Depending on the substances alight, and any impurities outside, the colour of the flame and the fire's intensity will be

¹¹ The three closing verse lines are slightly different in the 2008 version of the poem: “turned into flesh and then back into earth / again and again –are just resting / and waiting their turn.”

different. But Bringhurst has chosen a completely different approach in this case: he has left aside the scientific path and related discourse that we find in the previous meditations on air and earth, and he has entered the road leading to mythological thinking. From beginning to end, the whole poem could be said to tessellate myths associated to several constellations in the night sky. Thus, fiery stars are conceptualized as being the pure embodiment of fire itself, and so the poetic voice firstly focuses on the Pleiades and the Ursa Major constellations and then moves on to other stars that hide a wealth of mythological layering or thinking beneath them. As a matter of fact, the myth of Ursa Major is a recurrent one in Bringhurst's literary corpus. It figures prominently alongside the Orion constellation myth in "Winter Solstice, Cariboo Mountains", the fourth movement in *New World Suite No. 3* (2005), and it is the fundamental myth at the heart of *Ursa Major* (2003 & 2009), another polyphonic and polyglot poem that explores the Greek and Latin myth (told in Book II of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) as well as the Cree story of the bear-woman as recorded by Leopold Bloomfield in *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree* (1930).

The first stanza, which is omitted altogether in the 2008 version of the poem, concerns the Pleiades constellation. In Greek mythology, the Pleiades (Πλειάδες) – Maia, Electra, Taygete, Alcyone, Celaeno, Sterope and Merope – were the seven daughters of the titan Atlas and the sea-nymph Pleione, and the sisters of the Hyades, the Hesperides, Calypso and Hyas. Also, they were companions of the sylvan goddess Artemis. The story of their catasterism (i.e., of the way they literally became stars) is a moving and memorable one. There are several versions of the myth. It is said that, after Atlas was forced to carry the burden of the heavens upon his shoulders, they were pursued by the giant hunter Orion. They were first transformed into doves by Zeus and then their images were thrust in the form of stars up above in the night sky, as they were being chased by Orion, whose constellation is said to still pursue the Pleiades across the night sky. In a different version of the story, all seven sisters took their lives because they were extremely sad due to the fate of their father or due to the loss of their siblings, the Hyades. Zeus decided then to immortalize them by placing them forming a constellation in the sky. However, in Bringhurst's mythological account of the existence of the Pleiades, the story goes like this:

The wind's daughter married the son
of the morning star, and she loved him
too much and praised him too highly.
Therefore he drowned and returned
as a seagull. She tried to drown herself too
and turned into a kingfisher. These
droplets of fire, the Pleiades:
these, it is said, are the kingfisher's splash.

The original violent chase of the Pleiades by Orion is now replaced by a love story in which two natural elements, the wind's daughter and the morning star, are ready to commit suicide to spend their lifetime together. Both lovers become sea birds that share the realms of sea and air for eternity. In this account, the Pleiades are the water drops left by the kingfisher emerging from the sea out into the living air. This is probably meant as a reference to the fact that, at some point, the Pleiades are seen far away in the distance, on the horizon, near the sea level.

Stanzas two and three are concerned with the Ursa Major constellation and the myth beneath it. In Greek mythology, the constellation is identified with the nymph Callisto, who was placed in the heavens by Zeus in the form of a bear together with her son Arcas as "bear keeper", or Arcturus. The Greeks named the constellation 'Arctos', the she-bear, or Helice, from its turning around Polaris, the Pole Star. The myth in full is found

in Book II of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Lycaon's daughter, the nymph Callisto joined the retinue of Artemis, the sylvan virgin goddess, and soon she became one of the favourite hunting partners of the goddess, to whom she had sworn a vow of chastity. On a hunting day, as Callisto was resting her limbs in a shady forest grove, Zeus saw her and fell passionately in love with her. He cunningly approached her assuming the appearance of Artemis, embracing her with amorous intensity. It was too late for the poor nymph to react. A few months later, her shame was made visible to her partners in the hunting party. They all came to a river and decided to bathe together. Artemis and the other virgins undressed, while she was reluctant to uncover the shame to the goddess' eyes. As she finally undressed, Callisto's advanced pregnancy was revealed to the whole party and the goddess, infuriated, banished her from her sight. Later on, Callisto gave birth to a son, Arcas. Zeus' wife, Hera, who knew of the god's infidelity, was determined to take revenge on the nymph. She grabbed her by her hair and pulled her violently to the ground. At that moment, she was transformed into a bear: dark hair covered her whole body, her hands and feet became claws, and her beautiful mouth became horrible jaws incapable of uttering a single word. For 15 years, poor Callisto wandered in the forests fleeing the presence of hunters, but she still had a human mind. One day she came across her son, Arcas, whom she had recognized and wanted to approach. Backing off in fear, Arcas clutched a spear and near killed his own mother, had Zeus not intervened out of pity transforming them into the constellations Ursa Major and Ursa Minor up in the heavens, respectively. Ursa Minor is the little bear, the Cub, sucking the nipple of heaven, whereas Arcturus is Alpha Boötis, the brightest star in the constellation Böötes, which lies in almost direct line with the tail of Ursa Major as the "bear guard".

In Bringhurst's condensed rendering of the myth, two stanzas draw an exhaustive anatomy of the constellation. Merak and Dubhe are called the "Pointers" because the line Merak-Dubhe points to the Pole Star. Dubhe comes from the Arabic *al-dubb* ('the bear'), and Merak comes from the Arabic *al-maraqq* ('flank or groin'). Alioth, Mizar and Alkaid are other stars in the Ursa Major constellation. Second in line along the tail is the wide double star Zeta Ursa Majoris, the two members of which are called Mizar and Alcor. The name Alioth is applied to the next star along the tail, Epsilon Ursae Majoris. Alkaid lies at the tip of the bear's tail. These are Bringhurst's words:

Merak and Dubhe, the lip of the dipper,
the dugs of the Bear, point to the pole star:
the mouth of the Cub, sucking what once
was the nipple of heaven. Sucking what then
was the mill and the churn. Sucking what then
was the point of a spear. Sucking what now
is the radar screen, bombsight and crosshair.

Alioth, Mizar, Alkaid: these are the throat,
not the rump and the tail, of the Great
Bear, who is stretching her tongue
to Arcturus, her son, who is clutching
the butt of a spear. He is biting the head of the spear
in his own teeth in his other form, the Cub.
And the spearshaft runs through the throat
of his mother the Bear.¹²

¹² In the 2008 version of this poem, this stanza reads quite differently: "Alioth, Mizar, Alkaid: these are the throat, / not the rump and the tail, of the Great / Bear, who is stretching her tongue / to Arcturus, her son,

“*Where there is fire, there is a story. / Where there is a story, there is a door.*” In the stanza that follows these verse lines, Bringhurst mentions other stars in the heavens associated to myths from antiquity. Stories are ubiquitous, says Bringhurst, and stories are a form of accounting for what might seem ineffable, inexpressible or unintelligible at first. Myths are stories at whose centre stand not humans, but the world itself in its myriad forms or incarnations instead. They are therefore more comprehensive in a way than, say, novels, which are primarily concerned with exploring human psychology or personality. The constellation (or ecology) of myths that make up a mythology embodies a hypothesis about the nature of reality, which is both human and nonhuman. Mythological accounts of the world are not to be dismissed as inaccurate explanations not on a par with philosophical or scientific accounts of reality. They simply offer a different, more humane, glimpse of *what is*. Among the “names of fire” mentioned by the poet are Regulus, Spica, Antares, Altair, Deneb, Cassiopeia, Capella and Vega.¹³ What all these stars have in common is that they are among the brightest in the night sky and that they are somehow associated to heroes and victims from ancient mythology. They still hold an irresistible fascination for all human beings who turn to look at them up there in the night sky, and they do hide an immense wealth of meaning which is hard for us to decipher, as we seem to have forgotten the code to interpret them correctly:

Regulus, Spica, Antares: the path
of the animals. Altair and Deneb
and Cassiopeia and Capella: the path
of the birds. Altair, the Eagle Star,
Vega the Hawk Star, Deneb the Swan Star,
silently watching the three-sided field.

The closing stanzas of this meditation on fire turn more philosophical. Now Bringhurst applies the name ‘fire’ to very different realities:

- (1) “*Things that exist but do not have a substance –/ mind, for instance – are usually fire.*” The mind is conceived of as being fire, probably because it illuminates the dark recesses of reality in its relentless search after the truth. It was the so-called *αρχή* or ultimate principle of reality for Herakleitos. The mind is also intangible, invisible, unknowable; it remains a true mystery, like fire itself, which has always held an irresistible fascination for human beings of all places and all times.
- (2) “*As for history, that nightmare, / it is fire.*” Fire is associated here to History, the relentless and pitiless unfolding of events over time governed by the whims of tyrants and greedy men. Humankind’s history is marked by greediness, nonsense, violence, war and destruction, and so it is a form of self-consuming fire. However, “*What is bigger than history,*” said one of the three voices in *New World Suite N° 3* (Movement I, staves 14-15). *Being* is bigger than history, and it is indestructible.

who is clutching / the butt of a spear. He is biting the head of the spear / in his own teeth in his other form, the Cub. / And the spearshaft runs through the throat / of his mother the Bear.”

¹³ For elemental information on all these stars see the entries in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: (1) Spica (Latin: “Head of Grain”), also called Alpha Virginis, is the brightest star in the zodiacal constellation Virgo and one of the 15 brightest in the entire sky. (Vol. 26, p. 15675.) (2) Antares is the brightest star in the zodiacal constellation Scorpius and one of the largest known stars, having several hundred times the diameter of the Sun and 10,000 times the Sun’s luminosity. The name comes from a Greek phrase meaning “rival of Ares” (i.e., rival of the planet Mars) and was probably given because of the star’s red colour and brightness. (Vol. 2, p. 681.) (3) Cassiopeia is a constellation of the northern sky, easily recognized by a group of five stars forming a slightly irregular W. (Vol. 5, p. 2951.) (4) Capella (Latin: “She-goat”), also called Alpha Aurigae, sixth brightest star in the night sky and the brightest in the constellation Auriga. (Vol. 5, p. 2811.) (5) Vega is the brightest star in the northern constellation Lyra and fifth brightest star in the night sky. (Vol. 29, p. 17317.)

- (3) “As for what you call technology, / it offers you the wherewithal / to cook the feast, the guest, the host, / the dining hall, the whole shebang.” Technological advance in the hands of man has contributed to increasing the torture and pain inflicted upon Mother Earth. In this context, Bringhurst’s words are a vindication of a new environmental awareness. The poem closes with an invocation to all four elements and to two well-known trickster figures (coyote and raven) to cleanse our senses, restore us our common sense, and save the world from our own greedy manners: “Earth, water, air, fire, coyote, raven, bathe us. / Clean our bones.”

Stars and constellations have held a lasting fascination for humans of all times and historical periods. Philosophy and science were born of the desire of knowledge in the face of the awe-inspiring grandeur and beauty of the universe. The word *κόσμος* meant ‘order’ and order is after all a beautiful thing to human eyes. The most notable thing about the universe is the order it displays in events on a cosmic level like the movements of sun, moon and stars. There is an inevitable aura of divinity still clinging to stars that the rationalistic or scientific outlook has not yet managed to dispel in people’s minds. That we should still raise our eyes and direct them towards the shiny bits and pieces of light shimmering in the night sky testifies to the endless fascination stars hold for us humans. It also accounts for the attention given to the heavens by the very first thinkers in the cradle of Western philosophy: Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes, among others, would lift their eyes to the heavens and tried to produce a systematic and scientific account to explain what their eyes saw for them. That 2,500 years later Bringhurst should have decided to compose a literary work of art on the constellation of Ursa Major and some of the brightest stars in the night sky comes as no surprise; it is a palpable proof that humans have not changed as much as we might think at first sight.

IV.4 · WATER

The closing poem of *Elements* is an accomplished meditation on water, which was also the palpating heart of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986) – “This music is all about water.” Water stands for all that is natural, spontaneous, nature-made (not man-made); it might also stand for the fluid nature of *being*, which is capable of assuming many forms or manifestations. In this context, water is now examined from a myriad standpoints as one of the basic constituents of reality, possibly the least dispensable of all. It comes as no surprise that Thales of Miletos, one of the eminent Presocratics and sages of ancient Greece, should have chosen it as the ultimate *arché* (i.e., principle and origin) of reality about 2,500 years ago. Water is the origin of life in a most elemental sense of the word: our bodies are made of water almost in their entirety, and we need water as a daily element in our diet if we are to lead a healthy life. But, in another sense, water is like crystal: it tells of nothing beyond its transparency and purity. Like light, it is the nutriment of all life on Earth, or, to put it differently, water is the fluid nourishment of *being*. From a purely structural point of view, Bringhurst’s composition consists of six stanzas and six movements for the reader’s soul as well. “Water” opens with an enumeration that, far from being chaotic, has a relentless logic about it. Nothing is random about this well-wrought poem, where we get to see Bringhurst at his best, fusing ideas and music into a unique tapestry of powerful resonances. As in the case of the meditation on earth (section IV.1 of *Elements*), the first stanza of this poem is indeed an exhaustive catalogue of the allomorphs or incarnations of water, ranging from the immensity of the oceans and the seas to the tiny dew drops:

Ocean, snowflake, frazil, raindrop,
tide-rip, sea-ice, icefloe, hoarfrost, hail,
geyser, graupel, spindrift, mist,
tidewater, pondwater, swampwater, dew . . .

Upon closer inspection, it seems that water is an omnipresent element: it is inevitable, pervasive, and necessary for life. That it is such an essential ingredient is out of the question; it is made explicit in the second stanza (and movement) of the poem, which claims that water is blood. But the world is inhabited by both immortals and mortals, and so the poetic voice affirms that (1) “*Snow is the blood of the dead*”, (2) “*Dew is the gods’ blood*” and (3) “*Creeks, rivers and seas / are the blood of the only one who is living.*” Snow, dew, streams, rivers and seas are all allomorphs of water, and they constitute the nourishing blood of both gods and humans, and also of “*the only one who is living,*” which is possibly meant as a reference to Earth itself in its entirety – or to *being*, which is indestructible. As is common practice with Bringham, the simplicity and transparency of the poet’s language is admirable and moving. That the poet should be able to speak of water with such profundity and clarity at the same time is truly a miracle. A sustained meditation on this most elemental of things requires of great stamina and intellectual precision, which is no minor accomplishment. Bringham makes use of simple declarative sentences following the basic pattern *A is B* at the heart of this string of metaphors. Now, the syntactic simplicity of the two opening stanzas stands in sharp contrast with the third stanza, which focuses on humans’ greedy exploitation of water resources to generate electricity or to amuse themselves. Curiously enough, it is “a rusting backhoe” that gives voice to the injunction (of strong biblical echoes reminiscent of the Ten Commandments given by Moses to the Israelites in the Book of Deuteronomy) for humans not to overexploit water mindlessly:

And at dark I heard a rusting backhoe say,
 Thou shalt not boil a kid in its mother’s milk
 nor bury the river under its own water
 for kilowatt hours and pleasureboats
 nor suck the river dry – unless, of course,
 you wish to; and in that case, please present
your passport and your credit card
to the desk clerk; leave
your culture and your language
and your children and your genome in the till.¹⁴

The Earth is a sacred place, and so is water as one of its basic constituent elements. We humans appear to forget this elemental truth. Our obsession with *money and jobs*, those absurd goals in life in the Western frame of mind that Bringham rightly criticizes in his impressive essay “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, prompts us to abuse the Earth’s generosity. Hence the references to the *passport* and the *credit card*, those superfluous tools that do not truly define a person. If one pays homage or gives in to these, one is mindlessly leaving *culture, language*, one’s *children* and the human *genome* behind, even though they are the things that truly matter. Humans belong to a given social community that speaks a particular language and treasures a culture that is being built over time as a collective *work in progress* of titanic dimensions. These are the genuinely human traits that define a person; money, passports and credit cards are dispensable accessories after all. They have nothing quintessentially to do with what we are. And yet they are the things that matter in a monstrous system where money takes precedence over the dignity and well-being of all humans. A system with no scruples like this one is absolutely corrupt at its roots. It is unhealthy, abnormal, bound to extinguish itself over time in one way or another, we like to think.

¹⁴ These verse lines read differently in the 2008 incarnation of the poem: “your credit card and passport to the desk clerk; / leave your culture and your language / and your children and your genome in the till.”

In the fourth stanza the poetic voice dwells on the nature of the voice, heart and thought of gods and humans. Whereas the gods have water voices, fire bodies, air hearts and earth thought, humans have air voices, water bodies, earth hearts and fire thought. Body, speech and mind – the potent triad recurrent in Bringham's poems – are made of all four classical elements in different measures and combinations though. That gods' voices are water makes sense as soon as we acknowledge that the gods are incarnate in streams and rivers, in every single natural element indeed. In pre-industrial societies humans could still sense the presence of gods and goddesses in mountains, trees, seas, stones and birds. By contrast, in industrial societies we are unable to notice them anymore. That gods' bodies should be fire accords with the Presocratics' intimation that all things in the perishable world were made of corruptible combinations of elements, whereas celestial beings were made of fire, which is more ethereal in a way. Similarly, gods' heart is air, for they are sometimes whimsical in the way they interfere with human affairs, and their thought is earth, which means that they think all things into being. Their thoughts are the trees, seas, mountains, stones, flowers, birds, etc. that populate the world. By contrast, humans have got voices of air that emanates directly from their lungs and is modulated by their speech apparatus; they have got bodies which are primarily made of water and earth hearts in love with the pleasures offered by this Earth. Their thought is fire and is capable of creating intellectual and imaginative constructs of amazing intricacy and perfection. Bringham embodies this wealth of meaning and profundity of thought in a short stanza of only five verse lines:

The voices of the gods
are water; ours are air;¹⁵
their bodies, fire; ours are water.
Gods have hearts of air, but ours are earth;
their thought is earth, and ours is fire.

An ode or a tribute to trees – this is what we find in the fifth stanza of “Water”. Trees are rightly a recurrent image in Bringham's work: they represent everything that is natural, simple, nature-made. At one level, this stanza concerns the nature of trees themselves, which draw their nourishment from the water and minerals their roots find underground, as well as from the carbon dioxide and light they seek with their leaves and branches. Trees grow then vertically, downwards into the hidden recesses of nourishing earth, and upwards into the blue expanses of light and air. Like feet, which link humans' body with the world, trees are the link that bring earth and sky together. But on another level, this stanza evokes a state of perennial metamorphosis or change whereby all elements are inextricably linked to one another. One is reminded of a fragment of Herakleitos like this: “The life of fire comes from the death of earth. The life of air comes from the death of fire. The life of water comes from the death of air. The life of earth comes from the death of water.”¹⁶ The mutual interdependence of elements is evoked in the incantatory lines that follow:

In the white pines and the aspens,
the larches and birches,
earth is climbing a ladder of water
and water a ladder of air,
and air is climbing a ladder of fire,
and fire descending a stair
of air and water into the earth

¹⁵ In the 2008 incarnation of this poem, this verse line reads as follows “are made of water; ours are air.”

¹⁶ See fragment 34 as translated by Guy Davenport, *ibid.*, p. 161.

that is reaching and climbing with tiny hands
a ladder knotted of water, fire and air.

And the closing stanza of “Water” is an indirect or subtle reference to the myth of Ursa Major once again. Callisto, metamorphosed into a bear, confronts her son Arcturus in the woods. He nearly kills her, unaware that the bear standing in front of him is truly his mother, but fortunately Zeus intervenes and turns them into immortal constellations. A mere mortal, Callisto becomes one of those who never die the very moment she becomes a constellation. The stars that make up her body in the night sky hide a moving story that Bringhurst recreates in full detail in his complex polyglot polyphonic poem *Ursa Major*. In this stanza only the elementary brushstrokes are provided to evoke the myth preserved by Ovid in Book II of his *Metamorphoses*, while, at the same time, the circularity of

It is the sounded mother
rising up the spear shaft,
shinnying up the tree.¹⁷
transforming earth and water, fire and air,
to fire and air and earth and water:
air transforming into air and earth to earth
and fire to fire and water to water
and blood to water and blood to snow
and hunter to hunted and breath to air
all over and over again.¹⁸

This is the end of *Elements*. Now the circle is brought to perfect completion. What started as a scientific or philosophical investigation into the ultimate constituents of matter has turned out to be a complex meditation on the way the human mind and heart approach reality in their attempt to make sense of it. The Presocratics, who were poets, philosophers, scientists and naturalists, were determined to reduce the world down to its most elemental principles. Thales posited water as the ultimate *arché*, Anaximander posited the *apeiron* as the indestructible origin of reality, and Anaximenes posited air as the fundamental principle beneath the world. Herakleitos was convinced that all things were in a state of perpetual metamorphosis and yet governed by the *logos*, which he associated to eternal fire. For his part, Empedokles said that all things were the result of a combination of all four elements in different measures, and Demokritos affirmed that reality was made of tiny, indivisible atoms clashing with one another to form sensible objects. Parmenides simply abolished the plurality or multiplicity of sensible things. Reality was the *One Being* – a continuous, indivisible, undifferentiated, motionless, eternal plenum. Bringhurst draws on the ideas of all of them to produce a durable meditation on the elements that bring humans and nonhumans into a unique *Gestalt* of meaning and perfection.

¹⁷ “The wounded mother / clammers up the spear shaft, / shinnies up the tree,” in the 2008 text.

¹⁸ In the 2008 version, this line reads thus: “all / over / and over / again.”

The Lyell Island Variations

On Strange Shores of Other Literary Traditions

INTRODUCTION

“The Lyell Island Variations” is one of the ambitious poem sequences in Robert Bringhurst’s entire literary corpus. Like many of his other sequences – for instance, the Presocratics sequence of “The Old in Their Knowing” and the Oriental sages sequence of “The Book of Silences” –, it has undergone important textual changes over time. In its late definitive incarnation, the one we find in Bringhurst’s recent *Selected Poems* (2009), the sequence consists of nine poems in total: “Larix lyallii”, “Thin Man Washing”, “Absence of the Heart”, “The Reader”, “The Starlight Is Getting Steadily Dimmer”, “The Long and Short of It”, “A River, a Runner”, “Riddle”, and “Day In, Day Out”. Originally, as it was first published in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986) and in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), the sequence consisted of only seven poems – with “A River, a Runner” and “Day In, Day Out” missing altogether. These two pieces were then included for the first time in *Selected Poems*, where the sequence is expanded up to a total of nine compositions. In addition, the poems were preceded by an untitled headnote in the *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* version which was later omitted in all subsequent incarnations of the sequence. Some of the poems in “The Lyell Island Variations” were also published here and there in a number of literary magazines and periodicals. This is the detailed editorial history of the poems in the sequence:

- (1) The sequence was first published as a sequence in A.32, *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), and shortly afterwards in A.35, the first US edition of the same title. “The Lyell Island Variations” includes here an untitled headnote (cf. introduction to A.22) and seven poems: I: Larix lyallii (rpt. from C.42); II: Thin Man Washing (rpt. from A.14); III: Absence of the Heart (rpt. from A.14); IV: The Reader (rpt. from C.42); V: The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer (rpt. in A.47, A.48, C.53, C.57); VI: The Long and the Short of It (rev. from C.33); VII: Riddle (rpt. from C.44). Most of these poems were published in book form for the first time in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, except for “Thin Man Washing” and “Absence of the Heart”, which had been already published in book form in *The Beauty of the Weapons* in 1982 under the title “Two Variations” with minor textual variants.
- (2) The sequence is reprinted in A.47, *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995). The untitled headnote from *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* is missing here. All seven poems are reprinted from A.32, though poem VI, “The Long and Short of It”, is slightly revised.
- (3) The sequence is reprinted in a separate publication, A.48, *Lyell Island Variations* (1995), with calligraphy by Diane Amarotico; gouache, watercolor and torn paper illustrations by John Goodyear; oasis goatskin binding and box by Carol Joyce. 19 × 31 cm. This is a manuscript book produced in an edition of only four copies. It includes an untitled preface and a poem in seven sections, all reprinted from A.35.
- (4) The sequence is expanded into a sequence of nine poems in A.92, *Selected Poems* (2009): I: Larix lyallii; II: Thin Man Washing; III: Absence of the Heart; IV: The Reader; V: The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer; VI: The Long and the Short of It; VII: A River, a Runner; VIII: Riddle; IX: Day In, Day Out.

- (5) Some of the poems in the sequence were published in scattered magazines and periodicals: (i) C.42 “Two Variations: I. The Reader; II. *Larix lyallii*”, first published in *Canadian Literature* 100 (Spring 1984): 48–49. (ii) C.44 “Riddle”, first published in *Canadian Literature* 105 (Summer 1985): 15. (iii) C.46 “Riddle”, published in *Ring of Bone Zendo Newsletter* (North San Juan, California; 15 October 1985): 1, as a partial reprint from C.44 which includes only the first four lines of the poem. (iv) C.53 “Three Poems from *The Lyell Island Variations*”, in *Landfall* (Christchurch, New Zealand) 159 (September 1986): 325–327. Contents: V: The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer; VI: The Long and the Short of It; VII: Riddle (all reprinted from A.32). (v) C.57 [Four poems], in *Rubicon* (Montreal) 8 (Spring 1987): 103–107. Contents: “Hóng Zichéng”, “Bodhidharma”, “Sengzhào”; from *The Lyell Island Variations*: V. “The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer”, all reprinted from A.32, but with two stanzas missing from the first poem.

What the nine poems in the sequence “The Lyell Island Variations” seem to have in common is that they are all *an exercise in intertextual gymnastics* on the part of the poet, or, to borrow Bringham’s words, “an album of mere mistranslations.” They do pay an astonishing homage to a number of prominent poets from different literary traditions, or, to be more precise, to giant poets on the horizon of 20th-century poetry, as the use of textual thresholds in different languages found in the epigraphs placed as brief quotations at the beginning of each single poem makes clear. Thus, these poems are seemingly written in response to the fragmentary epigraphs from various poets writing in different languages. In between the lines are heard the voices of Paul Celan, René Char, Paul Valéry, Rainer Maria Rilke, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Jules Supervielle, Pindaros, Pablo Neruda and Michelangelo Buonarroti, in both modern languages (German, French, Polish, Spanish and Italian) and in classical Greek, in the case of Pindaros. That the poet is tessellating words from so many different languages only testifies to his profound love of language, of all human languages, dead or alive, classical or modern. As Bringham himself puts it in memorable words in his foreword to *The Calling*,

Years ago in a Bosnian town a woman tried repeatedly to speak to me, though the words she knew and trusted were words I did not understand. At length, in desperation, she gave me an egg. So I was present at the birth of language – as all of us are many times in our lives. I saw a gesture turn an egg, for just an instant and for eternity, into a noun, and the egg transform the gesture into a verb. I have known since that moment that *I wanted – no matter how preposterous and impossible it might be – to learn all the words and grammars in the world*, and that poetry nevertheless precedes them all and can make its way, if it must, with the help of none. The egg is gone now, and Bosnia, like Auschwitz, is a permanent cry of pain – far less a legacy from the past, it seems to me, than a curse on the future, delivered and witnessed by us. Yet the gift remains: a feast to last a lifetime, made from a single egg, which was not consumed.¹ [*Italics mine.*]

“The Lyell Island Variations” are brought together under the name of an island in Haida Gwaii (also known as the Queen Charlotte Islands), an archipelago off the coast of Alaska and British Columbia and home to the Haida, one of the native peoples of North America. Bringham defines it as “a forested, rain-drenched Cyclades in a corner of the North Pacific” that “holds somewhere within itself – as anyone can tell by simply listening – one centre of the world.” The island has been deforested by greedy humans in search of profit and money, but strange remnants coming from other worlds wash up on the beaches:

In the meantime, much washes up on the beaches, changed by the journey. Dislodged bits of the world wash up on the beaches, pickled and dead, or

¹ See Foreword to Bringham’s *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), p. 11.

seachanged into something rich yet skeletal, familiar and yet strange. Like these small offerings from elsewhere, gathered in the shadow of the island's momentary name.

In another time, stories and songs were transformed as they passed through the prism of languages on this coast. They rotated and changed as they moved through the Salishan into the Wakashan tongues, and from Tsimshian and Haida to Tlingit and Tahltan and back again. This is an album of mere mistranslations, or it is a cycle of songs which have altered, as might have seemed right to men and women whose flesh is now trees – and of whom we should think as the trees are falling.²

Similarly, in the nine compositions of “The Lyell Island Variations”, what Bringhurst is essaying is trying to rescue strange remnants of visions and tattered fragments of wisdom from voices speaking different human languages. Over time the tree of language has evolved innumerable branches around the world, which are the natural languages spoken by different human communities. These languages have become the vehicle of expression of amazing literary works of art in a number of different traditions. To a serious poet like Bringhurst, it is of the essence to make poems that are firmly grounded on what has already been accomplished by the masters in the past. Hence he writes with the whole burden of tradition in his bones, and he seeks to master as many languages as possible. Translation and his interest in the solid form of language are expressive of the fascination that words and grammars hold for him. The poems that comprise “The Lyell Island Variations” embody a wide spectrum of human languages and literary traditions, not just literary works that are written down in the form of books, but also those monumental oral literatures of the native people of North America, which is the immediate home to the poet. To place Pindar next to Michelangelo, Rilke, Valéry, Celan, Cher or Neruda is certainly an act of intellectual bravery, as well as a forceful statement on his own poetics. Though no fragments from the immense reservoir of the native oral literatures are incorporated into the living fabric of the sequence, they are somewhat invoked in the untitled statement preceding the sequence. Lyell Island is after all a tiny spot on the West Coast of British Columbia, once populated by humans and mythtellers who still sensed the presence of spirit beings in the natural world around them. To these dwellers of old, the Haida, Bringhurst would later devote a monumental trilogy that explores the world of the classical mythtellers and gathers the translations of the poems by Ghandl and Skaay.

I · LARIX LYALLII

The first poem in the sequence “The Lyell Island Variations” is curiously entitled “Larix lyallii”. Prefaced by a handful of resonant German words, it is a moving homage to the German poet Paul Celan. Born of a Jewish family in Czernowitz (now Chernovtsy), Bukovina (Romania) on 23 November 1920, Paul Celan³ (pseudonym of Paul Antschel) spent his formative years in a Jewish community that had recently ceased to be within the boundaries of the Austrian Empire. There he attended school until his first visit as a

² See untitled prefatory note to “The Lyell Island Variations” in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), pp. 52-53. The short introduction to this sequence is a beautifully wrought piece of prose: it reminds us that any place in the world is susceptible of becoming a centre and that those ancestral people who inhabited Haida Gwaii have become the very trees that are now systematically falling. See Patricia Keeney Smith's review of *Pieces* in *The Star* (Toronto), 29 November 1986: M4.

³ For the essential bio-bibliographical information on the author, see the entry on ‘Paul Celan’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 5, p. 3033, as well as the critical Introduction by Michael Hamburger to Paul Celan's *Selected Poems*, translated by Michael Hamburger and Christopher Middleton, London: Penguin, 1972.

medical student to Tours (France) in 1938. Shortly afterwards, he returned to his home town to study Romance Languages and Literatures. In 1940 his town was occupied by Russian troops, but he still continued to study there. However, in 1941 the German and Romanian forces took over and the Jews were confined into a ghetto. 1942 was an *annus horribilis* in Celan's life: his parents were deported to a concentration camp, where they eventually died. He managed to escape, but then he was sent to a forced-labour camp in Romania. After working from 1945 to 1947 as a translator and publisher's reader in Bucharest, Celan moved to Vienna, where he published his first collection of poems, *Der Sand aus der Urnen* (1948). From the outset, his poetry was marked by a phantasmagoric perception of the terrors and injuries of reality, as well as by an astonishing sureness of imagery and prosody. In July 1948 he finally settled in Paris, which became his home until the end of his life. There he spent his most productive years as a poet and translator, and he also lectured on German literature at the *École Normale*. His poetic affinities were French, Russian, English and German.

Placing Celan's work within the body of German literature after 1945, or against the larger background of international modernism, is, however, by no means an easy task. As Michael Hamburger points out, "all we can be certain of is that it occupies a prominent, isolated and anomalous position."⁴ His poetry betrays "an obvious preoccupation with the holocaust which he survived in body but not in spirit."⁵ Among his early poetry collections are *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (1952), which won him immediate recognition, and *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle*, which would follow in 1955. Two crucial collections, *Sprachgitter*⁶ (1959) and *Die Niemandrose* (1963), marked a shift towards a second phase in Celan's work. They were followed by *Atemwende* (1967), *Fadensonnen* (1968) and, posthumously, by *Lichtzwang* (1970), *Schneepart* (1971) and *Zeitgeböht* (1976). Celan was also an accomplished and prolific translator. His many translations into German included poems by such diverse poets as Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Valéry, Stéphane Mallarmé, Guillaume Apollinaire, Henri Michaux, André du Bouchet, René Char, Paul Éluard, Jules Supervielle, Shakespeare (a selection of his sonnets), John Donne, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, Blok, Mandelshtam and Yesenin, among others. "The loss of his parents and his early experience of persecution left indelible scars"⁷ on Celan's psyche, says Michael Hamburger. And yet Celan was not a confessional poet. In "Todesfuge", his most famous and anthologized poem, his personal anguish is transmuted into distancing imagery and musicality so that a sort of terrible beauty is born from the poem as a perfect artifact. However, the anguish, the darkness and the shadow of death are present in all his poems, even if only in a subtle way. In spite of the difficulty of his poetry, Celan always insisted that "he was not a hermetic poet but one out to communicate, describing his poems as 'ways of a voice to a receptive you', a 'desperate dialogue' and 'a sort of homecoming'.⁸ And yet, his was a poetry firmly rooted in experience, so that "the hiatuses, the silences, the dislocations of normal usage belong to what he had to say and to the effort of saying it."⁹ The essential difficulty and paradox of his poetry demand that readers pay special attention

⁴ See Michael Hamburger's Introduction to Paul Celan's *Selected Poems*, London: Penguin, 1972, p. 9.

⁵ Michael Hamburger, *ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶ According to M. Hamburger, this is the stylistic evolution of Celan's poetry: "From *Sprachgitter* onwards the images grow sparser and more idiosyncratic, the syntax more broken, the message at once more urgent and more reticent. The existing resources of language become inadequate. Celan begins to coin new words, especially compound words, and to divide other words into their component syllables, each of which acquires a new weight. The process of condensation and dislocation is carried further in the following collections. Both verse lines and whole poems tend to grow shorter and shorter." *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

⁷ Michael Hamburger, *ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

⁸ Michael Hamburger, *ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹ Michael Hamburger, *ibid.*, p. 13.

to every single word in his poems. Part of the authenticity and fascination surrounding Celan's poems stems precisely from the darkness, seemingly cryptic allusions and paradox inherent in his work. He decided to commit suicide on 1 May 1970, at the age of only 49, by drowning into the Seine.

"*Larix lyalii*" is a strange Latin title for an opening poem in a polyglot or multilingual sequence. From the "Cast of Buddhas, ghosts and other creatures" placed at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, we learn that *larix lyalii* is "the alpine larch, a deciduous conifer found only in Northern Rockies and Cascades." The alpine larch is then a coniferous tree native to northwestern North America; it lives in very high altitudes in the Rocky Mountains of Idaho, Montana, British Columbia and Alberta. There is also a disjunct population in the Cascade Range of Washington. These are all places the poet is familiar with, and so the tree mentioned at the heart of the poem is probably a specimen of *larix lyalii*, for Bringhurst always strives to be as much scientifically accurate as possible. Precision is one of the highest tests of a poet's sincerity, said Ezra Pound, and also one of the marks of true vocation for a millennial craftsmanship. No doubt, trees are of the essence in Bringhurst's poetry and prose, where they are quintessentially the embodiment of what is worthwhile, spontaneous and beautiful in the natural world. But this composition is, above all, a moving tribute to Paul Celan, one of the most prominent German-language poets of the twentieth century. As Bringhurst puts in the foreword to *The Calling*, "In many of the poems, the voices of the dead are also quoted or evoked. The dead, in my experience, are indispensable too, especially when they are silent, watching and listening as they do in the land, the air and us." This partly accounts for the use of paratexts or linguistic thresholds in the form of brief quotations preceding the poems in "The Lyell Island Variations". As a matter of fact, in this particular poem the epigraph "... *es sind / noch Lieder zu singen jenseits / der Menschen*" is lifted from Celan's poem "Fadensonnen", a short jewel-like lyric poem of utter concision published in *Fadensonnen* (1968). This is the original German poem in full:

Fadensonnen
über der grauschwarzen Ödnis.
Ein baumhoher
Gedanke
greift sich den Lichtton: es sind
noch Lieder zu singen jenseits
der Menschen.

This short poem consisting of only seven short verse lines becomes the starting point for Bringhurst's first variation, consisting of three little movements for the soul, three perfectly symmetrical stanzas of five lines each. The overall impression is one of sensuous difficulty or complexity firmly grounded in reality. Thus, the first stanza tessellates air, leaves and light into a unique image: air whispers in the tree leaves and light passes through them generating a subtle interplay of light and shadow. However, this first stanza is no literal translation of the opening lines of the original German text, though there are traces of Celan's poem scattered in some key words. For instance, *Faddensonnen* (a German neologism typical of his poems meaning literally 'threadsuns') is subtly evoked through "threadbare air" and "the blue light", whereas *grauschwarzen Ödnis* is translated as "ash-black shadow":

In the threadbare
air, through the tattered
weave of leaves,

the blue light cools
into ash-black shadow.

SP, p. 143.

At the geometrical centre of the poem is the image of the tree. The original German short verse lines “*Ein baumbober / Gedanke / greift sich den Lichtton*” become a perfect five-line stanza marked by enjambment, which the poet uses to obvious effect:

Tree: the high
thought roots itself
in the luminous clay
of the caught light’s closeness
to audibility.

SP, p. 143.

The tree is the perfect embodiment of the mind, or the other way around. In much the same way the tree stretches its roots downward into the living soil, in search of water and nourishing minerals, the human mind (inhabited by thoughts) extends its tentacles as it were in all directions in search of air and light, in search of knowledge and truth. The texture of transparent light verges almost on audibility, and this mixing up of senses, or rather, this transposition from one sense realm to another is a recurrent device in many of Bringhurst’s poems. However, there is something truly elusive about this short composition of his: the more we try to concentrate on the poem itself, on its mode of utterance, which includes both theme and manner, the more clearly we see that difficulty and paradox are of its essence. In this respect, Bringhurst’s poem could be said to capture something of the difficulty and paradox inherent in Paul Celan’s original German text. “*Larix lyalli*” is then paradoxical, elliptic, obscure, difficult, ambiguous, a bit hermetic, and yet, at the same time, it has got the texture and clarity of a perfect crystal. There is a sense in which every word falls exactly into place, and that none can be removed without seriously damaging the whole.

The closing stanza brings the poem to completion and makes it reach a climactic moment. Celan’s German words, used as an epigraph to Bringhurst’s piece, are now translated into English and incorporated into the living fabric of the poem with astonishing naturalness. The ultimate message conveyed by these lines is tinged with optimism: there are songs to be uncovered or discovered that lie beyond humankind, and so poetry remains a constant groping forward as it were. This has something to do with what Michael Hamburger calls the *inwardness* of Paul Celan’s poetry:

Yet the ‘inwardness’ of his poetry places it in a line of descent that runs from Hölderlin through Rilke to Expressionism. [...] he wanted poetry to be open to the unexpected, the unpredictable, the unpredeterminable. His poems were ‘messages in a bottle’, as he said, which might or might not be picked up. That element of risk was as necessary to them as the need to communicate. On the few occasions when he spoke about poetry in public he spoke of it as a process, a groping forward, a search.¹⁰

Celan’s poetry is always *close to the unutterable*, as Michael Hamburger himself suggests. And Bringhurst manages somehow to convey this sense of the ineffable that is inherent in much

¹⁰ Michael Hamburger, *ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

of the real. Words cannot replace things, not even reach a core of irreducible meaning in them. This might well be a source of epistemological frustration, but acknowledging that words are only valuable tools in our epistemological approach to the world, that they do not replace the real thing in any way whatsoever, might also be a means of redemption. That there are still songs to be sung, even after Auschwitz and the horror of the Holocaust, is an optimistic statement after all. It signifies the redemptive power of words. The poet has still a hard work to do before him, or so seem to suggest the lines of the final stanza:

So we know that again
today, there are songs
still to be sung. They
exist. Just on the other
side of mankind.

SP, p. 143.

II · THIN MAN WASHING

“Thin Man Washing” and “Absence of the Heart” were originally published as “Two Variations” in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982). Thus, the sequence entitled “Two Variations” consists of two distinct poems that have been preserved in Bringham’s living corpus over time.¹¹ From a purely thematic and structural point of view, they are closely connected to one another in significant ways that shed light on the proper understanding of what looks like two musical variations on the same theme. What that theme at the core of both compositions is is something we must strive hard to find out, for these are by no means easy poems. Their complexity is part of their charm and part of the aesthetic pleasure derived from decoding them. That the prevailing tone is one of sadness or melancholy is already anticipated in the very titles of both poems and also in the epigraphs preceding them. As pure artefacts typographically made visible on the page, what first strikes one’s attention is the perfect symmetry of both compositions: both consist of four four-line stanzas; both are preceded by two brief quotations lifted from two contemporary French poets, Paul Valéry and René Char. As we have already seen elsewhere in our critical analysis of Bringham’s poems, the author is very fond of using textual thresholds that might shed some kind of light on his own pieces. Needless to say, these handful of resonant words are not chosen at random. When we look into the echoes of Valéry’s and Char’s words and place them next to Bringham’s, we learn that the voices of his literary ancestors are subtly connected to and illuminate in unexpected ways his own words. In the end, this is what tradition is all about: salvaging from oblivion the best that has been

¹¹ This is a short editorial history of “Two Variations”: I. “Absence of the Heart” and II. “Thin Man Washing”. Both were first published in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982) and then reprinted with some minor textual variations in A.32 *Pieces of Map and Pieces of Music* (1986); in A.47 *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995); in A.48 *Lyell Island Variations* (1995), the manuscript book produced in an edition of four copies, with calligraphy by Diane Amarotico; gouache, watercolor and torn paper illustrations by John Goodyear; oasis goatskin binding and box by Carol Joyce, 19 × 31 cm. Contents: Untitled preface and poem in 7 sections: I: Larix Lyallii; II: Thin Man Washing; III: Absence of the Heart; IV: The Reader; V: The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer; VI: The Long and the Short of It; VII: Riddle (all rpt. from A.35, the US edition of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, 1987); and in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009). In addition, “Thin Man Washing” was also reprinted in B.69, *A Matter of Spirit: The Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry*, edited by Susan McCaslin, Victoria, British Columbia: Ekstasis Editions, 1998: pp. 41-58, alongside “Poem about Crystal”, “Deuteronomy”, “Herakleitos”, “Parśvanatha”, “Nagarjuna”, “Sengzhào”, “Hán Shan”, “Yúnmén Wényan”, “Sunday Morning” and a short prose piece. The implication is crystal-clear: the poems in “Two Variations” remain important pieces in Bringham’s work in progress or *living repertory*.

thought, perceived, verbalized, and made into universal poetry, capable of moving humans coming from different cultural and historical backgrounds. The whole pattern of tradition is that of a tapestry of gigantic measurements or proportions. And there is never an ending to this infinite tapestry, which is always unfolding over time, perpetually in the making, no matter what languages it finds its voice or expression in to endlessly come alive out of the creative mind of humankind. Ezra Pound, with his proverbial wisdom and the immense generosity of his *bel esprit*, used to say that the important thing was to get poetry being written; it did not matter much who did the writing.

“Thin Man Washing” is preceded by a quote lifted from a poem by René Char. Some basic information about this French poet might be in order here to understand the reason why Bringhurst has prefaced his poem with a handful of words from one of his poems. René Char¹² (b. June 14, 1907, L’Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, Fr.–d. Feb. 19, 1988, Paris) is an important 20th-century French poet who began as a Surrealist but who, after his experiences as a Resistance leader in World War II, wrote economical verse with moralistic overtones. (This tendency towards moralization may have something to do with the ultimate message we infer from Bringhurst’s poem “Thin Man Washing”.) After completing his education in Provence, Char moved in the late 1920s to Paris, where he became friends with Surrealist writers and wrote poems about his native Provence. His most important early book of verse, *Le marteau sans maître* (1934), was Surrealistic in style, being marked by verbal luxuriance and a free play of imagery. During World War II Char led a Resistance unit in the French Alps. After the war’s end, he published some of his finest (and most politically committed) poems in the collections *Seuls demeurent* (1945) and *Feuillets d’Hypnos* (1946). The latter work, his poetic journal of the war years, reflects his humanism, his belief in man’s high calling, and his anger at the brutality of war. Char’s subsequent volumes include *Les Matinaux* (1950), *Recherche de la base et du sommet* (1955), and *Commune présence* (1964). His *Oeuvres complètes* was published in 1983. Char was a master of poetic brevity, which he achieved by the use of the ellipse, the aphorism, the terse image, and the “heraclitic” phrase – i.e., the merging of contradictory ideas. The result is a poetry (including prose poems) that is austere, dense, and somewhat difficult. Needless to say, Bringhurst must have admired for sure the terseness and simplicity and beauty of Char’s language. Both compose poetry that is demanding, intellectual and complex; both seek a rare form of austerity and elegance in their language and in their ideas.

“Thin Man Washing” is a peculiar poem of rare intensity. To begin with, it has a clearly identifiable narrative compulsion to it – i.e., it tells a story in miniature which consists of four distinct parts or stanzas. The language is simple and straightforward; there is no obscurity inherent in the poem at all, though there is a moral to be learnt from it when we reach the end. Hunger is not just hunger, but something else, as we shall see below, which means that this is a deceptively simple poem. The very beginning, the traditional opening of folktales and stories (*Once upon a time...*), announces the fact that the reader is about to encounter a short story:

Once upon a time there was a man
 who never hungered any more, [anymore in *The Calling & SP*]
 or so I heard – he had devoured so many legacies,
 bitten off anything, eaten through anyone who came near –
 who one day found

¹² See the entry on “Char, René” in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 6, pp. 3156-57, for more detailed information.

that his table was cleared,
his bed emptied, his children renamed,
and the soil gone sour in the uplands of his heart.

BW, p. 121.

From a syntactic point of view, these two stanzas are closely linked to one another, as they expand on the antecedent “a man” by means of two long defining relative clauses. In the first stanza we learn that there was a man who knew no hunger any more. He had swallowed everything he found in his way and so he had reached a point at which utter satiety made it impossible for him to hunger any longer. Hunger is not physical alone; it is both literal and figurative at the same time. Here, hunger possibly denotes appetite for everything that is worth living in one’s lifetime, including the most sacred of things, which is human relationships, commerce with other fellow human beings. It is hunger that makes us feel alive, in much the same way desire sets the targets or goals we direct our efforts towards. Because we are hungry (i.e., we need something else apart from ourselves) we might say that we are alive. If we did not need anyone or anything, we would be simply dead in life, or trapped within the limits of a frightening solipsism, or completely isolated within the crystal spheres of our minds, unconnected to everything else in the world.

In the second stanza, we readers learn that the man realizes that the heart is empty or absent, as the poem “Absence of the Heart” appears to suggest, if there is no ample room for love, which renders life meaningful all of a sudden. The sudden realization that emptiness pervades his life brings about paralysis and terror to a consciousness that is alert to these nuances of existence. The epigraph preceding the poem, “... *et la terre mauvaise dans le champ de son coeur*,” lifted from a poem by René Char entitled “Le Masque funèbre,”¹³ is now rendered into English: “*and the soil gone sour in the uplands of his heart.*” The heart is conceptualized as being a patch of soil, located up there in the uplands, far away from the coast and the life-giving substance which water is, which has gone unpleasant. Land gone sour gives no crops, brings no sustenance for humans; the same happens to a heart that is bad-tempered or not cheerful any more. It is gone sour because it is incapable of feeling anymore; it remains impassible, imperturbable, unmoved, dead. This is *la terre mauvaise* of which Char speaks in the words Bringhurst has quoted at the beginning of the piece and then naturally woven into the very fabric of his own poem in an English rendering of the same. Deprived of wife and children, of his family, and of the safety of the domestic realm, the man is nothing at all. Thus, in the third stanza he is depicted as a complete monad, with no warmth or protection, completely isolated from all creatures on Earth, with no bonds reconciling him with anything living or non-living in the world (“*Objects avoided him, animals lied to him*”). Worst of all, he had come to think he would be immortal forever (“*he had dug no grave*”), and he had forgotten what generosity means, or how to give or receive, as expressed in the parallelistic verse line “He had nothing to give; he had less to receive”. By the way, the Diamond Sutra mentioned at the end of the stanza, which the man is unable to comprehend, is probably meant as a reference to a sutra that encourages the cultivation of generosity.

¹³ This is the original French text of the poem “La Masque funèbre”, published in *Les Matineaux* (1950): “Il était un homme, une fois, qui n’ayant plus faim, / plus jamais faim, tant il avait dévoré d’héritages, / englouti d’aliments, appauvri son prochain, trouva / sa table vide, son lit désert, sa femme grosse, et la / terre mauvaise dans le champ de son cœur. / N’ayant pas de tombeau et se voulant en vie, / n’ayant rien à donner et moins à recevoir, les objets / le fuyant, les bêtes lui mentant, il vola la famine et / s’en fit une assiette qui devint son miroir et sa propre dérouté.” See René Char, *Poesía esencial*, translated into Spanish by Jorge Riechmann, Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2005, p. 454.

In the final stanza, we witness the return to hunger, which is to say the return to life. The man of our story undergoes an epiphany-like moment of revelation. As if he were Prometheus himself, who stole the fire from the gods to give it to humans as a gift, he steals hunger, shapes it into a bowl and bathes it when no one can see him. This is the *thin man washing* of the title; it remains unclear whether he has managed to go back to humanity or not:

It was only then that he crept back in
and stole hunger and shaped it into
a bowl, in which, to this day, when no one
is looking, and the wind not blowing, he bathes. [isn't in TC & SP]

BW, p. 121.

III · ABSENCE OF THE HEART

“Absence of the Heart” could be interpreted as a counterpoint piece to others collected in Bringhurst’s *The Beauty of the Weapons*, such as “The Heart Is Oil”, for instance, which explores the heart from a completely different perspective. The epigraph, “*Douceur d’être et de n’être pas*”, is lifted from a poem by Paul Valéry entitled “Les Pas” published in a poetry book entitled *Charmes*.¹⁴ Translated into English, it would go like this: “sweetness of being and of not being”. The relevant questions to ask at this point might possibly be these: Why did Bringhurst decide to preface his poem with these words by a French poet? And in what ways was Valéry relevant to his own poetic sensibility? We know that Bringhurst is a poet concerned with exploring the problem of *what is* and *what isn’t*, the problem of metaphysics, or the fundamental question of the ultimate reality of things (which is a concern shared by poetry, philosophy and science), as the sequences devoted to the Presocratics since the mid-1970s (*Pythagoras* 1974, *Eight Objects* 1975, *Bergschrund* 1975; the section entitled “The Old in Their Knowing” in *The Beauty of the Weapons* 1982, *The Calling* 1995 and *Selected Poems* 2009; and the separate book entitled *The Old in Their Knowing* 2005) and to the Oriental sages and philosophers since the mid-1980s (the section entitled “The Book of Silences” in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* 1986, *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* 1995, and *Selected Poems* 2009; and the separate book *The Book of Silences* 2001) make crystal-clear. As we go into the basic contours of Valéry’s life and work, we realize that there was much to the French poet that Bringhurst must have admired for sure. There are also subtle parallelisms between both of them when seen as erudite men interested in poetry and science and cultural ideas in general. The echoes of Valéry’s life in Bringhurst’s are simply astonishing in a way when analyzed in depth with careful attention.

Paul Valéry¹⁵ (b. Oct. 30, 1871, Sète, Fr.–d. July 20, 1945, Paris) is mostly known as one of the most renowned French poets of the late 19th century and first half of the 20th century, but he also gained a solid reputation as a prolific essayist and critic. He was a good friend to the writer André Gide, and his early literary idols were E. A. Poe, J.-K. Huysmans

¹⁴ “Tes pas, enfants de mon silence, / Saintement, lentement placés, / Vers le lit de ma vigilance / Procèdent muets et glacés. // Personne pure, ombre divine, / Qu’ils sont doux, tes pas retenus ! / Dieux !... tous les dons que je devine / Viennent à moi sur ces pieds nus! // Si, de tes lèvres avancées, / Tu prépares pour l’apaiser, / À l’habitant de mes pensées / La nourriture d’un baiser, // Ne hâte pas cet acte tendre, / Douceur d’être et de n’être pas, / Car j’ai vécu de vous attendre, / Et mon coeur n’était que vos pas.” See *Oeuvres de Paul Valéry*, vol. I, édition établie et annotée par Jean Hytier, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1957, pp. 120-121.

¹⁵ See the entry on “Valéry, Paul” in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 29, pp. 17267-68.

and Stéphane Mallarmé, to whom he was introduced in 1891 and whose artistic circle he came to frequent regularly. The time-span between 1888 and 1891 was truly productive in his literary career as a poet: Valéry composed innumerable poems that were published in Symbolist magazines and were critically appraised in very favourable terms. However, 1892 was an important year in his life, for, having undergone a painful experience of unrequited love and feeling artistic frustration, he made up his mind to forget about all emotional preoccupations and to dedicate himself entirely to the life of the intellect. From 1894 onwards he would untiringly wake up early in the morning and meditate on such profound issues as consciousness, the nature of language, or the scientific method, and he would jot down his ideas and record his thoughts in aphoristic form in his famous notebooks, which were later published as his *Cahiers*.

He had almost completely forgotten about his early poetic output, but 1912 was something of an *annus mirabilis* in his life. André Gide encouraged him to revise some of his early writings for publication and Valéry began work on the collection *La Jeune Parque*, centred on the awakening of consciousness in the youngest of the three ancient “Fates”, which traditionally symbolized the three stages of human life. Such was the technical challenge inherent in the whole enterprise, that it took him five years to finish the long symbolic work. Published in 1917, it brought him immediate success and public recognition as his greatest poem. Shortly afterwards, it was followed by two volumes that consolidated his reputation as the most outstanding poet of his time – *Album de vers anciens, 1890-1900* (1920) and *Charmes ou poèmes* (1922), a collection that includes his long poem “Le cimetière marin”, his famous meditation on death in the cemetery at Sète (where he now lies buried). 1922 was also an important year somewhere else: it saw the publication of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Hermann Hesse’s *Siddharta*. All of his poems seemed to be subtly united by a single thread: the tension within the human consciousness between the desire for contemplation and the will to action, or, in other words, the infinite potentialities of mind and the inevitable imperfections of action. Thus, in “Le cimetière marin” he broods by the sea at noon on *being* and *not-being*, on the living and the dead. Similarly, his many letters regularly complain of the conflict in his own life between the dictates of public life and his desire for solitude. Some centuries earlier the Italian humanist and poet-diplomat Francesco Petrarca had also meditated on this same issue.

After 1922 Valéry wrote almost no poetry comparable to his earlier achievements; he devoted his energies to the cultivation of prose and criticism instead. He began work on a large number of essays, occasional papers and lectures on a wide range of topics. Profoundly interested in the problems of writing poetry, in scientific discoveries and in the political problems of his time, he devoted considerable time and attention to a wide range of subjects that testify to his abiding interests: writers and writing, philosophers and language, painters, dancing, architecture, the fine arts, education, politics, and cultural values are topics he reexamined with a lucid mind and a refreshing vigour. His essays and prefaces were not, of course, the result of improvisation, but rather the fruits of his regular meditations sustained over time. In his insatiable appetite for ideas, he resembled Bringham – or the other way around. Like Bringham himself, Valéry was greatly interested in the state of modern physics and mathematics in particular, and, through extensive reading and personal acquaintance, he became well versed in the work of such scientists and mathematicians as Michael Faraday and Albert Einstein, among others. His reputation as an erudite and courteous man, endowed with dazzling conversational gifts, made him very appealing in the society of his time, and so famous writers, scientists and politicians of the day sought his company. In 1937 he became professor of poetry, a chair

created especially for him, at the Collège de France, and he spent all his days meditating, writing, and delivering lectures. He was capable of writing sensuous poetry and prose: his poetry, at its best, was rich in natural images and allusions, classical in form, melodious in ways reminiscent of Racine or Verlaine; his prose was graceful, elegant and aphoristic. Despite his complete dedication to the life of the mind, he remained keenly responsive to the pleasures of the senses.

Like other pieces in “The Lyell Island Variations”, Bringhurst starts with the experience of a writer in another language and absorbs the poem so completely that it becomes simply a take-off point for another, similar, development. Even without reference to the originals, all the poems in the sequence are superb pieces. Like many other Bringhurst poems, “Absence of the Heart” is not easy to decipher; it is an obscure poem. The references of personal pronouns and possessive demonstratives suggest the presence of a female character and a male voice in the poetic universe evoked within the boundaries of the poem. The opening lines remain a true mystery; not much is revealed about the physical space or setting where the events in the poem take place:

Her footfalls, born of his voicelessness,
 paving their way, like a saint’s steps, patiently
 lead, windchilled and mute, [wind-chilled in *The Calling & SP*]
 toward the watchman’s bed.

BW, p. 120.

It is only conjecture to say that this might be a poem about communication among human beings, about silence and words, and about the love that renders the heart meaningful, even though, at times, it turns out to be absent for whatever reasons. It explores voicelessness and the things unsaid (“*All the words, all the silences disguised as words, / adrift between us and the unsaid.*”), but also the redemptive power of love: “*the invisible / nutrition of the kiss / opening the bark bouquet of mouths / fitted into his head*” [*wadded* in later version in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music, The Calling* and *Selected Poems*]. It remains unclear whether the imperative “Take your time” is addressed to the female presence in the poem approaching the male presence in the form of a watchman. In the closing stanza, pervaded by somewhat ominous connotations, the heart is depicted as being stalking all the time: “*still / when you are still and moving as you move, / matching your stride, echoing your tread.*” What is out of the question is that “Absence of the Heart” is an impressive technical accomplishment:

Out of Valéry’s short poem ‘Le Pas’, which is virtually untranslatable because of its Racinian limpidity as well as the profound differences between French and English, Bringhurst has created a moving equivalent – cello music which is deeper, softer, darker than the violin of the French. For instance, ‘pieds nus’ and ‘dieux’, with ‘ombre divine’, have suggested ‘shoeless like the gods, and the long light / laid across hear arms.’ He has added his own alchemy, ‘the dark bouquet of mouths wadded into his head.’¹⁶

¹⁶ G.V. Downes’ review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, “Breathing in Tune and Time”, in *Event* (New Westminster, B.C.) 16.2 (Summer 1987), p. 117.

IV · THE READER

The fourth piece in “The Lyell Island Variations” is “The Reader”, a poem prefaced by a luminous fragment lifted from a poem entitled “Der Leser” by Rainer Maria Rilke. It was originally published as part of C.42 and then reprinted in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986) and in all the subsequent incarnations of this nine-part sequence. Rilke is one of the gigantic, indispensable poets on the horizon of world twentieth-century poetry admired by Robert Bringham. “The Reader” is both a moving meditation on the act of reading itself, and a homage to the German-speaking poet. But why should have Bringham chosen him as the starting point or source of inspiration for this poem? According to W. H. Auden (*New Republic*), Rilke’s most obvious influence on twentieth-century poetry has been on diction and imagery, but there is something else about his poetry that must have made it truly fascinating to Bringham himself: Rilke thinks of the human in terms of the non-human, and he expresses ideas with physical rather than intellectual symbols. His intensely unique vision and his love of the world must have made him an irresistible choice for inclusion in “The Lyell Island Variations”.

Rainer Maria Rilke¹⁷ (b. 4 December 1875, Prague – d. 29 December 1926, Valmont, Switzerland) is an Austro-German poet who became internationally famous with such works as *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*. Being the only son of a not-too-happy marriage, from early in his life he knew he would pursue a literary career. His father became a railway officer after an unsuccessful military career, and his mother belonged to a well-to-do family in Prague. Rilke’s education was ill planned and fragmentary, and his parents pressured the talented young boy into entering a military academy. It was a waste of time for the poetically talented youth. At the age of 11, Rilke began his formal schooling at a military boarding academy, but in 1891 he was discharged due to health problems. In 1895 and 1896 he attended university in Prague and Munich, where he studied literature, art history and philosophy. But soon he became disenchanted and he left university to devote himself entirely to poetry. His mature life, as a man driven by inner needs and as an artist endowed with a unique vision, was marked by restless travels on the European continent in all its breadth and variety – Russia, France, Spain, Austria, Switzerland and Italy were the physical setting of different moments in his spiritual and creative lifetime.

Among Rilke’s earlier collections of poetry were *Leben und Lieder* (1894), *Larenopfer* (1895), *Traumgekrönt* (1897) and *Advent* (1898). They show the influence of the German folk song and so they have been compared to Heinrich Heine’s work. Russia was one of those elective homelands that had a decisive impact on his sensibility and his work. During two extensive trips, he discovered this land with Lou Andreas-Salomé, a married woman with whom he had a love affair from 1897 to 1900, and a friendship that lasted till the end of his life. In Russia he met Leo Tolstoy, L. O. Pasternak (father of Boris Pasternak), and the peasant poet Spiridon Droschin. Soon after his return from Russia, he started work on an important book: between 1899 and 1903 he completed a long three-part cycle of poems entitled *Das Stunden-Buch* (1905), consisting of three volumes (*Das Buch vom mönchischen Leben*, 1899; *Das Buch von der Pilgerschaft*, 1901; and *Das Buch von der Armut und vom Tode*, 1903), where the poetic persona is that of a monk addressing his prayers to a god that is the pure incarnation or embodiment of life (as conceived in Nietzsche’s philosophy), the numinous quality of the worldly diversity of things. So God is not the traditional deity of Christianity, but rather the embodiment of life force, nature, an all-embodying pantheistic

¹⁷ For basic bio-bibliographical information on this poet, see the entry on Rainer Maria Rilke in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 24, pp. 14183-14185.

consciousness as it were. At the core of *The Book of Hours* are the central themes of the poet's own inner life, as well as the apotheosis of art – the artist's role in society, his inner doubts about his belief in the superiority of poetry.

In 1902 Rilke settled in Paris and the city became the geographical centre of Rilke's life for the next 12 years, though he frequently travelled to other cities and countries in search of new experiences and inspiration. Paris was his second elective home, no less important than Russia, as it meant an intellectual challenge to the artist with all its historic, human and scenic qualities. It was not the *belle époque* capital imbued by luxury and eroticism, though, but a city of anonymous masses, of dehumanizing misery, of the dispossessed, faceless, aged and sick. 1902-1906 saw the publication of *Das Buch der Bilder* in four parts. However, in Paris he made the acquaintance of Auguste Rodin, the famous French sculptor, who taught him a new form of artistic discipline, characterized by close attention to detail, nuance and form in art. Rilke was deeply involved in the sculpture of Rodin, on whom he wrote a monograph (*Auguste Rodin*, 1903), and the paintings of Paul Cézanne. As a result, in his *Neue Gedichte* (1907-1908) Rilke developed a new style in his lyrical poetry, the so-called *Ding-Gedicht* ("object poem"), which focuses on the plastic essence of a particular physical object. In a way, these poems are verbal translations of works of the visual arts in which Rilke is after well-wrought artifacts, written in a language of an astonishing subtlety and refinement. Language and poetic form become shaped and shaping materials in his hands; Rilke used simple vocabulary to describe concrete subjects experienced in everyday life. The poet's verse became more objective, evolving from an impressionistic or personal vision to a representation of this vision with impersonal symbolism. The novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, started in 1904 and completed in 1910, is the prose counterpart to the *Neue Gedichte*. It concerns the subjective, personal problems of a young Danish expatriate, the lonely occupant of a Paris hotel room, for whom fear is the inspiration for the creation of poems that are perfect objects. All of Rilke's major themes seem to be present here: love, death, the fears of childhood, the idolization of woman, and the matter of "God", who is not the traditional deity of Christianity. Both works questioned Rilke's very reason for writing poetry: the search for deeper meaning in life through art, his belief in the creative and transforming powers of art. He realized that life was much more creative than art itself, and that this new objectivity he had found in his new poems and novel did not really open the secret of living things though.

After the completion of these two masterworks, and with the imminent outbreak of World War I, Rilke entered a critical period of creative paralysis that lasted for almost 13 years. Though he was able to write two long poems early in 1912 in the style of elegies (which were to become part of a longer cycle) while he was staying at Duino Castle, near Trieste, and then he completed a short poetry cycle entitled *Das Marienleben* (1913) and wrote the fourth Duino Elegy in the fall of 1915, the writing block and severe depression lasted until 1922. Having come to a dead end in the objective poetry of his *Neue Gedichte*, he needed to find a new path for himself. After the inspiration-stifling depression Rilke suffered during and after the Great War, within the space of a few days of amazing productivity, in February 1922 Rilke managed to complete the ten-part Duino cycle begun years earlier, as well as another mastery cycle of 55 sonnets entitled *Sonnets to Orpheus*. The *Duineser Elegien* and the *Sonette an Orpheus* represent the apex of Rilke's poetry. The unifying poetic image in the *Elegies* is that of angels, representing a higher force in life, both beautiful and terrible, and Rilke's personal struggle to reconcile art and life into a unifying whole. He was determined to praise existence, although the pervasive tone was that of a lament. In the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, pervaded by an overwhelming sense of joy, he produced

the songs of his victory, a complement to the distress and anxiety of the elegies. From 1923 onwards, Rilke had to struggle with serious health problems and spend long periods of time at a sanatorium near Lake Geneva. However, innumerable poems of great value were published between 1923 and 1926, as well as his abundant lyrical work in French inspired by such poets as Paul Valéry and Jean Cocteau. His illness was diagnosed as leukemia, of which he died on 29 December 1926.

“The Reader” opens with this epigraph: “... *der da mit seinem Schatten / getränktes liest*”, a quote lifted from “Der Leser”,¹⁸ a poem by Rilke. The translation into English of these German words is naturally incorporated into the fabric of the poem in the second stanza. Here Bringhurst has chosen to focus his attention on a simple, everyday scene: that of a young woman reading a book. This is a recurrent theme in Western painting, by the way, particularly since the 16th century, if one thinks of the work of such painters as Jan Vermeer, for instance. The whole piece is an original meditation on the act of reading. What happens when a woman takes a book in her hands, opens it and crosses the threshold separating this world from an alternative universe? The poem opens with a rhetorical question that awaits no answer:

Who reads her while she reads? Her eyes slide
under the paper, into another world
while all we hear of it
or see is the slow surf of turning pages.

SP, p. 146.

Not much of a transcendental nature appears to happen during the act of reading. Though the only thing we get to see is a woman turning the pages of the book she is reading, she is quietly falling down into an elemental realm which is outside the province of this world. In this context, reading a book is tantamount to stepping into a different universe. There is something truly fascinating about this miracle: it is not necessary to leave home, travel or take a means of transport so as to experience other worlds, far remote in time or in space. That is part of the everlasting fascination exerted by books: it is possible to establish a dialogue with men and women who are not present here and now any more. More intriguing though is the suggestion that the reading woman is being read by someone else. This is a bit uncanny. Is there a presiding consciousness that gazes upon everything that is going on in this world?

At the geographical heart of the poem the focus is on the state of self-absorbed concentration the young woman finds herself in while reading the book. “*Soaked to the skin as she is in her own shadow*” is Bringhurst’s translation into English of Rilke’s original German words quoted in the epigraph, as well as the expression of the strange metamorphosis the woman undergoes in the act of reading. Isolated from the world outside, ignorant of the teeming life unfolding outside the book, the woman becomes alert to a new form of reality and, in the process, she becomes unrecognizable, even to her mother and to the passing

¹⁸ This is the original German text of Rilke’s poem: “Wer kennt ihn, diesen, welcher sein Gesicht / wegsenkte aus dem Sein zu einem zweiten, / das nur das schnelle Wenden voller Seiten / manchmal gewaltsam unterbricht? // Selbst seine Mutter wäre nicht gewiss, / ob er es ist, der da mit seinem Schatten / Getränktes liest. Und wir, die Stunden hatten, / was wissen wir, wieviel ihm hinschwand, bis // er mühsam auf sah: alles auf sich hebend, / was unten in dem Buche sich verhielt, / mit Augen, welche, statt zu nehmen, gebend / anstießen an die fertig-volle Welt: / wie stille Kinder, die allein gespielt, / auf einmal das Vorhandene erfahren; / doch seine Züge, die geordnet waren, / blieben für immer umgestellt.” Published in *Der neuen Gedichte anderer Teil* (1908).

intruder that the poetic voice addresses. Three rhetorical questions follow then: “*how much does she lose when she looks up? When she lifts / the ladles of her eyes, how much / flows back into the book, and how much / spills down the walls of the overflowing world?*” These are variations on one and the same question: how much gets lost when one’s eyes are not fixed on the book anymore? The very moment the woman looks up in some other direction, something is being inevitably lost in the act of reading, either falling down back into the labyrinthine recesses of the book itself or covering the walls of this new world being built by the unfolding story told by the book. As is common practice in Bringham’s poems, he makes use of an apt metaphor: “*the ladles of her eyes*” suggests that the parallel world built during the act of reading has a very different kind of texture than the real world we live in. It is almost of a liquid nature, it can vanish into airy nothingness any moment in time, and so the woman’s eyes are spoons as it were catching the precious, nourishing liquid before it is gone.

The closing stanza seeks to make the previous message clearer: in their games and their innocent playing, charged with symbolic meaning, children are self-absorbed, isolated and ignorant of their surrounding world as well. They are absent from this world, from the spatio-temporal constraints of human experience as it were, for a while and then they return to see what it is “*to be here.*” Their eyes get to see something endowed with the very texture of transcendence. The reading woman’s eyes are also altered in this way, because of a new vision. The only outward evidence that she is going through a transforming experience is then to be found in her eyes, but also in her lips: “*Words / she’s never said reshape her lips forever.*” That is also part of the miracle of reading: uttering, even if only silently, the words conceived by another mind, at a different moment in time and in a different place in space. The whole experience transmutes her forever: the very moment one closes a book, something has changed for good.

V · THE STARLIGHT IS GETTING STEADILY DIMMER

“The Starlight Is Getting Steadily Dimmer” was originally published in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986) and then reprinted in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), *The Lyell Island Variations* (1995) and *Selected Poems* (2009). It was also reprinted as C.53, “Three Poems from *The Lyell Island Variations*”, in *Landfall* (Christchurch, New Zealand) 159 (September 1986): 325–327, together with “The Long and the Short of It” and “Riddle” (all reprinted from *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*), and as C.57, *Rubicon* (Montreal) 8 (Spring 1987): 103–107, alongside “Hóng Zichéng”, “Bodhidharma” and “Sengzhào”, all reprinted from *Pieces* too, but with two stanzas missing from the first poem. The poem is meant to be a tribute to the Polish author Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz and so it is prefaced by a handful of words lifted from his poetry: “*Miesiac jak królik wśród obłoków byca.*” Like other pieces in “The Lyell Island Variations”, the resulting composition is bilingual to a certain extent, for Iwaszkiewicz’s Polish words are tessellated in the form of a textual threshold that invites the reader to enter the perfect artefact woven of English words that appear to emanate directly from Bringham’s voice. There is a natural spontaneity and naturalness, in fact, about the way the poem flows towards its own end with perfect simplicity and beauty.

Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz¹⁹ (b. 20 February 1894, Kalnik, Russian Empire [now in Ukraine] – d. 2 March 1980, near Warsaw, Poland) is a Polish poet, novelist, playwright, and essayist who was actively involved in the literary life of Poland during his whole lifetime. His worldwide reputation largely rests on his achievements in poetry. Though he studied Law at the University of Kiev from 1912 to 1918, Iwaszkiewicz devoted his time and energy to literary creation. In 1919 he published his first poetry collection, *Oktostrychy* (*Octoverses*), and with Julian Tuwim and Antoni Słonimski he cofounded the Skamander group of experimental poets the same year. Between 1923 and 1935 Iwaszkiewicz was active in political life and diplomatic service, but he continued to write poems, novels and plays with prodigious energy, which made him one of the leading writers of the period. He published poems in numerous periodicals like *Gazeta Polska* (1934-1938) and *Ateneum* (1938-1939). With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Iwaszkiewicz provided a shelter for intellectual life on his small estate, Stawisko, near Warsaw. Once the war was over, he associated himself with the Defenders of Peace movement, a pro-Soviet organization of leftist intellectuals, and he continued his political and literary activities with renewed energies. He was a secretary to The Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts, a member of the Polish PEN Club, and an active member of The Trade Union of Polish Writers. He edited the literary monthly *Twórczość* (*Creation*) from 1955 until his death in 1980. His poems appeared in a number of books, including *Dionizje* (*Dyonisiacs*, 1922), *Kaskady zakończon siedmioma wierszami* (*Cascades Ending in Seven Poems*, 1925), *Pejzaże sentymtalne* (*Sentimental Landscapes*, 1926), *Księga dnia i księga nocy* (*The Book of Day and the Book of Night*, 1929), *Powrót do Europy* (*Return to Europe*, 1931), *Inne życie* (*Another Life*, 1938), *Lato 1932* (*Summer 1932*, 1933) and *Wiersze zebrane* (*Collected Poems*, 1968). In many cases, his poems are lyrical evocations of the Polish landscape. His prose production was also quite prolific and included such varied forms as several short stories collections, novels, essays, plays, biographies and translations. One of his most well-known novels is the three-volume *Sława i chwala* (*Fame and Glory*, 1956-1962), a saga that examines the turbulent Polish society from 1914 to 1967. He was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize as a recognition of his work.

“The Light Is Getting Steadily Dimmer” is characteristically written in the simple, transparent language Bringham is so fond of using in the making of his poems. The simplicity might be reminiscent of the original words that inspire this piece, placed as an epigraph right before the poem. In this sense, Iwaszkiewicz’s words are the starting point for a meditative piece that evokes a literal night landscape that becomes something that transcends itself into a cosmic level by the end of the poem. It seems to us that two parts might be easily identified in the unfolding of Bringham’s poem. In the first two stanzas, the moon is invoked as presiding a night landscape of peace and quiet:

The moon sneaks like a rabbit from cloud to cloud.
In the darkness you can’t see the funerals.
The light – no matter how little or much
we are given – spills down our cheeks,
though a portion is eaten each day
by our eyes, to feed the inedible
fruits of our voices.

SP, p. 147.

The moon resembles a rabbit that hides itself behind the clouds covering the night sky. The reference to *funerals* is a gloomy one. The moonlight or the starlight that illuminates the sky

¹⁹ See the entry on ‘Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 15, pp. 8552-8553, for the essentials on the life and work of the Polish author.

resembles something else too: it spills down the gazers' cheeks as if it were human tears. In Bringhurst's poetic universe light is of the essence, like air, water or stone. Our eyes feed on light every day; *the inedible fruits of our voices* also feed on light. We need light to live – to see, to breathe, to speak. It is absolutely indispensable. Light illuminates the world for all of us to see and for the poet to be able to celebrate its glory and beauty in the form of perfect poems. However, there is something gloomy about the moon too: it "*scares me,*" says the poetic persona, and though it is priestly it might visit him "*any, day, shaped / like a boy.*" The *white goddess* to Robert Graves's eyes, the moon figures prominently in many mythologies around the world since antiquity. It also figures in the poetry of such major poets as Federico García Lorca (another great poet admired by Bringhurst himself), for whom there was something uncanny and gloomy about the moon. In Bringhurst's poetry the moon is sometimes associated with a woman with breasts full of musical instruments, with an elemental feminine principle or life force as it were.

In the second part of "The Light Is Steadily Getting Dimmer" the focus is on the departure of both gods and stars: "*The gods and the stars are all flying away.*" That the starlight is steadily getting dimmer means that the world is changing all the time and that it is getting somehow older, with the light of the stars proceeding towards a relentless self-extinction or self-annihilation. Gods are akin to stars in this respect: they are progressively hiding themselves away, into the unknown, travelling almost at light-speed in the direction of who knows where. The whole universe is leaving, fading away: "*Does anyone still think anything really / remains here? You're leaving too, I guess, / are you? Already?*" asks the poetic voice. Humans are no exception: in much the same way starlight is getting dimmer and dimmer with the passing of time, so are humans changing incessantly in their walking towards their own death. Nothing remains the same, everything is in a state of perpetual flux, and so we humans cannot delude ourselves into thinking that we remain exactly as we are. We might be dying a bit faster than our ancestors did just because we no longer acknowledge the presence of gods and goddesses that men and women in days of old sensed in trees, mountains, stones, rivers, grass, or in the moon itself. Their mythological accounts were a form of homage, a tribute, to this acknowledgment: they said, *we know the invisible exists, we know gods are by our side, pervading everything.* This seems to be the core message or elemental lesson the poetic persona is trying to convey to the reader. And so the closing words of the poem direct our attention to the clarity of the language and the importance of the message just delivered:

Listen in simple words
to what I say. I know I sometimes
speak it, like an educated
foreigner, a little too
clearly. Even so, it is
your own tongue – which no one
anywhere may ever speak to you again.

SP, p. 147.

The message is spoken in the simple language of human beings, in the mother tongue of the addressee implicit in these verse lines. Like the gods or the stars, even human languages might be flying away too, dying slowly and fading into nothingness. There might be a time when words are no longer needed and then the only thing left for humans to do might be to raise their eyes and look at the stars silently, with a feeling of gratitude that recognizes the kinship with those little shining specks scattered in the night sky.

VI · THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

“The Long and the Short of It” appeared originally under the title “Piece after Supervielle”²⁰ in Robert Bringhurst’s unpublished MFA thesis, *Carmina propria et opuscula translata*, submitted at the University of British Columbia (Vancouver) in 1975. Afterwards, it was revised as C.33 in *New Orleans Review* 6.2 (January 1979): 155, and reprinted in *Pieces of Map*, *Pieces of Music* (1986), *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), *The Lyell Island Variations* (1995), *Selected Poems* (2009) and in C.53, “Three Poems from *The Lyell Island Variations*”, in *Landfall* (Christchurch, New Zealand) 159 (September 1986): 325-327, alongside “The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer” and “Riddle”. Bringhurst’s poem is a homage to the French poet born in Uruguay, whose words preface this short composition in six symmetrical stanzas. Jules Supervielle²¹ (b. 16 January 1884, Montevideo, Uruguay – d. 17 May 1960, Paris) is one of the great 20th-century poets writing in French. He was an accomplished poet, a short-story writer and a playwright. In fact, T. S. Eliot was convinced that both Jules Supervielle and Saint-John Perse were the two most accomplished poets of their generation, being the authors of a work of lasting value. At a time when Surrealism was dominant, Supervielle tried hard to keep away from the tyranny of the unconscious and rejected automatic writing, while advocating a more attentive look at the real world, at the universe that surrounded him. Thus, paying attention to the world outside in its manifold subtleties and to the reactions of the interior world, he embraced a more modest approach to the mysteries of the universe without radically questioning the reliability of language as a tool of communication and knowledge. He somehow anticipated much of the poetry that was to be written by René Char, Henri Michaux, Saint-John Perse and Francis Ponge – all of them gigantic figures on the horizon of French poetry. Supervielle’s themes are the love of a lonely but fraternal man for the pampas and for the open spaces of his South American childhood and his nostalgia for a cosmic brotherhood of men.

A voracious reader, Supervielle sought the company of such classics of French literature as Paul Claudel, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé and Jules Laforgue, as well as that of the great American poet Walt Whitman. He became friends with two major poets, the French author Henri Michaux and the German titan Rainer Maria Rilke. 1922 saw the publication of his first poetry book, entitled *Débarcadères*. Other works would follow: *Le Voleur d'enfants* (1926), his first collection of fantastical short stories, *L'Enfant de la haute mer* (1931), the stories collected in *L'Arche de Noé* (1938), the play *La Belle au bois* (1932); the poetry collections *Gravitations* (1925), *Les Amis inconnus* (1934) and *La Fable du monde* (1938), rich in sensitive, often humorous or precious poems; a collection of mythological tales entitled *Orphée* (1946), the plays *Shéhérazade* (1947) and *Robinson* (1949), the book of poems *Oublieuse mémoire* (1949), the autobiographical book *Boire à la source*. *Confidences* (1951), and his last poetry collection *Le corps tragique* (1959).²² Supervielle was

²⁰ This is the original text of “Piece after Supervielle”: “Starving giraffes, you / star-lickers. Steers seeking / the infinite in / a disturbance of the grass. // Greyhounds planning to catch it / on the run. Roots / that know that it is / hidden down there somewhere. // What have you turned / into to me now / that I’m only a live and have no / handhold but the unseen sand? // The air contracts at times / toward taking form. / but what will happen not on / one but at once on both sides of the soul? // Terrestrial / recollections, what do you call / a tree, a sea-wave breaking / up, a sleeping child? // If only I could / pacify my long-faced memory, / if only I / could tell it a forbearing story.” See Bringhurst’s MFA Thesis (unpublished), p. 23.

²¹ See the entry on Jules Supervielle in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 27, p. 16029, for the essentials of his life and work.

²² His complete works were published as *Oeuvres poétiques complètes*, édition publiée sous la direction de Michel Collot, avec la collaboration de Françoise Brunot-Maussang, Dominique Combe, Christabel Grare, James Hiddleston, Hyun-Ja Kim-Schmidt, Michel Sandras, Paris, Gallimard, coll. «Bibliothèque de la Pléiade», 1996, 1112 p.

also a skilled translator and he translated from the work of such diverse authors as William Shakespeare, Jorge Guillén or Federico García Lorca, among others. Like Bringham himself, he was also an exacting self-editor and would revise his own works incessantly, and this resulted in new republications in which he tried to improve upon earlier incarnations of his own texts.

“The Long and the Short of It” begins with a handful of resonant words lifted from Supervielle’s poetry: *“Parfois l’air se contracte / Jusqu’à prendre figure.”* These French words are translated almost literally into English and spontaneously incorporated into the living fabric of the poem. How is it possible for air to contract into recognizable shapes or forms? A certain degree of semantic indeterminacy pervades the whole piece, particularly the first of the two parts it appears to consist of. The title itself already points to this sense of vagueness and imprecision: the expression ‘the long and the short of it’ is used when you are telling someone the essentials about something without explaining all the details. The reader is thus plunged into a world of oneiric texture, while at the same time the real world of stubborn physicality is evoked with utter precision. This might sound paradoxical, but this is the overall impression one gets in the end after reading “The Long and the Short of It”. In the first part of the poem (stanzas 1 to 3) the poetic voice addresses “*ravenous giraffes*” that are “*star-lickers*”, steers “*seeking the infinite in / a movement of the grass*”, greyhounds “*out to catch it / on the run*”, and roots “*who know that it is / hidden down there somewhere.*” The picture is a bit surrealistic: giraffes are hungry and lick the stars up above in the star, possibly conceived as the embodiment of everything that is mysterious and impenetrable in the universe; steers feed on grass while paying attention to the subtle movement of blades that evoke the presence of the infinite in the little small things of this world; and greyhounds, lovers of motion and speed, try to catch this indeterminate something that is unstoppable and eel-slippery. It remains unclear what exactly the *it* refers to. Is it the infinite or the mystery inherent in *what is?* Animals and plants seem to be endowed with an innate capacity to look for this mystery; unlike humans, they instinctively know the path leading to the inner recesses of *being*. Roots are in fact personified, as the use of the relative pronoun *who* seems to suggest, and they point to something beyond themselves, deep inside the bosom of living earth, out of which all life springs. The recognizably human voice speaking beneath the lines of the poem affirms that it is lingering mid-air without heading towards a definite destination, wandering aimlessly now that there are no handholds left other than “transparent sand”:

what has it turned into
in me now that I am no more
than alive and all my handholds
are transparent sand?

SP, p. 148.

The second part of the poem opens with Bringham’s rendering into English of Supervielle’s words. Air, which is invisible and unformed, solidifies as it were into clearly shaped form. Like mystery, air is an intangible and pervasive presence that surrounds everything we know exists in this world. Humans cannot touch it or see it, but they do know it is out there. Air, light, water, stone, bone, blood are essential ingredients in the poetic universe of the poet, who is eager to turn the reader’s attention to the world just as it is, while opening his/her eyes to the invisible and the mysterious. Now, the poetic voice invokes “*earthly recollections*” and asks them in lines marked by strong enjambment to tell him “*how to speak / with trees, with sea-waves / breaking, with a sleeping child.*” Trees, sea-waves and a sleeping child are all incarnations of innocence, purity and naturalness. To be able to speak

to them appears to be tantamount to being able to understand what they all have to teach the sensitive adult. The elemental lesson they do teach all those who are eager to listen is possibly one that encourages paying attention to the details of the world with all five senses. Patience and gratitude are also of the essence: trees grow slowly into full maturity with a staunch loyalty to *being* that is simply admirable; breaking sea-waves are ready to sacrifice themselves time and again against the shore cliffs, to be born into a new form of existence once more; and a sleeping child still believes in the redeeming power of dreams, a haven of warmth and protection from the mediocrity of waking life (no matter whether asleep or awake, a child's gaze is an unprejudiced and transparent one after all). Now the speaking voice seems to be floating amid an indeterminate realm or space where it only wants "to pacify [his] long-faced / memory, to tell it / a more patient story." Nature seems to be able to restore the peace of mind lost somewhere along the way.

VII · A RIVER, A RUNNER

A tribute to the ancient, classical Greek poet Pindar (Pindaros in the Greek language), "A River, a Runner" was published for the first time in book form in *Selected Poems* (2009) as the seventh piece in the sequence "The Lyell Island Variations". This is not, however, the first time Bringhamurst pays due homage to the great poet: the set of broadsides entitled *Under Strange Sail: Translations & Improvisations from Many Hands*,²³ published in 2007 by Jan and Crispin Elsted at the Barbarian Press, already included an earlier incarnation of this

23 See the entry B.101 in Robert Bringhamurst's bibliography. The poem was first published as one sheet in a set of 16, loose in a folder, in *Under Strange Sail: Translations & Improvisations from Many Hands* [Mission, British Columbia: Barbarian Press, 2007: s.n.] Bringhamurst's contribution, "For the Sprinter Asopikhos / & for Others: A Version of Pindar's Olympian 14", is exactly a translation from Greek, originally made for the Olympic Literary Festival, Calgary, Alberta, in 1988. *Under Strange Sail* was designed and printed by Crispin and Jan Elsted at Barbarian Press from November to January 2006-7 – ISBN 0-920971-37-7. There are 100 sets for sale, with 15 sets for contributors *hors commerce*. We consulted it at UBC Library (Special Collections) on the 28th July 2010, under the call number PN 6101 U53 2007. The whole set consists of 15 broadsides, of which 13 are translations from different languages by several hands: (1) Fereydoun Faryad, "Master Craftsman Nikos Kapsis. Greek Woodworker", translated from the Farsi by Scott King; (2) Stéphane Mallarmé, "Apparition", translated from the French by Albert Moritz; (3) Doris Kareva, "Three Poems", translated from the Estonian by Toomas Hendrik Ilves; (4) Nichita Stanesco, "The Lightning & the Chill", translated by Oana Avasilichioaei; (5) "From the Amours of Pierre de Ronsard, Englished by John Pass"; (6) "A Dream of Ronsard. Wood Engraving by Peter Lazarov"; (7) Pierre-Jean Jouve, "The Sadness of a Lovely Day", translated from the French by Albert Moritz; (8) Rainer Maria Rilke, "Herbsttag", translated from the German by Crispin Elsted, and Georg Trakl, "Verfall", translated from the German by Manfred Meurer; (9) Willem van Toorn, "In zijn hoofd" / "In his Head", translated from the Dutch by Francis Jones; (10) "Tessellations, from fragments after Sappho of Mytilene", translated from the Greek by Crispin Elsted; (11) Eugenio Montale, "The House at Olgiate", translated from the Italian by Francis Phillimore; (12) Philippe Jaccottet, "Renverse. A version, or inversion, of Jaccottet's 'La nuit est une grande cite encornie', translated from the French by John Francis Phillimore; (13) "For the Sprinter Asophikos, & for Others: A Version of Pindar's Olympian 14", translated from the Greek by Robert Bringhamurst. The 14th broadside in the set is on "The Types & the Papers" and the 15th broadside is on "The Poets & the Translations". Bringhamurst's poem on Pindar is in Van Dijk with Open Kapitalen on Barcham Green Chilham (handmade paper). One of the broadsides is on the poets and the translations, and it tells us that "Pindar (*circa* 520-440 BC) was born into a noble Spartan family, but adopted Athens as his home. He was known as a poet at twenty, and was revered by his death. His odes are the most complex and crystalline examples of the form in antiquity or in the modern period. Robert Bringhamurst is one of Canada's most notable poets and translators. His selected poems appeared in *The Calling* (1995) and his translations include *The Fragments of Parmenides* and two volumes of classical Haida poems by Ghandl of the Qayahll Llaanas and Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay. He is also known internationally as a typographer; his *The Elements of Typographic Style* is now in its third edition, & has become so widely used by designers and typographers that it has become eponymous."

poem entitled “For the Sprinter Asophikos, & for Others: A Version of Pindar’s Olympian 14”, prefaced by these Greek words Πίνδαρος Καφισίων ὑδάτων λαχοῖσα. The latest version has been changed in remarkable ways with respect to the original, which is much more explicit in the references to the characters involved in this epinikion. The 2007 version of the poem exhibits tremendous energy and is worth quoting in full:

Where the trout streams feed
the Kaphisos, your house made of water, you run
with your sundappled horses. Queens of Orkhomenos,
Ladies of Grace, see how your names
gleam through our voices. Every man’s ration
of wisdom, his beauty, his rightness,
comes from your hands. Even the gods
cannot manage their dances without you.
Your place is that close to the master
of music and death, with his golden bow
on his shoulder; that close to your father,
that close to the mountain.

Lady of Light, Lady of Happiness, Lady of Flowers,
born of the mountain god, watch
how they dance to a Lydian song
for Asóphikos. No one knows dancing
better than you. And they dance for a man
who comes from your country, Orkhomenos.
Dance with us too, if you will. I must call
other goddesses’ names now.

Walk to the black wall at the back
of the house of Persephone, Echo, and let them
know. Touch Kleódamos’ shoulder. Say
that his son has been in the place so many men
speak of: Olympia. Say in his flowing hair
he is wearing the wings of wild olive leaves
given to winners. Say that the light
rests on those feathers. Say
they are shining.

Born to an aristocratic family, possibly a Spartan family, near Thebes, Pindar²⁴ (b. probably 518 BCE, Cynoscephalae, Boeotia, Greece – d. after 446, probably *c.* 438, Argos) is considered by some scholars to be the greatest lyric poet of ancient Greece and the master of epinikia (victory songs), i.e. choral odes intended to be sung by choirs in celebration of the victories achieved by athletes in the Olympian, Pythian, Isthmian, and Nemean games. Whereas the works of other Greek lyric poets have survived only in bits and pieces, Pindar is one of the few ancient poets represented by a substantial body of work. Seventeen volumes of Pindar’s poetry,²⁵ comprising almost every genre of choral

²⁴ See entry on ‘Pindar’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 22, pp.13222-13224, for the essentials on the poet’s life and work.

²⁵ According to William H. Race, “The ancient editors divided Pindar’s poems into seventeen books (papyrus rolls) by genres: 1 book of hymns to various gods; 1 of paeans (hymns addressed mainly to Apollo); 2 of dithyrambs (hymns addressed mainly to Dionysos); 2 of prosodia (hymns for approaching a god’s shrine); 3 of partheneia (hymns sung by maidens); 2 of hyporchemata (dancing hymns); 1 of encomia (songs in praise of men at banquets); 1 of threnoi (songs of lament); and 4 of epinikia (victory songs). Although numerous fragments of his paeans and other poems have survived on papyrus or through quotation by

lyric, were known in antiquity. Only four books of epinikia have survived complete though, doubtless because they were chosen by a teacher as a schoolbook in the 2nd century CE. Divided as Olympian, Pythian, Isthmian, or Nemean (the games in which the victories he celebrated were held), the surviving epinikia number 45 odes in all. Pindar had an assured mastery of his medium. They are supplemented by numerous fragments: poems that have survived only in quotations from other authors or on fragmented scraps of papyrus discovered in the 19th and 20th centuries. These have contributed to a deeper understanding of Pindar's achievement, especially in paeans and dithyrambs. All the evidence, however, suggests that the epinikia were Pindar's masterpieces.

Written on commissions from the victors' family, friends, or benefactors, the victory odes place the athletes within the contexts of family history, festivals, and stories of the gods, to whom the pious Pindar attributed their victories. The 1997 Loeb Classical Library edition of the poet's work, edited and translated by William H. Race, provides an excellent assessment of Pindar's literary qualities. In W. H. Race's formulation, the generic function of the poems is that of "praising men within the religious and ethical norms of aristocratic fifth-century Greece."²⁶ Being of noble birth, his poetry evinces a conservative attitude of absolute adherence to aristocratic values,²⁷ a rigorous sense of piety, and a familiarity with the great mythological heritage that had achieved a first systematic presentation in the work of Pindar's Boeotian predecessor Hesiod at the end of the 8th century BCE. With Hesiod he shared a deep religiosity, a groping toward something more profound and satisfying than contemporary cults could offer, a fondness for abrupt and violent transitions in thought and mood, and a forthright pungency of speech. In athletic contests the palm goes to superior physique and morale, believed to derive from superior birth and the favour of the gods. The notion that poetry mediated between the memorable achievement and the deserved glory is a recurrent motif in epinikian poetry. The poet's songs spread their legacy ever further through the community and into the future; in that way, Pindar argued, poems were superior to the other popular medium of praise, the statue, which transmitted its message only to those who could see it.

Certain recurrent elements are found in almost all of Pindar's epinikia. The praise and worship of the god whose festival is being celebrated sets the tone, and thanksgiving is an integral part of the structure. A second constituent element is the myth, impressionistically treated in a series of short sharply visualized scenes and meant to link

ancient authors, only the four books of epinikia, comprising forty-five odes in celebration of athletic victors, have been preserved almost intact in a continuous manuscript tradition, and it is upon them that his reputation has largely rested as Greece's greatest poet of praise." See the two-volume edition of Pindar's work, and, in particular, volume I: *Olympian Odes, Pythian Odes*, edited and translated by William H. Race, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, The Loeb Classical Library, 1997, pp. 1-2.

²⁶ See the critical Introduction to Pindar's *Olympian Odes, Pythian Odes*, edited and translated by William H. Race, The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 3. Consider also this reflection: "'Of the nine Greek lyric poets Pindar is by far the greatest for the magnificence of his inspiration, his precepts, figures of language, lavish abundance of matter and words, and river (so to speak) of eloquence.'" This assessment by Quintilian in his survey of Greek poets (*Inst. Or.* 10.1.61) was the standard evaluation of Pindar in antiquity and helps to explain why nearly one fourth of his odes are well preserved in manuscripts..." (p. 1)

²⁷ See W. H. Race on this particular issue: "Pindar's poetry expresses the conservative, so-called "archaic," mores of the sixth and early fifth century. His thought is ethically cautionary and contains frequent reminders of man's limitations, his dependence on the gods and nature, and the brevity of life's joys. He espouses moderation [...], the aristocratic ("Doric") values of civic order [...] and peaceful concord [...], and reverence for the gods [...]. His gaze is primarily backwards toward the models of the past, as they are exemplified in the legends from Hellenic myth, and it is against these that the victors' achievements are measured." Pindar's *Olympian Odes, Pythian Odes*, p. 3.

the glorious present to the yet more glorious past and to give a new dimension to the transient moment of victory. Somehow Pindar manages to explicitly connect the person, the family, and the city or divinity to the celebrated. A third element is the aphoristic moralizing, often in Pindar resulting in passages of extreme beauty, even sublimity. Aphorisms link the present reality with the mythic narrative and repeatedly stress the dangers of excessive pride in achievement. The emotional impulse stems from the aristocratic ideal of self-assertion, competition and leadership. Pindar's odes are, however, notoriously difficult to understand. Every ode has an actual victory as its occasion, and so the odes refer to historical persona and events. In fact, one of the most enduring difficulties of interpreting Pindar derives from the fact that his poetry was composed for special occasions and is rich with references to persons, places, mythical figures, and historical events that were known to the original audience but are obscure for modern readers. Although careful valuation of the ancient testimonies can provide useful indications, Pindar's odes are complex mixtures of praise, mythical narratives, prayers and hymns, advice, athletic triumphs (and failures), and current historical events, conveyed in highly artificial language and in often complicated poetic meters and meant to be sung and danced to the accompaniment of lyres and pipes. In fact, Pindar's metrical range is exceptionally wide, with no two poems being identical in metre, and he controls difficult and convoluted techniques with consummate professional mastery. His style is frequently cryptic and oracular, subtle and complex at the same time. According to William H. Race, "Pindar's verse gives the impression of ever new creativity." He then gives us the essential clues as to the Pindaric style:

The best known characterization of Pindar's style is by Horace in Odes 4.2.5-12: "like a river rushing down a mountain which rains have swollen above its normal banks, the deep-voiced Pindar seethes and floods far and wide, sure to win Apollo's laurels when he tumbles new words through his daring dithyrambs, and is carried along by rhythms freed from rules." From these descriptions we can isolate the following general characteristics of Pindar's style: it is abundant, creative of new words and expressions, bold, passionate, old-fashioned, tinged with aristocratic bluntness, disdainful of the ordinary, and displays a rough strength typical of nature rather than of balanced art.²⁸

In his duties as a poet, he travelled extensively around the Greek world; though he was subject to the complicated political tensions of the period, he did not avoid expressing his political and moral views. It is a tribute to the quality of Pindar's poetry that he was universally respected and accepted as a major creative artist. In his lifetime Pindar found a growing demand for his poetry and a growing appreciation of his skill. It remains a mystery, or a miracle, how Pindar's subject matter – victory in an athletic contest or in a chariot race – could inspire poetry characterized by high seriousness and deep feeling. Pindar cannot, indeed, speak across the centuries with the directness of Homeric epic poetry or Sophoclean tragedy, but he does create, with disciplined mastery of a sophisticated and complex art form, a choral lyric of unsurpassed splendour and sustained nobility. After a long and prosperous career, he died at Argos in 443 BCE at the age of 79. It is reported that when Alexander the Great sacked Thebes more than a hundred years after Pindar's death, the poet's house was the only one that was spared.

There is no doubt that Pindar's victory ode must have provided an aesthetic and intellectual challenge for Robert Bringhurst. In this respect, "A River, a Runner" marks a high point in Bringhurst's career as a poet and translator, one of those pinnacles that are

²⁸ Pindar's *Olympian Odes, Pythian Odes*, p. 26.

truly a miracle, in that it is a most original version of Pindar's Olympian 14. For him, poems are not conceived as expressions of the poet's personal opinions and subjective feelings, and so it is only natural that he should try his hand at translating one of the most accomplished epinikia by the ancient Greek poet. Like Bringhurst, Pindar does not seek to express personal feelings in his poems. In his victory odes, we see him striving to catch the fleeting radiance that plays about the moment of supreme endeavour when a man transcends his own limitations of physique and character and so proves worthy of his birth and ancestry. Though successful men, like those who have failed, are destined to die, though all human beings appear to be insignificant in the grander scheme of things, when success or victory comes, there is something sublime about a man reaching the limits of human achievement. This is a theme that plays a large part in Pindar's epinikia and it must have been truly appealing to Bringhurst himself. The early German Romantics also admired Pindar (especially Hölderlin, who translated a number of his epinikia), but afterwards his influence began to diminish.

Bringhurst's version of Pindar's epinikion consists of two clearly distinguishable parts: whereas part 1 (first stanza) praises the victor's homeland while addressing the three Graces, part 2 (second and third stanzas) celebrates more explicitly the sprinter's victory. Hence, "A River, a Runner", like Olympian 14, begins with an elaborate hymn to the Graces (Aglaia, Euphrosuna and Thalia), who provide the grace needed for poetry, victory, dancing and singing. This is the right mythical background against which to measure the praise of the victor. In generic terms, Pindar's epinikia are "occasional poems that invoke shared social values to praise victors and offer them immortality in verse. For this task there is no set prescription, and each ode is a unique blend of praise, myth, and argumentation."²⁹ Well aware that "the word lives longer than deeds" (*Nem.* 4.6), Pindar celebrated the victories of athletes from a wide range of places in the ancient Greek world. "The geographical dispersion of the victors celebrated by Pindar indicates how broadly his reputation and associations had spread"³⁰ and testifies to the Panhellenic reputation he enjoyed in the century following his death."³¹

"A River, a Runner" is prefaced by Pindaros' Greek words: *Καφισίων ύδάτων...*, lifted from Olympian 14. Like the original epinikion, Bringhurst's poem opens with a reference to the land where the celebrated victor comes from, as well as with an invocation to the indwelling powers – i.e., the Graces – that bless the land. In this way, the opening stanza in Bringhurst's version of Pindar's victory ode constitutes an elaborate hymn to the Graces, as well as a moving depiction of Orchomenos, the homeland of the sprinter Asophikos, the victor at the Olympian games:

Where the trout streams feed
the Kaphísos, your sinuous
house made of water, you run with your sundappled
horses. Your country, that dancing ground,
shudders with beauty. Even our own voices
glow in the darkness of speech when we speak of you.
Everyone's ration of wisdom, gracefulness, rightness,
is lifted and poured with your hands.
Men and gods are alike when they call to you:
neither can manage their dances without you.
Your place is that close

²⁹ Pindar's *Olympian Odes, Pythian Odes*, p. 16.

³⁰ Pindar's *Olympian Odes, Pythian Odes*, p. 9.

³¹ Pindar's *Olympian Odes, Pythian Odes*, p. 7.

to the master of music and death, with his golden
bow on his shoulder; that close to your father,
that deep in the mountains.

SP, p. 149.

This first stanza serves a clear purpose: it celebrates the land of the victor by invoking the Graces and by offering a comprehensive glance at the services which they perform for mankind and on Olympus, for “the land and the powers which make it holy are so plainly the source of the victory” of the sprinter.”³² According to D.S. Carne-Ross, “there is every reason to believe that the Graces meant a great deal to Pindar and that his devotion to them finds beautiful expression” in Olympian 14,” for he saw that “he would best serve his young client by letting the Graces take the primary stress.”³³ Thus, the stanza opens with a reference to an earthly river (the Kaphísos), and then it rises to the heavens where the Olympian deities dwell, Zeus (the god honoured in the Olympian games) on top of them. We have already mentioned the importance of the religious dimension to Pindar’s odes. Like most Greeks, Pindar “thought both that to achieve success one needs the help of the gods and that too much success and prosperity is dangerous and will attract the jealousy of the gods.”³⁴ In fact, his victory odes are divided into four categories after the four great athletic Panhellenic games, which were part of a religious festival in honour of gods or heroes. The Olympic games, consecrated to Zeus, were the oldest and most prestigious. However, among his gods were not only the great Olympian deities, but also other lesser divine figures and powers, such as the Graces. The invocation to the Graces allows Pindar to enhance the athlete’s victory and to idealize him. In any case, every ode has an actual victory as its occasion. To put it very simply, Olympian 14 is

An odd epinician, of uncertain date, since no indication is given in the ode of which event the victor Asopichus had won. It is mainly a hymn to the Graces (Aglaia = Radiance, Euphrosyne = Good Cheer, Thalia = Festivity [...]), specially worshipped at the victor’s home-city of Orchomenus in Boeotia, about 30 miles north-west of Pindar’s Thebes. The ode reveals [...] how important Pindar thought divine help was for any type of human success.³⁵

All that remains to be done now that the victor’s homeland has been celebrated through such a moving invocation to the Graces is to celebrate his victory openly. In the second part of “A River, a Runner” (stanzas 2 and 3) we see what Pindar’s (and Bringhurst’s) intention must have been: that “the Graces must play the central role, and that if in a brief space he [Pindar] could convey all that they meant and all they gave, and

³² See D. S. Carne-Ross, *Pindar*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, p. 61.

³³ See D. S. Carne-Ross, *ibid.*, pp. 61-62. Carne-Ross dwells extensively on the meaning of “kharis”: “kharis is the splendour and glory granted by victory and is also the poem praising the victory; it is the bond of goodwill and gratitude between victor and poet that is sealed by the victory poem, and sometimes that poem itself; it is the divine power of fertility quickening the limbs that won the victory [...] and inspiring the poet who celebrates it; it is the gladness in which the festivity crowning the victory is bathed; it is the favour or grace granted by a god which makes victory possible in the first place.” See p. 63.

³⁴ Pindar, *The Complete Odes*, translated by Anthony Verity, with an introduction and notes by Stephen Instone, Oxford: OUP, 2007.

³⁵ Pindar, *The Complete Odes*, pp. 154-155. D. S. Carne-Ross provides us with a much more detailed analysis of the original Olympian 14: “Written perhaps in 488 when Pindar was thirty, Olympian 14 consists of only two twelve-line stanzas. [...] The victor, named Asopikhos, had won the footrace at Olympia. He was apparently still a boy and came from Orchomenos in Pindar’s own province of Boiotia, [...] a great center in the Mycenaean period but now fallen on quiet days and renowned only for its cult and sanctuary of the Graces. They were worshipped there in the form of three great stones which were said to have fallen from heaven.” See D. S. Carne-Ross, *Pindar*, p. 59.

then bring this concentrated richness to bear on the boy, he would have a victory poem the like of which no victor had ever been granted.”³⁶ In the first place, the poetic voice addresses the Graces directly and celebrates their precious dancing abilities. In the original 2007 version of Pindar’s Olympian 14, Bringhurst invokes and ceremoniously names the three goddesses: “*Lady of Light, Lady of Happiness, Lady of Flowers, / born of the mountain god, watch / how they dance to a Lydian song / for Asóphikos.*” These are “Aglaiá, the splendor or radiance surrounding the victor; Euphrosuna, the joy of victory; and Thalia, not simply festivity but *floraison.*”³⁷ However, in the 2009 incarnation of the text the invocation becomes more elusive and the names of the Graces are done without completely:

And the sprinter who’s standing here
comes from that country. You see
how we dance for him. No one knows dancing
better than you, the mountain god’s daughters.
Dance with us too, if you will. I must call
other goddesses’ names now.

SP, p. 149.

In the closing stanza a dead relative of the victor receives word of the sprinter’s victory. The dead are set apart from the world of the living, but they are not altogether excluded. The poetic voice now bids Echo take the news of the celebration to one person who is not directly present and yet should take part in the occasion: the boy’s dead father. Pindar/Bringhurst states that an individual has reached the limits of human success, and that there is something truly sublime about this. Echo must go the realm of the dead or Underworld in Greek mythology (Hades, “*the house of Persephone*”) to tell Asophikos’ father (Kleódamos, “*the old fellow*”) that he must share in the victor’s good fortune. In order to express the exaltation of being celebrated in poetry, Bringhurst describes the victor Asophikos in moving terms in the third stanza. The lines contain several perceptual categories – height, brightness and sound – from which the poet draws metaphors to designate the joy and celebration of victory:

Walk to the black wall at the back
of the house of Persephone, Echo, and let them
know. Go in there and touch
the old fellow’s shoulder. Say
that his son stands in the place so many men
dream of. Say in his hair he is wearing
the twist of wild olive leaves given to winners.
Say that the light rests like the voice of a bird on those
earth-colored feathers. Say they are shining.

SP, p. 149.

Obvious information from the original 2007 text is withheld, omitted or simply evoked: the father’s name (Kleódamos) or the name of the setting for the games being celebrated (Olympia, “*the place so many men / dream of*”) are simply taken for granted. Here Bringhurst uses repetition to obvious effect. Four sentences begin with the verb “say” in the imperative form; they serve a simple purpose: by insisting on the simple fact that a mere

³⁶ D. S. Carne-Ross, *Pindar*, p. 63-64.

³⁷ D. S. Carne-Ross, *Pindar*, p. 64.

mortal has reached the limits of human success, they insist on the sublimity inherent in the fact that “the victory celebration will reverberate even to the house of the dead.”³⁸

There is a rare and precious coherence about Robert Bringhurst’s entire poetic corpus which is also discernible in “A River, a Runner”. By variations of wording, rhythm and emphasis, the poet avoids exact repetition and produces strikingly new formulations. The most pervasive aspect of Bringhurst’s style is variety: his poetry gives the impression of ever new creativity. Another is the constant and habitual use of metaphor. There are many metaphorical expressions in his poems, some so slight as to be barely perceptible, other extremely bold. As for the lexicon, the evidence of his poetry shows that he uses numerous words pertaining to knowledge, body, speech, the mind and the physical world – bone, blood, water, air, song, being, stone. Bringhurst’s poems are also rich textures of verbal echoes, and we have already carefully listed many occurrences of repeated words in Bringhurst’s pieces. The frequency of recurrent words such as *water*, *air*, *blood*, *being*, *stone*, *mind* and *speech* in Bringhurst’s poetry is indisputable. By careful sifting, we can isolate such words in “A River, a Runner” too.

VIII · RIDDLE

Robert Bringhurst is a devout admirer of the work of the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, and so it comes as no surprise that “Riddle”, the eighth perfect jewel-like poem in “The Lyell Island Variations” sequence, should be inspired by a handful of seven words (“debo reanudar mis huesos en tu reino”) lifted from one of his poems, *Aún* (1969).³⁹ Originally published as C.44 in *Canadian Literature* 105 (Summer 1985): 15, “Riddle” was reprinted in *Pieces of Map*, *Pieces of Music* (1986), *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), *The Lyell Island Variations* (1995) and C.53, “Three Poems from *The Lyell Island Variations*”, in *Landfall* (Christchurch, New Zealand) 159 (September 1986): 325-327, alongside “The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer” and “The Long and the Short of It” (all reprinted from *Pieces of Map*, *Pieces of Music*). Furthermore, it was also partially reprinted in C.46, *Ring of Bone Zendo Newsletter* (North San Juan, California, 15 October 1985): 1, which is a partial reprint from C.44 and includes only the first four lines of the poem. The epigraph prefaced to the poem as textual threshold, Neruda’s words “debo reanudar mis huesos en tu reino”, are the starting point for a crystal-clear poem that is entitled nonetheless “Riddle”. Upon closer inspection, it turns out that the poem has some riddle-quality about it in the end, for, even if the language is transparent and simple, the message remains evocatively imprecise at some points. This is part of the grandeur of a poem that catches the reader’s attention precisely by almost surrealistic references to men and birds singing a song which is none other than the flesh song of the Earth, the ultimate essence of the poetry implicit in the real. At the same time, there are suggestive echoes from Neruda’s poems, read between the lines if one pays enough attention, and there is a profound meditation on the nature of poetry itself. “Riddle” is both a *sui generis* love poem and a meta-poem.

³⁸ Pindar, *The Complete Odes*, p. 155.

³⁹ See Pablo Neruda, *Aún*, Barcelona: Editorial Lumen, 1971, p. 7. This is the third stanza of section I of *Aún* where the words quoted by Bringhurst occur: “Tú, mi bella, dormida aún en agosto, / mi reina, mi mujer, mi extensión, geografía, / beso de barro, cítara que cubren los carbones, / tú, vestidura de mi porfiado canto, / hoy otra vez renaces y con el agua negra / del cielo me confundes y me obligas: / debo reanudar mis huesos en tu reino, / debo aclarar aún mis deberes terrestres.”

Neruda remains one of the great twentieth-century poets and his work has been translated into virtually all the major languages of the world, which testifies to his being a universal poet, one capable of touching and speaking to the sensibility of readers from different cultural backgrounds. Celebrated as the greatest Latin-American poet since Rubén Darío, he was awarded important literary prizes in his lifetime, including the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971. Neftalí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto⁴⁰ (b. 12 July, 1904, Parral, Chile – d. 23 September, 1973, Santiago, Chile) chose his pen name ‘Pablo Neruda’ after Czech poet Jan Neruda, whom he greatly admired. He attended university with the intention of becoming a French teacher, but he gave up his studies at the age of 20 to devote himself completely to the art of poetry. Throughout his lifetime he worked as a diplomat holding a number of posts around the world (particularly in the Far East and in Europe), integrating private and public concerns as an active poet-politician. Thus, he produced a prolific output of literary work in a huge variety of styles, ranging from the youth poems published in his first poetry book, *Crepusculario (Book of Twilights)*, 1923), and the explicitly erotic love poems of his immensely popular *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada (Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair)*, 1924), rich in their explicit celebration of sexuality and suggestive in their equation of woman with nature on a cosmic level (the feminine being an irresistible force at the heart of the universe); through the surrealist poems in the first two volumes of his *Residencia en la tierra (Residence on Earth)*, 1933 and 1935; a third volume of a very different nature was published in 1947); the overtly political poems of an ardent communist supporting the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War in *España en el corazón (Spain in the Heart)*, 1938), which signaled a shift in his conception of poetry as being an active agent in social and historical change; to the historical epic *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, a book-length poem in twelve parts completed in 1945, which betrays a growing interest in the ancient civilizations on American soil which he would also explore in *Canto general* (begun as early as 1935 and finished in 1948), a lengthy epic poem on an entire continent and its people, or an almost Whitmanesque catalog of the impressive history, geography, flora and fauna of South America (i.e., the land’s rich natural heritage and the defeat of the native Americans by the Europeans), pervaded by the poet’s own observations and experiences, which might have been an indispensable source of inspiration for Robert Bringhurst’s own *New World Suite No. 3* (2005) – his own epic on the richness inherent in the New World and a denunciation of greedy humans’ mismanagement of the Earth’s resources for the sake of purely material benefit. Neruda spent the last twenty years of his life writing innumerable fine love poems (*Cien sonetos de amor / One Hundred Love Sonnets*, 1959) and poems on common, ordinary everyday things like plants, feet, rain, a stone, a flower or a bird, all of which are observed with care and attention and a form of grateful love which glorifies experience in itself (*Odas elementales / Elemental Odes*, in several volumes published in 1954, 1956, 1959). He accomplishes this through a language marked by spontaneity, emotional urgency and passionate directness.

Bringhurst’s poem is a moving tribute to the universal Chilean poet. The piece consists of three stanzas and three distinct movements for the soul. That the first stanza is a straightforward statement on the poet’s own poetics becomes crystal-clear upon closer inspection, as the poem itself unfolds into full bloom. The poet is he who has no hands (hands, unlike feet, are damaging to the world, according to Bringhurst) and keeps singing his song from immemorial times for anybody willing to listen to what he has to say. Hands handle writing tools, but in Bringhurst’s poetics poems are born out of the living voice in the first place (and so there is initially no need for hands holding pens to write down poems) and poetry is a pervasive quality found in reality. Humans have no monopoly on

⁴⁰ For essential bio-bibliographical information, see the entry on ‘Neruda, Pablo’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 20, pp. 11853-11855.

poetry then, and this partly accounts for the presence of a bird with no hands either, asking the world one of those fundamental questions any sensitive human being must ask at some point in their life: what is the gist, the core or the heart of the song poets must sing? The answer is simple enough: Earth is the ultimate source of all poetry, the only theme, the final truth. The use of the present continuous (*is singing, is asking and is answering*) and of parallelism in these opening lines reminds the reader that this has been going on for long. Humans have looked at the awe-inspiring beauty of the world and have surrendered to the mystery that the real *is*, the perpetual riddle that *what is* poses to humans' inquisitive gaze. Or, in Bringhurst's memorable words:

A man with no hands is still singing.
A bird with no hands is asking the world,
and the world is answering every day:
earth is the only flesh of the song.

SP, p. 150.

An ominous picture is shown in the second stanza, where "*a man with now wings is crossing / the sky's black rapid on his hands.*" Wings recall Icarus, the mythological figure who dared fly too close to the sun, which melted the wax in his wings in the end and made him inevitably fall down and plunge into the vast sea. But they are also evocative of imagination, of the highly narcissistic musings the poet is prompt to surrender to from time to time in his poems. This is a man who has no wings, and yet he is capable of touching the real with his own hands, of giving himself up to the changing and changeable world, in a state of perpetual flux, or so seem to suggest the *black rapids* mentioned in the poem. This is a man who is aware that bones are the only thing that remains after one's residence on Earth: "*His mother's bones lie slumped / by the stumps of the cedars.*" Trees are also mutilated; they are not healthy or complete, but mere stumps. They suggest that the human hand has been damaging their physical integrity, possibly in the service of progress, comfort or money. Like bones, stumps are remains, almost organic debris. However, *bones* is a recurrent word in Bringhurst's entire poetic universe: they are sacred too, they are what links us humans to the very physicality of the world. We are bones and dust. We are not special or different in any way, as we tend to think, for life is a most subtle continuum upon which all beings, animate and inanimate, are to be found. If all existing things were ground down to their bare essentials (the four classical elements explored by Bringhurst in *Elements* in 1995, or the elements recorded in the periodic table), then we would stumble upon a simple truth we usually overlook: we are all made of the same basic chemical elements and there is nothing that sets humans apart in the grander scheme of things. Trees are also central to Bringhurst's oeuvre; they are the perfect embodiment of the natural, spontaneous force of life implicit in Nature, in the real. If there are only stumps left, instead of living trees, then there must be something wrong about the way humans relate to the world.

The word 'bones' is repeated three times throughout the poem, which is no random choice or happy coincidence at all. Now the speaking voice of the poem, which we might take to be the poet's, addresses a *you*, which possibly stands for Neruda himself. Neruda's country, like Bringhurst's, is part of the New World, a land of ancestral wisdom, natural richness and diversity spoiled by the hand of European colonizers. The land belonged to the native people of the continent, the First Nations or the indigenous people that emerged out of the living soil that gave them their own sustenance, and the conquest of the New World by greedy Europeans was a shameless rape of the pristine lands that sustained environment-friendly lifestyles of people who knew exactly how to preserve the right equilibrium within the natural world. Now the poet is coming to Neruda's land, to the

American continent, carrying his own bones in his own hands (for that is the only thing he has, even if only for rent, because he must give them back to earth's lap when death comes), to find out that the land is no compartmentalized kingdoms or legends. The land is Mother Earth and also a woman's body – the feminine principle and primordial force at the heart of the universe in many of Neruda's love poems. The land is a telluric realm out of which all creatures emerge into the light of day; the living soil is the ultimate source of life. Are the strangers the indigenous people that were deprived of their own land, resources, cultural heritage, dignity and life? Possibly. The strangers, the others, are the poet's (and everyone's) brothers. Bringhurst conveys all this wealth of meaning with memorable and musical words, endowed with an irresistible beauty:

I carry my own bones in my hands
into your country,
and there are no kings; it is not a kingdom;
and there is no legend; it is the land
and a woman's body, and these are my bones.
What do I owe to these strangers my brothers?

SP, p. 150.

IX · DAY IN, DAY OUT

“Day In, Day Out”, the closing piece in “The Lyell Island Variations”, was first published in *Selected Poems* (2009). It looks like a most accomplished composition to mark the end of a sequence of nine poems that has been in the making for such a long time. The textual threshold preceding Bringhurst's poem is lifted from one of the many poems written by Michelangelo, who lived in sixteenth-century Italy, during one of those historical periods that represent an unsurpassable peak of accomplishment in the history of humankind. The artist whose genius produced such masterworks of Western art as the fresco paintings of the Sistine Chapel (particularly the scenes from Genesis on the ceiling and *The Last Judgment* on the altar wall), or the sculptures of the *Pietà* (1499) or *David* (1504) (made before he turned 30), Michelangelo Buonarroti⁴¹ (b. 6 March 1475 – d. 18 February 1564) was a prolific sculptor, painter, architect, engineer and poet. Together with his contemporary Leonardo da Vinci, he embodies the ideal of the Renaissance humanist – a versatile polymath at home in a number of disciplines at which he excelled with contributions of a high order. Thus, the archetypal Renaissance man produced a prodigious output in every field, so that the sheer volume of works, sketches, poems and correspondence preserved to this day make him the best-documented artist of the sixteenth century and the first Western artist whose biography was published while he was still alive. Two biographies were published in fact: one by his apprentice Ascanio Condivi (*The Life of Michelangelo*) and another by the well-known Italian biographer Giorgio Vasari. In *Lives of the Artists*, Vasari said of him that he represented the true pinnacle of all artistic achievement since the beginning of the Renaissance. Aware of the potentialities and force of the art of sculpture, Michelangelo knew how to take beauty out of marble blocks. It is a miracle that Michelangelo managed to carve out of formless stone blocks such beauty and perfection as he achieved in the *Pietà*, a depiction of the body of dead Jesus on the lap of the Virgin Mary after the Crucifixion that the artist completed at the age of only 24; in the colossal statue of *David*, one of the most renowned works of the Renaissance and the symbol of Florentine

⁴¹ For essential information regarding the life and work of Michelangelo, see the entry on ‘Michelangelo’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 19, pp. 11081-11088.

freedom, carved from a marble block from the quarries at Carrara that established his pre-eminence as a sculptor of amazing technical skill and imaginative strength; or in other technical accomplishments like *Moses* or *Laocoön and his Sons*, the latter residing now in the Vatican.

Michelangelo is also known as a most accomplished fresco painter and prolific architect. He is especially remembered for his frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, which originally were meant to represent only the twelve apostles against a starry sky. The final project took him almost four years to complete (1508-1512) and included over 300 figures drawn largely from the Bible and representing much of the Catholic Church doctrine. Representing the creation of mankind, the downfall of man, and the promise of eternal salvation, at the centre of the painting sequence were nine episodes from the Book of Genesis, arranged into three parts – God’s creation of the Earth, God’s creation of humankind and the fall from His grace, and Noah and his family. On the other hand, among Michelangelo’s major architectural projects are the unexecuted façade of the Basilica of San Lorenzo, the Medici Chapel, and the Laurentian Library and the fortifications of Florence; in Rome he executed such ambitious projects as Saint Peter, Palazzo Farnese, San Giovanni dei Fiorentini, the Sforza Chapel in the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore, Porta Pia and Santa Maria degli Angeli. The sheer bulk of his work gives an idea of the kind of human being Michelangelo was: an abstemious and hard-working person of monk-like chastity all his life according to his biographer Condivi, he always lived like a poor man, indifferent to food or drink, and he was a solitary and melancholy person by nature. He avoided the company of human beings, and impressed his contemporaries with his *terribilità*, a sense of awe-inspiring grandeur that stemmed from his own personality, genius and talent. It comes as no surprise that such a man should have attracted the attention of Robert Bringhurst, a tireless craftsman, a polymath himself, a committed poet, linguist and typographer who puts all his passion and attention into every single project he embarks on. “Day In, Day Out” is a memorable tribute to the Italian artist.

The poem is prefaced by these Italian words by Michelangelo: “*il saggio al buon concetto arriva / d’ un’ immagine viva / vicino a morte.*” He was a truly talented genius, a polymath in a number of artistic disciplines. As a poet, he wrote hundreds of love sonnets and madrigals addressed to friends for whom he nurtured a great love (Cecchino dei Bracci, Tommaso dei Cavalieri or Vittoria Collona), pervaded in many cases by Neoplatonic notions and openly erotic connotations. The words with which Bringhurst has chosen to preface his tribute to this unique, irreplaceable human being are lifted from poem number 241 of his *Rime*. Upon closer inspection, it turns out that “Day In, Day Out” is an accomplished translation of Michelangelo’s poem.⁴² Translation is a most fruitful practice and intellectual discipline Bringhurst has never abandoned since he started his literary career. The piece consists of three stanzas and three clearly distinguishable movements. What makes this such a poignant poem is that it is almost a meta-poetic meditation on the work of a whole lifetime: through the practice of sculpture, painting and architecture, Michelangelo devotes his whole life to a passionate search after beauty and truth, and he somehow feels that he is closer to the ultimate vision exactly at the moment when death is closing in. Thus, in the first part, the image of the artist as thinker or sage

⁴² This is poem 241 from Michelangelo’s *Rime*: “Negli anni molti e nelle molte pruove, / cercando, il saggio al buon concetto arriva / d’ un’ immagine viva, / vicino a morte, in pietra alpestra e dura; / c’ all’ alte cose nuove / tardi si viene, e poco poi si dura. / Similmente natura, / di tempo in tempo, d’ uno in altro volto, / s’ al sommo, errando, di bellezza è giunta / nel tuo divino, è vecchia, e de’ perire: / onde la tema, molto / con la beltà congiunta, / di stranio cibo pasce il gran desire; / né so pensar né dire / qual nuoca o giovì più, visto ’l tuo ’spetto, / o ’l fin dell’universo o ’l gran diletto.”

constantly seeking the truth is presented in a language of lyric urgency and passionate clarity that is simply moving in its straightforward simplicity:

After many years and versions,
then the thinker finally manages,
in hard, high-country stone, a clear
conception of a living image, death is closing in.
We come so late to high, bright things
we can't stay long.

SP, p. 151.

Michelangelo chose the path of sculpture as a way of capturing the fleeting beauty and truth he intuited pervaded the universe. Punctuated by a system of trial and error, his entire oeuvre is conceptualized as being nothing more than a relentless sequence of tentative approaches to touch an irreducible core of meaning, or the truth. Day in, day out, his struggle with colour, line, perspective, stone and words takes him ever closer to his goal. It remains a true miracle that Michelangelo should have been able to shape the formless marble blocks into the beautiful sculptures of utter perfection he made. Needless to say, his art was his way of capturing the beauty and eternity of the world, the ultimate vision he distilled from the fleeting appearances of the real, and his precious gift to posterity. In this respect, the “*hard, high-country stone*” is possibly meant as a reference to the Carrara marble, and the “*clear conception of a living image*” is a generic allusion to the many sculptures he produced. That stone should be made to sing like this by Michelangelo remains a welcome mystery. And yet he cannot avoid feeling a certain sense of belatedness: he arrives too late at the clear conception, to “*high, bright things*,” so late that he feels death is just round the corner. Truth is elusive, eel-slippery, and so it does not let itself be trapped that easily – it keeps hiding from humans’ inquisitive gaze. Beauty is also such an overwhelming thing that we humans, mere mortals, cannot bear their presence for so long. The interesting point is that the sculptor is a thinker: he thinks with his mind and his hands in shaping formless stone blocks into meaningful and clear images that point to the ultimate beauty and truth of this world.

The second stanza and part of the poem is a meditation on the unstoppable flux of reality, and it seems to juxtapose Herakleitos’ flux-doctrine with Platonic notions on the realms of appearance and immutable ideas. That “*reality keeps wandering, / day in, day out, from one / incarnation to another*” suggests that everything is in flux, that reality is perpetually in the making, always in a state of pure metamorphosis, and so it must be extremely complex for the artist to cling to unchangeable forms, to “*hang on / to anything it’s found.*” There are no reliable handholds or footholds either for the audacious imagination of the artist in search of eternal essentials. “*In the upper / reaches of loveliness,*” up there in the Platonic realm of pure ideas, maybe there is a chance that “*reality / is very nearly done.*” If objects of this world are nothing but pale shadows or reflections of the unchanging forms populating the realm of ideas, then the ultimate reality must be looked for there. Beauty, perfection and eternity dwell together in this divine realm, placed outside the province of time and space as it were, away from this perishable world.

The closing stanza brings together two key words: the *terror* evoked by death closing in and the *beauty* of the ultimate insight into reality, knowledge, wisdom, the final revelation:

So terror, coming deeply into beauty,
calms huge hunger with strange food.
I see your face and cannot think or say

which is the greater – the damage or the joy,
or the end of the world or the ultimate pleasure.

SP, p. 151.

The *huge hunger* is the desire for knowledge; the *strange food* is the vision, “*il buon concetto [...] d’ un’ imagine viva*”, in Buonarrotti’s words. Looking at or scrutinizing the thinker’s face, the poetic voice is unable to say whether it is the terror evoked by closing death or the beauty of knowing at last something of everlasting value that is greater. With every single person’s death, *the end of the world* is enacted time and again, but *the ultimate pleasure* is something that cannot be stolen once it has been experienced first-hand – not even death can spoil that last, decisive moment at which the sage comes to experience the truth face to face at last. There is something sublime about the closing lines of “Day In, Day Out”: they do bring the circle of the poem into perfect completion, while at the same time they make human life a meaningful *Gestalt* that death ends for good.

The Physics of Light

Light Is Vision Is Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Robert Bringhurst is a diverse, talented and profound poet, widely read in science, history and world literature. The poems included in the section entitled “The Physics of Light” in *Selected Poems* (2009) are compositions one might expect from a poet as learned as Bringhurst is. In addition, the compositions have a complex literary history behind them. The whole section consists of thirteen poems, of which nine had already been published in previous collections and scattered literary periodicals. The genesis of these poems is to be traced back to the section “Gifts & Presences” in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* and to the section “Their Names” in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995). With the passage of time, the section has been subtly revised and expanded into a complex sequence comprising poems dealing with being, nature, knowledge and humans’ interaction with the world at large. The very title, “The Physics of Light”, reminds us that Bringhurst’s poems are firmly rooted in the real, and that he is after a serious investigation into fundamental questions pertaining to humankind in its entirety. The poems are accomplished pieces of literary composition, words set to the music of breathing speech, insights into the ultimate essence of reality. As is common practice with Bringhurst, the poems have also evolved textually over time, as if to adapt themselves to the excellence level “his living repertory” or whole corpus of poems demands: technical perfection going hand in hand with profundity of thought, clarity and musicality. Thus, the editorial history of the poems can be best summarized as follows:

- (1) A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986). Section entitled “Gifts & Presences”, consisting of five poems: “Sutra of the Heart” (reprinted from C.50); “Thirty Words” (reprinted from C.50); “Rubus Ursinus: A Prayer for the Blackberry Harvest” (reprinted from A.28); • “Sunday Morning” (reprinted in B.42, C.52; revised in A.47, B.69); “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985” (reprinted from C.50).
- (2) A.47 *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995). Section entitled “Their Names”, consisting of ten poems: [•] “Sutra of the Heart” (revised from A.32), [•] “Gloria, Credo, Sanctus et Oreamnos Deorum” (revised from B.47), • “Kol Nidre”, “Rubus Ursinus: A Prayer for the Blackberry Harvest” (reprinted from A.32), “For the Bones of Joseph Mengele” (reprinted from A.32), • “Fathers and Sons”, • “Hick & Nillie”, • “Demons and Men”, • “The Flowers of the Body”, [•] “Sunday Morning” (revised from A.32).
- (3) A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009). Section entitled “The Physics of Light”, consisting of thirteen poems: “Sutra of the Heart” (slightly revised from A.47), “Kol Nidre” (reprinted from A.47), “Gloria, Credo, Sanctus et Oreamnos Deorum” (reprinted from A.47), “Rubus Ursinus: A Prayer for the Blackberry Harvest” (reprinted from A.47), “For the Bones of Joseph Mengele” (reprinted from A.47), “Fathers and Sons” (slightly revised from A.47), “Hick & Nillie” (reprinted from A.47), “Demons and Men” (slightly revised from A.47), “Sunday Morning” (reprinted from A.47), • “Children of the Old Horse”, • “The Physics of Light”, • “The Occupation”, • “Long Poem on Four Feet”. Notice that “The Flowers of the Body” is included in a different section entitled “The Living”, the closing handful of poems in *Selected Poems* (2009).

THE POEMS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

I · “Sutra of the Heart”

“Sutra of the Heart” was first published in C.50 and reprinted in C.51, *Canadian Forum* (Toronto) LXVI.760 (June/July 1986): 34-35. In book form it was first reprinted from C.50 in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), slightly revised in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), and reprinted in this definitive 1995 incarnation in *Selected Poems* (2009). Bringhurst’s long composition is a string of 45 different definitions of what the heart is. The language is kept crystal-clear, elegant and moving in an astonishing way. In simple declarative sentences, the poetic voice makes tentative approaches to pin down the essence of the human heart. From beginning to end, the emphasis seems to be placed on the very physical dimension and anatomy of the heart. However, the concept is explored in depth and new insights into what is the beating motor of the human body come up to the light. Through illuminating analogies and apt metaphors (of the kind *A is B*), the whole universe (all spaces and all times) is conceptualized as being contained in the human heart. To this end, Bringhurst makes use of very simple literary devices – alliteration, lexical repetition, parallelism and metaphor. The result is a memorable poem rich in profound insights into the human condition, for the heart, like thought or speech, is at the very core of what it means to be human. Through purely objective, impersonal and detached statements, the poet manages to define, and yet not to exhaust, all the thematic potential implicit in the subject. The tone remains meditative throughout the entire composition, though, and the rhythm of the lines becomes incantatory¹ through the sheer repetition of a simple syntactic pattern (*A is B*) at the heart of each single metaphor. Metaphor is precisely of the essence in this particular poem, for it becomes an intellectual tool of precision in the poet’s confrontation with his subject matter. It might be easy to fall into narcissism, subjectivity and cliché when dealing with the human heart, but Bringhurst succeeds in producing a unique poem which is both a beautiful artefact of tessellated words that sound euphonically when spoken aloud and a beautiful, profound meditation on the heart.

The poem is entitled “Sutra of the Heart”, but what does ‘sutra’ mean exactly? If we look up the word in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, this is exactly what we find out under the ‘sutra’ entry:

Sūtra (Sanskrit: “thread”), Pāli SUTTA, in Hinduism, a brief, aphoristic composition; in Buddhism, a more extended exposition, the basic form of the scriptures of both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions. The early Indian philosophers did not work with written texts and later often disdained the use of them; thus, there was a need for very brief explanatory works that could be committed to memory. The earliest *sūtras* were expositions of ritual procedures, but their use spread. The *sūtras* of the Sanskrit grammarian Pāṇini (5th-6th century BCE) became in many respects a model for later compositions. Nearly all the Indian philosophical systems had their own *sūtras*, most of which were preserved in writing in the early centuries CE.

In the Buddhist *sūtras* a particular point of doctrine is propounded and deliberated. The most important collection of the Theravāda *sūtras* is to be found

¹ According to Patricia Keeney Smith, ““Sutra Of The Heart” seems more rigorously Bringhurst’s than other pieces, although it still resonates wonderfully of old chants, stories and ancient ways of seeing. Sutra beats with a pulse that is uniquely its own...” See her review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* in *The Star* (Toronto), 29 November 1986: M4.

in the Sutta Pitaka section of the Pāli canon, which contains the discourse attributed to the Buddha Gotama. In Mahāyāna Buddhism *sūtra* is applied to expository texts.²

A *sūtra* is then a brief, expository statement that sheds light on the nature of the subject of meditation. There is something gnomic about these concise sentences, which, upon closer inspection, turn out to be rich in nuances of meaning and profundity of thought. Thus, Bringhurst's poem can be said to be a string of beautifully written and linked *sūtras* that clarify the nature of the human heart. When put together, these 45 illuminating *sūtras* written in the language of philosophical thinking might look like the scriptures of a new school of humanist and scientific descent that advocates a stern look at the heart just as it is. And so the poem opens like this, with a handful of four *sūtras*:

The heart is a white mountain
left of centre in the world.
The heart is dust. The heart is trees.
The heart is snowbound broken
rock in the locked ribs of a man
in the sun on the shore of the sea who is dreaming
sun on the snow, dreaming snow on the broken
rock, dreaming wind, dreaming winter.

SP, p. 155.

The heart is a mountain, dust, trees and rock broken by snow. This simple enumeration of living and non-living things in the world suggests that the heart contains everything we know to exist within its boundaries in the human breast. Morphologically speaking, the heart resembles a mountain, placed almost at the uppermost part of the trunk, near the summit of the head. It is also dust, because, like the rest of the flesh-and-blood body, it is perishable and must turn to the earth's lap when death comes. And it is trees, the perfect incarnation or embodiment of all that is natural and spontaneous and worth preserving in Bringhurst's poems. The fourth definition is the most elaborate and complex of all: the heart is snowbound broken rock in the chest of a man dreaming the natural elements in the world, as if dreaming itself were tantamount to creating the thing dreamt of out of the blue.

The rest of "Sutra of the Heart" is a string of perfectly linked sutras, which constitute a prolonged and sustained meditation on the nature of the heart. The theme is observed with uttermost attention and tranquility, with a detached peace of mind, and the insights into its ultimate nature are recorded with astonishing immediacy in a masterly language. As a matter of fact, Bringhurst's poems are loved at first sight just for the very texture of his limpid language – one marked by simplicity, clarity and a precious elegance. It seems to us that it has always been Bringhurst's aim to write one simple true sentence, the truest and profoundest sentence he could find. From there, he would go on and write his magnificent poems, which turn out to be scintillating constellations of jewel-like words. Necklaces of meaning or concentric ripples on the surface water of an untroubled lake, his words are to be tasted on the tongue as we read them aloud as if they were solid food or drink – oysters, wine, or bread, as Hemingway would put it. These are words that sit upright like solstice stars and light the dark sky of a winter night. Wordsworth said that poetry is recollection of memories from the past in tranquility. Modernist authors would no doubt insist on the fact that those precious memories are then transmuted into a memorable poem as *a thing made* or *artifact*, precisely because the memories are intangible

² See the entry on 'sutra' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, volume 27, p. 16048.

and are written in the same fugitive alphabet of dreams. It is through the prism of language that memories must first pass if they are to become part of an everlasting well-wrought poem, or a piece of prose beautifully written, capable of touching the reader's sensibility. But Bringhurst's poems are not about memories, but about real things in the real world perceived fully and in depth by the senses and the mind instead. He works with his mind and with words that are tools with which to shape his poems. That he should pay attention to every single detail and nuance of meaning is a proof of his sincerity, his vocation and his serious commitment to a millennial art to which he has devoted a whole lifetime. In any case, poems are not just the words they are made of; words are just the tiny blocks with which the poet orchestrates a whole composition. Poetry is something larger and vaster that goes beyond the clear-cut boundaries of a poem. To Bringhurst, it is an attribute of reality, it is in the very texture of living things.

Poetry is also a form of knowledge in Bringhurst's hands, and there is something exploratory or inquisitive about "Sutra of the Heart" indeed. Let us have a look at a handful of brief sutras lifted from the poem:

- (1) *"The heart is a flute with four fingerholes / played in the rain."* The heart is a musical instrument with four fingerholes that stand for the four cavities inside it. That it is played in the rain, and not in the sun for instance, remains a mystery. Is this meant as a reference to the wet nature of the heart as a handful of meat or flesh full of blood?
- (2) *"The heart is a deep well dug upward."* This looks like an enigmatic riddle, for wells are dug downward, not upward. Is it because the heart's aspirations reach upward, toward some kind of goal somewhere up above?
- (3) *"The heart is a deepwater sponge / tied up with smooth muscle in two / double half-hitches, sopping up blood / and twice every second wrung out like a rag."* This sutra explores the anatomy itself of the heart, which resembles a sponge living in the deep sea and consists of two halves pumping blood all the time. Something similar happens in *"The heart is three bowls / always full and one empty"*: a sutra of Oriental inspiration in its very reference to bowls, which stand for the heart's cavities emptying and filling constantly with flowing blood through the diastole and systole stages. Similarly, in *"The heart is a four-winged / moth as it lifts and unfolds."* (in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, 'moth' was replaced with 'bird') the anatomy of the heart is explored in more subtle ways. Now the heart is like a moth (or a bird) which is about to flap its wings and take flight.
- (4) *"The heart is a cut root / brooding in the worn earth, / limping, when no one is watching, / back into the ground."* The heart is also a half-dead root trying to find its way back to the living soil, back to the lap of Mother Earth, the ultimate source of life for everything in this world. In a way, the deepest affiliations of the heart are ultimately telluric, and so it seeks to go back to the earth, which means that there is nothing special about the human heart – i.e., it belongs to the larger scheme of things in this world.
- (5) *"The heart is a place. The heart / is an unmentioned name."* The heart is a physical and meaningful space too where emotions and feelings are thought to gather and reach momentum, or so we think. It is also a word, a name that remains unmentioned, an inaccessible mystery.
- (6) *"The heart is everything, but nothing / is the heart."* This paradoxical statement is rich in nuances of meaning and it hides a wealth of potential interpretations. The heart is beneath each single decision we make in our lifetime, its constant beating guarantees that the body goes on existing, but, paradoxically enough, it is nothing at the same time. Or is this nothing something positively real? A synonym for *non-being* or *what-isn't*?
- (7) *"The heart is lime and dung and diapers / in a hole."* The heart is found even in the heterogeneous debris and detritus in a hole. It does not have to be something necessarily sublime, as we might think at first. It is therefore ubiquitous.
- (8) *"The heart is / diamond and cooked turnip, lead and precious metal, / stone."* This is a most curious enumeration: it brings together a precious stone with a cooked vegetable, metal and common stone. It is a diamond because it is precious, invaluable, irreplaceable in itself.

- (9) *“The heart is wood.”* Back in an elemental world of essentials, the heart is trees and the wood trees are made of. And wood is good in itself: it gives humans warmth and protection in the form of houses and fire.
- (10) *“The heart is light. The heart is cold.”* Light is an essential ingredient in Bringhurst’s poetic universe: it renders the world visible, it makes sight possible, it signifies the benign presence of the life-giving sun. At the same time, it is cold, as opposed to heat.

Other sutras are longer and even more complex. In one of them the whole history of humankind seems to be captured in only five verse lines. The heart is a canyon, a manifestation of earth, in the Triassic period, populated by such elemental things as grass, bones and remains of corn. The prehistoric paintings on the canyon’s walls evoke humans and animals from a time long past:

The heart is a sandstone canyon in the high
Triassic fields, inhabited by grass,
potsherds and scapulae, femurs and burnt corn,
with horned men and mountain sheep
painted and pecked in the straw-colored walls.

SP, p. 155.

And somewhere at the heart of this meditation on the heart we find an amazing constellation of three completely different sutras. In the first place, one jewel-like sutra goes like this: *“The heart is four unintersecting / strokes of the brush in Chinese...”* Here Bringhurst draws on the realm of writing to try to define the essence of the heart. It turns out that the Chinese ideogram for *heart* consists of four brushstrokes that do not touch one another and that possibly evoke the heart’s cavities. Also, the Chinese word has got seven interesting homophones (i.e., words that are pronounced exactly the same) in the language: it is a happy coincidence (and good news too) that *daylight*, *zinc*, *firewood*, *bitterness*, *joy*, *earthbreath* or *lampwicking* should be pronounced like the word *heart* itself. Speech brings together or reconciles the heart with daylight (*“The heart is light”*), with metal (*“The heart is [...] precious metal”*), with firewood (*“The heart is wood”*), with such elemental states of mind as bitterness and joy (thought to reside in the heart), with earthbreath (because the heart is *a cut root* trying to find its way back to the ground, to Mother Earth, when no one is looking) and with lampwicking (because the heart is cold but it is also a flickering, passionate flame illuminating the path of our life). Secondly, a simple, brief sutra follows: *“The heart is a pitcher of untasted water.”* Like light, water is of the essence in Bringhurst’s conception of the world and the real – *“This music is all about water,”* said one of the voices in *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986). That the heart is a pitcher containing water that has not been tasted yet suggests the pristine state or purity of the heart itself. And thirdly, there is a beautiful myth-like definition of the heart, rich in resonances and echoes reminiscent of such central Bringhurst poems as *“Bone Flute Breathing”*, *Tzjubalem’s Mountain* (1982) or *Tending the Fire* (1985). The heart is still the “white mountain” of the opening line of *“Sutra of the Heart”*, but now a woman living in the moon with breasts that are musical instruments climbs it. Sometimes the very motion accompanying the rhythm of the heart (systole and diastole) carries her up and down the mountain:

The heart is a white mountain
which the woman in the moon,
her left breast full of cellos and her right
breast full of violins,
climbs and is sometimes carried
up and down.

“Sutra of the Heart” closes with sutras that resonate in the echo-chamber of the reader’s mind long after finishing reading the poem aloud: “*The heart is being / knowing only that it is; / the heart is dumb; the heart is glass.*” The heart is nothing more, and nothing less, than *being* itself, or the embodiment of *being*, and it knows a simple thing: it exists. It does not need words to give voice to this simple truth, to this intimate awareness that it is alive. It is dumb, and it is also fragile and vulnerable like glass, which can easily break down into a million pieces. The closing lines of Bringhurst’s poem are incantatory and alliterative, and they remind us once again that the heart is *being*, and that *being* aches and beats at the same time, and that it knows itself:

The heart is being aching, being
beating,
being knowing being
that not what not
who not how not why
it is the beating that it is.

SP, p. 157.

II · “Kol Nidre”

“Kol Nidre” was first published in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995). It was then reprinted with no textual variants at all in “The Physics of Light” section in *Selected Poems* (2009). The title is, to begin with, enigmatic. What does *Kol Nidre* exactly mean? Though not exactly a prayer, Kol Nidre is an Aramaic declaration recited in the synagogue before the beginning of the evening service on every Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It concerns the vows and promises one makes and one must live up to. When first confronted with this lyric poem, one cannot help feeling that every indispensable word that has been threaded into the living fabric of the composition falls exactly into place and that if one single word were removed, something would inevitably go wrong with the whole organic *Gestalt* of the piece. Once again, the language is kept simple, transparent and elegant. Though there is no rhyme here, there is a subtle musicality implicit in the cadences of the words making up the poem when spoken aloud. The pervasive tone from beginning to end is meditative, almost elegiac, as if the voice speaking in the poem were whispering a prayer, addressing an unknown *you* and asking for forgiveness. Marked by such a simple literary strategy as repetition and parallelism, these lines have a litany-like quality about them that makes them memorable:

Forgive me my promises. Those I have kept
and those I have broken. Forgive me
my pledges, my vows and the rest
of my boasts and concessions.

SP, p. 158.

If “Kol Nidre” opens precisely with an implicit vocative addressed to this unknown *you*, then the heart of the poem is a detailed record of a revelation which has the precious texture of transcendence: what the poetic voice learns all of a sudden is that “*what is is what links us,*” and this *us* is meant to reach beyond the realm of the human into the non-human, as we shall see below. The epiphany-like moment of revelation comes in the most uncanny of situations though, as the speaking subject is raking his “*father’s bones out of the long furnace.*”

Now, Bringhurst's poems are rich in references to bones, one of those recurrent words found time and again in his poetic corpus. "For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985" is one such eloquent example, but in many other Bringhurst poems bones are the embodiment of something primordial that links the human body to the stones of the earth and the rest of the constituent elements of reality. One is also inevitably reminded of Paul Celan's "Todesfuge" and Bringhurst's "Larix lyalii", a variation on the Romanian poet's short lyric poem "Faddensonnen" in "The Lyell Island Variations". But there is nothing truly uncanny about the bones in "Kol Nidre", we learn as we read further into the poem as it unfolds into a celebration of *what is* in its manifold manifestations. As a matter of fact, what follows is a rather exhaustive catalogue of *what is*, lifted from the human and non-human realms. What links all creatures on Earth, human and non-human, living and non-living alike, is nothing more than the ground we all tread upon, the air we all breathe (the air all living things inhale into their lungs and exhale back to the exterior lung of the world), and "*the rocks and trees that look down on us all in their candor.*" This is an elemental universe of earth, air, water, stones, trees and animals. But this catalogue does not exhaust the rich diversity of links or bonds uniting humans to other humans when living in society.

More than 2,000 years ago, Aristotle claimed that humans are *political animals*, which means that we are bound to live together in social communities governed by laws agreed upon by consensus and sanctioned by custom. It is the presence of the others that makes us truly human; it is impossible to conceive of a man or a woman living in complete isolation, unconnected to any other human being. Living together with other human beings is no easy undertaking though. This is what Bringhurst's words appear to convey through the long enumeration of things that link us to one another:

all that remains of all that surrounded us when we were sane –
and the eyes; the hands; the silence; reciting the names
of what is in the world; divining the names
of what isn't; the wounds we inflict

to relay and mirror the wounds we receive;
and the knots that we cannot undo
between father and son, daughter and mother,
mother and father, the one

God and all his believers:

SP, p. 158.

The reference to everything that remains from a time when we were all sane is enigmatic. What follows this statement is of a metonymic nature: eyes and hands are projections of the self out onto the world outside that link us to other human and non-human beings. Like speech, silence is also of the essence in our reconciliation with *what is*, because apprehension of *what is* demands respectful attention if we are to feel its presence in reality. Reciting the names of what exists in the whole world is no minor undertaking: it begins with an act of humility and it turns out to be a gesture of gratitude, for it acknowledges the inexhaustible diversity of *what is*. Amid the living mesh of things, along this uninterrupted continuum, humans belong among all the rest of creation. And *what isn't* is the other side of the coin; we cannot try to divine the names of *what isn't*. Furthermore, wounds are a quintessentially human trait and they do unite us to one another, both the ones we inflict and the ones we receive. As the natural or spontaneous expression of love and hate, wounds remind us that we are fallible creatures and that we need the other's presence to

make sense of ourselves. The knots that bring humans together are innumerable and sacred at their very roots, and so the poetic voice speaks of the unbreakable bonds within a family and of the powerful religious bonds between “*the one / God and all his believers.*” That there is one God is possibly meant as a defence of religious tolerance and solidarity. *Alle Menschen werden Brüder* – those were the words of the dream Schiller dreamt of in his “Hymnen an die Freude” so long ago –, regardless of religious, political or ideological beliefs. And “Kol Nidre” closes with one more sacred knot that brings two human beings together: “*the marriage made without vows / between those who have pleased / and hurt one another that deeply.*” Are these words meant as a reference to the passionate love that unites two people forever? In genuine love relationships pain and pleasure go hand in hand; no doubt, the intimacy born between two persons that are unique and irreplaceable has got a moving sacred quality about it. After all, communion of body and mind enacts an emotional, intellectual and physical bond that is simply astonishing, beyond verbalism.

III · “Gloria, Credo, Sanctus et Oreamnos Deorum”

“Gloria, Credo, Sanctus et Oreamnos Deorum” saw the light of day in 1985, when part 1 of the poem was published in an untitled promotion piece (A.25) by The Writers’ Union of Canada in Toronto, in a single sheet, 21.5 × 28 cm., containing a poem entitled “Thirty Words for Deborah Peaker”, accompanied by a brief commentary and a photograph, and issued in conjunction with Bringhurst’s 1985 reading tour of Australia and New Zealand. Afterwards, it was reprinted as “Thirty Words” in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986) and in C.50.³ Later, it was reprinted as part 1 of “Gloria, Credo, Sanctus et Oreamnos Deorum” in B.47⁴, A.47 and A.92. The title of the poem brings together several Latin words that function as subtitles for each of the four parts the composition consists of. Thus, part 1 would be *Gloria*, i.e. the celebration or praise of *what is*; part 2 would be *Credo*, dwelling on human knowledge and on the poet’s own immutable convictions and beliefs; part 3 would be *Sanctus*, a treatise in miniature on the nature of knowledge and the sacredness of the Earth; and part 4 would be *Oreamnos Deorum*, i.e. a meditation on the ubiquitous presence of gods in this world, desperately calling to be felt by human beings. All four parts constitute a moving prayer in which the words “*knowing, not owning*”, ascribed to Canadian poet Don McKay, one of Bringhurst’s contemporary fellow poets and one of the most prominent authors of the so-called *Group of Five* (Jan Zwicky, Dennis Lee, Tim Lilburn, Don McKay and Robert Bringhurst himself), are repeated in all but one of the four sections to direct the reader’s attention to a new form of environmental awareness and ethics.

Part 1 of “Gloria, Credo, Sanctus et Oreamnos Deorum” has remained immutable in spite of the passing of time and the revisions the composition has undergone through successive textual incarnations. The poem opens with McKay’s words, “*Knowing, not*

³ See C.50 [Eleven poems]. *CutBank* (Missoula, Montana) 26 (Spring/Summer 1986): 37–58. Contents: 1) “Six Poems from *The Book of Silences*”: • “Uddalaka Aruni: A Song for the Weavers” (rev. in A.32); • “Wáng Bì” (rpt. in A.32, B.44; rev. in A.65); • “Jízàng” (rpt. in A.32, A.65); • “Línjí Yìxuán” (rpt. in A.32, rev. in A.47, A.65); • “Dānxiá Zìchún” (rpt. in A.32, A.47, A.65); • “Nánquán Puyuàn” (rpt. in A.32, A.65; see also F.2); 2) • “Sutra of the Heart” (rpt. in A.32, A.47, C.51; cf. S.241); • “Rubus Ursinus: A Prayer for the Blackberry Harvest” (rpt. from A.28); • “Thirty Words” (rpt. from A.25, where it appears as “Thirty Words for Deborah Peaker”); • “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985” (rpt. in A.32, A.47, B.27, B.59, B.60, B.78a, B.83a, B.93); and 3) “Tending the Fire” (rpt., with new prefatory note, from A.27).

⁴ See B.47, *Witness to Wilderness: The Clayoquot Sound Anthology*, edited by Howard Breen-Needham, Sandy Frances Duncan, Deborah Ferens, Phyllis Reeve, Susan Yates. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1994: pp. 266–268. Contribution: • “Gloria, Credo, Sanctus & Oreamnos Deorum” (part 1 is reprinted from “Thirty Words” in A.32; full text is revised in A.47; the A.92 text is reprinted from A.47.)

owning”, which in their linguistic concision (only five syllables) remind us that *we do not own what we know*. Knowledge usually brings a sense of intellectual security or control, but also a form of dominion over what is known by the human mind. Humans *want* to know and *need* to know, which is a universal compulsion indeed, in much the same way they want to be happy and lead an authentic life. The whole history of humankind is nothing but a titanic effort sustained over time in reaching towards absolute knowledge of *what is*. Self-absorbed as we are, human beings tend to think that we are at the top of creation and take for granted that we do have a right to manage the Earth and everything in it as we please. But this poem is precisely a praise of what is objectively and stubbornly real, a moving celebration of the inexhaustible richness of *what is*. Two short four-line stanzas turn out to be enough to give voice to the conviction that the real is always more complex and interesting than whatever we might think or feel about it. Flattering or pleasure, narcissism or egotism, are secondary to the preeminence of what simply *is*, and so are mental constructs, simplifications of what is really real:

Knowing, not owning.
Praise of what is,
not of what flatters us
into mere pleasure.

Earth speaking earth,
singing water and air,
audible everywhere
there is no one to listen.

SP, p. 159.

The second stanza offers a view of Mother Earth as the primordial goddess out of which everything we know to exist springs to life. Humans have no monopoly on meaning or language, and so Earth is endowed with speech, for it does speak its own language, one made of earth, not of human words. It also sings *water and air* (only *fire*, the fourth of the classical elements, seems to be missing here). What Earth speaks or sings is to be heard everywhere as long as humans are ready to pay attention. But the Earth’s speaking and singing is moving further back into somewhere else where there is no one to listen. It is hiding itself, possibly because of humans’ greedy manners in their interaction with the world.

Part 2 sings of the poetic voice’s convictions or beliefs; it is as though it were saying, *This is what I firmly believe in*. Interestingly enough, the poem tessellates the three fundamental concepts of *being*, *knowing* and *touching* to advocate a total communion between *the knowing self* and *the known world*. The relationship holding between them should be balanced or harmonious, not one of subjugation. We humans are what we know, but absolute knowledge of *what is* is simply impossible, an intellectual undertaking that is doomed to failure from the start. A certain degree of humility is necessary in our intellectual confrontation with the real, and so the poet reminds us that it is essential to learn to value whatever “*rags*” and “*blisters*” we manage to possess of our knowledge of the world. The “*rags*” point to the impossibility of achieving a completely reliable or total knowledge of the world; the “*blisters*” are possibly meant as a reference to the pain inherent in much of our knowledge of what surround us. Indeed, blisters proliferate in hands and feet, which are the body’s prolongations in our interaction with reality, and the skin, that gigantic organ covering the human body, is our primary link with the world out there. In this respect, touching is meant as a reminder of human beings’ need for reliance on the first-hand raw materials the senses provide the mind with. The *I* is *a big eye* that sees

everything around it, but it is also *a vastly sensitive skin* capable of touching what it learns. Possibly there exists only what we can touch and what can touch us. However, touching something to know it does not necessarily mean that we own what we touch or try to know. We have to be ready to be touched by the world we touch, to let it go, to release and be released, and to become what we know and what we do not know during our knowing and unknowing at the same time. Thus, the ultimate message is a defence of humans' willing surrender to *what is*, of humble acknowledgement that we are not superior to what this world has to offer us. The whole poem is worth quoting in full:

Knowing, not owning:
being, not having,
the rags and the blisters
of knowledge we have:

touching the known
and not owning it. Holding
and held by the known,
and released and releasing,

becoming unknowing.
Touching and being
unknowing and knowing,
known and unknown.⁵

SP, p. 160.

Part 3 is a treatise on knowledge in miniature and a celebration of the sacredness of Earth, which is the immediate subject of investigation, the ultimate object and source of human knowledge. Bringhurst's poetry is rich in images of sharpened objects; the mind is usually conceptualized as being a sharpened tool to make sense of reality. Knowing is but an act of perpetually sharpening one's mind in our confrontation with the world, hence the opening verse lines of part 3: "*Sharpening, honing / pieces of knowledge, / pieces of earth.*" Earth and knowledge belong together, they go hand in hand, and so it does make sense to speak of sharpening handfuls of earth or pieces of human knowledge. *Sharpening*, in this context, means making more perfect, clearer or distinct to the human mind's apprehension. In any case, knowledge, like plants, springs from earth itself, one of the four classical elements out of which all things are made in this world. Therefore, getting to know anything at all is tantamount to "*unearthing the knowledge / and planting the knowledge / again,*" for the question arises from Earth itself and the answer is to be found in Earth itself – both question and answer "*inhabit the ground.*" As a token of gratitude an offer is made to Earth: "*hunger, not anger, / wonder, not terror, / desire, not greed*". The parallelism of these short verse lines emphasizes an important aspect: hunger for knowledge, or the irresistible desire to know, is a universal compulsion among humans of all times and historical periods, just because one cannot help but feel overwhelmed in the face of the grandeur of the universe. However, in the present state of affairs, anger, terror and greed seem to shamelessly dominate humans' way of relating to the world. Having forgotten the fundamental truth that we belong among a grander scheme of things, humans are angry at a world which has become a victim, a prey, an entity to be wringed, spoilt and abandoned. *Knowing, not owning* – this is

⁵ In B.47, the poem reads like this: "Knowing, not owning, / Being, not having / what knowledge we have. / Not owning the knowing. // Knowing the known / and not owning it means / embracing unknowing, / releasing the known // and becoming unknowing, / touching and being / knowing, unknowing, / known and unknown." *Witness to Wilderness: The Clayoquot Sound Anthology*, edited by Howard Breen-Needham, Sandy Frances Duncan, Deborah Ferens, Phyllis Reeve, Susan Yates. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1994: p. 266.

what we should be doing instead: trying to understand what it means to be alive in this irreplaceable world of ours, amid so much beauty, with humble respect and gratitude. Reality, the universe, is sacred at its roots. The whole of the human enterprise on earth is nothing but an attempt to make things cohere. Curiosity is of the essence; it is the prerequisite for humans to start inquiring about the ultimate nature of things. You cannot walk in a forest and simply ignore the teeming forms of life surrounding you everywhere you turn to look.

The five stanzas that follow convey a sense of emotional urgency and so they flow into one another in a spontaneous way. A series of indiscrete and seemingly unconnected elements brings together “*the touch of another, / the other’s reluctance, / the incense of fear*” as well as “*the smell of the horses / in darkness, the thread / of the story, the thread / of the thread of the story.*” What these words suggest is that the poet might be urging the reader/hearer to acknowledge the sense of communion uniting all humans, and humans and animals alike. However, *arrowhead*, *bowstring* and *snare* are all weapons to subdue or subjugate animals, which testifies to our thirst for dominion over the rest of creation. Of a very different nature is the beautiful meditation on breath that follows:

... the breath
going out, the breath
going all the way out

and half-turning⁶
and waiting there, listening.
Yes. Breath
that is lifted and carried

and entered and left.
Through the doorway of flesh,
the barely invisible
footprints of air.

SP, pp. 160-161.

Like speech, breath is of the essence in Bringhurst’s poetry. Like feet, breath is our most elemental link with the exterior gigantic lung of the world, and the body is the connection between the world at large and the self. In breathing, we are inhaling the air breathed by all other nonhuman creatures, and so this is a natural and democratic action we usually overlook or take for granted. Breathing is also a form of attention and a form of acknowledging the sense that we belong among the other living and nonliving creatures that populate this world. Breath is also inextricably linked to speech: words are semantic air that emanates from one’s lungs and manages to convey a wide range of meanings to our fellow human beings. This is truly a miracle that we tend to ignore.

Part 4 is a meditation on the ubiquitous presence of the gods, wandering homeless in this world of ours because we no longer acknowledge their existence. In his foreword to *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), Bringhurst himself speaks of “a lot of homeless gods – who dream of alpine meadows, rivers, rocks and trees and coral reefs and coves – forced to make do for a time with a diet that might consist of little more than sterile earth

⁶ In B.47, these lines of the poem read like this: “and stopping. The breath / stopped. Waiting there. / Listening. Not / breathing. And then // breathing, the breath / breathing again. / The breath going out, / the breath coming in.”

and poisoned air and water.” Killing and eating the gods is no crime though. It means trying to absorb them and make them part of our very flesh. Gods are innumerable and different in human cultures: they are *four-footed*, *winged*, *rooted*, *footless*, or *one-footed*, which are references to the presence of the divine, or spirit beings, in animals, birds, trees, mountains, and other creatures of the world, for instance among the native peoples of North America or in ancient Graeco-Latin mythology. This divine presence at the heart or core of things is no longer perceived by humans, but this does not preclude its existence, of course. We still need the gods for a number of purposes:

gods: making flesh
of their flesh, thought
from their thought in the form
of the traces they leave,

words from their voices,
music and jewellery
out of their bones,
dreams from their dances,⁷

SP, p. 161.

Our thinking and our singing and our dancing are all made possible by the very existence of gods, the poet tells us. And the poem closes with a prayer addressed to the stones, from which the poetic voice begs *forgiveness* for all the pain inflicted upon the Earth (of which the stones are the exterior skin) and *continuance* – i.e., the survival or the persistence of life in spite of the destruction of the world in the hands of greedy humans. However, stones remain unperturbed, impassive, unmoved. They are stones after all, in spite of the poetic voice’s attempt at personifying them. But if you put your ear to them, they will tell you something you never heard before: they will teach you the stricture of being a stone, they will teach everything they have been mute witnesses to, they will sing you a song without words or notes.

IV · “*Rubus Ursinus*: A Prayer for the Blackberry Harvest”

“*Rubus Ursinus*: A Prayer for the Blackberry Harvest” was first published in 1985 as a broadside (A.28), 26 × 33 cm., issued in Mission, British Columbia, by Barbarian Press. According to the colophon, there are 126 copies, but, in fact, the edition consisted of only 25 signed and numbered copies, numbered from 1/126 through 25/126, with perhaps a few unnumbered strays. The poem would be later reprinted in A.32 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), in C.50 *CutBank* (Missoula, Montana) 26 (Spring/Summer 1986): 37–58, along with ten more poems (see footnote above), in A.47 *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995) and in A.92 *Selected Poems* (2009).⁸ The title combines both Latin and English, a classical and a modern language. But what exactly does *Rubus Ursinus* mean? It is Latin for *blackberry*, a small soft fruit that grows on a bush (also called a blackberry or a bramble) with thorns in gardens or in the countryside. Clearly, this poem belongs among the jewel-

⁷ In B.47, these lines read like this: “gods: making flesh / of their flesh, thought / from the traces they leave, / words from their voices, // music and jewelry / out of their bones / to rekindle their lives / in our dreams and our dances.”

⁸ “*Rubus Ursinus*” was later reprinted in B.106, *Affix This to That with Poetry*, Gaspereau Press poetry sampler. Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau, 2009: [ii–v], alongside “The Greenland Stone” and “Herakleitos,” all rpt. from *Selected Poems* (A.92).

like short lyric poems in Bringham's literary corpus – among such early poems as “Poem About Crystal”, “A Scholium” or “An Augury”. In its verbal concision, the poem, consisting of only eight short verse lines, tessellates three little movements for the soul: the description of the picking of blackberries amid the stinging thorns of the bush that hurt one's hands, a vocative addressed to three different people in lines marked by strong enjambment, and what looks like a rhetorical question awaiting no answer. This is the poem in full:

Reaching through thorns,
milking the black
udders with stung
wrists. Sister and
mother and un-
named stranger, say:
whose is this dark
blood on my hands?

SP, p. 162.

Blackberrying (i.e., harvesting blackberries from their bush) is akin to milking the udders of a cow, but the difference here lies in that what the harvesters get from the thorny bush is not white milk but dark blood that stains their hands. It remains a mystery why the speaking voice in the poem should address a sister, a mother and an unnamed stranger, all of them probably taking part in the same act of picking blackberries. In any case, the moment has the texture of mystical transcendence: the Earth is bleeding in the form of blackberries' juice giving way in the harvester's hands. This dark blood is not dissimilar from the one running through humans' veins, for human and nonhuman creatures alike are born from the bosom of Mother Earth. This appears to be the profound message beneath the lines, or so it seems. Stylistically, it is no random choice that adjectives (*black*, *stung* and *dark*) should be left lingering mid-air at the end of lines 2, 3 and 7, and that even a prefix (*un-*) should be rent apart from its past participle at the end of line 5, since the voice speaking in the poem is tentative and advances falteringly in the unfolding of this prayer. It is not known whether the prayer in itself is meant to accompany the blackberrying or not, as is the case with popular songs sung in traditional agrarian societies. Whichever the case, this short composition keeps on resonating in the echo-chamber of one's mind long after one has finished reading it aloud and tasting its very texture on one's tongue.

V · “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985”

Published for the first time alongside other poems in *CutBank* (Missoula, Montana) 26 (Spring/Summer 1986): 36–58 (C.50), “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985” is a poem central to Bringham's poetic corpus. Shortly afterwards, it was reprinted in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), and almost ten years later in Bringham's major anthologies – *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995) and *Selected Poems* (2009). It has also been reprinted in a number of anthologies throughout the years,⁹ which testifies to its

⁹ (1) In B.21, *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Two*, edited by Gary Geddes, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988: pp. 490–505. Contributions: “The Beauty of the Weapons”, “The Sun and Moon”, “Poem about Crystal”, “Anecdote of the Squid”, “Xenophanes”, “The Stonecutter's Horses”, “The Song of Ptahhotep” (all rpt. from A.14), “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985” (rpt. from A.32). (2) In B.59, *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, 6th edition, edited by J. Paul Hunter & Jerome Beaty. New York: Norton, 1995. (3) In B.78a, *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Three*, edited by Gary Geddes, Toronto: Oxford University

central position in the authors' entire work. Written in the tradition of Paul Celan's "Todesfuge", Bringham's poem concerns the horrors of the Holocaust as embodied in the so-called *Todesengel* (Angel of Death) – i.e., Josef Rudolf Mengele (b. Günzburg, Bavaria, 16 March 1911), an infamous SS captain and physician known for his horrible medical experimentation on prisoners at the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau and his selections of prisoners to be executed in the gas chambers. He was in charge of supervising the arrival of new prisoners in the camp, determining who was to survive as a forced labourer and who was to be immediately gassed. He was also known as *der weiße Engel*, for, as he stood on the platform wearing his white coat and inspecting new arrivals, directing some to the left and some to the right, he looked like a white angel with outstretched arms. During his 21-month stay at Auschwitz, he gained notoriety for performing grisly medical experiments on camp inmates: he was particularly interested in twins and in physical abnormalities, and performed terrible medical experiments upon the camp prisoners such as changing eye colour by injecting chemicals into children's eyes, amputations of limbs, sterilization and shock treatment performed on women, vivisections on pregnant women, or shameless dissection of twins' bodies. Even if his chosen victims were placed in special barracks and saved from the gas chamber, most of the experiments resulted in painful deaths. Cosmic justice did not apply in his case: he evaded capture and managed to escape Germany after the war. In spite of being hunted as a Nazi criminal war, he spent the rest of his life under a false name quite unmolested in a number of places in South America – Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil, where he died in Bertiooga on 7 February, 1979. He never showed regret or remorse for the crimes he had committed while at Auschwitz. On 6 June 1985 his bones were exhumed in Brazil and identified as his by forensic experts. In 1992 a DNA test confirmed the identity of the bones. There was no doubt about it: these were the bones of the Nazi war criminal who managed to evade capture for 34 years.

It is not necessary to know all these background details to be in a position to understand this moving poem, the work of a passionate intelligence and a technical accomplishment. Bringham writes with emotional force about Mengele and those who dug up his bones in Latin America. In the glossaries at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986) and of *The Calling* (1995), the author gives the reader the essential pieces of information needed for a proper understanding of the poem:

JOSEF MENGELE (1911-1979?) The German physician in charge of medical experiments at Auschwitz-Birkenau. After the war, he was rumoured to be living in South America, then to have drowned near São Paulo. In 1985 a skeleton said to be his was exhumed and its identity exhaustively tested.

Bringham's poem consists of three stanzas and three movements for the hearer's or reader's soul. In the first stanza, the speaking voice addresses the war criminal through three vocatives and meditates on the ultimate ownership of these bones researchers are unearthing. There is no need to dwell on the heinous medical experiments he performed on camp inmates; the vocatives are eloquent enough: this is a murderer, a physician who

Press, 2001: pp. 388–400. Contributions: "The Beauty of the Weapons", "Anecdote of the Squid", "The Stonecutter's Horses", "These Poems, She Said", "Poem without Voices", "For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985" (rpt. from A.47). (4) In B.83a, *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing*, edited by Laurie G. Kirszner, Stephen R. Mandell & Candace Fertile. Scarborough, Ontario: Thomson/Nelson, 2003: pp. 541–542. Contribution: "For the Bones of Josef Mengele" (rpt. from A.47). (5) In B.93, *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing*, edited by Laurie G. Kirszner, Stephen R. Mandell & Candace Fertile, 2nd Canadian ed., Toronto: Nelson, 2007 [actually distributed in spring 2006]: pp 597, 838–844. Contributions: "For the Bones of Josef Mengele" (rpt. from A.47); "The Way the Weather Chose to Be Born" (rpt. from A.62).

does not save humans from death or illness, but who causes people's death through horrible procedures. In any case, the act of exhuming Mengele's bones prompts a profound meditation on the symbolic significance of bones, which are central to Bringhurst's poetry from beginning to end. The bones resemble old bread that crumbles into pieces as soon as one touches it with one's fingers, and so the German physician is not drowning (he is thought to have drowned accidentally while swimming in the Atlantic, or to have died of a stroke while swimming), but eating:

Master of Auschwitz, angel of death,
murderer, deep in Brazil they are breaking
your bones – or somebody's bones: my
bones, your bones, his bones, whose
bones does not matter. Deep in Brazil they are breaking
bones like loaves of old bread. The angel
of death is not drowning but eating.

SP, p. 161.

In the second stanza, a sort of violence is being exerted upon the bones, which are inanimate, seemingly devoid of speech, nothing more than the mute remains of a monster. The researchers unearthing the corpse are urging the bones to speak: "*Speak!* they are saying. *Speak! speak! / If you don't speak we will open and read you!*" With guns to their heads, the bones are personified and all of a sudden they start confessing their guilt: "*Yes! It is true, we are guilty!*" The bones' identity was exhaustively tested, Bringhurst tells us. All kinds of forensic tests were performed on the bones to make them reveal their owner's identity. There is a sense of emotional urgency conveyed in this second stanza which is simply moving. A sort of climax is reached in its last verse line, where the bones give up and confess their guilt openly. The premise that the bones are guilty is central to the second stanza, and is certainly found at the geometrical centre of the composition, but the third stanza will prove that bones are not guilty at all.

"*Butcher, baker, lampshade and candlestick / maker*": the opening vocatives suggest, again very subtly, the horrors attributed to Mengele while exercising as SS physician at Auschwitz-Birkenau. He was a true butcher because of the many limb amputations and dissections he performed on children and women alike; he was a baker because he sent thousands of innocent human beings to the gas chambers and then their bodies were burnt into ashes; he was a lampshade and candlestick maker who performed horrible experiments on the bodies of the Jews, from whose skins it is said the Nazis made lampshades. The bones have nothing to do with the monster, with the man who committed these atrocities. They are nothing but "*earth, metals, teeth,*" Bringhurst claims. They are not guilty. What is left from Mengele is nothing but a handful of dust, which is part of Earth itself, which is innocent. The guilt is found in the heart or the mind of the living human being; once dead, the horror is found in other human beings' hearts and minds:

These are not guilty. The minds of the dead
are not to be found in the bones of the dead.
The minds of the dead are not anywhere to be found,
outside the minds of the living.

SP, p. 162.

In a brief and lucid analysis of the poem, Robyn Sarah points out that Bringhurst's poem belongs to a tradition of poems written about the Holocaust, in spite of Theodor Adorno's statement that "After Auschwitz it is barbaric to write poetry." Among the most powerful

poems about the Holocaust are, of course, Celan's "Todesfuge" ("Death Fugue") and Anthony Hecht's "The Book of Yolek". But Bringhurst's poem does not deal with the subject of the Holocaust directly:

Vancouver poet Robert Bringhurst's "For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985", does not directly address the Holocaust. Its focus is an event decades later: the arrival in Brazil of a forensic team to exhume remains thought to be those of the infamous physician in charge of medical experiments in Auschwitz. Bringhurst's poem addresses the human need to seek what the tired jargon of recent years has named "closure"... [...]

The power of this poem sneaks up on us. The closing lines quietly deliver a message we weren't expecting, whose truth nevertheless hits straight home: The bones may be Mengele's, but the evil that was Mengele – the dehumanizing hatred, contempt for the sanctity of life – is not there to be found. Bones are only bones. But the evil that demonizes Otherness will exist as long as the human mind exists. We will not find it in a grave. If we would root it out, we must be vigilant against its manifestations among the living.¹⁰

VI · "Fathers and Sons"

Dedicated to Jan Conn and first published in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995) and then reprinted with a minor textual variant in "The Physics of Light" in *Selected Poems* (2009), "Fathers and Sons" is a moving meditation on the relationship between a father and a son. There might be autobiographical resonances beneath these terse verse lines: Bringhurst was an only child and he must have spent long periods of time in his father's company walking in the mountains of Montana, Utah and Alberta where he was raised as a young man. Those were formative years spent outdoors, in close contact with a vast natural space where he learnt to listen attentively to whatever the mountains, the rivers and the trees had to teach him in the form of welcome revelations. In the book of Nature¹¹ he would learn to read many pages that would later inform his own poems. As a matter of fact, Bringhurst's poems are full of air, water, stones, blood, trees, animals and the whole

¹⁰ See Robyn Sarah's article "Good poetry stands up to evil", published in *The Gazette* (Montreal), November 17, 2001: J3. Column on "For the Bones of Joseph Mengele," from *The Calling*.

¹¹ Sandee Wong, in a newspaper article entitled "Western's writer-in-residence provides safe environment for budding authors", published in *Western News* (London, Ontario) 35.12 (1 April 1999): 11, records a story and interview occasioned by Bringhurst's tenure as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario. At some point, Bringhurst tells of how his mother taught him to read: "Born in south central Los Angeles, now a place "full of barbed wire and broken glass," Bringhurst immigrated to Canada at the age of five. His father was an ambitious man with little education. His mother taught him to read and write at the age of three. "She used to give me legal pads and a pencil," says Bringhurst of his mother. "She taught me the alphabet first of all and I spent hours happily filling the pages with letters before I could read or write anything. She would come along and find the words that I had written quite by accident." Bringhurst's mother also instilled in him a love of books. "She used to read stories to me which I would memorize," he says. "I can remember she would get bored reading these stories over and over again and would change them, and I would then correct her because I had memorized them. So I was using my mother as a tape recorder, which is a terrible thing to do to anybody, especially a mother." Bringhurst was writing by the time he was 12, and published his first book when he was 25, but it was not "commercial," he says. "Poets don't make money by writing poems. I don't think I published anything of any interest or importance until I was almost 30." At some other point of the same article, the author speaks of the decisive role his mother played in his becoming a poet: "Perhaps [becoming a writer was a decision] made for me by my mother who did not happen to be able to play the piano or the violin or to paint or to speak Yiddish," says Bringhurst, "but she did know how to read and write and it occurred to her for some reason to teach me these skills very early." So whereas his father taught him to read the book of Nature, his mother taught him to read books full of letters.

living Earth in its entirety, but humans seem to be always somewhat dispensable or dwarfed, standing somewhere far away in the background. Now, “Fathers and Sons” is uncommon in Bringham’s corpus, concerned as it is with human relationships in such an explicit manner. At least three distinct parts are identifiable in this composition: a fragmentary, or to be more precise, metonymic portrait of the father’s physical appearance and character in stanzas 1 and 2; a meditation on the kind of emotional containment that dominated the relationship between a taciturn father and a son willing to be spoken to (stanzas 3 and 4); and the kind of outdoor *Bildung* the father provided the son with without his being aware that he was teaching him a fundamental lesson (stanzas 5 to 7).

The poem opens with a recollection of isolated but relevant fragments from the father’s anatomy. The son remembers the face, particularly “*the mouth crouched in the silence*” and the eyes, “*bright as ripe olives, slippery as stones / in the sunlit creek bed, and suddenly / lightless as ash.*” That the father was not a talkative man is crystal clear from the start. The string of similes relies on elements drawn from the natural world (*olives, stones and ash*) to try to make sense of the father’s inscrutable eyes. The bright and slippery eyes betray reserve, emotional distance, but what does strike one as a surprise is that they become suddenly “*lightless as ash*”, which suggests that there is no passionate light in them, no capacity for empathy or for placing oneself in the other’s shoes, not even the son’s. There is something uncannily frightful and impersonal about these eyes. That there might be a difficult or strained relationship between father and son is made clear by the words spoken by the autobiographical *I* in the second stanza, where he remembers the father’s voice. The poetic device at stake here is synaesthesia – i.e., the mixing of senses so as to shed light on a difficult emotion the poet is trying to convey. It is not the tone, pitch or quality of the father’s voice that the son remembers, but the taste instead. How is it possible for a voice to have a taste? A voice that is salt and that sits in the son’s throat only evokes pain. There is also salt in the tears one sheds, and emotional tension or pain usually gathers force or momentum in one’s breast or throat:

I remember
the taste of his voice, not the sound.
It was wet, salt, warm,
and it sat in my own throat, not in his,
like a mouthful of tears.

SP, p. 163.

The second movement of the poem (stanzas 2 and 3) dwells on the silence reigning between father and son. Theirs is a relationship marked by silence and emotional containment, as if they were incapable of giving voice to the unacknowledged feelings in their chests. It seems the father seldom addressed the son: he never spoke to him, he only “*yelled his name, and no more.*” What is simply astonishing is that the son dies before the father passes away, which is rationally impossible because, if that were the case, he would not be able to tell of his father, unless he were a ghost speaking his words from the afterlife in an afterworld. This is possibly intended as meaning that the son died or starved emotionally because he was deprived of the sense of warmth or protection a father is supposed to give a son. So the speaking voice in the poem tells of his own death in these moving terms:

I remember him
yelling my name, and no more. My father
outlived me. There was a light and I reached for it. He
touched the air’s cheek. Touched it
and floated there. Soared.

I suppose
he told everyone, later, how well [later is new in *SP* text]
he had warned me and coached me, but nobody
coached me. No one said anything then.
Not to me.

SP, p. 163.

The father does not talk to the son, even if he boasts that he has coached his son pretty well. Under these circumstances the son has been forced to become a self-made man, an autodidact, to learn everything there is to learn in life on his own. However, the father did teach him something of the utmost importance: spending long periods of time with his son outdoors, in the mountains, this father who could or would not talk to “*that halfbreed / thing he had sired or midwived*” (which is a pitiful self-reference) would teach him the elemental lesson of how to listen to the world, breathing through the feet, paying respectful attention to *what is*. Even if he would not talk personally to his son, the father taught the son to love the world (the stones, trees and animals in it), which is no unfruitful or dispensable lesson at all. The son’s emotional attitude towards the paternal figure is one of mixed feelings, and so he cannot help hating and loving him at the same time:

I watched him.
I listened. He talked
to the rocks and the trees,
the bees and the hawks, not to me. But he gave me
the wings.

And for this, for a moment, I loathed
and revered him.

SP, p. 164.

As if he were a modern version of Icarus, the son/poet learns to fly on his own with the wings his father has given him. This is no small legacy. If he is given the wings, then he is in a position to soar much higher, away from mediocrity and into the *numen* of things, to look at reality with fresh eyes and to listen to the polyphonic world of speaking nonhuman beings with open ears. Thus, the closing note is one of forgiveness and emotional reconciliation; the son has at last found a new peace of mind and reconciled himself with the father’s figure, through whose eyes and ears he learnt to pay attention to the beauty inherent in this world of ours. Even if silence was predominant in their relationship, the son has also learnt to hoard as little silence as he can get amid a chaotic world. After all, silence is one of the elemental prerequisites to pay respectful attention to what is worth listening to. We need speech, but we also need silence, and there is a pregnancy of meaning in silence itself. Silence *means*. It might denote spiritual affinity, profound thinking, humility and gratitude. In any case, this poem is a moving tribute to the father, whose death confirms that he has been alive in this world for a while. The section entitled “Their Names” in *The Calling*, where “Fathers and Sons” was published for the first time, is prefaced by a quote lifted from Vladimir Jankélévitch’s *L’Irréversible et la nostalgie*. And so is the section entitled “The Physics of Light” in *Selected Poems* (2009). When placed against the words of this poem, this epigraph resonates with a powerful energy:

Paradoxalement c’est la mort elle-même, décidant pour l’éternité, qui à jamais nous
sauve de l’inexistence.... Celui qui a été ne peut plus désormais ne pas avoir été....
Tout est perdu, tout est donc sauvé.

Strange to say, it is death itself, making a final decision, that rescues us once and for all from nonexistence.... What has once been can henceforth never not have been.... All is lost, so all is saved.

VII · “Hick & Nillie”

“Hick and Nillie” was first published in the section “Their Names” of *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995) and later reprinted in “The Physics of Light” in *Selected Poems* (2009). Like “Demons and Men”, “Hick and Nillie” is a conversational poem, reminiscent of other pieces in the Bringhurst canon like section I, “One-Room School”, in the seven-part poem *Elements* (1995), a meditation on the four classical elements. And it is also reminiscent of the Platonic dialogue *Cratylus*, a meditation on the relationship holding between names and objects, which resonates powerfully beneath the lines of a conversation between the god and the poet on the ultimate nature of words. The composition has got a tripartite structure: firstly, both poet and god dwell on the statement that “*all words are true*”; secondly, the poet stumbles upon the insight that words end up emptying themselves of meaning due to sheer repetition, by both humans and gods; and thirdly, the meditation closes with the conviction that silence has got a therapeutic or purifying effect on human language, for it cleanses words and takes them back to their pristine condition. The tension at the heart of the poem lies in the profundity of the thought being conveyed to the reader and the outward literary form the poem assumes, as a light-hearted conversation of no seeming transcendence at all. The very title, “Hick & Nillie”, suggests informality, irrelevance of content, a funny exercise in intellectual gymnastics. The truth is that there is profundity of thought in the poem though, as it seeks to penetrate the ultimate essence of nothing more and nothing less than human language and its relation to the truth. Words are windows open onto the flux of reality, tools in our intellectual confrontation with the world, sharpened things we handle to build knowledge over time. This is real dialectic, with Bringhurst at his most teasing in his effort to make us think about the truth-value and reliability of those mouthfuls of air charged with semantic meaning that we do not normally notice or tend to take for granted when using speech.

So the poem opens with a reflection on the truth that appears to be inherent in all words. It is the god that starts the conversation and asks the first fundamental question:

- Poet, said the god, Is this the truth?
— All words are true, the poet said.
— All words?
the god said.
— All words, said the poet.
— Lies are also true then, said the god.
— They are, the poet said. All words
are empty, useless, placeless, true.
— Some words have places, said the god.
— Many words have places, said the poet.
— Are those with places empty? asked the god.
— Not if they’re in place, the poet said.

SP, p. 164.

It seems to us that echoes from Plato’s *Cratylus* are heard between these lines. Concerned with the relationship holding between language and reality, the central theory of Plato’s dialogue is that names have a natural affinity with their objects. There is a natural

rightness implicit in names and so one cannot but embrace the impossibility of false speaking. In *Cratylus*, Plato sets out two opposing theories regarding the relationship holding between words and objects. Two main characters are the protagonists of the Platonic dialogue: Hermogenes holds that names are attached to things by convention, that they are merely conventional labels imposed by agreement or custom (*nomos*) and changeable at will, whereas Cratylus claims that everything has a naturally correct name. Cratylus himself is a disciple of Herakleitos, who believed that names give some indication of the nature of their objects and bear an essential relation to it (fr. 48, βίος-βίος). To Hermogenes, things have names by nature, actions are realities, and speech is an action performed with words, which are its proper instruments and serve a twofold function – communication (informing) and the differentiation of one real thing from another (i.e., distinguishing things as they really are). The general essence of a name is to be an informative and diacritical instrument. But any tool, to perform its function properly, must be made by a skilled worker, and names are no exception. Their maker must have been a lawgiver, the rarest of all human craftsmen. For Plato this is none other than the philosopher, the dialectician, who handles words with utmost sensitivity and skill. Naming is no light undertaking: a name is only correct if it makes clear the nature of the things it names. Socrates, the third speaker in the dialogue, shows, by a torrent of etymologies, how certain words or names reveal the nature of their objects. He reflects on how Homer speaks of different names given by gods and men, and presumably the gods know the right ones (*Iliad*, 20.74, 24.291 and 2.813 f.). People with no respect for truth distort words with the passing of time. But, according to Socrates, truth is not to be got from names (428c-40e).

By contrast, Cratylus' premise is that correctness of names lies in their power to reveal the nature of their objects. False speech is impossible, he claims. To speak falsely would be to speak what is not, and to say what is not is not to say anything, but only utter meaningless sounds. Cratylus insists that the resemblance between names and their objects is so close that names are the only source of information and so he who knows the names knows the objects too. Names are the only source of knowledge for him. The idea that the correct concept of a thing must be inherent in its name was widespread in Plato's time. In this respect, a true word is one which speaks of (or describes) things as they are. In Greek eyes, names themselves fulfilled this condition: the correctness of a name means that it will show the object as it is. However, Socrates says that to take names as a guide to realities is dangerous, for names are copies of realities, and it is more enlightening to learn from the original directly. Names are imitations of their objects, representations. Names, as copies, cannot be perfect, or they would be indistinguishable from their objects, which is absurd. Thus, in the world of sense, accuracy is never more than approximate. The true power of names is that they deal with essences; only by using words can we exercise the uniquely human capacity to generalize. The correctness of names must be tested by their capacity to distinguish the essences, or indwelling nature, of things. Thus, the effective resemblance is not between things and their names, but between things and forms – those steadfast and unchanging ideas. "The upshot of the *Cratylus* is that names do give information by distinguishing between classes or essences of things."¹² The conclusion of the whole dialogue is "that names offer no help in discovering the essential natures of things, though they serve to communicate those natures when known."¹³ And so we must find something other than names to reveal the truth. If we embrace the Heraclitean flux-doctrine (the idea that everything is in perpetual change) and take it to an extreme, then if all things are

¹² W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*. Volume V: *The Later Plato and the Academy*, Cambridge: CUP, 1978 (reprinted 1979), p. 28. See pages 1-31 for a detailed discussion of this dialogue.

¹³ W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Later Plato and the Academy*, p. 30.

actually in flux, they cannot even be spoken of. What is continually changing cannot be spoken of or known, because even as the knower approaches it, it becomes something different. Thus, knowledge itself cannot exist. Either it remains the same (which contradicts the flux doctrine) or if the very form of knowledge is always changing, it will no longer be knowledge.

Turning back to Bringhurst's poem, if we presume that "*all words are true*," then lies are also true, because they are also made of words and so there is no way of admitting the falsity of speech. However, the poetic voice resorts to paradoxical statements – "*All words / are empty, useless, placeless, true*." – and to tautological statements – "*All words are true, the truth is true, / and lies are also true*." – when trying to pin down the ultimate essence of words. The words used by the gods must be of necessity different from the words used by simple mortals. Even if words are the tools poets use to make their own poems ("*you / and I stand eye-deep in our words*," says the god), it might seem appropriate to think that maybe only gods know the right words, the ones that truly uncover the essence of things. However, the second movement of "Hick & Nillie" dwells precisely on the pernicious effect repetition, by humans and gods alike, has got on words:

— Words become less true with repetition,
even by a god.
— And less true still,
with repetition by a poet.
— Yes. All words were true in the beginning,
but all words now are less true, and a time
will come when all words will be false.
— What happens then? the god said.
— Speech will happen only in
the spaces that remain between the words.
— But speech is action, said the god.
— When words turn false, all acts
will do the same, the poet said.
— And then?
— The gods will stop. The poets
will grow silent, or turn vicious,
or turn coy.

SP, pp. 165-166.

These verse lines tell the story of the fall of language, as it were. Once upon a time, words were reliable tools of communication and knowledge, and they unveiled the heart of truth at the core of things. In the beginning was the *λόγος* – a primordial force that allowed humans to name things as they are. The pristine *λόγος* was true, but then something ominous happened and words started to be less and less true owing to sheer repetition. In due time all words will be false and true speech will have to be looked for somewhere else – in the spaces between the words, i.e. in silence. Speech is an action humans perform with the help of words and if words turn false, then "*all acts will do the same*," nothing will matter that much because of radical epistemological indistinguishability and moral degeneracy. At that point in time when words cease to be sharpened tools of precision in our naming of reality, "*the gods will stop*", which means that their presence will go unnoticed to humans (we live in a world where gods wander homeless from one place to another, says Bringhurst), and poets will have no option left but to remain silent, not to utter a single word. Silence will prove to be the only effective cure in that state of affairs:

— Silence, like clear speaking,
washes words. In time they will
come true again. But then, of course,
they will be different words.

— How long

will all this take? the god asked.

— Moments, said the poet.

— Moments?

— Less than the time it takes to speak a word.

SP, p. 166.

Silence will return words to their pristine condition of epistemological precision. Words will be true once again as soon as they pass through the therapeutic or purifying prism of silence. We might come to think that this will take a long time, but the poet informs the god that it will only take moments – a minimum fraction of a second. Maybe poets themselves are in charge of purifying the *words of the tribe*, the language that is wounded or in tatters due to shameless misuse or abuse by humans who do not have any regard for the truth or the cultivation of language with some degree of elegance, beauty and precision. Or maybe it is silence that carries out this self-regeneration process at the heart of words used for innumerable purposes in everyday communicative transactions among humans. Like philosophy or science, serious poetry also cares for the state of well-being and health of the words with which poems as beautiful artefacts and containers of truth are woven. Poets handle words as tools of precision, charged with meaning and a degree of musicality: their choice and arrangement on the page is not random at all. Every word falls into place; the words that are *in* place, the poet speaking in “Nick & Nillie” says, are not empty, for they manage to convey a meaning worth communicating to other fellow human beings. If that were not the case, then silence might as well be a better path to choose.

VIII · “Demons and Men”

“Demons and Men” was published for the first time in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), and then reprinted with just one textual variant in *Selected Poems* (2009). Every poem of Robert Bringham is a self-contained, organic unity, yet each is bound to its fellows by a subtle web of interconnecting threads. “Demons and Men” is no exception in this respect and might be said to be linked to “Hick & Nillie” inasmuch as they share a similar dialogic structure. However, from a purely thematic point of view, it is closely connected to “Children of the Old Horse”, a short poem also included in “The Physics of Light” section; to “Herakleitos”, the opening poem in the Pre-Socratics’ sequence of “The Old in Their Knowing”; and to the second of the “Six Epitaphs” in the section “Bone Flute Breathing” in *Selected Poems*. Even “The Occupation”, a poem also found in “The Physics of Light”, is subtly based on the Heraclitean doctrine of the eternal flux of sensible things in the world. What all these pieces have in common is a concern with the thinking of Herakleitos, one of the essential pre-Socratic philosophers. Not much is known about the details of his life. This is what Guy Davenport tells us of the unknown man in his brilliant introduction to *7 Greeks*, which gathers an ambitious handful of translations from the classical Greek of Archilochos, Sappho, Alkman, Anakreon, Herakleitos, Diogenes and Herondas:

Of Herakleitos we know only that he lived in Ephesos between 540 and 480 BC, and that he wrote a book dedicated to Artemis, fragments of which have survived through quotation by later writers.

The astuteness and comprehensiveness of his insight into the order of nature have commanded attention for 2500 years, exhibiting a freshness for every generation. Plato counted him among the transcendent intelligences, as did Nietzsche, Gassendi, Niels Bohr, Spengler. His presence as a spirit in both modern poetry (Eliot, Pound, William Carlos Williams, Hopkins) and modern physics makes him peculiarly a twentieth-century guide, one of our daimons.¹⁴

Even in the handful of tattered fragments we have of Herakleitos' poem *On Nature*, the extraordinary form of this sage's mind is discernible in the precious, isolated strings of gnomic words. Not all philosophers can be so broken and still compel attention for over 2,500 years. It is good news to learn that Herakleitos still has an important lesson to teach to present men and women of the third millennium CE, and that his philosophy has been preserved in scattered jewel-like fragments that have managed to survive into the present in one way or another. What Bringhurst so marvellously accomplishes in "Demons and Men" is rescuing precisely two fragments of Heraclitean wisdom from the past and tessellating them into a unique poem of rare beauty and perfection. Herakleitos' words in classical Greek are placed side by side with the poet's rendering into English, so that if the reader does not read Greek, this should not be an obstacle for a proper understanding and enjoyment of the poem. Communication with the reader in crystal-clear and elegant language is a recurrent concern of Bringhurst's entire literary career indeed.

"Demons and Men" consists of at least four clearly identifiable parts and, curiously enough, the whole composition exhibits what looks like a circular structure. The opening stanza strikes the reader as an unexpected surprise: "*Nature, Mr Alnutt, / is what we are put in the world / to rise above.*", says Katharine Hepburn to Humphrey Bogart in the film *The African Queen* (1951). Hepburn's words make sense when placed against Herakleitos' first words, which are quoted at the heart of the poem. The first of the Heraclitean fragments Bringhurst resorts to is fragment 119, lifted from Stobaeus, *Anth.* IV, 40, 23: ἦθος ἀνθρώπου δαίμων, which Kirk, Raven and Schofield translate as "Man's character is his daimon."¹⁵ According to these scholars, the gnomic sentence contained in this fragment is

a denial of the view, common in Homer, that the individual often cannot be held responsible for what he does. δαίμων here means simply a man's personal destiny; it is determined by his own character, over which he has some control, and not by external and often capricious powers acting perhaps through a 'genius' allotted to each individual by chance or Fate. Helen traditionally blamed Aphrodite for her own weakness, but for Heraclitus (as indeed for Solon, who had already reacted against the moral helplessness of the heroic mentality) there was a real point in intelligent and prudent behaviour.¹⁶

For his part, Guy Davenport translates ἦθος ἀνθρώπου δαίμων as fragment 69 in his book in the following concise terms: "Character is fate." In the introduction preceding his translations, he dwells on the decision he has made in translating these words like this, following Novalis' example:

¹⁴ See Guy Davenport, *7 Greeks. Translations by Guy Davenport*, New York: New Directions, 1995, p. 15. Davenport published his own translation of the Pre-Socratic philosopher's fragments in a beautifully designed book entitled *Herakleitos*, published by Peter Koch in a special limited edition in 1990.

¹⁵ See the classic *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 1983, p. 211.

¹⁶ See G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, pp. 211-212.

In Fragment 69 I have departed from literalness and accepted the elegant paraphrase of Novalis, “Character is fate.” The Greek says that ethos is man’s daimon: The moral climate of a man’s cultural complex (strictly, his psychological weather) is what we mean when we say daimon, or guardian angel. As the daimons inspire and guide, character is the cooperation between psyche and daimon. The daimon has foresight, the psyche is blind and timebound. A thousand things happen to us daily which we sidestep or do not even notice. We follow the events which we are characteristically predisposed to cooperate with, designing what happens to us: character is fate.¹⁷

In Bringham’s poem, Herakleitos’ words are placed at the heart of the second movement of the piece. *Dichtung* = *condensare*, said Ezra Pound. The poet has an elegant way of compressing a wealth of information into a few verse lines with the astonishing economy of just a few linguistic strokes. Bringham reveals the literally physical source of the Heraclitean words he has rescued from oblivion: “*chicken-scratched / papyrus*” in the temple of Artemis, the sylvan goddess to whom the philosopher dedicated his now-lost poem *On Nature*. The classical Greek words ἥθος ἀνθρώπου δαίμων Bringham translates as “convention is a demon” (“habituation is a demon” in the first version of the poem published in *The Calling*). And what follows this translation is a gloss or detailed explanation on the word ‘demon’, which has nothing to do with devils, sin or damnation – words belonging to the Christian discourse of salvation or damnation of the human souls in an afterlife:

Herakleitos to Artemis,
 leaving a fraying brick of chicken-scratched
 papyrus on the sunlit polished stone:
 ἥθος ἀνθρώπου δαίμων –
 “convention is a demon” – meaning [habituation in *The Calling* version]
 nothing to do with devils or damnation;
 meaning nothing to do with sin, for which
 there is no word in Herakleitos’ language.

SP, p. 166.

What ‘demon’ in this context means is, according to Bringham, “*everybody’s culture, custom, manner – / her identity, his ethos – is a minor, mortal god.*” A man’s personal fate or destiny is determined by his own character and by the conscious decisions he makes at every step of the way. ‘Demon’ means “*each of us is both / a being and a character, / a person and the armour that it wears.*” Hepburn’s words make sense now: if Nature is what we are put in the world to rise above, it is because we have free will and the capacity to make our own decisions to direct our life path in the direction we choose. It is no happy coincidence that Hepburn should be uttering these words as they descend the river, for the river is essential in Herakleitos’ thought: the perfect embodiment of the flux-doctrine that everything is in perpetual change and yet there is an immutable or unchangeable substratum to reality, the ultimate principle of which was fire for this philosopher. The rest of lines in the third stanza is a chain of seemingly paradoxical statements that do make perfect sense in the wider context of Heraclitean thought regarding the existence of opposites at war at the heart of reality: “*You are you and not you. / A is A and not A. / I is not reducible to I.*” The I is a plurality, a crowd of people including the other, a set of cultural and personal circumstances that determine the shape of one’s lifetime.

¹⁷ See Guy Davenport, *7 Greeks. Translations by Guy Davenport*, New York: New Directions, 1995, p. 16.

The second string of Heraclitean words quoted by Bringhurst in his poem is lifted from fragment 78, which, in his monumental history of Greek philosophy, W.K.C. Guthrie translates as “Human nature has no insight, but divine nature has it.”¹⁸ Guthrie tells us that these words betray the philosopher’s “religious sense of the worthlessness of human knowledge in comparison with divine, his contempt for humankind in general, and his conviction that the “truth is something that is there for all men to grasp (in his language it is ‘common’), yet most men are too stupid to see it, and live as if they had their own ‘private’ wisdom.”¹⁹ For his part, Guy Davenport translates these words as fragment 61 in his book: “Men are not intelligent, the gods are intelligent.”²⁰ In Bringhurst’s rendering, we get to listen to Herakleitos speaking to his daughter in an idyllic setting:

And in the sea-blue sky
above the sky-blue sea, the still,
dry lightning of the pine branch
and the migratory jewel of the evening star.
Beneath the pine,
the thinning smell of sheep and lupine,
and the day’s heat seeping from the stone.

SP, p. 167.

Standing somewhere near a flowing river, an ubiquitous presence throughout “Demons and Men”, Herakleitos’ words are a meditation on the fragile nature of human understanding of *what is* as compared to the divine knowledge of omnipotent gods, for “The boy is to a man as a man is to a god” (fr. 105 in Davenport’s translation). The whole world is teeming with the presence of gods we humans are no longer able to see: “There are gods here, too” (fr. 74). *All humans think*, says the philosopher in one of his fragments (fr. 80), but only gods appear to be in a position to truly understand the ultimate essence of the real. Fragment 5 reminds us that “Our understanding of the greatest matters will never be complete.” However, it is at least good news to know that gods can truly grasp the irreducible core of meaning at the heart of things:

Herakleitos, looking out across the river
in the shrinking sunlight, thinks
the silt is rising in the river as the pine forest falls.
Looking out across the river,
he mutters to his daughter:
ἦθος γὰρ ἀνθρώπειον μὲν οὐκ ἔχει
γνώμας, θεῖον δὲ ἔχει –
“human culture has no purchase on what is,
but god-culture does.”

SP, p. 167.

Herakleitos’ daughter does not seem to understand the point her father is trying to make and so the philosopher goes on with his thinking:

— Touch is the condensation of vision,
Herakleitos says. The mind
is a string-game played
with fingers, ears and eyes.

¹⁸ W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*. Volume I: *The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans*, Cambridge: CUP, 1962 (reprinted 1967, 1971, 1977), p. 413.

¹⁹ W.K.C. Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 413.

²⁰ Guy Davenport, *ibid.*, p. 164.

— You used to say the brain
is a swollen nose, his daughter answers.

SP, p. 167.

“I honor what can be seen, what can be heard, what can be learned.” (fr. 11), says Herakleitos. Sensation is the starting point: from sensations all human beings have the power of forming general concepts, making possible the use of general terms. The senses provide humans with the raw materials upon which to build reliable knowledge, but it is necessary to discriminate and critically analyze whatever information they give us about the world. Herakleitos is prompt to warn us that “eyes and ears are poor informers to the barbarian mind.” (fr. 13) The mind or soul grows dizzy and confused when it relies on the bodily senses, which can only show it what is constantly changing. Thus, the senses and the mind cooperate in the construction of human knowledge about the world, and so, in Bringhurst’s metaphor, the mind becomes a musical instrument played by touch, hearing and sight. That the brain is conceptualized as being a “swollen nose” is a reminder of the common characterization of Herakleitos as being “the weeping philosopher” in the Roman period, “founded partly on humorous references to the idea that all things flow like rivers (cf. e.g. Plato *Crat.* 440C, believers in flux are like people with catarrh).”²¹ The daughter asks the father whether the gods could possibly help humans to learn to know *what is*, but it seems that this is a titanic effort humankind has to resume every single day we are given upon Earth. In much the same way “There is a sun for every day” (fr. 36), humans are to start from scratch every day. Truth is immutable, eternal, and we only need to look at the world with cleansed senses, even if “Nature loves to hide” (fr. 17):

— Thought starts from scratch each day, says Herakleitos,
and the fallers start wherever they left off.
Thought starts from scratch.
Understanding starts from scratch.
And the truth will save itself instead of you.

SP, p. 168.

“Demons and Men” closes with an explicit anachronism that takes the reader back to the opening stanza. It shows Herakleitos’ daughter at the cinema, watching presumably *The African Queen*, from which Katharine Hepburn’s words quoted in the first stanza are lifted. The river, embodying the perpetual change inherent in the real, manages to survive despite the devastating effects of colonization on the African continent, and despite the nonsense of human wars. Truth saves itself and *being* manages to survive – it *persists* – in spite of the destruction of the world in the hands of greedy human beings:

— In the city last week I saw a film,
says Herakleitos’ daughter.

— What did it say? asks Herakleitos.

— Two empires fought, and one of them won.
The jungle was thick, and the river survived.
But the missionary married the mechanic.
After that, who knows?

²¹ See G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 1983, p. 183.

IX · “Sunday Morning”

Dedicated to Jan Zwicky and Don McKay, “Sunday Morning” is a poem which remains central to Robert Bringhurst’s poetic corpus. Originally published in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), it was then reprinted with no textual variants at all in several publications and revised in subsequent textual incarnations.²² To the best of our knowledge, the best critical interpretation of this poem to this day is provided by Bringhurst himself and by professor Laurie Ricou, from the University of British Columbia (Vancouver), in a text entitled “Robert Bringhurst’s “Sunday Morning”: A Dialogue” (see footnote below for the detailed bibliographical reference). There is not much to be added to this illuminating analysis, for it looks at all the subtle nuances of meaning embedded in the texture of this unique composition. We can only state the obvious: that Bringhurst comes back from the wilderness to tell us what he has seen and heard in the form of welcome revelations or epiphanies (his poems are his gift to the world); that his love of and respect for the world makes his poems beautiful works of intellectual precision firmly rooted in the real; and that he is ultimately concerned with *being*, which is universal, indestructible, and human as well non-human. If anything, this is a poem in honour of *being* that directs the reader’s attention to the inexhaustible beauty inherent in the world. This might sound like an irreverent oversimplification in the face of the complexity of the exegetical analysis undertaken by Bringhurst and Ricou in their original approach to the intricacies of the poem. In the face of this complex composition, the only homage left us is paying attention to its details with due linguistic reverence and listening to what it has to tell us with open ears.

Bringing together a piece of living landscape and ideas on the mind and on what it means to *know* the world at all, “Sunday Morning” constellates resonant words into three 10-line stanzas followed by a compact final stanza of four short lines.²³ There is something beautifully inevitable about the linguistic shape of the poem, as if every single word fell exactly into place. In this respect, on the very genesis of the poem, fictional Laurie and real Bringhurst point out:

— I have a poem here entitled “Sunday Morning” and circumstantial evidence that indicates you wrote it. It includes a great white pelican, the sun, the moon, a saxifrage, a mountain, Guatemala, Great Slave Lake, two kinds of pines, and a considerable clutter of abstractions. Or it includes words that symbolize all these. It is a page and a half long and lives in a book. Is it a bird? Are you a tree?
— It sings and I don’t. At least, it makes a noise – like a breeding pelican or a jay – that I call singing.

²² (1) B.42, *Inside the Poem*, edited by W.H. New, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992: pp. 14-15, 88–93. Contributions: Sunday Morning (rpt. from A.32); • White Pelican, Blue Jay: Part I of Robert Bringhurst’s “Sunday Morning”: A Dialogue, by Robert Bringhurst & Laurie Ricou. The other half of this “dialogue” is S.125. (2) S.125, Laurie Ricou, “Saxifraga punctata, Raven”: Part II of “Robert Bringhurst’s ‘Sunday Morning’: A Dialogue,” by Robert Bringhurst & Laurie Ricou, in *Inside the Poem*, edited by W.H. New, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992: 93-100. Ricou appears as a fictional character in the portion of the dialogue written by Bringhurst, while Bringhurst appears as a fictional character in the portion written by Ricou. (3) C.52, “Sunday Morning”, *The Paris Review* (New York) 100 (Summer/Fall 1986): 54-55. Rpt. from A.32, *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986). On the other hand, “Sunday Morning” was revised in A.47, *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), and in B.69, *A Matter of Spirit: The Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry*, edited by Susan McCaslin, Victoria, British Columbia: Ekstasis Editions, 1998: pp. 41-58.

²³ Laurie Ricou claims that the structure of the poem is argumentative: “You have there something like an expanded Shakespearean sonnet form marking three stages – I would label them setting (or occasion), exposition, and resistance – followed by a pithy, witty paradox that sums up and sends your reader back through the poem, back to look at the line, back to consider the puzzles of transcribing in mute type the mysteries of the speaking voice going out of existence.” “Saxifraga punctata, Raven”, *ibid.*, p. 95.

— Did you write it?

— I don't know. It came together in my mind, in my limbs. (In you, those may be different; in me, they are the same.) I saw it, heard it, felt it, thought it, tasted it. I began to mumble, to stutter, of my own incoherence. So I kept at it until I could speak a few clear phrases. After a time, I even grew fond of them. Then, so as not to forget them, I wrote them down...²⁴

What is interesting about Bringhurst's reflection on the genesis of his own poem is precisely that the birth of "Sunday Morning" is no less a bodily experience than an intellectual or emotional experience. Poetry is a form of groping forward, a search for the right words – those minimal means available to humans – to capture the unspeakable and the unspoken as it were. What sets the unspeakable and the accompanying meditation going in this particular case is the sighting of a migrating pelican that "has veered from its normal migration route, which lies several hundred kilometers inland."²⁵ The first stage or movement for the soul in this poem describes the explicitly physical setting for Bringhurst's meditation:

Moonset at sunrise, the mind
dividing between them. The teeth
of the young sun sink through the breast of the cloud.
And a great white pelican rests in the bay,
on his way from Great Slave Lake
to Guatemala.
The mind is made out of the animals
it has attended.
In all the unspoken languages,
it is their names.²⁶

SP, p. 168.

The setting is evoked with an astonishing linguistic economy, with just a few brush strokes reminiscent of Oriental painting or Zen Buddhism. By what looks like a most curious celestial phenomenon, the moon and the sun coexist up above in the sky. The sun is rising and the moon is setting at the same time, while sharing exactly the same portion of space in the sky. Against this background, a big white pelican is seen resting in the bay, in Vancouver bay, for we learn that there was a real pelican Bringhurst saw on the outer harbor of Vancouver on a Sunday morning.²⁷ After all, the poem is *about migration*, says Laurie Ricou:

²⁴ See Bringhurst's "White Pelican, Blue Jay", Part I of Robert Bringhurst's 'Sunday Morning': A Dialogue, by Robert Bringhurst & Laurie Ricou, in *Inside the Poem*, edited by W.H. New, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 89.

²⁵ See Laurie Ricou's "Saxifraga punctata, Raven", Part II of "Robert Bringhurst's 'Sunday Morning': A Dialogue," by Robert Bringhurst & Laurie Ricou, in *Inside the Poem*, edited by W.H. New, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 94.

²⁶ An extra verse line is added in *The Calling* (1995) and *Selected Poems* (2009) version of the poem: "Mule deer, black bear, killer whale, salmon." The very animals mentioned here evoke the oral literatures of the First Nations of North America Bringhurst is so fond of.

²⁷ According to Bringhurst, the title "Sunday Morning" is not really an allusion to Wallace Stevens's well-known poem. "The most important source of the name is simple fact. It was Sunday morning when I saw the pelican." *Ibid.*, p. 90. And he did not compose the poem immediately after seeing the pelican. It was a busy time in his life and he had friends (Gary Snyder, Jan Zwicky and Don McKay, among them) visiting, so it was only weeks and months later that he set to work on the poem. "But of all those conversations, which were many and intense, the wordless one with the pelican is the one that stayed most vividly in my mind. And I contributed nothing to it: nothing but intent inaction. The pelican had been gone for weeks or months before I found my tongue." *Ibid.*, p. 90.

Cosmic migrations, if more predictable, figure aviary migrations. Moonset, for example, coincides with sunrise once each lunar month, at the new moon. The conjunction of sun, a stationary heavenly body (at least relative to earth), which is perpetually seen as mobile, and a continuously circling moon which only shows one face, is a paradigm of migration. The poem enacts a condition of moving between limits, of living in the spaces between.²⁸

Laurie Ricou claims that Bringhurst's poem "combines species names and biological, geographical particulars with abstracts, ambient pronouns, and copula constructions. So it's typically cerebral in that sense. The poem as brain teaser: how do you say the unsayable."²⁹ Thus, the second stanza of "Sunday Morning" concerns knowing, the mind and a tree called *Saxifraga punctata*. It opens with a complex definition of the verb 'to know': "*To know means*³⁰ *to hold no opinions: to know / meaning thinks, thinking means.*" This double aphorism might "teach that complete knowledge depends on setting aside the prejudices and feelings our culture has induced."³¹ But this paraphrase does not exhaust the wealth of meaning conveyed by these words. The double aphorism is reminiscent of the Zen koan or riddle. Opinions are not true knowledge, but mere shadows or tentative approximations to *what is*. Knowledge is objective, impersonal, detached. By means of intent inaction and effortless attention, knowing comes to happen. Knowing means that you are aware that every single thing in the world seeks to mean something, that meaning is larger than speech, that humans have no monopoly on meaning, that thinking is *its own purpose and significance*, as Laurie Ricou suggests. After dwelling on what it means *to know*, the poetic voice essays three different definitions of the mind. Ricou directs our attention to the mesmerizing repetition of the formula "*the mind is...*", which is put to eloquent use. In the first definition the mind is conceptualized as being a space, a place not taken or trodden upon: "*The mind is the place not already taken.*" There is a sense in which knowing is a form of groping forward into the unknown (i.e., what remains to be known), and so in this respect the mind might be said to resemble a place we have never been to. The second definition is much more complex in that it equates the mind with a constellation of water, tree leaves, a mountain and the moon:

The mind is not-yet-gathered beads of water
in the teeth of certain leaves –
Saxifraga punctata, close by the stream
under the ridge leading south to Mount Hozameen,
for example – and the changing answers of the moon.

SP, p. 168.

Saxifraga punctata is a flower species. Bringhurst himself gives us essential information about the proper names and trees mentioned in the poem (in the second and third stanzas). What they do have in common is that they are figments of the truth he is trying to penetrate and convey to the reader. By paying attention to the little details of the natural world, he is paying homage to *what is*, acknowledging a kind of beauty that is not man-made (but Nature-made) that deserves our attention and respect:

²⁸ Laurie Ricou's "Saxifraga punctata, Raven", *ibid.*, p. 94.

²⁹ Laurie Ricou's "Saxifraga punctata, Raven", *ibid.*, p. 94.

³⁰ "To know *is* to hold no opinions..." in the previous incarnation of the poem in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*.

³¹ Laurie Ricou's "Saxifraga punctata, Raven", *ibid.*, p. 94.

Other fragments of the truth, come to roost in the tree or stand with it, in honour of the pelican. Bristlecone pines, from the Shoshone and Paiute country in Nevada. Whitebark pines from the Rockies and Cascades. Dotted saxifrage from Mount Hozameen, which is a long, toothy ridge in the Interior Salish country, on the B.C./Washington line. Glaciers and rivers, and glacier-scraped granite and grasses and schists. The immensely delicate, persistent little flowers that grow in the palms and fists of the rock, and the intricate, sensuous hardness of the stone. Reminders that beauty is not of our making. Reminders that beauty requires our respect far more than our protection.³²

Bringhurst's is an accurate mind in love with precision, and this scientific accuracy is palpable in the references to trees and places mentioned in this quote. According to the second definition, the mind resembles the tiny beads of water that have not gathered yet in the leaves of the *Saxifraga punctata* that grows close to Mount Hozameen. What Bringhurst finds truly fascinating about these little flowers is their "diminutive glory in the early morning, wearing necklaces of tears"³³ (i.e., dewdrops). Finally, the third definition ("*The mind is light rain gathered / on the ice-scarred rock, a crumpled mirror.*") equates the mind with the rain gathered on rocks that have been disfigured through erosion, and so the water on its surface resembles "*a crumpled mirror.*"

The third stanza of "Sunday Morning" deals with *being*. To the poet, *to be* means to speak with the different tree species that inhabit this world, and also with all other living forms such as streams, glaciers, grass or birds. Speaking with them is tantamount to setting up a relationship of intense communion with all living things. This is after all a primordial encounter between self and Nature. Therefore, Bringhurst is absolutely precise about the use of names; he handles them with care and devotion. There is a wealth of information that is encoded (or embodied) in the names of the trees themselves: "Their names have meaning, more and deeper than the names of London or Jerusalem or Hadrian or Keats or Waterloo."³⁴ What they are is implied in "Sunday Morning", subtly evoked in between the lines. The implication is that the world is alive, and that it thinks and speaks. Thus, Laurie Ricou points out that the ultimate message of the poem might be "that the physical and breathing things of the world are profoundly to be thought about [...] that the way to deep thinking is through the plants and rocks."³⁵ The conversation between the self and the world has been going on uninterrupted possibly since the dawn of time; *being* embraces everything the mind encounters in reality, everything it comes to love. What one loves has meaning, which is indestructible and goes on forever. Bringhurst makes use of gnostic language to convey such profundity of thought:

To be is to speak with the bristlecone
pines³⁶ and the whitebarks,³⁷

³² Bringhurst's "White Pelican, Blue Jay", *ibid.*, p. 90.

³³ Bringhurst's "White Pelican, Blue Jay", *ibid.*, p. 92.

³⁴ Bringhurst's "White Pelican, Blue Jay", *ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁵ Laurie Ricou's "Saxifraga punctata, Raven", *ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁶ Bringhurst's "White Pelican, Blue Jay", *ibid.*, p. 91: "Bristlecones trees aren't pretty at all, but they are extraordinarily beautiful. They don't grow very tall, but the oldest ones go back about 5,000 years, which is to say they are the oldest individual, independent living beings in the world. What may have been the oldest of them all – the senior-most sentient being on the planet – was deliberately felled with a chainsaw in 1964 by a scientist, so-called, who couldn't wait to count the rings."

³⁷ Bringhurst's "White Pelican, Blue Jay", *ibid.*, pp. 90-91: "Whitebark pines are very pretty trees, as most sub-alpine species are. They're as flexible as yogis. You can tie their limbs in knots, and that's how they outwit the mountain snowloads and the wind. They carry their needles in bundles of five, like a wild rose or a human hand. And they depend on other creatures, not as intermediaries in actual copulation, as flowering plants so often do, but as midwives performing a kind of Caesarean section. Whitebark cones don't open of their own

glaciers and rivers, grasses and schists,
and if it is permitted, once also
with pelicans. Being
is what there is room for in that
conversation. The loved is what stays
in the mind; that is, it has meaning,
and meaning keeps going. This
is the definition of meaning.

On another level, the theme of the poem might be trees. Trees are at the palpating heart of the third stanza, which is a tribute to them. Trees are serenity in themselves. They are recurrent in Bringham's poems in fact. The poet himself claims that the mind is omnivorous, that it encompasses the whole world it has experienced and loved first-hand, that it consists of all the plants and animals it has known, and that speech is not enough to capture *what is*, which is vaster than what humans might say about it:

The theme of this confession seems to be trees. I, as a tree, am inclined to speak about other trees. The theme of the poem, I think, is what it says: that the mind is made out of the plants and animals it has watched, touched, smelled, thought and listened to, that being consists in speaking with other species of beings; that meaning is persistence, and that meaning in the end is what we love; that what-is is more than language; that language is a charming metaphor, but *out there* and *in here* and the arteries and veins and nerves which bind them are still present, functional, meaningful, even when language disappears.³⁸

Hence the poem closes with a four-line stanza that echoes the Zen riddles. It is still an intense meditation on *what is* and on language. The poetic voice claims that "*What is is not speech,*" which is our favourite tool to try to capture it, but something else. "*What is is the line / between the unspeakable / and the already spoken.*" Language is no panacea at all. *What is* is beyond verbalism; it resists being caught through words. It might be elusive, eel-slippery, evanescent. Words will not suffice to reduce the varied exuberance of the world into neat categories. Reality is a continuum of subtle nuances and connections between glaciers and rivers, grasses and schists, trees and lichen. The mutual interdependence between organisms reminds the poet that we live in the ruins of what was once a functioning whole, in an "impotent, directionless, and atomized" world where we appear to have lost all sense of communion with the larger world, which is largely nonhuman. It has taken the poet a lot of patience, love and attention to the minute details of the world to carve a poem like "Sunday Morning", a masterwork in miniature, out of the living mouthfuls of words that emanate from all living things in the world. This poem is the fruit of this uninterrupted conversation that the poet has conducted with *what is* for a long time now.

accord. They wait for Clark's nutcracker – a long-billed cousin of the whiskeyjack, the Steller's jay, the crow – to pry them open and eat the seeds. What passes intact through the nutcracker's guts – along with whatever he spills in his greed, unless it is eaten by ptarmigan, grouse, grey jays, winter wrens, and rosy finches, or by marmots and picas and voles – is what seeds the new generation."

³⁸ Bringham's "White Pelican, Blue Jay", *ibid.*, p. 91.

X · “Children of the Old Horse”

“Children of the Old Horse”³⁹ is closely connected to “Demons and Men”, another poem in “The Physics of Light” section in *Selected Poems* (2009), in its concern with Herakleitos’ flux-doctrine. What is striking about this short poem, written in spontaneous conversational English, is that Bringhurst manages to bring together into a brief composition of six three-line stanzas the thinking of two eminent philosophers: Herakleitos, the pre-Socratic philosopher who lived in Asia Minor in the sixth century BCE, and Zhào zhōu Cōngshēn (778-897),⁴⁰ a Zen Buddhist master who lived in Tang Dynasty China and was particularly known for his paradoxical statements and strange deeds. Paradox and obscurity seem to be two aspects both sages, Western and Eastern, had in common. At an early age, Zhào zhōu became ordained as a monk and then, at the age of 18, he met Nánquán Pǔyuàn (Nan-ch’uan P’u-yuan, 738-834), “a Zen monk trained, like Baǐzhàng⁴¹, under ‘The Old Horse,’ Mazǔ Daòyì, in Jiangxi. His own hermitage was farther north, in the oak forests of Anhui”, as Bringhurst himself tells us in the glossary at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986). Zhào zhōu received the Dharma from Nánquán Pǔyuàn through a dialogue in which the master asked the young monk the koan “What is the Way?”. Zhào zhōu attained enlightenment at the height of that intense conversation and continued to practice under the master’s guidance till he died. Afterwards, he wandered from one place to another, travelling throughout China, visiting the prominent Zen masters of the time before finally, at the age of eighty, he settled in Guānyīn àn, a ruined temple in northern China, where he taught a small group of monks for another 40 years till the very moment of his death. He became one of the great masters of Tang Dynasty China during a decadence time when the imperial hegemony was disintegrating due to the emergence of more and more regional military governors asserting their power. Many koans in the Buddhist classics *Blue Cliff Record* and *The Gateless Gate* concern Zhào zhōu.

The later title of Bringhurst’s poem, “Children of the Old Horse”, makes sense as soon as we learn that “The Old Horse,” Mazǔ Daòyì, was a Zen master, under whose guidance many prestigious Zen monks were trained, Nánquán Pǔyuàn among them. Both Herakleitos and Zhào zhōu are considered to be children of the Old Horse, heirs to the same ancestral legacy and form of wisdom. And both sages are put in the improbable anachronistic situation of a modern classroom. Herakleitos is a visiting professor in some kind of university,⁴² giving a lecture to avid learners, and Zhào zhōu is one of the students

³⁹ “Children of the Old Horse” was originally published under the title “Zhào zhōu Cōngshēn” in C.73 [Two Poems]. *Canadian Literature* 154 (Autumn 1997): 8, 110. Contents: • “Zhào zhōu Cōngshēn” (rev. in A.65, A.85); • “The Living Must Never Outnumber the Dead”. It was then revised in A.65 *The Book of Silences* (2001), and reprinted from A.65 as A.85 *Zhaozhou Congshen*. Sherman Oaks, California: Ninja Press, 2007 (a broadside, 43 × 28 cm, 75 copies on Nideggen paper). Recently it has been reprinted from C.73 as “Children of the Old Horse” under the section heading “The Physics of Light” in *Selected Poems* (2009).

⁴⁰ In *The Book of Silences*, Los Angeles: Ninja Press, 2001, Bringhurst gives us only essential information concerning this sage’s life: “Zhào zhōu Cōngshēn (Chao-chou Ts’ung-shen) 778-897? Traveled most of his life, setting in Hebei, northeastern China.” See the separately bound section entitled “Contents & Notes” at the end (unpaged).

⁴¹ In the glossary at the end of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), Bringhurst tells us who this sage was: “BAǏZHÀNG HUAIHAI (Pai-chang Huai-hai, 720-814) Reputedly the author of the first set of Zen monastic rules, including the famous formulation ‘One day no work, one day no eat.’ Born in Fujian, he succeeded Mazǔ Daòyì (Ma-tsu Tao-i) as Abbot at Nanking in Jiangxi, then moved to Xinwu, also in Jiangxi, under Baizhang Mountain.”

⁴² At this point, it might be worth dwelling for a while on Bringhurst’s relationship with the university over the years: “Robert Bringhurst is one of those scholars who work best outside the formal academic setting. Although he has had brief affiliations with universities since leaving academia after earning his Master of Fine Arts at UBC, this prodigious scholar, poet, and translator, currently based on Quadra Island, has mostly

in the room. The Greek philosopher is expounding his flux doctrine, i.e. the notion that all sensible things in this world are in a state of permanent flux: “*Can’t step twice / into the same river, Visiting / Professor Herakleitos said.*” These simple words embody the Heraclitean view of the world as all flow and movement. One of Herakleitos’ most famous sayings is: ‘One cannot step twice into the same river, for the water into which you first stepped has flowed on.’ (fr. 21, Davenport’s translation). He also said: ‘Everything flows; nothing remains. [Everything moves; nothing is still. Everything passes away; nothing lasts.]’ (fr. 20, Davenport), and ‘The river we stepped into is not the river in which we stand.’ (fr. 110, Davenport). W.K.C. Guthrie tells us that “the statement of the flux-doctrine which has become almost canonical in later ages, πάντα ῥεῖ, occurs in the ancient authorities only in Simplicius (*Phys.* 1313-11), and is unlikely to have been a saying of Heraclitus.”⁴³ In *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Kirk, Raven and Schofield claim that “the river-image illustrates the kind of unity that depends on the preservation of measure and balance in change”, and that the river-statement is found in at least two relevant fragments:

214 Fr. 12, Arius Didymus *ap.* Eusebius *P.E.* XV, 20, + fr. 91, Plutarch *de E* 18, 392B. [...] Upon those that step into the same rivers different and different waters flow... They scatter and... gather... come together and flow away... approach and depart. [...] According to the Platonic interpretation, accepted and expanded by Aristotle, Theophrastus and the doxographers, this river-image was cited by Heraclitus to emphasize the absolute continuity of change in every single thing: everything is in perpetual flux like a river. So **215** Plato *Cratylus* 402A... [...] *Heraclitus somewhere says that all things are in process and nothing stays still, and likening existing things to the stream of a river he says that you would not step twice into the same river.*⁴⁴

So the river is the embodiment of the perpetual change inherent in reality. Everything is pure metamorphosis, nothing stays the same, and ‘Change alone is unchanging’ (fr. 23, Davenport). Once Herakleitos has propounded his flux-doctrine with such concision, Zhàozhou gives voice to what looks like common sense and says something to this effect:

Zhàozhou rose. Sir, he said, far

worked independently. “Robert Frost said he had a lover’s quarrel with the world; I’ve had one with the university,” said Bringhurst. “I spent 10 years getting my BA. I started off majoring in physics and wandered all over the academic map before getting a degree in comparative literature. I’ve been a student all my life, but never a model student – and I haven’t proven a model teacher either. “In a normal year, I visit five or 10 different campuses, giving lectures, doing readings, sometimes teaching a seminar, but never sticking around. For me this has been an ideal arrangement. I’m not the sort of person who should stay very long in either a city or an institution. I’m happier zipping in and out again, giving my lecture, having a day or two of non-stop conversations, and going on my way. And equally happy staying home, writing and tending my little patch of forest.” Despite his reticence about long-term ties with universities, Bringhurst appreciates the honorary Doctor of Letters degree awarded him by the University College of the Fraser Valley. “I am thoroughly delighted to be receiving this honorary degree,” he said. “My relationship with the university is like a series of love affairs, not like a marriage. And I think that there is nothing the least bit shameful in intellectual promiscuity. Now and again, one encounters institutional scholars who are suspicious of non- institutional people like me. I see the degree not only as an honour but in a way as a vindication, and as evidence that institutions, like individuals, can think beyond their own immediate self- interest.” See the newspaper article entitled “Quadra Island Author Awarded Honorary Degree”, published in *Campbell River Mirror* (Campbell River, B.C.), June 16, 2006: A16. This is a lengthy news release evidently issued by the University College of the Fraser Valley.

⁴³ W.K.C. Guthrie, *ibid.*, p. 450, footnote 1. Footnote 3 informs us that Aristotle, in *Metaphysics* 987a32, explains how Cratylus “carried the views of Heraclitus to their logical extreme by correcting the sentence ‘You can’t step into the same river twice’ to ‘You can’t step into it once’. Between the instant when your foot touched the surface and the instant when it reached the bottom the river at that point had already changed.”

⁴⁴ G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 1983, pp. 194-195.

over your head there,
treading flowing water,

or standing in the middle
of your one-inch square
of dry rock,

five thousand miles from the closest
shore, where else
do you expect to step?⁴⁵

SP, p. 170.

If Herakleitos happens to be somewhere in the heart of continental China, with his feet pressing firmly on the ground, it is certain that the sea is far away from the exact location where he stands now. And if he is actually “*treading flowing water*,” then there is no way of stepping twice into the same river, because the river and the man are different from one moment to another. What is the point in reminding a classroom full of avid students like Zhàozhou that you can’t step twice into the same river? They already know. They have known it all the time. The Zen monk’s words are enigmatic, though, and still more enigmatic are the closing words of the poems: “*Quite, said Herakleitos, / and how often / can you step there?*” Zhàozhou leaves the classroom and marches away while singing “*left, right, left,*” which is a most curious reaction to the question asked by the visiting professor. His answer does not assume the expected form of words, but of an action instead. But, how are we to interpret this action? Possibly it is meant as a reminder that we humans flow in much the same way this incessantly changing river of reality flows. Actually, we are somewhere in the middle of the river of changing life, bathed by the flowing waters in all directions. Therefore, we can step into the river any moment we choose to do so, or cannot avoid doing it, because motion is the very essence of the real.

XI · “The Physics of Light”

Like the poem entitled “Giotto’s Bones” included in the section “The Living”, “The Physics of Light”, published for the first time in *Selected Poems* (2009), is a short poem concerned with painting and the way it comes to terms with interpreting light, colour, form and perspective in the world. At the core of the poem is what looks like Cézanne’s meditation on the nature of the real from a painter’s point of view. A French Post-Impressionist painter, Paul Cézanne (b. 19 January 1839 – d. 22 October 1906) produced a body of work that laid the very foundations for the transition of 19th-century to 20th-century painting. It is no exaggeration that both Picasso and Matisse should have considered him the father of all new modern artists, for he was a sort of bridge between Impressionism and Cubism. In fact, his explorations of geometric simplification and optical phenomena inspired Picasso, Matisse, Juan Gris, Georges Braque and many other painters to experiment with ever more complex multiple views of the same subject and eventually the fracturing of form. Fascinated about the complexity of human visual perception, the penetrating gaze beneath his paintings tries to convey both a direct expression of the sensations of the observing eye and an abstraction from observed nature. Cézanne’s mastery in his use of design, planes of colour, tone, composition and draughtsmanship to

⁴⁵ This stanza reads differently in its A.65 textual incarnation: “five thousand miles / from the nearest shore, where / else will you step?”

create complex fields through small brushstrokes reveals a lifelong passion to explore the ways in which painting reaches into the heart of *what is*, which must have been an appealing source of inspiration for Bringham's poem.

Cézanne struggled throughout his life to develop an authentic observation of the seen world by the most accurate method of representing it in paint that he could find. To this end, he structurally ordered whatever he perceived into simple forms and colour planes, as he was interested in the simplification of naturally occurring forms to their geometric essentials – such as the sphere, the cone, the cylinder. Of course, this demanded from him a profound knowledge of the complexity of spatial relationships and depth perception. His desire to capture the truth of his own perception compelled him to render the outlines of forms so as to attempt to display the distinct views of both the left and right eyes (binocular vision). Thus, his paintings augment and transform earlier ideals of perspective, in particular single-point perspective. Capturing all the complexities that an eye observes: this is what Cézanne was after. He wanted to see and sense the objects he was painting rather than think about them. Ultimately, he wanted to get to the point where sight became also touch. While painting, he was somehow capturing a moment in time⁴⁶ that, once passed, would never come back, and so he would take hours to put down a single brushstroke needed to contain the air and the light surrounding a single object. This love of precision, this physical exploration of *what is*, must have been truly fascinating to Bringham himself. Cézanne was also irresistible to Ernest Hemingway, who, in a memorable passage in *A Moveable Feast*, dwells on his own technique of writing simple, true sentences so as to build his own stories. Possibly what he had in mind was the use of simple brushstrokes that cumulatively create the impression of a rounded, perfect object placed in space, in much the same way simple sentences make paragraphs that make whole stories with a beginning, a middle and an end:

I was learning something from the painting of Cézanne that made writing simple true sentences far from enough to make the stories have the dimensions that I was trying to put in them. I was learning very much from him but I was not articulate enough to explain it to anyone. Besides it was a secret.⁴⁷

“The Physics of Light” consists of two clearly distinguishable parts: whereas the first concerns an explicit meditation on the nature of reality as seen from a painter's eyes, which reduce the real to such essentials as lines, planes, colours, geometrical forms and

⁴⁶ *Mutatis mutandi*, this is what Virginia Woolf and James Joyce tried to do in the masterworks of Modernist narrative through the so-called stream-of-consciousness technique: their appetite for perfection and faithful representation of the real compelled them to try to capture evanescent moments in time as seen through the unique prism of the characters' idiosyncratic minds.

⁴⁷ Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, London: Arrow Books, 2004. See, in particular, chapter 2 – “Miss Stein Instructs”, p. 9. Somewhere else, in chapter 8 – “Hunger Was Good Discipline”, p. 39, Hemingway meditates on the way hunger is a good discipline for the creative spirit and on how he used it to profoundly appreciate the art of Cézanne when he observed his paintings as he was hollow-hungry: “You got very hungry when you did not eat enough in Paris because all the bakery shops had such good things in the windows and people ate outside at tables on the sidewalk so that you saw and smelled the food. When you had given up journalism and were writing nothing that anyone in America would buy, explaining at home that you were lurching out with someone, the best place to go was the Luxembourg gardens where you saw and smelled nothing to eat all the way from the Place de L'Observatoire to the rue de Vaugirard. There you could always go into the Luxembourg museum and all the paintings were sharpened and clearer and more beautiful if you were belly-empty, hollow-hungry. I learned to understand Cézanne much better and to see truly how he made landscapes when I was hungry. I used to wonder if he were hungry too when he painted; but I thought possibly it was only that he had forgotten to eat. It was one of those unsound but illuminating thoughts you have when you have been sleepless or hungry. Later I thought Cézanne was probably hungry in a different way.” Cézanne's hunger was for perfection in painting as a way of exploring the innermost recesses of reality.

perspective, the second part appears to dwell on perspective and on the axis of *what is*, making every single thing or object in the world fall into place. The poem opens with a simple statement or piece of thinking attributed to Cézanne: “*nature, for us humans, / is more depth than it is surface.*” This is the French painter singing reality. Painting might seem to reduce the three-dimensional space found wherever one turns to look in the world to uncomplicated surfaces on the canvas, but the truth is that painters explore complex spatial relationships in their work. The elemental truth Cézanne stumbles upon is that the real exists in space (as well as in time) and that the perception of space through the human eye is far from simple or straightforward:

What exists, from our perspective,
is always a little bit wider than it is tall
and a little bit deeper than it is wide,

and full of sloping planes and sharpened corners.
The colors charge each other up.
Light dances in between them.
That is where the truth begins and hides.

SP, p. 171.

What we see is “*wider than it is tall*” and “*deeper than it is wide*”: this looks like a reflection on optical phenomena and spatial depth. Thus, the painter reduces the complexity of the world to a handful of essential ingredients: “*sloping planes*”, “*sharpened corners*”, “*colors*” and “*light*”. Truth, or at least the kind of truth that interested Cézanne, begins precisely at that point where these simple elements converge into one another in mid-air and mid-light. That the poet and the painter are after one and the same thing seems to be out of the question. Even if they make use of different tools and strategies in their respective art forms, they are always trying to find ways of capturing the truth. This sounds like a truism, repeated time and again by practising poets and painters from different traditions and artistic trends. In an essay entitled “The Relations between Poetry and Painting”, included in *The Necessary Angel* (1960), the great American poet Wallace Stevens claims that both the poet and the painter do their job making use of the same tool, which is to say the mind:

... the greater the mind the greater the poet, because the evil of thinking as poetry is not the same thing as the good of thinking in poetry. The point is that the poet does his job by virtue of an effort of the mind. In doing so, he is in rapport with the painter, who does his job, with respect to the problems of form and color, which confront him incessantly, not by inspiration, but by imagination or by the miraculous kind of reason that the imagination sometimes promotes. In short, these two arts, poetry and painting, have in common a laborious element, which, when it is exercised, is not only a labor but a consummation as well.⁴⁸

In the second part of the composition, the speaking voice in the poem dwells on what looks like single-point perspective and on the way the imaginary axis of *what is* makes every single thing in the world fall into place. *What is* is moving away from where the observer stands and coming back to him/her at the same time, nailing him/her in place. Perception is of the essence here: perceiving space through one’s eyes is a way of imposing order on the incessant flux of sensations coming from all directions and encroaching the

⁴⁸ Wallace Stevens, “The Relations between Poetry and Painting”, in *The Necessary Angel. Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, London: Faber and Faber, 1984, p. 165. For his part, Bringham has also written a number of lucid essays on painting, such as “Into the Absolute of Nature: The Face of Joan Miró” (in *Everywhere Being Is Dancing*), “The Audible Light in the Eyes” and “The Voice in the Mirror” (in *The Tree of Meaning*).

perceiving subject, as it were. It might seem we are in control, but reality is also in control in one way or another: what is real and exists places you in the right place in relation to all the rest of things and creatures in the world. The poem closes, in fact, with a string of alliterative verbs (*pins*, *plants* and *puts*) that reminds us that the sight of *what is* is inevitable and inescapable in its capacity to place the perceiver where he/she must be:

the longest axis of what is
leads straight away from where you are
and comes straight toward you,
nailing you in place.

When you open your eyes
the sight of it pins you,
plants you, puts you where you are.

SP, p. 171.

XII · “The Occupation”

“The Occupation”, a poem dedicated to Canadian musician Janet Danielson, was published for the first time in “The Physics of Light” section in *Selected Poems* (2009). The poem consists of four simple stanzas written in what looks like elegant, conversational and yet poetic language. At the heart of the composition is Herakleitos’ notion that everything is in perpetual motion. Somewhere on the coast of Asia Minor, almost 2,500 years ago, the eminent pre-Socratic philosopher stumbled upon this simple truth, which he formulated with utter poetic concision: *πάντα ῥεῖ* (*everything flows*). There is no single thing in the world that does not change from one moment to another; eternal metamorphosis is the essence of all things, living and non-living alike. Life moves fast; nothing stays the same for long. For better or for worse, we humans tend to think that it is our job to change the world, which is of course unnecessary because it is already changing all the time. Bringhurst’s poem is an account of a woman telling a story of how the world changed in the end: “*I will tell you how it was the world / changed, she said – and darkness / wrapped us round.*” So here we are, listening to a poem telling of a story being told to someone else. This is the magical moment of storytelling; darkness is closing in all around and the listener (or listeners) pays attention to the woman’s spoken words. The language of the poem itself evokes the natural flow of the female speaking voice, telling her story unimpeded by unwelcome interruptions. All the while, the (male) listener of the story (and speaker in the poem) remembers how the telling resembled pure singing, and how he could hear her clearly even if he “*barely heard the words*”, which sounds like a paradox. The final revelation or gist at the heart of the story being told by the woman comes as a most precious gift in the two closing stanzas:

Our job, she was saying, is not
to change the world – nor even
to keep it from changing.

No, she was saying (the story
was over already): our only
job is being changed.

SP, p. 172.

This is a moving meditation on the need for human beings to let themselves be changed in their lifetime by all the myriad circumstances that happen to a person from the very moment he/she is born till the moment of his/her death. Far from being a solid matter,

life is amorphous, fluid, malleable, a bunch of potential paths that individuals might take, even if they are not absolutely sure about where they might lead. Along with learning, love is of the essence because, it seems to us, love is the embodiment of a primordial feminine principle. In the beginning of the world there was not much; there will not be probably much at the end either. There were the sky and the earth, and out of their union through love all the rest of the universe came into existence. At least, that is the elementary lesson many cosmogonies from all around the world have to teach us. There is no mystery inherent in life; life *is* the mystery, and love is at the very centre of it. Out of love comes everything else; it is because of love that all human enterprises seem to make sense all of a sudden. Life is simple enough to be understood by the human mind: it consists of two fundamental events in the history of a human being – birth and death – and towering high between them, right in the middle, is love. Love leads a chameleonic existence in human languages: *ἔπος* in Greek, *amor* in Latin, *amore* in Italian, *l'amour* in French, *die Liebe* in German. Whereas love is masculine in most other languages, curiously enough it turns out to be feminine in German. Is this just a happy coincidence? Maybe not. The German language might have come to the sudden realization that love, together with learning, is the most fundamental vocation of *being*. In a sense we are born to love, not just ourselves, but rather other human beings and the vast world surrounding us – of which we are but a tiny part. There is so much beauty in the world that human life would be inconceivable if it were not meant to love itself and the larger world where it belongs. And yet we keep constantly changing the world, inflicting ineffable pain and wounds on Mother Earth, raping its resources, which are not boundless, infinite or inexhaustible. It takes a great dose of humility and wisdom to acknowledge that our most elemental occupation is *being changed*. The rest is all additional or dispensable paraphernalia. Life is in essence perpetual change; let us allow change to mould our spirit and soul in fruitful ways so that we may lead a genuine life.

XIII · “Long Poem on Four Feet”

“Long Poem on Four Feet” follows closely in the steps of Ezra Pound’s well-known haiku-like composition entitled “In a Station of the Metro”, published in the early years of the twentieth century, almost a hundred years ago. In April 1913 the Modernist master published in the prestigious magazine *Poetry* the famous haiku, which, in its original typographical arrangement, looked like this on the page:

The apparition	of these faces	in the crowd:
petals	on a wet, black bough.	

The memorable two-line haiku on the apparition of faces in the subway, resembling wet leaves on a bough, was soon incorporated into the literary magazines Pound was championing at the moment and probably into *Des Imagistes*, the Imagist anthology published in 1915. The three famous principles of the Imagist manifesto of summer 1912 demanded that poetry be founded on the Image: “An “Image” is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. [...] It is the presentation of such a ‘complex’ instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.” Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” is a masterpiece of its kind and presents the reader with the precious intensity of an illuminating insight into the essence of things. Written in the best tradition of the Japanese haiku, it offers the reader a snapshot, a moment frozen in time, associated with a sudden

epistemological revelation. The epiphany-like moment of revelation has the texture of transcendence: faces are petals on a bough, humans are trees in the woods. The whole of Western literature is full of such mystic moments of intense vision, and Bringham's "Long Poem on Four Feet" testifies to this:

LONG POEM ON FOUR FEET

Emptied of humans
the dancing ground dances.

There is a precious musical cadence that makes these lines memorable and poetic in a way. The title is ironical, of course: how could this be a "long poem on four feet" when two verse lines and seven words should suffice to convey the poet's illuminating insight into the joyful nature of Earth, our only home? Unless the word *feet* is meant as a reference to *metrical feet*, not to a part of the body. Earth itself could be thought of as dancing all the time, as it moves constantly, rotating around its own axis and around the Sun. The unexpected revelation in this particular case is simple enough: when no one is looking, the ground dances joyfully on its own, relishing the pleasure inherent in motion *per se*. Needless to say, motion is the essence of all living things, and the Earth is no exception in this respect. It *speaks earth* and it *sings water and air* (see "Gloria, Credo, Sanctus et Oremus Deorum"), and it also dances to the rhythm of *being* itself. It is hiding and in hiding because of humans' greedy attitude in their relation with all the richness and exuberance the Earth has to offer them.

The Living

The Body Is Flowers

INTRODUCTION

Selected Poems (2009), a beautifully designed book (an art object) with an elegant layout and sewn pages, draws on 16 books and spans 35 years of work. *Selected Poems* replaces Bringhurst's previous volumes of selected poems, *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982) and *The Calling* (1995), as his new living repertory.¹ The anthology is indeed marked by comprehensiveness and a generous selection of a prolific poetic output. The collection gives "the striking impression of coherence and continuity" for, though the book is divided into roughly chronological sections,² one feels that Bringhurst has been engaged by "a

¹ According to Nicholas Bradley, "This collection replaces Bringhurst's previous volumes of selected poems: *The Calling* and *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), both long out of print. It forgoes the explanatory notes and statements of poetics included in those books and in *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986), and is consequently more difficult. But it has the relative advantage of comprehensiveness; the poems shed light on each other, amply rewarding the meticulous reader. *Selected Poems* is not, however, simply an updated version of *The Calling* – it is a new selection and thus provides a slightly revised account of Bringhurst's career. In *The Beauty of the Weapons*, he wrote that a "selected poems ought to mean not [a poet's...] historical record but his living repertory: not a catalogue of the animals he has named but a festival of those who are still speaking." In these terms, *Selected Poems* is a livelier festival, a more expansive habitat for talkative animals. [...] The final section, "The Living," contains nine poems that have, to date, only appeared in journals or limited-edition books, and in Bringhurst's collected lectures and essays, *The Tree of Meaning* (2006) and *Everywhere Being Is Dancing* (2007). A quibble with the generous selection concerns the absence of samples of Bringhurst's translations of Haida poetry, which would have complemented the monologues and choruses from *Ursa Major* (2006 [sic]), a book-length masque. The poetry of Ghandl and Skaay is not Bringhurst's poetry, of course, but his powerful translations represent, I think, an integral aspect of his poetic thinking and craft." See Nicholas Bradley's review of *Selected Poems*, published in *The Malabar Review* 169 (Winter 2009): 97-102. See, in particular, p. 101.

² I · "THE BEAUTY OF THE WEAPONS": "The Beauty of the Weapons", "Song of the Summit", "Ararat", "A Quadratic Equation", "One Glyph", "The Greenland Stone", "Poem About Crystal", "A Lesson in Botany", "Some Ciphers", "Anecdote of the Squid"; II · DEUTERONOMY: "Jacob Singing", "An Augury", "Essay on Adam", "Deuteronomy"; III · THE OLD IN THEIR KNOWING: "Herakleitos", "Parmenides", "Miletos", "A Short History", "Empedokles: Seven Fragments", "Empedokles' Recipes", "Pherekydes", "Pythagoras", "Demokritos", "Xenophanes", "Of the Snaring of Birds", "The Petelia Tablet"; IV · THE STONECUTTER'S HORSES; V · BONE FLUTE BREATHING: "These Poems, She Said", "The Heart Is Oil", "Ptahhotep's River", "Death by Water", "Leda and the Swan", "The Better Man", "Cave of the Nymphs", "Six Epitaphs", "Poem Without Voices", "Bone Flute Breathing"; VI · TZUHALEM'S MOUNTAIN; VII · THE BOOK OF SILENCES: "Short Upanishad", "Pārsvanātha", "Uddālaka", "Nāgārjuna", "Bodhidharma", "Sengzhào", "Yongjiā Xuánjué", "Sarāha", "Sarāha's Exercise for Beginners", "Baizhang Huaihai", "Nanquan Puyuan", "Hán Shān", "Yúnyán Tánshèng", "Línjì Yìxuán", "Dòngshān Liángjiè", "Xiāngyán Zhixián", "Yunmen Wenyan", "Fayan Wenyi", "Lianhua Fengxian", "Xuedou Zhongxian", "Danxia Zichun", "Dahui Zonggao", "Tiāntóng Rújìng", "Dōgen", "Keizan", "Jakushitsu", "Bankei Yōtaku", "Hakuin"; VIII · LYELL ISLAND VARIATIONS: "Larix lyallii", "Thin Man Washing", "Absence of the Heart", "The Reader", "The Starlight Is Getting Steadily Dimmer", "The Long and the Short of It", "A River, a Runner", "Riddle", "Day In, Day Out"; IX · THE PHYSICS OF LIGHT: "Sutra of the Heart", "Kol Nidre", "Gloria, Credo, Sanctus et Oreamnos Deorum", "*Rubus ursinus*: A Prayer for the Blackberry Harvest", "For the Bones of Josef Mengele", "Fathers and Sons", "Hick & Nillie", "Demons and Men", "Sunday Morning", "Children of the Old Horse", "The Physics of Light", "The Occupation", "Long Poem on Four Feet"; X · THE BLUE ROOFS OF JAPAN; XI · CONVERSATIONS WITH A TOAD; XII · NEW WORLD SUITE N° 3: "All the Desanctified Places", "Who Is the Fluteplayer?", "The Children of Zhuang Zi Confront the Frozen Saskatchewan River", "Winter Solstice, Cariboo Mountains"; XIII · URSA MINOR; XIV · THE LIVING: "Finch", "Birds on the Water", "The Flowers of the Body", "Giotto's

single, decades-long poetic project.”³ The poems included in the volume range from short jewel-like lyrics to the long polyphonic poems that occupy a large portion at the end of the book, but the thematic concerns are essentially the same: “the recurrence of philosophical obsessions and favoured images (knife-edges, blood, bones, birdsong) reveals a tightly focused vision.”⁴ All the poems form a sort of gigantic *Gestalt* in which even the longer poems are subtly connected to the dramatic monologues and sculpted lyrics by their concerns and vocabulary. In any case, this collection shows Bringhurst as a mystic trying hard to escape fuzziness “with a steady stream of direct statements and concrete images.”⁵ According to Fraser Sutherland, in *Selected Poems* the poet plays “many variations on a basic theme: body and mind are one, and there can be no distinction between the container and what is contained.”⁶ The unity of body and mind is an equation central to Bringhurst’s poetry, which “aims at lines of paleographic permanence.” Bringhurst’s metaphysics is physics, which is to say that his poems are firmly steeped or rooted in the real, and that his meditations on the ultimate nature of reality stem directly from his acute observation of the world around him. He feels that the world is a much more complex and interesting place than personal relations or even history.⁷ In his search for a permanent form of truth, he ventures into the wilderness in search of inspiration in the company of mountains, trees and birds. His poems could be seen then as being transcriptions of what he has seen and heard in the open air, in close contact with the natural world. Given his love of intellectual precision, it is only natural that he should be endowed with an exact knowledge of flora and fauna, and that all this knowledge should find its way into the making of his own poems.

Now, the last section in *Selected Poems* (2009) brings together under the curious heading “The Living” a handful of new poems – “Finch”, “Birds on the Water”, “The Flowers of the Body”, “Giotto’s Bones”, “The Focal Length of Fuel”, “So Do We”, “The Living Must Never Outnumber the Dead”, “At Last”, and “For the Geologist’s Daughter”. Of these nine compositions only two had been previously published in book form in poetry volumes by Bringhurst – i.e., “The Flowers of the Body”, a long poem included in the section “Their Names” in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995), and “The Focal Length of Fuel”, another long poem in several sections based on the seven-part poem entitled *Elements* (1995), Bringhurst’s extended meditation on the four classical elements (earth, water, air and fire) out of which the entire world is made. Five of the remaining poems had been previously published in scattered periodicals or books, and one would be later published in a collection of essays to honour the work of Canadian poet and philosopher Jan Zwicky. This is then the editorial history of the poems included in this section:

Bones”, “The Focal Length of Fuel”, “So Do We”, “The Living Must Never Outnumber the Dead”, “At Last”, “For the Geologist’s Daughter”.

³ See Nicholas Bradley’s review of *Selected Poems*, *ibid.*, p. 98.

⁴ Nicholas Bradley’s review of *Selected Poems*, p. 101.

⁵ See Fraser Sutherland, “Art and Nature, Body and Mind”, published in Toronto *Globe and Mail*, 11 July 2009: F12.

⁶ “Art and Nature, Body and Mind”, published in Toronto *Globe and Mail*, 11 July 2009: F12.

⁷ In a review of *Selected Poems* (2009) entitled “Art and Nature, Body and Mind” and published in Toronto *Globe and Mail*, July 11, 2009: F12, Fraser Sutherland dwells on the impersonality of Bringhurst’s poems: “Only a few poems, such as “The Beauty of the Weapons” and “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985”, allude to recent history. With the exception of “These Poems, She Said”, his poems seldom venture into personal relations. He prefers the company of the wilderness. For Bringhurst, universal, enduring truth locates itself in the four elements and humours: “Air, earth, water, fire, be here/ to rebuild what we destroy,” he declaims in *Ursa Minor*. Yet this nod to environmental correctness in a sense belies the sombre celebration of change and transformation that he sustains for much of his book.” The thought occurs that even “These Poems, She Said” is not strictly speaking about personal relations: it is more a metapoem and a moving meditation on the nature of love.

- (1) B.83 *Many-voiced fountains: Studi di anglistica e comparatistica in onore di Elsa Linguanti*, a cura di Mario Curreli e Fausto Ciompi. Pisa: ETS, 2003: pp. 16–29. Contributions: Three Poems for Elsa: • “Self-Portrait: Giotto’s Bones” (rev. as C.80), • “And So Do We”, • “The Living Must Never Outnumber the Dead”; • essay, “What is Found in Translation” (rev. in A.83). See also D.118.
- (2) B.92 *Words on the Water: Campbell River Writers’ Festival 2006*. [Campbell River, British Columbia: Words on the Water Festival Society]: [p 2]. Contribution: • “Birds on the Water” (poem), commissioned by the festival and printed on the inside front cover of the festival program (March 24–25, 2006). Photograph and brief biography of Bringhurst on p. [4].
- (3) B.115 *Lyric Ecology: An Appreciation of the Work of Jan Zwicky*, ed. by Mark Dickinson & Clare Goulet. Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2010: p. 259. Contribution: “For the Geologist’s Daughter,” rpt. from A.92. [Bringhurst also designed the book and wrote the colophon, supplied the photographs, and wrote the photo caption on p. 260.]
- (4) C.73 [Two Poems], *Canadian Literature* 154 (Autumn 1997): 8, 110. Contents: • “Zhàozhou Congshen” (rev. in A.65, A.85); • “The Living Must Never Outnumber the Dead”.
- (5) C.79 “Giotto’s Bones”, published in *Times Literary Supplement* (London), 2004, revised from B.83.
- (6) C.80 • “Finch”, published in *Onearth* (New York) 28.2 (Summer 2006): 28.

The whole section is preceded by an epigraph lifted from Jan Zwicky’s “Beethoven, Op. 95”, a piece included in her poetry book *Songs for Relinquishing the Earth: “For still, that is / earths’ definition: / whatever it knows, / that is enough.”* The quotation sheds light on Bringhurst’s poems collected under this section, for most of them are concerned with the pure physicality of what it means to be alive in a tangible world we can perceive and enjoy through the senses. They constitute a moving song and tribute to the living, while they do not forget that the real also includes what remains invisible to human eyes – not just the roaming, wandering, homeless gods we no longer seem to be able to perceive, but also the dead, whose presence may turn to be overwhelming at times, and not just in the form of voices preserved in books full of the wisdom and knowing of the sages from the old days. Like Bringhurst’s poems, Zwicky’s poems are firmly rooted in the real and show a moving reverence towards the sacredness of Earth, a sense of gratitude and humble willingness to give in to the grandeur and beauty of life, which transcends purely human limitations. The words lifted from one of her poems reveal much of this: the Earth is a sacred place that knows and speaks its own language; it knows and thinks and celebrates every single creature of the many that populate this world. Thus, it is only appropriate that this section of Bringhurst’s poems should be entitled “The Living”.

I · “Finch”

“The Living”, the closing section of *Selected Poems* (2009), opens with two closely related poems, “Finch” and “Birds on the Water”. A passionate lover of birds, in these two accomplished pieces Bringhurst is following closely in the steps of such Modernist masters as Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, the example of British poet Ted Hughes’s well-known poetry volume *Crow*, and of earlier Romantic poets such as Percy Bysshe Shelley (“Ode to a Skylark”) and John Keats (“Ode to a Nightingale”).⁸ Birds, like trees, have

⁸ See Scott Ellis’ review of *The Calling*, “Where the Music Goes”, published in *Books in Canada* 24.5 (Summer 1995): 30-31. See, in particular, p. 31: “If there’s a good summary word for a poet like Bringhurst, it’s “bracing.” In a poetry scene overrun with slack confessional verse and semiotic object lessons, he brings to mind someone like Ted Hughes, whose territory his overlaps, though without the British laureate’s density of word-play or syntactic piling on... [...] He shares Hughes’s quick eye for life in the wild and his metaphoric

elemental lessons to teach, and so the poet spends much time outdoors, seeking their company to listen to whatever they have to tell him. Nature is no ornament for Bringhurst, either. The presence of the natural world, with its mountains, trees and birds, is an overwhelming presence in his everyday life on Quadra Island. In the wilderness, the sense of sublime grandeur and beauty transcending the human scale is simply inescapable. Alert to these subtle nuances of the natural world, the poet cannot but produce poems like these: a direct emanation from his pristine encounter with the real, objective and stubborn physicality of *what is*. And birds are an essential part of *what is*, no doubt. Bringhurst is then an avid outdoorsman. As Chris Dafoe points out in a beautiful meditation on Bringhurst's *poetics of bearing or listening*,

... if you ask Robert Bringhurst to describe what he does, chances are he'll say that he listens. Not only to the voices of other people, but also to trees, birds, the Earth. If that makes Bringhurst sound like some sort of West Coast mystic, he certainly doesn't seem the part, either on the page or in person. His poetry, praised by the likes of Stephen Spender for its "dazzling purity," is austere and precise, dotted with references to philosophers from ancient Greece and China, Haida storytellers as well as powerful, vivid images from the natural world.

Bringhurst is an avid outdoorsman and the wild is where he goes to hear his poetry. "Poetry is still an outdoor activity for me," he says, "and it really does have to do with listening. That's not so unusual. We expect people who paint to look at things, and when you write poetry you listen to the world and you hear things and you try to translate that into English or French or whatever.

"I know a lot of 20th-century literature is about the human world – it's part of that feedback loop – but that can turn into an ugly hum pretty quickly; and it seems to me that if you open a window and stick your ear outside, you can hear some pretty interesting things. I can learn a lot about poetry by listening to birds, for example, or by listening to trees. They speak ancient languages. And if I can't exactly transcribe them word for word, at least I can make some kind of counterpart in my own language. It's not that I want to escape from the human world, it's just that I don't want to be confined to it."⁹

"Finch" was originally published in *Onearth* (New York) 28.2 (Summer 2006): 28, and three years later it was reprinted in *Selected Poems*. The poem is descriptive and meditative in nature, and stems directly from Bringhurst's direct, attentive, first-hand observation of the world. To a certain extent, it also does tell a simple story: the story of a finch badly wounded, "*who must have tangled with a predator, / or maybe with a truck*", with one eye missing and a stump for a beak, either because it has been attacked by a predator or because it has collided with a truck, there is no way of knowing for sure. The poet keeps a bowl with birdseed in his garden for birds to eat from. The variety of birds gathering round this bowl every day is expressive of the rich diversity of the natural world at large: siskins, finches, crossbills, cowbirds, chickadees and blackbirds all come together to feast in his garden. Among them is a female finch that is a true survivor. Out of his sheer love of scientific precision and respect for the real, Bringhurst invokes its Latin name: it is a *Carpodacus mexicanus*, he says tentatively. What is simply moving about the presence of this finch among the other healthy birds is that none of them seems to care in the way humans would under the same circumstances:

suppleness..." See Scott Ellis' review of *The Calling*, "Where the Music Goes", published in *Books in Canada* 24.5 (Summer 1995): 30-31. See, in particular, p. 31.

⁹ See Chris Dafoe, "Robert Bringhurst: in ink and paper", Toronto *Globe and Mail*, 24 June 1995: C1-2. Article based on an interview conducted in Vancouver in April 1995, with reference to *The Calling*.

Not one among the others acts
concerned. No one seems, in fact,
to notice the black cavity that once
was her right eye, the shattered
stump that used to be her upper beak.

And no one gawks or whispers
at the awkward sidewise motion
that enables her to eat. And no one
mocks, crunching a sunflower seed,
her preference for millet.

SP, p. 247.

From the naturalness of the whole scene presented in these stanzas the poet learns an elemental lesson: whereas humans would show concern or unhealthy curiosity in the presence of a handicapped person, these birds simply keep on eating birdseed as if the wounded finch were one more of them and belonged among them with perfect spontaneity. There is no room here for what we would view as genuinely human feelings such as empathy or compassion in the face of the other's pain: "*Where ostracism, charity or pity / might have been, there is reality / instead.*" Self-absorbed as we are, humans might think that there is something cruel about the birds' not caring about the ugly deformity in the wounded finch's anatomy, but the poet tells us that "*their superlative / indifference is a kind of moral / beauty, as perfect as the day.*" This is not amoral behaviour, but a form of natural morality that takes for granted the profound bonds uniting all living creatures. Thus, if other animals (the red-tailed hawk or the neighbour's cat) come near the bowl half full of birdseed, they simply have a look at the scene, exchange a couple of words and are gone. There is no cruelty at stake here: animals acknowledge one another's presence and seem to be grateful for the simple fact of being alive on Earth. They do speak a language of their own, but they do not gossip, they do not whisper pain-inflicting words, they do not hurt each other in the way humans do. This is the poet's meditation on the ultimate nature of birds and on the elemental lesson they teach us all:

But I never
hear them talk of one another.
They speak of what they are, not who
they do or do not wish to be.
That is a form of moral beauty

too, as perfect as the day. Which is
to say they sing. By nothing
more than being there and being
what they are, they sing.
They sing. And that is that.

SP, p. 248.

The tone of these lines is beautifully conversational and have a freshness of their own that emulates the naturalness with which birds live and sing their song. In singing, birds celebrate their being alive. They do not pretend to be what they are not; they talk to one another of what they are instead. They are grateful and respectful with the real and with *being*, of which they are a tiny but indispensable part. One cannot help thinking of desire, which is the driving force and motivation for humans every step they take in their lifetime. It is as if birds had not desire other than the natural wish to be themselves and to keep on

living in the world. Like θάνατος, ἔπος is universal, which is to say that everyone (all living creatures) wants to live, one might think, but, unlike humans, animals live in a natural way that complies with the flux of life implicit in the world. They let themselves go, they do not force any kind of situation. They simply *exist*. Their song has the beauty of all natural things, which cannot avoid being what they are. “*And that is that,*” concludes the poet, as if there were nothing else to be said once one stumbles upon this simple fact. This is a form of gratitude that we rarely find in the company of other human beings, and so the poet naturally seeks the birds’ company.

II · “Birds on the Water”

Originally published in *Words on the Water: Campbell River Writers’ Festival 2006*, Campbell River, British Columbia: Words on the Water Festival Society, p. 2, “Birds in the Water” is the companion poem of “Finch” and another accomplished tribute to all the birds in the world. Thus, the words “*There are birds on the water, / birds in the air*” (or the other way around) are repeated time and again throughout the whole composition as an incantatory refrain. The piece consists of six six-line stanzas of perfect symmetry and three movements for the mind. In the first part (stanzas 1 and 2), the poet celebrates the ubiquitous presence of birds everywhere one turns to look in the world: birds are creatures that populate water, air and trees (“*on the snags, in the conifers*”), and they are also to be found “*flying down to the lakefloor,*” on the ice “*melting away at the foot of the world*” (in the South Pole), and on the ground, “*overturning the layers / of last summer’s leaves,*” as if birds could read the words written in the book of nature. The crucial image is found in the second stanza: “*There are birds who are building invisible, audible nests / in the bare-naked limbs of the alders in winter.*” These two lines are a jewel-like technical accomplishment on the part of the poet: to the euphony of beautifully arranged sounds (notice the alliteration of /b/ in *birds, building* and *bare*, or the sheer repetition of /l/ in *building, invisible, audible, limbs* and *alders*) one must add the beautiful idea conveyed by the words of birds building invisible but audible nests. This is a complex image isolated in time and in space in what looks like an autonomous haiku-like composition within the framework of “Birds on the Water”: birds build their nests in the upper branches of alders, and so they are invisible to the naked human eye, but they are audible, for the laborious birds keep on singing their melodious songs.

The second part of the poem dwells on the relationships between birds and human beings. Whereas birds are shown to be endowed with a sort proverbial wisdom and generosity in that they come close to humans, “*storing food in their ears*” and “*bringing mosses and twigs to their half-zipped pockets and palms*”, giving us food for thought and their songs as a most welcome gift, humans are shown to be somewhat egoistical and opaque creatures:

Birds break their necks
flying into your eyes
in the perfect belief
that the brilliant interior world
is as spacious and seamless and real
as the world outside.

SP, pp. 248-249.

The “*brilliant interior*” is possibly a reference to the inner geographies of the human soul, which turn out to be not so diaphanous, vast and real as the realm of water and air populated and known by birds so instinctively. Birds sacrifice themselves, flying unafraid

into humans' eyes, unaware that the space humans hide inside themselves is an unknown and obscure territory. Labyrinthine and convoluted, complex and difficult – this is what the interior spaces in humans look like, or so seem to imply these verse lines. The perfect naturalness of birds is thus placed against the deceptive nature of appearances surrounding humans. Birds simply give in or give up, not pretending to be what they are not, and they are ready to die. Thus, in the third movement of “Birds on the Water” the birds are seen lying dead at humans' feet. These birds never feared “*that your eyes might not mean what they're seeing, / your mind might not mean what it bears.*” Once again, as in many other Bringhurst pieces, the senses and the mind are invoked as the tools by means of which humans come to terms with the real in their tireless attempt at understanding *what is*. Wrongly assuming that human eyes do mean what they actually see, birds fly directly to their secure death, unaware that the senses and the mind are not completely reliable and might be deceptive after all. And where do birds go to once they die? Is there a special heaven or hell awaiting them? Or do they share the same heaven and hell with humans? In the closing stanza of the poem, the poet's voice does not hesitate for a second to give a forceful and conclusive answer: birds populate the air and the water, but there are no birds in heaven or hell:

There are birds in the air,
birds on the water,
but no birds in heaven
and no birds in hell
and no one to tell them the difference,
not here and not there.

SP, p. 249.

Because birds commit no crimes and they remain content to lead a life of simplicity, flying and singing their own existence into bloom, there is no punishment for them in a terrific hell in flames. There is no reward for them either in heaven, for they enjoy an untroubled life of natural acquiescence with the world. They do not pretend to be what they are not, they do not think or talk of “*who they do or do not wish to be,*” as the poet said in “Finch”. Not even humans are in a position to tell them the difference between heaven and hell, possibly because they coexist here and now, upon this Earth of ours. Not even the gods are able to tell the difference either.

Bringhurst's poems about birds remind us of an elemental truth: his view of the world is not anthropocentric at all; humans are not at the very centre of creation. Most of the time, his poems concern the realm of the nonhuman, which is larger and of greater interest to the poet. His primary interest is getting at a profounder apprehension of *being*, and by going to the mountains and spending time in the company of trees, stones and birds he has come to learn a new way of looking at the world – one that is less egoistical, less selfish, less egocentric. *Being* means ‘largesse’ after all in his ecological conception of reality. So he goes to the wilderness and he comes back whole, with a bundle of poems born in the voice, informed by the music of the teeming forms of life that populate the woods, away from the nonsense of city life in industrial societies:

... an eco- rather than a socio-poet, raising his exquisitely chiseled and stunningly spun word-dwellings within a radically different conception of the spacetime of history and tradition: not only are Bringhurst's poems more actively, consistently, and deeply engaged with non-Western thought- and word-worlds, recording elemental conversations with worthies dead only in body; they also pointedly neglect to centre themselves in the lyric ego, or even sometimes in the human sphere; whereas many of us habitually truncate the phrase “human being” to

“human,” Bringhurst effectively truncates it to “being,” and his poems haunt an ontic domain unconstrained by the anthropic.... [...] Not for him the stock-in-trade poetic personae of sensitive soul, wild bore, or hardboiled egghead; rather, a set of unlikely, often archaic avatars and totems, amongst them toad, squid, and the stone bone of the earth’s breathing body. The result of this anti-Viconian and stateless independence is a book of fiercely intelligent poems that regard their readers as certain birds do their watchers: like northern flickers, they are at home in the air, the trees, and on the ground, refusing to be known except in motion and only then if you dwell with them as they go.¹⁰

III · “The Flowers of the Body”

A long poem in seven closely interconnected parts, “The Flowers of the Body” is an atypical love poem and a celebration of the pleasure implicit in being alive in a world that all of us can perceive and enjoy through our senses and our mind. That it is a love poem is confirmed by the fact that Bringhurst has dedicated this moving and accomplished composition to his wife, Jan Zwicky, whose words on Earth’s definition preface the whole section entitled “The Living”. The title itself brings together the Earth, as embodied by flowers sprouting from the living ground, and the human body, which is shown to be covered by flowers sprouting from every single bodily part. At some point in the poem, the body becomes a potent microcosm (i.e., the representation or embodiment of the whole world in miniature) and the whole world in its manifold manifestations turns out to be subtly connected to the human body in astonishing ways. The first of the seven parts in the sequence opens with a powerfully straightforward metaphor: “*We are the flowers we bring / to one another: two bouquets / of changing colors.*” The lovers themselves are bouquets of flowers they give one another as a token of their love, as the supreme gift. When in love, the lovers give themselves completely as the best gift they can offer to each other and as a proof of their genuine love. There is something sacred about the intimacy and communion of two bodies loving and knowing each other so profoundly. That they should see themselves as being fragile and vulnerable and changing as flowers, comes as a welcome surprise to the reader. The flowers in the lovers’ bodies are seven flowers “*flowering in layers,*” says the speaking voice in the poem:

The first is a flower the color of earth,
in which the other flowers flower.
The second is all the colors of bone and
cornstraw, chlorophyll and blood.
The third is flame. The fourth
is turquoise, ochre, jade.
The fifth shifts like the mountain sky
or the sea from rose to indigo. The sixth
is the colorless color of water and air.
And there is one more, rainbow-colored like the deer.

SP, p. 249.

All four classical elements out of which reality is thought to be made are invoked in these lines – earth, flame (fire), water and air – and so the seven flowers encompass the whole world in its entirety. The colours of the flowers of the lovers’ bodies embrace the whole

¹⁰ See Iain Higgins’ “Many Mansions”, published in *Canadian Literature* 154 (Autumn 1997): 197-203. This is a review of many books, including *The Calling*. See, in particular, p. 200.

world: one is the colour of earth, the basic ingredient in reality out of which literal (non-figurative) flowers sprout; another is the colour of “*bone and blood*” (present in animals and humans) and of “*cornstraw and chlorophyll*” (present in trees and plants in general), which evokes the whole realm of living creatures in the world; another is the colour of flame (which might be intended as a reference to the passion of love); another is turquoise, ochre, jade (a subtle reference to stones and minerals); another shifts from rose to indigo in the sky and in the sea (the mythological partner of the earth in many cosmogonies or creation myths around the world); another is colourless like water or air; and the last one brings together the colours of the rainbow. Thus, if the colours of the flowers of the body embrace the whole world with all its living creatures (earth, sky, sea, mountains, air, plants and animals), the lovers *are* the world. Something similar happens in John Donne’s “The Canonization”, where the lovers in their bedroom stand in a world apart, away from warring empires, and yet embody the whole world through their love. Every little, tiny part of the universe contains the universe in its entirety: a drop of water contains the rain, the oceans and rivers of the world; and a speck of dust is the innumerable mountains, hills, deserts and stones of the world. As William Blake put it in “Auguries of Innocence” so long ago, it is possible *to see the world in a grain of sand, to hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour.*

In the second part of “The Flowers of the Body”, the poet calls these seven flowers by a different name: “*Their common names are smell, taste, / sight, touch, sound, thought.*” The flowers of the body are nothing more (and nothing less) than the five senses (and their corresponding physical prolongations or bodily organs), plus thought, “*the one sense these lead from and toward,*” which is to say that, in our intellectual confrontation with the world, the mind operates with the first-hand data or raw materials provided by the senses, and that the senses direct the myriad sensations we receive from all directions to the centre of the mind, which metamorphoses them into a meaningful *Gestalt*. Thus, part 3 of Bringhurst’s poem consists of an exhaustive or precise catalogue of the knowledge organs of the human body, which include all five senses and thought. All of them are firmly ingrained in the living fabric of the body, or are a prolongation of its very physicality, and sprout as flowers sprouting from the living soil of earth:

These are the flowers of the body:
the nose at the base of the body;
the lips and tongue at the root of the body;
the eye looking out from the palm of the body;
the drum of the blood, strummed by the hand
that roosts like a bird in the heart of the body;
the ear in the pit of the throat, which is
the midpoint of the skin; the brain
in its leaking chalice of bone; the moon.

SP, pp. 249-250.

Marked by incantatory parallelism, these lines tessellate a series of daring and compelling metaphors. These lines show Bringhurst at his best, building musicality upon the sheer repetition of sounds (near-rhymes and assonance) and syntactic structures (parallelism). Needless to say, the nose stands for smell, the lips and tongue stand for taste, the eye stands for sight, the complex metaphor in “*the drum of the blood, strummed by the hand / that roosts like a bird in the heart of the body*” stands for touch, the ear stands for hearing (*sound* in Bringhurst’s poem), the brain stands for thought, and the moon does come as a surprise as the seventh flower. All five senses and the mind are once again invoked as the inevitable

link between the human body and the world, which we come to know through the very pores of our skin.

The fourth and fifth sections of “The Flowers of the Body” dwell on the flowers that sprout from the face and from the limbs, respectively. Thus, poem 4 reminds us that “*In the fist of the face, the flowers / reappear: nose, lips, eyes, ears.*” through a simple alliterative enumeration (notice the repetition of /f/ in *fist-face-flowers*). The face is conceptualized as being a hand where the flowers of the body sprout; five-fingered hands are an effective and useful prolongation of the human body in our daily interaction with the world. We tend to overlook the simple fact that the face is the meeting point for at least four fundamental senses (smell, taste, sight and hearing). By contrast, touch is ubiquitous in that it is to be found throughout the whole skin covering the human body. These flowers or blossoms commonly called ‘senses’ are in charge of “*reading and writing the light / on tattered scraps of air*”, which is to say that the senses read and interpret the world, and that in this interpretive process they re-write *what is* and translate it into humanly understandable terms. Light floating mid-air is what we perceive first of all, and light is rich in signs for us to interpret and make sense of. Somewhere in the echo-chamber of the brain is the mind (“*the face’s other hand*”) producing “*meaningful wholes*” out of all the pieces of information provided by the senses: “*The blind roots listen through their pores, / squeezed in the face’s other hand.*” Similarly, arms and legs, and feet and hands are also covered with flowers sprouting in the form of “*Ankles, elbows, shoulders, hips / and fingertips.*” The metaphors at the heart of poem 5 are daring: arms and legs are “*slender bodies*” and feet and hands are “*blinded faces*”. They are also prolongations of the body into the world that they seek to perceive and enjoy to the full.

Whereas sections 1 to 5 explore the sheer anatomy of the flowers of the body as it were, section 6 focuses on their voices. This section is crucial, for the human body becomes a miniature representation of the world in its entirety, i.e. a microcosm that comprises all the elements in reality. We learn that the voices of the flowers of the body are those of the *stars, the sea, the sea air, deep-sea ores*, and “*the sounds below the throat, / for which there are no letters*” – these are probably a reference to the ineffable, to the realm of feelings and emotions that are not easily verbalized. From the stars up above in the sky to the unknown world of under the sea, the whole cosmos is invoked and condensed into these verse lines. The flowers of the body speak a language of their own which is the language of the whole universe. *Eyes, hand and tongues* are flowers in themselves too, immersed in the act of coming to terms with and interpreting the real. As in many other Brinhurst poems, the precedence of speech over writing is out of the question. The language of the body’s flowers *speaks* us, but these flowers are simply indecipherable (silent or half-dead) when we try to freeze or record their speaking voices through writing. Spoken words are a living emanation from the lungs, whereas writing seems to have a deadening effect on speech:

Eyes, hands, tongues can become
the flowers again and again but cannot
turn to pick and dry them. In their voices
we are spoken. They are silent
in the tongues in which we try to write them down.

SP, p. 251.

“The Flowers of the Body” closes with poem 7, which brings together all the pieces scattered in all previous six sections. Whereas the lovers were *bouquets of flowers* of changing colours in the opening poem, now they become trees they plant in one another’s earth so

that they might flower together. The bodies are now earth and trees at the same time; loving someone is akin to planting one's tree (body, mind and speech) in their earth:

We are the trees we plant
in the one earth of one another,
that they flower there
together: flowers we bring on the living
branch to one another,
uncut, rooted
in the darkness where there are
no other faces, shapes or colors,
no bouquets, no other
others...

SP, p. 251.

The poet seeks to convey a sense of complete communion between the lovers, and he does succeed. Being trees in one another's earth, the lovers give each other flowers that are uncut, rooted, truly alive, as a token of their real love. There appears to be no room for anyone or anything else (for the others) in their love relationship, which is self-sufficient and all they truly need. However, as the poem unfolds we soon learn that *all others* are present somehow in one way or another, and that they are absent at the same time too, because this love is only theirs, it belongs to them and nobody else. Thus, the closing movement of the poem is pervaded by the incantatory rhythm of short verse lines of only a few words each, rich in alliteration and *-ing* forms. These words give an idea of the flux of life implicit in reality, away from which the lovers are experiencing the precious and rare intensity of their love:

no faces, voices, colors,
no bouquets,
no bringing,
no song singing itself
in the fingertips,
no tongues, no teeth,
no taut lips softening,
no opening
and closing, no
unsoftening,
no thought
of light and fire and
no fire
and no flowers
and no hands.

SP, p. 252.

IV · “Giotto's Bones”

Originally published in *Many-voiced fountains: Studi di anglistica e comparatistica in onore di Elsa Linguanti*, a cura di Mario Curreli e Fausto Ciompi, Pisa: ETS, 2003: pp. 16–29, together with “And So Do We” and “The Living Must Never Outnumber the Dead”, in honour of Elsa Linguanti, and later revised in 2004 in the *Times Literary Supplement* (London), “Giotto's Bones” is a poem reminiscent of “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985” in many respects. Thematically speaking, both pieces constitute a moving meditation on the

bones of two very different men and personalities: whereas the latter concerns the finding of the remains of the Nazi physicist who conducted horrible medical experiments on the inmates at the concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the former explores the technical accomplishments of the Italian painter and architect Giotto di Bondone¹¹ (b. 1266/7 – d. 8 January, 1337, Florence), one of the first great artists contributing to the Italian Renaissance, whose bones were found under very different circumstances in the 1970s. Thus, bones are the starting point for two very different pieces of meditation: where Mengele, the *Angel of Death*, destroys human lives in the belief that he is making a contribution to medical progress, Giotto is concerned with the creation of beauty in multiple forms – through the masterly combination of colours, planes and lines in his paintings and his frescoes. The fundamental dichotomy at the bottom is that between creation and destruction, and it is almost a truism to say that it is always more difficult to create than to destroy, for it takes time, talent, patience, creativity and vocation. Set apart by four hundred years, Mengele and Giotto are human types of a very different nature. They give Bringham an opportunity to meditate on the human condition, even if this meditation should start almost from scratch, or better, from the essentials – the bones that have managed to persist despite the passing of time. Like other signs populating the world, bones can be read and interpreted by the inquisitive gaze of the human mind. The act of exegesis and interpretation of Mengele’s and Giotto’s bones on the part of Bringham produces two memorable poems, two perfect artifacts that bring to light the lives and work of two human beings that left some kind of trace on the memory of subsequent generations.

In the late sixteenth century, the biographer Giorgio Vasari, in *Le vite de più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti* (1568), translated into English as *Lives of the Artists* by George Bull, Penguin Classics (1965), said of Giotto that he was held responsible for resurrecting the art of painting as the expression of drawing accurately from life, which had been neglected for almost two centuries by the more crude traditional Byzantine style. In fact, Giotto’s figures are solidly three-dimensional, they have faces and gestures based on close observation of reality, and they are dressed with garments that hang naturally on them, endowed with spontaneous form and weight. Also, he paid attention to the careful arrangement of figures on the canvas or the fresco wall, so that the viewer appears to have a particular place within the scene being represented, which gives an astonishing dramatic immediacy to his paintings. Thus, he set a new standard for representational painting in his works, where the depiction of the human face and emotion is a new feature, an expression of his interest in psychological penetration. Among Giotto’s masterworks are the decoration of Scrovegni Chapel in Padua (completed around 1305), a fresco cycle depicting the life of the Virgin and the life of Christ, one of the supreme masterpieces of early Renaissance, and the design of the *campanile* (bell tower) of the Florence Cathedral.

According to Vasari, upon his death the artist was buried in Santa Maria del Fiore, the Cathedral of Florence, on the left of the entrance and with the spot marked by a white marble plaque. By contrast, other sources claimed that he was buried in the Church of Santa Reparata. There is no contradiction implicit in these two reports though, for the remains of Santa Reparata lie directly beneath the cathedral, and the church continued in use while the cathedral was being built in the early 14th century. During an excavation conducted in the 1970s, bones were discovered beneath the paving of Santa Reparata at a spot close to the exact location given by Vasari. The detailed forensic examination of the bones revealed that these were the remains of a painter, possibly Giotto’s, because of the

¹¹ For basic biographical information, see the entry on ‘Giotto di Bondone’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 11, pp. 6628-6631.

presence of certain chemicals (arsenic and lead among them) commonly found in paint that had been absorbed by the bones while their owner was still alive. In Bringhurst's account, which follows closely the latest scholarly discoveries, the bones are found where Vasari said they should be found and they show evidence that they absorbed certain chemicals ("*heavy with mercury, lead and selenium*") associated with paint:

They were underneath the Duomo – just
below the stone floor, precisely where
Vasari said the marker used to be – and no one
meant to set them free – and yet they lie here
naked in fluorescent light, for anyone to see –

SP, p. 252.

There is something irreverent about someone's *naked bones* being exhibited like this, beneath a crystal panel on the ground, illuminated by fluorescent light. Bones, anyone's bones, are not meant to be displayed like this, for they are the innermost and most intimate part of any human being, the almost irreducible core of what is left of a person's remains. Giotto's bones did not ask to be discovered and unburied in this way; they were found quite by accident and science did his job well in the form of DNA tests and chemical analyses. Forensic examination of what were thought to be Giotto's bones brought to light that they belonged to a short man who may have suffered from a form of congenital dwarfism. The reconstruction of the skeleton revealed a short man with a disproportionately large head, a large hooked nose and one eye more prominent than the other. In addition, there was plenty of evidence that these were the remains of a painter. For instance, the neck bones indicated that the man had spent much time with his head tilted backwards, which was the natural thing to do while painting frescoes on the wall or on the ceiling, and the front teeth were worn due to the habit of frequently holding the brush between teeth. The man was 70 at the moment of his death, and that is the age at which Giotto is said to have died too. As a result, the team of researchers involved in the whole process was convinced that the body belonged to the Italian painter. On the other hand, there were additional pieces of evidence to be found somewhere else. That the bones found were Giotto's is backed by Vasari's description of the painter in his well-known biography, which is based on a description by Boccaccio, one of Giotto's friends. According to the Italian biographer, Giotto was the ugliest man in Florence, and his children were also plain and ugly.

In Bringhurst's meditation on Giotto's bones, the emphasis is laid on the hunger for beauty that inspired the painter's work and on his technical accomplishments. These are "*the twisted, mismatched bones,*" he says, of the man who was able to make "*plaster dust / and water, egg yolk, charcoal and red ochre / bunker down and sing the blues*". This is clearly a reference to his mastery of the fresco technique, to the way in which he combined basic ingredients to make colour an effective means of communicating subtle nuances of meaning in his paintings, in the service of psychological penetration and controlled naturalism, for his was a painting closely based on the real. In this particular respect, "Giotto's Bones" also recalls a companion poem entitled "The Physics of Light", concerned with Paul Cézanne's meditation on perspective and the nature of spatial relationships as represented in painting. In Bringhurst's short treatise on the art of Giotto, the painter is shown making use of all the typical painting tools of the time,

touching his brush – a vulture's quill,
tipped with a cluster of boiled weasel hair –

to his lips, lifting his hunched right shoulder
a little bit higher, bringing his clenched left foot
a little bit closer, making a taut and perfect
gesture with a splotched, disfigured hand.

SP, p. 253.

The physical description of the painter's disfigured body suggests once again that Bringhurst is following modern scholarship on the discovery of Giotto's remains to make his own poem as much accurate as possible. At the heart of the stanza is the evocative contrast between the ugliness of the painter's body and the beauty of the paintings he was able to produce in his lifetime for the sake of posterity, for generations still unborn who would enjoy the aesthetic experience of contemplating his frescoes, true masterpieces of early Renaissance painting. If poets working on speech as the ultimate basis of genuine poems make words (*le mot juste*) sing, then great painters make *the blues sing* on the canvas. What poetry and painting sing ultimately of is *being*: there are different paths leading to the same destination, and the same creative compulsion is to be found beneath the act of creation of the poet and the painter to convey to humankind the beauty and truth inherent in the world. There is no other option left for spectators and readers than to feel truly awe-struck in the face of the sense of the sublime pervading the world that great artists manage to capture in one way or another.

V · “So Do We”

Dedicated to the Italian literary scholar Elsa Linguanti, who has devoted much of her time and attention to the study of Bringhurst's work, “So Do We” is one of the three poems originally published as a homage to this university professor in *Many-voicèd fountains: Studi di anglistica e comparatistica in onore di Elsa Linguanti*, a cura di Mario Curreli e Fausto Ciompi. Pisa: ETS, 2003: pp. 16–29. The piece is a short lyric poem of only four stanzas and a straightforward meditation on the nature of language. At the heart of the meditation is the premise that humans have no monopoly on language. Language is conceptualized as being a body endowed with all the characteristically human bodily parts, including a gigantic ear it rests on the breast of the world, which is also personified. The intimation that everything is alive and connected to everything else in this world informs much of what is said in this poem. If the emphasis of the meditation in “Hick & Nillie” was laid on the relationship holding between words and objects, on their truth-value, here the reader's attention is directed to the simple fact that language is nothing more than a prolongation emerging out of the earth itself, as it were – a telluric emanation born from the dark bosom of Mother Earth. In the fundamental purposes language serves in humans' interaction among themselves and with the world as an effective tool of both communication and knowledge, it has to listen attentively to what the world has to say and teach if it is to work properly and to remain healthy. Its ear listens both inward and outward, to the beating heart of the living Earth and to its own rhythms:

The ear of language rests
on the breast of the world,
unable to know and unable to care
whether it listens inward or outward.

SP, p. 255.

It turns out that the language's ear is also the world's ear. It is not humans' ear, self-absorbed and egoistic as we are most of the time. This is the world singing its own song of flesh, while listening to itself singing. And the ear is the prototypical organ of speech, which is no prerogative of humans alone. Like one's own skin, bones, fingertips or hair, speech does not truly belong to us humans: "*Your / speech, of course, is yours. It is another's / even so. So is your skin. So are your bones. / So are your fingertips, your hair.*" Speech is grander than ourselves, larger than what we think it to be. Every little thing in the world speaks a language of its own, wants to mean, conveys a message in the grander scheme of life. Both living and nonliving, human and nonhuman creatures are inextricably linked to one another in the living mesh of things we call *reality*, a true continuum of differences we impose upon the Heraclitean, ever-flowing reality. It does remain a fact that whenever we open our mouths to utter a single word, what we say does not belong to us, is not even quintessentially human: "*When we are actually / speaking, what we say is not man-made.*" Language speaks through us, the whole of existence resonates in one way or another in the mouthfuls of words we utter, for language is universal, pervasive, to be found in the realm of the non-human too. It is there where it remains purer and more pristine, closer to the things it names. The final lesson this seemingly simple poem teaches us is that we have to learn to be humble in the face of the sublime nature of language, and grateful for being given the opportunity to belong to something grander than ourselves. And it is good news that we do have language as well to be able to convey the sense of gratitude and humility to ourselves and to one another.

VI · "The Living Must Never Outnumber the Dead"

First published as C.73 in *Canadian Literature* 154 (Autumn 1997): 8, 110, together with "Zhàozhou Congshen" and republished as B.83 in *Many-voiced fountains: Studi di anglistica e comparatistica in onore di Elsa Linguanti*, a cura di Mario Curreli e Fausto Ciompi. Pisa: ETS, 2003: pp. 16–29, alongside the essay "What is Found in Translation" (rev. in A.83) and the poems entitled "Self-Portrait: Giotto's Bones" and "And So Do We", "The Living Must Never Outnumber the Dead" is a powerful piece at the centre of "The Living" in *Selected Poems* (2009). A short lyric poem of only three four-line stanzas, the title itself points explicitly to the thematic concern of the composition. In simple declarative sentences, the speaking voice beneath the poem states that there are more living human beings than there should be. This is clearly a case of world overpopulation: we live in an overcrowded planet¹² where there is more life than the Earth's resources can afford to sustain. Environmental sustainability demands that the living never outnumber the dead; this is a tacit rule that we appear to have broken in the present state of affairs:

It is that simple. The living
must never outnumber the dead.
With us, at the moment, they do.
We have broken the rule.

SP, p. 256.

¹² Currently estimated to be seven billion by the United States Census Bureau as of January 2012, the world population comprises the total number of living humans on the planet Earth and has experienced continuous growth since the end of the bubonic Plague, Great Famine and Hundred Years Wars in 1350, when it was about 300 million. Current projections show a continued increase of population (but a steady decline in the population growth rate), so that by the year 2050 the world population will be somewhere between 7.5 and 10.5 billion.

The speaking voice admits that these are “*hard words / to say to a woman*”, because how is it morally possible to prevent a woman from her right to give birth to her own children? Birth control policies come up immediately to one’s mind. And they are “*preposterous words / to say to a child*”, because how on earth are we to prevent children from living into adulthood and enjoying the gift of life every human being has an inalienable right to? Once uttered, there is not much the poet can do about his own words. Where can he hide these sharpened words? These mouthfuls of live air he chooses to abandon somewhere mid-air in the hope that no one may find them. These are spoken words blowing in the wind that nobody might notice after all. *Littera scripta manet*, said Horace many centuries ago, and so does the spoken word. Once uttered, there is no way of *unsaying* one’s spoken words, as they *persist* somehow as part of the living fabric of air itself:

And I do not know what to do
except leave them behind
here in the air
where no one will find them.

SP, p. 256.

We might think that what gets spoken is easily forgotten because writing has a stubborn consistency about it that makes a verbal message durable in the solid form of language, while speaking has not. No matter whether spoken or written, words do remain in one way or another, they manage to survive, and the message in a bottle uttered by the poet in these lines has reached to us in the form of a memorable poem that looks reality in the eye and says in natural language what no one dares to say: that there are too many of us human beings on Earth, and that we have disturbed the balance that there ideally should be.

VII · “At Last”

“At Last” is another enigmatic short lyric poem. Written in simple declarative language, it has the purity and perfection of crystal, and it conveys profundity of thought once again. The whole composition is one extended stanza, even if subtle modulations of thinking are distinguishable as the poem unfolds like an astounding flower. As in many of Bringham’s poems, the reader is plunged back into an elemental world of air and earth where the dead, the living and the never-born coexist with one another in a seemingly spontaneous way. Metaphor is of the essence and parallelism is the main structural device around which the whole poem is masterly constructed, as can be seen from the very first opening verse lines. The air and the earth are mirrors hiding hearts that are beating at a different pace. That the air and the earth should have innumerable hearts, that most human of organs, means that they are alive with presences that we do not even notice or take for granted. It is not *one* heart, but *hearts*, in the plural, which evokes the immense richness and diversity of life forms populating the air and the earth. If reality is a continuum teeming with sacred life, then there is no reason to think that only humans have monopoly in hearts. What is fascinating about the statements in the first stanza is that the air’s hearts beat faster than human hearts, while the earth’s hearts beat slower and slower. Is it because Mother Earth is sick and tired of humans’ greedy manners in their relation to the real? Fed up with the way we manage the Earth’s resources with a shameless view to make the greatest profit possible? The poet does not judge, he simply puts forward the facts:

In the mirror of the air

are the hearts that are
faster than yours.
In the mirror of the earth,
the hearts that go
slower and slower.

SP, p. 256.

At the core of “At Last” is what looks like a passing meditation on the Beothuk. One of the First Nations of North America, the Beothuk were native inhabitants of the island of Newfoundland at the time of European contact in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They spoke a language isolate, a language thought to be a branch of Algonquian according to some linguists, but there are only limited records of the language to draw definitive conclusions. Beothuk means ‘people’ in the Beothuk language, which is significant enough. It is estimated that there were about 2,000 inhabitants at the time of European contact, possibly no more than 500 to 700 people, living in independent and autonomous family groups of 30 to 55 members. Being a hunter-gatherer people, their main sources of food were caribou, salmon and seals, and they also hunted or harvested other animal and plant species. They made their own warm clothes from the fur-bearing animals they hunted, they built their own canoes from bark with their own hands, and they lived in conical dwellings known as *mamateeks*, structures built around poles arranged in a circle and covered with birch bark. Unlike other native peoples, the Beothuk always strived to avoid contact with European settlers, who often treated them inhumanly. Population estimates of surviving Beothuks by the end of the nineteenth century vary from about 150 up to 3,000, but the point is that their relentless struggle for subsistence was doomed to failure due to the superiority of arms technology of European settlers and the territorial pressure exerted by other encroaching native peoples (the Inuit and the Mi’kmaqs) living nearby. Due to the loss of access to sufficient food resources, to the spread of infectious diseases such as smallpox brought to the New World by the European settlers, and to the violent encounters with settlers and other natives, Beothuk numbers dwindled rapidly toward extinction. They became officially extinct as a separate ethnic group in 1829, with the death of the last known survivor of the Beothuk, a young woman in her early twenties by the name of Shanawdithit. “*Did you suppose, after / the last Beothuk died, / that the cod and the lobster / would feed you forever?*,” asks the poet. Is this question addressed to humankind in general? The Earth’s resources are only limited, they are not boundless or infinite – this seems to be the message at the core of the heart of “At Last”. The pressure of European colonizers that the Beothuk had to endure brought about their final annihilation, but the Earth’s generous provision is not endless.

The closing lines of Bringham’s poem are disquieting enough. All human beings that have been long dead are “*dying of thirst*”, they have an unquenchable thirst for life, they are asking for another chance on this irreplaceable home of us. Similarly, the living are also “*dying of eating*”, because of sheer excess and shameless abuse of what the Earth has to offer us generously and in abundance. It is a matter of *not enough* or of *too much* in each case. A third category, somewhere beyond that of the dead and the living, includes “*the ones who have never been born*”: Is this a reference to the gods, eternal and immutable creatures? Possibly. They too are at last disappearing, because we no longer care whether they exist or not, because we do not acknowledge their invisible presence upon Earth. It is for the gods that the poet makes his poems as part of the universal poetry implicit in *what is*, not for us mortals, made of perishable flesh and bone after all. Thus, the closing lines of “At Last” echo beautifully in one’s mind long after we read the words of the poem aloud, noticing their parallelism and their musicality:

The dead are dying
of thirst, and the living
are dying of eating.
The ones who have never
been born, and for whom
we exist, are at last
disappearing.

SP, pp. 256-257.

VIII · “For the Geologist’s Daughter”

Five three-line stanzas are enough to make up this jewel of a poem, another perfect short lyric included in “The Living” with which Bringhurst puts a full stop to his *Selected Poems* (2009). Shortly afterwards, it was reprinted in a collection of essays entitled *Lyric Philosophy*, conceived as a tribute in honour of the subtlety of the thinking and the singing of Canadian poet and musician Jan Zwicky, whose presence is felt somehow beneath the lines. She is possibly the geologist’s daughter mentioned on the title. Despite its deceptively simple structure and language, “For the Geologist’s Daughter” shares no doubt powerful affinities in its profundity of thought with the major philosophical poems in Bringhurst’s corpus – the sequence of the pre-Socratics of *The Old in Their Knowing* and the sequence of Oriental sages in *The Book of Silences*. The language remains gnomic, enigmatic, ringing with echoes from Parmenides’ philosophizing on *being* and *non-being* as the fundamental foundations of the real, on the persistence of immutable *being* and the destruction of this world of ours in our stubborn and unknowing and damaging hands. Thus, the whole poem could be said to be a meditation in miniature on *what is*, or so seem to suggest the opening lines of the poem. Thus, the first part of the poem is built around a constellation of two key words – *nothing* and *everything*. Everything we know to exist in the world came up out of nothingness. *Nothing* is what there was at the beginning and what there will be in the end. An absolute void, a blank space, a zero amid the universe. *Nothing* positively exists, which is to say that *what is* and *what is not* are the two sides to one and the same coin: *what is* is *resonant and clear*, the poet tells us, like nothing itself:

There will be nothing in the end,
and that is everything that ever was
and will be.

Yet what-is is sometimes every
bit as resonant and clear
as nothing ever could be.

SP, p. 257.

The second part of the poem shows “*the philosopher of music*” (whom we take to be Zwicky) and “*the musician of ideas*” (Bringhurst himself) musing together on the nature of *what is*: “*what has been / can never not have been.*” *What is* is real for sure; it *is* and cannot not have been. There is no way of undoing this. But *what is* (being) is also moving fast into *what has been*, into *what is not* (non-being), and then “*its having been will sing / its silent song as long / as no one listens.*” Something must be left of what has been for sure, lingering somewhere in mid-air, singing “*its silent song*” (notice the alliteration of the closing lines) provided there are no humans nearby, close at hand, listening. Which is to say that *being* and *non-being* like to

hide away from humans' inquisitive, penetrating gaze.¹³ Everywhere being is singing and dancing, but we might need cleanse our senses and look at the world with open eyes and listen to its song with open ears. After all, a geologist is someone who looks at the world with fresh eyes and reads in the book of nature what normally passes unnoticed to the rest of common mortals. The geologist's daughter must have inherited a passion for what is tangible and real like mountains, rocks, a handful of sand, a heap of stones, ground layers, and all the words in the language spoken by earth itself. Which is to say that Bringhurst's metaphysics is physics in the end: his speculation about the real is firmly based on what the senses perceive and handle. The mind sings then its own subtle song out of the materials the eyes, the ears and the hands give it to start from.

¹³ As Fraser Sutherland points out in a review of *Selected Poems* (2009) entitled "Art and Nature, Body and Mind", published in *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 11 July 2009: F12: "If one gets a little lost here in the shunt between being and non-being, the lines may relate to a quotation from French philosopher and musicologist Vladimir Jankelevitch, which Bringhurst uses as an epigraph to "The Physics of Light" section: "What has once been can henceforth never not have been..." By punctuating life, death gives it definition. A variant of this sentiment appears in "Sunday Morning"."

CONCLUSION

Poetry is a mystery because it is as vast as reality or life itself. And life is a mystery indeed that defies discursive reasoning and intellectual oversimplification. There is something truly unassailable and ineffable about it, even if we humans strive to make sense of it so stubbornly that one is brought to a sense of astonishment at the determination with which humankind has devised all sorts of stylized explanations throughout history and the unfolding of successive civilizations on Earth just to account for it. What we have learnt from a close reading of Bringhurst's poetry could be summarized in just a handful of resonant words. Simplicity and brevity are a precious virtue after all. Poetry is in the very texture of *being*; it has nothing quintessentially to do with language, though we humans tend to try to capture it through words. And yet Bringhurst has taught us that there are certainly other paths leading to the heart of things: philosophy, science and art are just instances, ways of responding to the world with a maximum of intensity. Love is possibly another instance, another way of producing knowledge and of touching the truth of the world. The erudite scholars of the European Renaissance were convinced that man was the measure of all things, the centre of the universe, and the real object of human knowledge. They were humanists after all, nothing human was alien to them, and so it seems to us that Bringhurst is following closely in their steps. But to Bringhurst, who has a vast mind and a generous heart, the true object of knowledge is the world at large, which is both human and nonhuman. Though immensely varied and manifold in its expressions, *being* is just *one*, and so knowledge is also *one*. In his love of all things human and nonhuman, Bringhurst does not care about disciplinary boundaries. He is a polymath because his sense of curiosity in the face of the awe-inspiring grandeur of reality cannot be simply contained in any way.

Passion and enthusiasm are vital ingredients in all human endeavour. There is plenty of both ingredients in Bringhurst's life-long enterprise and calling. Not without good reason, he claims that learning is the most elemental vocation of all human beings – i.e., learning for the sake of learning, for the sheer pleasure of getting to know anything at all. Thus, it seems to us that gratitude, if anything, is the palpating heart of the poet's entire work, for Bringhurst's poetics is *a poetics of listening* or *a poetics of hearing*, which is to say a poetics of paying attention to the world. Paying attention to the real, Bringhurst finds out that poetry is pervasive, that it is implicit in the very texture of reality, that it is an attribute of the world. The ancient Greek philosophers, the Buddhist monk-scholars and the mythtellers of the oral literatures of North America were convinced that this was the case. Their pristine look at the world revealed nuances of meaning to them which are simply not audible or visible to us anymore. What they found in the world was a subtle sense of interconnectedness, a form of ecological integrity that has been lost for us now a few centuries later. In this respect, the sense of historical continuity is amazing with Bringhurst though. Centuries are nothing to him; all intellectual accomplishments are atemporal to his beautiful mind. Breathing through the feet, he stumbles upon the simple fact that the world speaks in many different voices and so his poems are attempts at *echolocation*, gestures to capture the polyphony inherent in reality. It is only natural that he should affirm time and again that his poems are more the product of oral composition than of writing. His poems come out of his mouth (they are mouthfuls of living words), but also out of the rhythms of his feet walking in the woods, for he is an avid outdoorsman eager to listen to the world with open ears and attentive eyes. He comes as an explorer back from long voyages into

exotic lands, bringing invaluable poems in his hands as a gift to humankind. His poems exist to honour the world and everything in it, human and nonhuman, but also to honour being and nonbeing, to honour our ancestors, the living, the dead, and the unborn. Bringhurst's poems are also born out of his hands, which handle the solid form of language with utter dexterity to reach the ultimate elegance of well-wrought books conceived as beautiful artifacts. The fascinations language and typography hold for the author are simply inexhaustible. Hence he has devoted much time and attention to book design, to the history of letterforms, to translation as a form of intellectual gymnastics. All these intellectual or creative enterprises are integral to his poetic endeavour. To do justice to his work as a conscientious, perfectionist and accomplished typographer would require another long dissertation.

Being has no more devoted student than Bringhurst himself. Reading his poems and his prose pieces, the reader comes out of the experience with the comforting sense that the world coheres and makes sense. There is such a precious sense of intellectual coherence and such a moving love of precision at the heart of his *oeuvre*, that one is under the impression that his corpus is a gigantic work in progress that has the simplicity, the beauty and the perfection of a circle. To this, one must add an impeccable use of language, as well as such an inescapable sense of ethical integrity and respect for the real that one cannot help surrendering to his unique, idiosyncratic *Weltanschauung*. This is poetry of great heights, and so it is only natural that many of his poems should measure themselves against the sheer magnitude of mountains, the beauty of trees, or the silence of stones. Looking at reality through the prism of his work, we come to learn that the core of his view of the world is that *being* is sacred at its very roots. It takes humility, integrity and *claritas* of mind to affirm this. *Being* is the talismanic word repeated over and over again throughout the entire work of Robert Bringhurst. So are *body* (blood or bone), *speech* and *mind*, which constitute a potent triad at the heart of his work. The Cartesian *res extensa* / *res cogitans* dichotomy is abolished or cancelled in his work. But deep inside his *oeuvre* there is a potent equation that brings *being*, *poetry* and *knowing* in depth together into a single whole. *Everywhere being is dancing and singing, knowing is known*, says Bringhurst. *All things think*. And humans have no monopoly on meaning or language, for every single thing in this world seeks to *mean* something. He speaks indeed of *the tree of meaning*, which is an apt metaphor that reconciles Nature and human language, that affirms the simple fact that words are an emanation from the world itself as it were. *Wörter blühen*. The thought occurs that, had he had the opportunity to read Bringhurst's works, Johann Gottfried Herder might have liked this metaphor for sure: the tree of meaning is an all-encompassing massive treasure, and out of an *Ursprache* have evolved the myriad languages spoken by *homo sapiens sapiens*, but also by birds, mountains, trees, lichen, toads, moss, rivers, and stones. *Die Sprache spricht*, and everything speaks.

Bringhurst's inquisitive or penetrating mind finds connections that pass unnoticed to most of us. The result is poems that are rich in profundity of thought and musicality; poems that are born of breathing, which, like feet, constitutes human beings' elemental link with the world. It is no exaggeration to say that *being* is the true and ultimate concern of Bringhurst's entire work, and so his poetry is universal. Transcending all sorts of spatial and temporal boundaries, he seeks the company of the ancestors who have devoted themselves to a profound meditation on *being* as well. As a result, his poems are philosophical poems or lyric philosophy, to borrow the title of Jan Zwicky's masterpiece. They are also portable, fluid structures of knowledge that have rescued from oblivion the best that has been said

and thought by our ancestors. And they are a temporary cache where the precious treasure of human legacy (both intellectual and emotional) is preserved. What he performs in his poetry is *an archaeology of human knowledge* whereby the best, and only the best, is captured in elegant language of utter transparency and simplicity. Thus, the cultural syncretism of his work betrays an immense erudition and a love of intellectual precision. This is the work of a man who writes with the whole burden of tradition not on his shoulders, but in his bones. Herakleitos, Pythagoras, Empedokles, Parmenides, Demokritos, Pindar, Sophocles, Nagarjuna, Saraha, Dogen, Haikun, Han Shan, Michelangelo, John Swanton, Ghandl, Skaay, Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, Dell Hymes, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Valéry, René Cher, Martin Heidegger, Paul Celan, Federico García Lorca, Pablo Neruda, among others, are all his walking companions, or, to put it differently, the human beings constellated into the living fabric of his personal canon. As a serious author, he is desperately in need of a vast (polyglot) literary map of the world, but also in need of a map of *homo sapiens sapiens* in and through time as one more species among all other species in this world. His elegant meditations on language are a powerful expression of what could be called *ecological linguistics* – one that contemplates the profound connections between meaning, language, being, Nature and philosophy with great insight and *claritas* of mind.

In addition, Bringhurst has spent much time studying the purely technical part of poetry: years of indefatigable study of different prosodic systems, of literary traditions other than European or Western traditions, have led to his finding his own distinct poetic voice. His poems have evolved towards prosodic experimentation, towards more complex experiments with voice. Musicians, painters and mythtellers have taught him much about the texture of the human voice, and about how to thread different voices into the living architecture of a single poem. Whereas his early poems of the 1970s – those collected in *The Shipwright's Log* (1972), *Cadastré* (1973), and *Bergschrund* (1975) – show the poet as territorial recorder, at pains to faithfully record *what is* with emotional detachment, objectivity and impersonality, but also the poet wearing the masks of such *poetic personae* as Moses, Jacob or Francesco Petrarca – in *Deuteronomy* (1974), *Jacob Singing* (1977) and *The Stonecutter's Horses* (1979) –, the work of the 1980s – *Tzubalet's Mountain* (1982), *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), *Tending the Fire* (1985), *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986) – reveals a poet walking towards his own poetic maturity with impressive assurance and dexterity. The 1980s and 1990s are marked by a keen interest in the oral literature and visual art of the indigenous people of North America (especially the Haida), but also by an interest in the philosophy of the Oriental sages revisited in *The Book of Silences*, a companion to his sequence on the Presocratics (*The Old in Their Knowing*), begun with the publication of “Herakleitos” in *Cadastré* (1973), *Pythagoras* (1974) and *Eight Objects* (1975), and an interest in exploring poems for several voices. Thus, Bringhurst has evolved towards prosodic experimentation in his attempt at creating poems meant to be spoken by several voices that speak simultaneously or react to one another in producing a kaleidoscopic message rich in subtle nuances. Hence his polyphonic poems – *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986), *Conversations with a Toad* (1987), *New World Suite No. 3* (2005) and *Ursa Major* (2003/2009) – are a tribute to the human voice and to the world at large, which is a many-voiced place where humans and nonhumans live together. And polyphony is inextricably linked to a deep sense of ecological awareness and commitment: the Earth is the only home for humans and nonhumans alike, and we do not own it in any way. This is, at any rate, the immense literary legacy Bringhurst has given the Earth and humankind so far as his personal gift. We are immensely grateful for this generous gesture.

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A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF ROBERT BRINGHURST

Robert Bringhurst is the author of a very prolific literary output which includes poems, essays, and translations. Not only has he produced his own books, but also contributed to innumerable magazines, journals and books by other authors. Indeed, he started his literary career while he was still an undergraduate and has been writing uninterruptedly since at least 1972 – i.e., for over 40 years so far. The essential bibliography that follows is the fruit of a collective effort begun a long time ago. Anne Hamilton Tayler (Yukon College, Whitehorse) began compiling the entries that make up this document in the early 1980s and since then many different people have progressively polished this document. Robert Bringhurst provided me with a working draft in June 2010, some of whose entries I have corrected myself. More recently, I have contributed other entries to this ongoing project, which is truly a work in progress. At any rate, the chronology of Robert Bringhurst's writings is somewhat complicated by his habit of revising, often extensively. Bringhurst himself opens this exhaustive bibliography with a preface from which I wish to quote here at least the opening words:

This bibliography was begun by Anne Hamilton Tayler in 1983 and has been continued by several hands since 1987. In its present form it lists about 350 publications, nearly 250 studies and reviews of Bringhurst's work by other hands, and about 30 translations into ten other languages: a total of some 650 items. It includes books, chapbooks, broadsides, contributions to periodicals, edited works, published sound recordings, films, and archival collections of manuscripts and other material by Robert Bringhurst. While an attempt has also been made to record reviews and other published responses to Bringhurst's work, and to list translations of his writings, it is certain that in both these categories this bibliography is incomplete. [...] In short, the bibliography lists primarily works of literature and criticism: poetry, translation, art history, literary criticism, and other forms of literary prose. It does, however, include recordings, films and archival collections as well as printed publications. The first appearance of any individual poem or other item is marked with a bullet (•). First editions of separate publications are marked with double bullets (••). Following every listing of the first known appearance of an item, all known reprintings and revisions are listed. In the listing for each subsequent appearance, the apparent source is given. Where no parenthetical information follows the listing of an item, this is its only known appearance in print. Minor typographic variants are not catalogued as revisions. Dimensions of separate publications are given in metric units, width followed by height. The ISBN (international standard book number) is given where known, but for separate publications only. Page counts for separate publications give the binder's measure (i.e., they include both printed pages and blanks). Page counts in all other cases include printed pages alone.

For the purposes of our doctoral dissertation, we have slightly abridged this working draft. Thus, we list the following entries:

- A** *Books & Other Separate Printed Works*
- B** *Contributions to Books & Other Separate Works*
- C** *Contributions to Periodicals: Poems*
- D** *Contributions to Periodicals: Prose*
- E** *Edited and Co-edited Works*
- F** *Films & Recordings*
- R** *Archival Collections*
- S** *Critical Studies, Reviews & other Secondary Sources*

These are the abbreviations used:

- first appearance of an individual poem or other work
- [•] first appearance of a substantive revision
- first edition of a book or chapbook
- [••] first printing of a subsequent edition which the author has substantially revised
- rpt* reprinted without substantive change
- rev* revised and republished
- Red** incomplete entry awaiting further information

ESSENTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

· POETRY ·

- The Shipwright's Log* · 1972
Cadastré · 1973
Pythagoras · 1974
Deuteronomy · 1974
Eight Objects · 1975
Bergschrund · 1975
Jacob Singing · 1977
The Stonecutter's Horses · 1979
Tzubalet's Mountain. A Sonata in Three Movements · 1982
The Beauty of the Weapons: Selected Poems 1972–82 · 1982
Tending the Fire: An Unparable of the Relations of Rabbits & Dogs & Old Women, &c. · 1985
The Blue Roofs of Japan: a Score for Interpreting Voices · 1986
Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music · 1986
Conversations with a Toad · 1987
The Calling: Selected Poems 1970–1995 · 1995
Elements (with drawings by Ulf Nilsen) · 1995
The Book of Silences · 2001
Ursa Major · 2003; 2nd ed. 2009
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A BOOKS & OTHER SEPARATE PRINTED WORKS

1972

A.1 • *The Shipwright's Log*. Bloomington, Indiana Kanchenjunga Press, 1972. 40 p. A few copies in cloth without dustjacket, 18.5 × 22.5 cm; the remainder in paper, 17.5 × 21.5 cm. "Of this first edition, ten copies have been set aside to be bound in boards and full cloth, signed and numbered one through ten. The remainder [250] have been bound in paper covers." [ISBN 0-913600-00-8.] (See also A.1a.) Contents: • "Limassol"; • "Jebel Saneen, Lebanon" (rpt. in C.27; compare A.13); • "The African Daydream"; • "Sinai"; • "A Form of Surrender"; • "Leafletting the Sentry"; • "The Beauty of the Weapons" (rpt. in B.7, C.3, C.5, and rev. in A.14, A.47, A.92, B.27, B.43, B.78a, C.54); • "Haruspitations in a Whorehouse"; • "Isthmian" (rev. in C.22); • "Self-Portrait: The Sansei Poem" (rpt. as "Self-Portrait for a Sansei Girl" in C.2); • "Three Early Poems"; • "Les Figures de Lissajous"; • "The Sun and Moon" (rev. in A.14, B.27); • "Portrait in Blood" (rpt. in C.27); • "The Shirt". With one drawing by Patrick Morrison and two by Paco Castillo. Reviews: S.1.

1973

A.1a *The Shipwright's Log*. Second Printing, 1973. Paper, 100 copies. Same as A.1, except for the copyright page.

A.2 • *Cadastre*. Bloomington, Indiana: Kanchenjunga Press, 1973. 80 p. Paper, 17.5 × 21.5 cm, approx. 300 copies. ISBN 0-913600-03-2. Contents: *Section I*: • "Herakleitos" (rpt. in A.5, A.6, C.22, and rev. in A.14, A.47, B.69); • "Song of the Summit" (rpt. in A.6, A.11, A.14, A.47, A.92, B.7, B.9, C.27, C.63); • "Study for an Ecumenical Window" (rpt. in A.6, A.14, C.9, C.54); • "Poem about Crystal" (rpt. in A.6, A.14, A.47, A.92, B.7, B.17, B.27, B.43, B.69, C.10, C.54, C.67); • "Strophe from Sophocles" (trans. from Greek, rpt. in C.22, C.36; rev. and enlarged as "Of the Snaring of Birds" in A.14; further rev. in A.47); • "Four Glyphs" (rpt. in A.6, A.14, C.22); • "Kerry Shawn Keys" (rpt. in B.64); • "The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods" (rev. in C.22); • "The Greenland Stone" (rpt. in A.6, A.14, A.47, A.92, C.27, C.36); *Section II*: • "A Portrait"; • "Four Love Poems from Vidyakara's Anthology" (trans. from Sanskrit); • "Lullaby for Brendan"; • "Antistrophe from Leopardi" (trans. from Italian, rpt. in B.67, C.10, C.22); • "Le Debat du cuer et du corps de François Villon" (trans. from French, rpt. from C.4); *Section III*: • "The Poet, Having at Last Encountered the Muse" (rpt. in C.10); • "A Document"; • "Poem of the Sexton's Tinnitus"; • "Three Ways of Looking for the Northwest Passage in the Shipyards of Bristol and Rouen" (see also C.8); • "Poem to be Sung into a Sheet of Paper at 216 Beacon Street"; • "Three Epigrams"; • "The Rhythms of Irene"; *Section IV*: • "The Song of Macuilxochitzin" (trans. from Nahuatl); • "The Ode of Imr el-Qais" (trans. from Arabic, rpt. in B.67, C.6; see also D.1). With three drawings by Patrick Morrison and one by Paco Castillo. Reviews: S.2.

1974

A.3 • *Deuteronomy*. Vancouver: Sono Nis Press, 1974. Chapbook, 8 p. Paper, 14.5 × 23 cm. "This first edition is limited to 150 copies." Contents: A poem (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.6, A.14, B.10, B.13, B.18, B.36, C.24; rev. in A.47, B.69).

A.4 • *Pythagoras*. Kanchenjunga Broadsheet No. 2. San Francisco & Vancouver: Kanchenjunga Press, 1974. Broadside, 22 × 56 cm, 500 copies. Contents: A poem (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.5, A.6, A.14, A.47, B.7).

1975

A.5 • *Eight Objects*. Kanchenjunga Chapbook N^o. 4. San Francisco and Vancouver: Kanchenjunga Press, 1975. 20 p. Paper, 15.5 × 24.5 cm, 250 copies. According to the colophon, "This first edition is limited to 258 copies. Eight of these are signed copies hand bound in boards, boxed and lettered a through h." But the eight hardcover copies were never bound and the sheets apparently

destroyed. ISBN 0-913600-39-3. Contents: Herakleitos (rpt. from A.2); • Parmenides (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.6, A.14, A.47); • Miletos (rpt. in A.6, A.14, A.47); A Short History (rpt. from C.22); Empedokles: Seven Fragments (rev. from C.12); Empedokles' Recipes (rpt. from C.24); Pherekydes (rpt. from C.25); Pythagoras (rpt. from A.4). Studies: S.159. And see S.180.

A.6 •• *Bergschrund*. Vancouver: Sono Nis Press, 1975. 104 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 16 × 23.5 cm. [ISBN 0-919462-14-6.] (See also A.6a.) Contents: *Section I*: Song of the Summit (rpt. from A.2); The Greenland Stone (rpt. from A.2); Four Glyphs (rpt. from A.2); • Three Deaths (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.14); • The Dogs of New Spain (incl. in R.1); Poem about Crystal (rpt. from A.2); The Identity Moving (rpt. from C.13); The Meadow (rpt. from C.16); [•] Stone-Lathe and Wing (rev. from C.14, where it appears as The Stone and the Wing); For Robert Grosseteste (rpt. from C.18); *Section II*: Herakleitos (rpt. from A.2); Parmenides (rpt. from A.5); Miletos (rpt. from A.5); A Short History (rpt. from A.5); Empedokles: Seven Fragments (rpt. from A.5); Empedokles' Recipes (rpt. from A.5); Pherekydes (rpt. from A.5); Pythagoras (rpt. from A.5); *Section III*: An Augury (rpt. from C.21); Genesis Frozen (rpt. from C.16); Essay on Adam (rpt. from C.11); • Patrimony (incl. in R.1); Deuteronomy (rpt. from A.3); Babylon (rpt. from C.13); *Section IV*: Hachadura (rpt. from C.26); *Section V*: Phoenix (rpt. from C.16); Sleep Does Not Have Chinese Eyes (rpt. from C.17); The Fish Who Lived to Tell about It (rpt. from C.17); City of Mirage (trans. from Arabic, rpt. from C.3); • Scholium (rpt. in B.7); A Quadratic Equation (rpt. from C.11); Study for an Ecumenical Window (rpt. from A.2); A Lesson in Botany (rpt. from C.20); Some Ciphers (rpt. from C.16); • Anecdote of the Squid (rpt. in A.14, A.47, B.7, B.20, B.27, B.78a); • Notes to the Reader (incl. in R.1; rpt. in B.10, B.26, B.36, B.114); • Ararat (rpt. in A.14, A.47, B.9, B.62, C.28). Reviews: S.3, S.4, S.5, S.6, S.7, S.8, S.12, S.15.

A.6a *Bergschrund*. Paper, 15 × 23 cm. Same as A.6 except for the binding.

1977

A.7 •• *Jacob Singing*. Kanchenjunga Chapbook No. 8. San Francisco and Vancouver: Kanchenjunga Press, 1977. 12 p. Paper, 20.5 × 30.5 cm. "This first edition consists of fifty copies signed and numbered I through L ... and one hundred copies signed and numbered 1 through 100." ISBN 0-913600-52-0. Contents: A poem (rpt. in C.31, and rev. in A.14, B.9, B.33; further rev. in A.47, B.74; further revised in A.92). Reviews: S.10, S.11, S.15.

A.8 • *Death by Water*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Library Press, 1977. Broadside, 61 × 40 cm, 20 copies on handmade paper; also issued as 51 × 38 cm, approx. 100 copies on newsprint. Contents: A poem (rpt. in B.9, C.32, and rev. in A.14, A.19, A.47, B.21, B.66, B.103), with a drawing by Michael Bullock.

1979

A.9 •• *The Stonecutter's Horses*. Vancouver: Standard Editions [Pulp Press and William Hoffer], 1979. Chapbook, 12 p. Paper, 19.5 × 28 cm. "This first edition... has been printed in an edition of 350 copies, of which 10, lettered A to J, are signed by the author..., 40, numbered 11 to 50, are signed by the author and 300 are numbered 51 to 350." Contents: A poem (rpt. from C.32). Reviews & studies: S.15, S.128.

1980

A.10 • *The Knife in the Measure: Variation on a theme by Li Shang-yin*. Steelhead, British Columbia: Barbarian Press, 1980. Broadside, 25.5 × 39 cm, in a folder 33 × 51 cm. Issued both separately and as part of a boxed portfolio – *Albion Broadsheets 1980–81* (Barbarian Press, 1981). Approx. 100 copies in total. Contents: A poem translated from Chinese. The Chinese text is reproduced from the calligraphy of Shui Yim Tse. Reviews: S.20.

1982

A.11 *Song of the Summit*. Toronto: Dreadnaught Press, 1982. Broadside, 19 × 12.5 cm. One of a set of 15 Dreadnaught broadsides issued for the 1982 National Book Festival. Contents: A poem (rpt. from A.6).

A.12 •• *Tzubahalem's Mountain: A Sonata in Three Movements*. Lantzville, British Columbia: Oolichan Books, 1982. 40 p. Cloth without dustjacket, 17.5 × 28.5 cm. "The edition is limited to 250 copies, the first 26 of which are lettered A–Z and the remaining 224 of which are numbered with Arabic numerals, all copies being signed by the author." ISBN 0-88982-044-9. Contents: A poem in 21 sections (rpt. in A.14, A.47), with untitled headnote (rev. in A.14). Includes a dedication and acknowledgement not reproduced in subsequent appearances. Excerpt rpt. in B.43. Reviews: S.21.

A.13 • *The Salute by Tasting*. Vancouver: Slug Press, 1982. Broadside, 43 × 23.5 cm. "Published in an edition of 100 copies, numbered and signed." Contents: A poem (rpt. in A.14, C.35; compare "Jebel Saneen, Lebanon" in A.1).

A.14 •• *The Beauty of the Weapons: Selected Poems 1972–1982*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982. 160 p. Paper, 14 × 21.5 cm. isbn 0-7710-1660-3. (See also A.14a, A.26.) Contents: Prefatory Note; These Poems, She Said (rpt. from C.37); *Hunters & Pilgrims*: [•] The Beauty of the Weapons (rev. from A.1); Song of the Summit (rpt. from A.2); Ararat (rpt. from A.6); A Quadratic Equation (rpt. from A.6); Four Glyphs (rpt. from A.2); Three Deaths (rpt. from A.6); [•] The Sun and Moon (rev. from A.1); The Greenland Stone (rpt. from A.2); Poem about Crystal (rpt. from A.2); Stone-Lathe and Wing (rpt. from A.6); Study for an Ecumenical Window (rpt. from A.2); A Lesson in Botany (rpt. from A.6); The Fish Who Lived to Tell about It (rpt. from A.6); Some Ciphers (rpt. from A.6); Anecdote of the Squid (rpt. from A.6); *Deuteronomy*: An Augury (rpt. from A.6); Essay on Adam (rpt. from A.6); Deuteronomy (rpt. from A.3); *The Old in Their Knowing*: Untitled headnote; [•] Herakleitos (rev. from A.6); Parmenides (rpt. from A.6); Miletos (rpt. from A.6); A Short History (rpt. from A.6); Empedokles: Seven Fragments (rpt. from A.6); Empedokles' Recipes (rpt. from A.6); Pherekydes (rpt. from A.6); Pythagoras (rpt. from A.6); Demokritos (rpt. from C.34); • Xenophanes (rpt. in B.17, B.27); • Of the Snaring of Birds (rpt. in C.54, B.40; see also Strophe from Sophocles in A.2); The Petelia Tablet (rpt. from C.22); *Hachadura*: Untitled headnote; [•] Hachadura (rev. from A.6); *Jacob Singing*: Untitled headnote; [•] Jacob Singing (rev. from A.7); *The Stonecutter's Horses*: Untitled headnote (rpt. in B.27, B.31); [•] The Stonecutter's Horses (rev. from A.9); *Ptahhotep's River*: The Heart is Oil (rpt. from C.32); Spell for White Sandals (rpt. from C.32); The Song of Ptahhotep (rpt. from C.40); *Bone Flute Breathing*: [•] Death by Water (rev. from A.8); • Leda and the Swan (rpt. in B.18, B.81a, B.113, B.114, C.41); [•] The Better Man (rev. from C.30); Cave of the Nymphs (rpt. from C.37); The Salute by Tasting (rpt. from A.13); Two Variations: I. Absence of the Heart; II. Thin Man Washing (both rpt. in A.32, A.47, A.48; the latter rpt. in B.69); Six Epitaphs (rpt. from B.5); Poem without Voices (rpt. from C.39); • Bone Flute Breathing (rev. in A.47; rpt. in B.73, B.114); *Tzubahalem's Mountain*: [•] Untitled headnote (rev. from A.12); Tzubahalem's Mountain (rpt. from A.12); Glossary; Acknowledgements. Reviews & studies: S.16, S.17, S.18, S.19, S.21, S.22, S.23, S.24, S.25, S.37, S.53, S.128, S.159.

A.14a *The Beauty of the Weapons*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart. Second printing, 1984. 160 p. Paper. Same as A.14, except for the copyright page.

A.15 • *Some Notes on Verse and Versification*. Vancouver: Privately printed, 1982. 20 p. Stapled sheets, 21.5 × 28 cm. Approx. 50 copies. Contents: Essay, printed for private circulation to members of the Literary Storefront Poetry Seminar, Vancouver, 1982 (rev. in A.17).

1983

A.16 • *The Book and Its Form: An Historical Anatomy of Literate Culture*. Vancouver: Simon Fraser University, 1983. Folded sheet, [4] p., 17 × 28 cm. Contents: Prospectus for and synopsis of a series of lectures (rev. in A.20; see also A.38).

A.17 [•] *What Kinds of Verse are There?* Banff, Alberta: Privately printed, 1983. 20 p. Unbound sheets, 21.5 × 28 cm. Approx. 25 copies. Contents: Essay, printed for private circulation to members of the Advanced Writing Program at The Banff Centre, November 1983 (rev. from A.15).

1984

A.18 •• *Ocean/Paper/Stone: The catalogue of an exhibition of printed objects which chronicle more than a century of literary publishing in British Columbia.* Vancouver: William Hoffer, 1984. 112 p. Paper, 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 0-919758-07-x. (See also A.34.) Contents: Preface by William Hoffer; Acknowledgements; Introduction; essay entitled "Finding the Place"; 215 catalogue entries along with 48 brief descriptions of presses. Includes bibliography and indices. With 32 illustrations. Reviews: S.44, S.48, S.65.

A.19 *Death by Water.* Mission, British Columbia: [student workshop at] Barbarian Press, 1984. Chapbook, [4] p. Paper, 13.5 × 21.5 cm, approx. 15 copies. Contents: A poem (rpt. from A.14).

A.20 *The Book and Its Form: An Historical Anatomy of Literate Culture.* Vancouver: Simon Fraser University, 1984. Folded sheet, [4] p., 17 × 28 cm. Contents: Revision of A.16. (See also A.21.)

A.21 *The Book and Its Form.* Vancouver: Simon Fraser University, 1984. [65] leaves. In three-ring binder, 26 × 31 cm. Approx. 50 copies. Contents: Reference materials distributed to participants in Bringhurst's lecture series of the same name (see A.20). Includes bibliography; chronological list of type designers; historical correlations of writers, composers and type designers; and many illustrations of letterforms. Some of this material was also issued in an earlier form as loose sheets, in conjunction with an earlier version of the lecture series (see A.16).

A.22 •• *The Raven Steals the Light.* Drawings by Bill Reid; stories by Bill Reid and Robert Bringhurst. Vancouver & Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984. 96 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 24.5 × 27.5 cm. ISBN 0-88894-447-0 (Canada); 0-295-96158-9 (USA). (See also A.22a, A.22b, A.30, A.51, A.52.) Contents: Dedication signed by Reid; • untitled introduction (unsigned, by Bringhurst; cf. headnote to "The Lyell Island Variations" in A.32) and ten episodes from Haida mythology accompanying ten drawings: • The Raven Steals the Light (rpt. in B.34, B.44); • The Raven Steals the Salmon from the Beaver House; The Raven and the First Men (rev. from Reid's publication of the same title, issued as Museum Note 8, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, 1980; rpt. in B.25, B.68); • The Raven and the Big Fisherman (rpt. in D.29); • The Raven with a Broken Beak (rpt. in B.34); • The Bear Mother and Her Husband; • Nanasimgit and His Wife; • The Wasgo and Three Killer Whales; • The Eagle and the Frog; • Epilogue: The Dogfish Woman. (First six episodes together with The Wasgo rpt. in A.30; partial rpt. in D.64.) Reviews: S.45, S.46, S.47, S.50, S.50a, S.51, S.57, S.69, S.94. Adaptations: S.103. Studies: S.155.

A.22a *The Raven Steals the Light.* Limited edition of 150 copies. Cloth in slipcase, without dustjacket. Vancouver & Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984. ISBN 0-88894-451-9 (Canada); 0-295-96194-5 (USA). Same as A.22, except for the binding, tipped-in frontispiece, colophon and copyright page. According to the colophon, "The embossed figure on the cover is taken from a drawing of *Mythic Messengers*, a bronze frieze by Bill Reid commissioned by Teleglobe Canada...." In fact, the cover illustration is a silkscreen print cut by John Broadhead, based on one of the Bill Reid drawings included in the book.

A.22b *The Raven Steals the Light.* Drawings by Bill Reid; stories by Bill Reid and Robert Bringhurst. Vancouver & Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of Washington Press. First paperbound edition, 1988. 96 p. Paper, 23.5 × 26.5 cm. isbn 0-88894-607-4 (Canada) & 0-295-96667-x (usa). Same as A.22 except for cover, copyright page and minor typographic changes.

A.23 • *Saraba*. Lexington, Kentucky: The King Library Press, 1984. Folded broadside, 26 × 33.5 cm. “Published in an edition of 150 copies, numbered and signed.” Contents: A poem (rpt. in A.32, A.47, A.65, B.18, C.45).

A.24 *An Augury*. [Ithaca, New York]: Cornell University Council on Creative and Performing Arts. 1984. Broadside, 27 × 43 cm. Contents: A poem (rpt. from A.14), with announcement of a reading by Bringhurst, “Thursday, October 25, . . . in the Temple of Zeus.” A.24a *An Augury*. Flyer, 21.5 × 28 cm. Same as A.24 but in a reduced size.

1985

A.25 Untitled promotion piece. Toronto: The Writers’ Union of Canada, [1985]. Single sheet, 21.5 × 28 cm. Contents: A poem, • “Thirty Words for Deborah Peaker,” accompanied by brief commentary and photograph. Issued in conjunction with Bringhurst’s 1985 reading tour of Australia and New Zealand. Rpt. in A.32, C.50 as “Thirty Words”; rpt. in A.47 and B.47 as part 1 of “Gloria, Credo, Sanctus et Oreamnos Deorum.”

A.26 *The Beauty of the Weapons*. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 1985. First US edition. 160 p. Paper. Offset from the Canadian edition (A.14). Same as A.14, except for the title page, copyright page and cover. ISBN 0-914742-90-6. Reviews: S.55, S.60, S.61. And see S.180.

A.27 •• *Tending the Fire*. Alcuin Chapbook No. 6. Vancouver: The Alcuin Society, 1985. [16] p. Paper, 14.5 × 24 cm. “The edition is limited to 126 copies, of which 26, lettered, are for the author’s own use and 100, numbered and signed by the author, are for sale.” ISBN 0-919026-14-1. Contents: A poem (rpt., with new prefatory note, in A.32, A.54, A.54a, C.50). Reviews: S.56, S.126.

A.28 • *Rubus ursinus: A Prayer for the Blackberry Harvest*. [Mission, British Columbia: Barbarian Press, 1985.] Broadside, 26 × 33 cm. According to the colophon, there are 126 copies. In fact, the edition consisted of only 25 signed and numbered copies, numbered from 1/126 through 25/126, with perhaps a few unnumbered strays. Contents: A poem (rpt. in A.32, A.47, C.50).

1986

A.29 •• *Shovels, Shoes and the Slow Rotation of Letters: A Feuilleton for John Dreyfus*. Vancouver: The Alcuin Society, 1986. 16 p. Paper. “The edition is limited to 600 copies.” Approx. 450 were printed on grey paper, 14 × 21.5 cm, and 150 on beige, 14 × 22 cm. Contents: An essay on the art history of letterforms. Reviews: S.59.

A.30 *The Raven Steals the Light/ Ō-karasu ga hikari o nusumu*. Stories by Robert Bringhurst and Bill Reid; drawings by Bill Reid. Edited with notes by Kenji Tamura, Seiki Tago and Yukio Tsuda. Osaka: Osaka Kyoiku Toshō, [1986]. vi + 90 p. Paper, in dustjacket, 15 × 21 cm. ISBN 4-271-11221-6. Contents: [1] Introduction, in Japanese, by the editors; [2] seven tales, in English, with accompanying drawings: The Raven Steals the Light; The Raven Steals the Salmon from the Beaver House; The Raven and the First Men; The Raven and the Big Fisherman; The Raven with a Broken Beak; The Bear Mother and Her Husband; The Wasgo and Three Killer Whales – all rpt. from A.22; [3] extensive notes by the editors, in English and Japanese.

A.31 •• *The Blue Roofs of Japan: A Score for Interpenetrating Voices*. Mission, British Columbia: Barbarian Press, 1986. [28] p. Paper, sidelaced, 19.5 × 28.5 cm. “100 copies, hand-numbered in Roman numerals & signed. . . .” ISBN 0-920971-05-9. Contents: A poem (rev. from C.49), with untitled headnote (rev. in A.32) and, at end of text, “Program Notes” (also rev. from C.49). See also A.31a, F.1. Reviews: S.73.

A.31a *The Blue Roofs of Japan*. Vancouver: William Hoffer, 1986. [28] p. Paper, sidelaced, 19.5 × 28.5 cm. “150 copies, hand-numbered in Arabic numerals & signed....” Same as A.31 except for cover, copyright page, title page, paper, and details of artwork and design. ISBN 0-919758-17-7.

A.32 •• *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986. With calligraphy by Yim Tse. 128 p. Paper, 14 × 21.5 cm. isbn 0-7710-1661-1. (See also A.35.) Contents: The Book of Silences: Untitled headnote; • Parśvanatha (rpt. in B.65, C.58, C.70, rev. in A.47, A.65, B.69); Uddalaka Aruni: A Song for the Weavers (revised from C.50); • Nagarjuna (rev. in A.47, A.65, B.69); Wáng Bì (rpt. from C.50); • Sengzhaò (rpt. in A.47, A.65, B.69, C.57, C.58); • Bodhidharma (rpt. in A.47, A.65, C.57); Jízàng (rpt. from C.50); Saraha (rpt. from A.23); • Saraha’s Exercise for Beginners (rpt. in A.47); • Baizhàng Huaíhai (rpt. in A.47); Hán Shan (rpt. from C.48); Línji Yixuán (rpt. from C.50); Nánquán Puyuàn (rpt. from C.50); Danxiá Zichún (rpt. from C.48); • Hóng Zichéng (rpt. in C.55, C.57); Jakushitsu (rpt. from C.43); • Hakuin (rev. in A.65); The Lyell Island Variations: Untitled headnote (cf. introduction to A.22); I: Larix lyallii (rpt. from C.42); II: Thin Man Washing (rpt. from A.14); III: Absence of the Heart (rpt. from A.14); IV: The Reader (rpt. from C.42); • V: The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer (rpt. in A.47, A.48, C.53, C.57); VI: [•] The Long and the Short of It (rev. from C.33); VII: Riddle (rpt. from C.44); Gifts & Presences: Sutra of the Heart (rpt. from C.50); Thirty Words (rpt. from C.50); Rubus Ursinus: A Prayer for the Blackberry Harvest (rpt. from A.28); • Sunday Morning (rpt. in B.42, C.52; rev. in A.47, B.69); For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985 (rpt. from C.50); Tending the Fire: [•] Untitled headnote (rev. from C.50); Tending the Fire (rpt. from A.27); The Blue Roofs of Japan: A Score for Interpenetrating Voices: [•] Untitled headnote (rev. from A.31); The Blue Roofs of Japan (rev. from A.31); Thinking & Talking: A Prose Caboose: [•] Breathing through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation (rev. from D.31); • Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre (partial rpt. in B.71); Cast of Buddhas, Ghosts & Other Creatures; Key to the Calligraphy; Acknowledgements. Reviews: S.62, S.64, S.66, S.67, S.71, S.74, S.77, S.83, S.84, S.95. (Cf. S.241.)

1987

A.33 •• *Conversations with a Toad*. Vancouver, B.C. and Shawinigan, Québec: Éditions Lucie Lambert, 1987. [25] p. Accordion-fold codex in cloth-covered boards, 26.5 × 34.5 cm. According to the colophon, the edition consists of 55 numbered copies, including the eleven deluxe copies (A.33a), numbered 1–11. Evidently, fewer than forty copies were bound, including the eleven deluxe. Thus the regular edition consists of no more than 29 bound copies with the remainder in sheets. All copies are signed by author and artist. The papers were advertised as hankusa for the deluxe edition (A.33a) and kizuki hoshō for the remainder (A.33), but in some copies the papers (not easily distinguished) were evidently mixed. (See also A.33a.) Contents: A poem in ten numbered sections, accompanied by eleven woodcuts by Masato Arikushi, from drawings by Lucie Lambert. Section v of the text is rpt., and sections III and VI rev., from C.56. Full text rev. in C.59. Excerpts rpt. in B.72, C.61; further rev. in A.47, B.114, C.72. Also rpt. in B.81a. Reviews: S.70, S.76, S.84, S.91, S.127.

A.33a •• *Conversations with a Toad*. Deluxe edition of eleven copies, printed on hankusa, with silver medallion inset into front cover, and including one of the artist’s eleven original drawings. Otherwise the same as A.33.

A.34 • *Pebble/Pond/Errata Slip: A Codicil to Ocean/Paper/Stone*. Vancouver: privately printed. 1987. 8 p. Paper. 14 × 21.5 cm. “Printed ... in a few copies to commemorate the annual meeting of the Bibliographical Society of Canada, Vancouver, June 1987, and in a few more for distribution to members of The Alcuin Society.” Issued as a separate item and as an insert to issue 69 of the Alcuin Society’s journal, *Amphora* (see D.44). Contents: Reflections on and corrections to A.18.

A.35 *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 1987. First US edition. 128 p. Paper. Same as A.32 except for the title page, copyright page,

acknowledgements, cover, and occasional minor typographic changes. ISBN 0-55659-003-2. Reviews: S.72, S.78, S.79, S.80, S.86, S.90, S.96, S.97.

A.36 •• *Part of the Land, Part of the Water: A History of the Yukon Indians*. Catharine McClellan, with Lucie Birckel, Robert Bringhurst, James A. Fall, Carol McCarthy and Janice R. Sheppard. Vancouver & Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1987. vi + 330 p. Trade edition bound in cloth with dustjacket, school edition in printed paper over boards, 22 × 28.5 cm. ISBN 0-88894-553-1. Contents: Preface signed by McClellan; twelve chapters on various topics – 1: The Changing Ways of Yukon Hunters and Fishers; 2: The Yukon as It Is Now: Landscape, Animals, People; 3: The Earth and Her Memories: Geology and Archaeology in the Yukon; 4: Yukon Indians Meet White People; 5: It's a Long Way to Ottawa: Yukon Indians and the Government; 6: Yukon Indian Languages; 7: Living in the Land: Traditional Food, Shelter and Clothing; 8: Are You a Crow or a Wolf? Traditional Social Patterns; 9: From Birth to Death: Traditional Life Cycles; 10: Special People, Special Events, Special Skills; 11: The Old People's Worldview; 12: What Yukon Indians Are Saying Today – with numerous photographs, drawings and maps; Acknowledgements signed by McClellan; Index. Portions of chapters 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11 by Bringhurst; remainder of text edited by him. Reviews: S.81.

1988

A.37 *1989 Desk Calendar*. Vancouver: Benwell-Atkins Ltd., 1988. Unpaged. Spiralbound paper, 21 × 21 cm. Authorship of the included text matter is indicated only on the copyright page. Contents: • Untitled sequence of illustrations and accompanying text on the subject of typographic history. (The sequence of 53 black-and-white photos and drawings – one per week throughout the calendar – was compiled by Bringhurst, and the running commentary, printed at the back as a “Key to the Illustrations,” was written by him.)

1990

A.38 • *A Maxim*. Chilliwack, British Columbia: Barbarian Press & Fraser Valley Regional Library, 1990. Broadside, 25.5 × 27 cm. Perhaps 60 copies. Contents: A single sentence – “The difference between books and computers is that books make governments afraid of the people.” This is reputedly a quotation from one of Bringhurst's lectures on the history of the book (see A.16, A.20 & A.21). Printed by Barbarian Press as part of a letterpress demonstration at the Chilliwack Library, 20 October 1990. Since the type remained standing at the press for some time, there may be other equally fugitive broadside editions of the same text but with different colophons.

1991

A.39 •• *The Black Canoe: Bill Reid and the Spirit of Haida Gwaii*. Text by Robert Bringhurst; photos by Ulli Steltzer. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1991. 176 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 23.5 × 27.5 cm. isbn 0-88894-679-1. (See also A.39a, A.40, A.41, A.41a, F.3.) Contents: Prologue; I: Haida Gwaii; II: Hunting & Painting; III: Copper, Wood & Stone; IV: Bill Reid; V: Stone, Bronze & Politics; VI: Thirteen Passengers; VII: The Raven & the Snag; VIII: Paddling to Byzantium; The Photographic Record [photos by Steltzer with captions by Bringhurst]; Note on Interpretations & Sources; Technical Summary; Suggestions for Further Reading; Acknowledgements. (Excerpts from Chapter III rpt. in D.59.) Reviews: S.109, S.110, S.111, S.112, S.113, S.114, S.115, S.116, S.117, S.118, S.119, S.120, S.120a, S.122.

A.39a *The Black Canoe: Bill Reid and the Spirit of Haida Gwaii*. Text by Robert Bringhurst; photos by Ulli Steltzer. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991. 176 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 23.5 × 27.5 cm. ISBN 0-88894-679-1 (Canada); 0-295-97144-4 (USA). Same as A.39 except for the title page, copyright page and jacket. Rev. as A.41, A.41a. Note: This joint-imprint edition is in fact the us edition in disguise. The decision to replace the separate us edition with this joint-imprint edition was made by the us publisher, seeking to insulate itself from

the prepublication disputes that developed between Bringhurst and several Haida activists. (Excerpts from Chapter VI rpt. in D.61.)

1992

A.40 • *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*. Washington, DC: Canadian Embassy [1992]. Four-panel folding brochure, 10 × 23 cm. The unsigned text (published in English with anonymous French translation) is by Bringhurst.

A.41 [••] *The Black Canoe: Bill Reid and the Spirit of Haida Gwaii*. Text by Robert Bringhurst; photos by Ulli Steltzer. Second, augmented edition. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1992. 176 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 23.5 × 27.5 cm. ISBN 1-55054-037-8. (See also A.41a.) Rev. from A.39, from which this differs as follows. There are amendments to the copyright and contents pages. Text has been added to p 47. The sidenote on p. 64 has been altered. Two photos have been added to pp 160–161, and one photo moved from p. 160 to p. 163. Text from pp. 161–166 has been moved to pp. 163–168. Text from p. 167 has been revised and relocated to p. 174. Reviews: S.133, S.141.

A.41a *The Black Canoe: Bill Reid and the Spirit of Haida Gwaii*. Text by Robert Bringhurst; photos by Ulli Steltzer. First paperbound edition. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1995. 176 p. Paper, 23 × 27 cm. ISBN 1-55054-403-9. Same as A.41 except for the binding, cover and copyright page. Jacket quotation taken from S.141.

A.42 •• *The Elements of Typographic Style*. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 1992. 256 p. Cloth in dustjacket. 14 × 23.5 cm. ISBN 0-88179-110-5. (See also A.42a; rev. as A.42b, A.42c, A.42d, A.55, A.55a, A.57, A.57a, A.60, A.60a, A.73, A.73a. Excerpts rpt. in A.44, A.46, A.50.) Contents: Foreword; 1: The Grand Design; 2: Rhythm & Proportion; 3: Harmony & Counterpoint; 4: Structural Forms & Devices; 5: Alphabetic Symbols; 6: Choosing & Combining Type; 7: Historical Interlude; 8: Shaping the Page; 9: Finishing Touches; 10: Prowling the Specimen Books; Appendix A: Sorts & Characters; Appendix B: Glossary of Terms; Appendix C: Further Reading; Appendix D: Status of Digital Faces; Index. Reviews: S.123, S.130, S.131, S.132, S.134, S.135, S.136, S.137, S.138, S.140, S.143, S.149, S.151, S.165, S.166, S.172.

A.42a *The Elements of Typographic Style*. Paper, 13 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-88179-033-8. Same as A.42 except for the binding and dustjacket.

A.42b [•] *The Elements of Typographic Style*. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 1992 [1994]. 256 p. Paper. 14 × 23.5 cm. ISBN 0-88179-033-8. (Rev. from A.42.) This appears to be merely a second printing, on different paper, of A.42, but the text has been silently altered on pp. 64, 112, 113, 152, 177 & 213. All copies of this printing have a defective 4th signature. (This printing was withdrawn and replaced by A.42c, but not before thousands of copies had entered circulation.)

A.42c *The Elements of Typographic Style*. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 1992 [1994]. 256 p. Paper. 14 × 23.5 cm. ISBN 0-88179-033-8. (Rev. from A.42.) Third printing, identical with A.42b except for the copyright page and correction of the printing error marring the 4th signature.

A.42d *The Elements of Typographic Style*. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 1992 [1994]. 256 p. Cloth in dustjacket. 14 × 23.5 cm. ISBN 0-88179-110-5. This is the hardcover version of A.42c.

1993

A.43 •• *The Ballad of Alastair Poltroon*. [Oakland, California]: Whut the Press, 1993. 4 pp, loose in paper wrapper. 13.5 × 21.5 cm. Contents: Rhyming lampoon, published anonymously in response to S.132, a review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42). See also S.158.

A.44 *A Well Made Book* [sic]. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1993. Broadside, 28 × 19 cm. Five-line excerpt from §1.1.2 of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42), with an illustration by Leslie Ross and numerous typographic errors.

A.45 *Trial design proof for a projected edition of 'New World Suite N° 3'*. Mission, British Columbia: Barbarian Press, 1993. Broadside, 31.5 × 41 cm. • One-page excerpt from the second movement of *New World Suite N° 3*. One copy was printed for exhibit at the Clark Library, Los Angeles, in the fall of 1993. A small number of additional copies are known to exist. The book itself was never printed. A.79, the Center for Book Arts edition, was issued in its stead.

1994

A.46 *Typographic Style*. New York: Oliphant Press, [1994]. Broadside, 25.5 × 33 cm. Contents: Excerpt from §7.3.6 of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42).

1995

A.47 •• *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970–1995*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995. 256 p. Paper. 14 × 22 cm. ISBN 0-7710-1651-4. Contents: Foreword (partial rpt. in B.71); [•] Conversations with a Toad (rev. from A.33); Hunters & Pilgrims: [•] The Beauty of the Weapons (rev. from A.14), Song of the Summit (rpt. from A.14), Ararat (rpt. from A.14), A Quadratic Equation (rpt. from A.14), The Greenland Stone (rpt. from A.14), Poem About Crystal (rpt. from A.14), [•] A Lesson in Botany (rev. from A.14), [•] Some Ciphers (rev. from A.14), Anecdote of the Squid (rpt. from A.14); Deuteronomy: [•] Jacob Singing (rev. from A.14), An Augury (rpt. from A.14), [•] Essay on Adam (rev. from A.14), [•] Deuteronomy (rev. from A.14); The Old in Their Knowing: i: [•] Herakleitos (rev. from A.14), ii: Parmenides (rpt. from A.14), iii: Miletos (rpt. from A.14), iv: A Short History (rpt. from A.14), v: Empedokles: Seven Fragments (rpt. from A.14), vi: Empedokles' Recipes (rpt. from A.14), vii: Pherekydes (rpt. from A.14), viii: Pythagoras (rpt. from A.14), ix: Demokritos (rpt. from A.14), x: [•] Xenophanes (rev. from A.14), xi: [•] Of the Snaring of Birds (rev. from A.14), xii: The Petelia Tablet (rpt. from A.14) [The sequence is the same as in A.14, but the poems are numbered here for the first time, and there are several small revisions to the text.]; Hachadura (rpt. from A.14); [•] The Stonecutter's Horses (rev. from A.14); Bone Flute Breathing: These Poems, She Said (rpt. from A.14), The Heart is Oil (rpt. from A.14), [•] Death by Water (rev. from A.14), Leda and the Swan (rpt. from A.14), [•] The Better Man (rev. from A.14), Poem without Voices (rpt. from A.14), [•] Bone Flute Breathing (rev. from A.14); Tzuhalem's Mountain (rpt. from A.14); The Book of Silences: I: • Short Upanishad (rpt. in A.65), II: [•] Parśvanatha (rev. from A.32), III: [•] Nagarjuna (rev. from A.32), IV: Bodhidharma (rpt. from A.32), V: Sengzhao (rpt. from A.32), VI: [•] Yongjia Xuanjue (rev. from C.63), VII: Saraha (rpt. from A.32), VIII: Saraha's Exercise for Beginners (rpt. from A.32), IX: Baizhang Huaihai (rpt. from A.32), X: • Yunyan Tansheng (rpt. in A.65), XI: Han Shan (rpt. from A.32), XII: [•] Linji Yixuan (rev. from A.32), XIII: [•] Dongshan Liangjie (rpt. from C.63), XIV: [•] Yunmen Wenyan (rev. from C.62), XV: [•] Fayen Wenyi (rev. from C.62), XVI: [•] Xuedou Zhongxian (rev. from C.63), XVII: Danxia Zichun (rpt. from A.32), XVIII: • Dahui Zonggao (rpt. in A.65), XIX: Tiantong Rujing (rpt. from C.62), XX: [•] Dogen (rev. from C.63), XXI: Jakushitsu (rpt. from A.32), XXII: Bankei (rpt. from B.48, where it appears as Bankei Yotaku in Los Angeles, dedicated to Leonard Cohen) [The sequence is much enlarged from A.32, and the poems are numbered here for the first time. As in C.63, all titles are now printed without accents, apart from the ś in Parśvanatha; but the names are spelled with full diacritics in the glossary at the back of the book.]; Lyell Island Variations: I: Larix lyallii (rpt. from A.32), II: Thin Man Washing (rpt. from A.32), III: Absence of the Heart (rpt. from A.32), IV: The Reader (rpt. from A.32), V: The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer (rpt. from A.32), VI: [•] The Long and the Short of It (rev. from A.32), VII: Riddle (rpt. from A.32), Their Names: [•] Sutra of the Heart (rev. from A.32), [•] Gloria, Credo, Sanctus et Oreamnos Deorum (rev. from B.47), • Kol Nidre, Rubus ursinus: A Prayer for the Blackberry Harvest (rpt. from A.32), For the Bones of Joseph Mengele (rpt. from A.32), • Fathers and Sons, • Hick & Nillie, • Demons and Men, • The Flowers of the Body, [•] Sunday Morning (rev. from A.32); The Blue Roofs of Japan (rev. from A.32); • New World Suite n° 3: I: All the Desanctified Places (rev. from C.60), II:

Who is the Fluteplayer?, III: The Children of Zhuang Zi Confront the Frozen Saskatchewan River, IV: Winter Solstice, Cariboo Mountains (rev. from B.37) (full suite rev. in A.79); Cast of Suspicious Characters; Index of Titles and First Lines; Acknowledgments. Jacket contains a comment by Jan Zwicky and quotes from S.32, S.34 and S.54. Reviews: S.161, S.162, S.163, S.164, S.167, S.168, S.170, S.171, S.174, S.177, S.187, S.193; see also S.245.

A.48 •• *Ljell Island Variations*. Calligraphy by Diane Amarotico; gouache, watercolor and torn paper illustrations by John Goodyear; oasis goatskin binding and box by Carol Joyce. 1995. 00 p. 19 × 31 cm. Manuscript book produced in an edition of four copies. Contents: Untitled preface and poem in 7 sections: I: *Larix lyallii*; II: Thin Man Washing; III: Absence of the Heart; IV: The Reader; V: The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer; VI: The Long and the Short of It; VII: Riddle (all rpt. from A.35).

A.49 •• *Elements*. Text by Robert Bringhurst; drawings by Ulf Nilsen; designed and printed by Russell Maret. New York: Kuboaa Press, 1995. [17 + 21] p. 24.5 × 24.5 cm. Contents: Poem in 7 sections – I. One-Room School; II. Prayer; III. A Periodic Table; IV.1 [air]; IV.2 [earth]; IV.3 [fire]; IV.4 [water] – with four suites of five drawings by Ulf Nilsen realized in paper (through watermarking, wet-pulp embossing, branding, and letterpress printing) by Russell Maret. The text is printed letterpress on loose unnumbered sheets with title page and colophon page contained in a cloth-covered box. Each suite of illustrations is also contained in a box. The five component boxes and a loose title page are contained in a larger box “[D]esigned, printed and housed ... by Russell Maret in an edition of 20 signed & numbered copies, plus 5 artist’s proofs.... All printing was done at the Center for Book Arts in New York City during August and September of 1995.” (§IV.1 [Air] rpt. in A.69. Whole work rev. as a poem in 6 sections, C.81.)

A.49a Prospectus for *Elements* (A.49). Riverside, Connecticut: Kuboaa Press. 1995. [8] p. 13.5 × 22 cm. Contents: §iv.1 [air] from A.49, with one drawing from the water suite by Ulf Nilsen.

1996

A.50 *A Book is a Flexible mirror...* [Vancouver: Hartley & Marks, 1996.] Untitled broadside, 28 × 48 cm. Excerpt from chapter 8 of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42).

A.51 *The Raven Steals the Light*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996. xiv + 156 p. 11 × 13 cm. ISBN 1-57062-173-X. Contents: Same as A.22 but redesigned and reset, with new front and back matter and minor typographic emendations. Includes English translation of the preface by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

A.52 *The Raven Steals the Light*. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1996. 112 p. 15 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 0-55054-481-0 (Canada) & 0-295-97524-5 (USA). Contents: Slightly revised from A.51, but this is a separate edition, redesigned and reset.

A.53 *Tiantong Rujing*. [Vancouver: University of British Columbia. 1996.] Broadside, 21.5 × 28 cm. Contents: A poem (rpt. from A.47), with announcement of a reading by Bringhurst, 9 October 1996.

A.53a *Tiantong Rujing*. Flyer, 11 × 14 cm. Same as A.53 but in a reduced size.

A.54 *Tending the Fire*. n.p. [Regina, Saskatchewan], 1996. 8 p. Paper, 14 × 21.5 cm. “100 copies ... reformatted and printed by Heather Hodgson with the permission of Robert Bringhurst.” Contents: A poem, rpt. from A.32. See also A.54a.

A.54a *Tending the Fire*. Regina, Saskatchewan, 1997. 8 p. Paper, 14 × 21.5 cm. Issued in a printed envelope bearing a short text by the Cree elder Ékosi (Christine Wilna Hodgson) and a folded sheet entitled “Robert Bringhurst: Biographical Sketches,” by Heather Hodgson. “100 copies ... printed

by Heather Hodgson for delegates attending the 36th Canadian Regional Conference....” (A variant edition of A.54, issued later.)

A.55 [••] *The Elements of Typographic Style*. 2nd edition. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 1996. 352 p. Paper, 13 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-88179-132-6. (Rev. from A.42 & A.42c. Excerpts rpt in B.70. See also A.55a, A.57, A.60.) Contents: Foreword; Historical Synopsis; 1: The Grand Design; 2: Rhythm & Proportion; 3: Harmony & Counterpoint; 4: Structural Forms & Devices; 5: Alphabetic Symbols; 6: Choosing & Combining Type; 7: Historical Interlude; 8: Shaping the Page; 9: The State of the Art; 10: Prowling the Specimen Books; Appendix A: Sorts & Characters; Appendix B: Glossary of Terms; Appendix C: Type Designers; Appendix D: Typefoundries; Appendix E: Recapitulation; Appendix F: Further Reading; Afterword to the Second Edition; Index. Much changed from A.42 & A.42c, and 96 pp longer than they, though the plan of the book remains the same. Reviews: S.181, S.182, S.183, S.184, S.185, S.212. Studies: S.186.

A.55a *The Elements of Typographic Style*. 2nd edition. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 1996. 352 p. Cloth in dustjacket. 14 × 23.5 cm. ISBN 0-88179-133-4. Same as A.55 except for the binding and dustjacket.

1997

A.56 •• *Boats is Saintlier than Captains: Thirteen Ways of Looking at Morality and Design*. [New York]: Edition Rhino, 1997. [24] p. 19 × 33 cm. “...designed by Russell Maret, & printed ... in an edition of 100.” (See also A.56a.) Contents: Essay in 13 numbered sections (rev. from D.86, though A.56 was the first to appear). [This was originally intended as a fund-raising publication for the Center for Book Arts, New York City. After disagreements between the management of the Center and the printer-in-residence, Russell Maret, the printer issued the publication under an imprint of his own.]

A.56a Prospectus for *Boats is Saintlier than Captains*. New York: Edition Rhino, 1997. 4 p. 19 × 33 cm. Contents: Excerpt from A.56, with the publisher’s advertising copy. [Very scarce. Due to errors at the press, the prospectus was produced in fewer copies than the publication it was meant to advertise.]

A.57 *The Elements of Typographic Style*. 2nd edition, corrected 2nd printing. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 1997. 352 p. Paper, 13 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-88179-132-6. Contents: Superficially the same as A.55, with the same ISBN, and a different cover. But as noted on p. 4, “This printing of the second edition incorporates additions and corrections to the following pages: 87, 91, 147, 186, 193, 207, 228, 232, 233, 240, 252, 254, 256, 264, 270, 277, 279, 301, 313, 316, 317, 333, 335, 336, 340, 345.”

A.57a *The Elements of Typographic Style*. 2nd edition, corrected 2nd printing. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 1997. 352 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 14 × 23.5 cm. ISBN 0-88179-133-4. Hardcover edition of A.57.

1998

A.58 •• *Native American Oral Literatures and the Unity of the Humanities*. The 1998 Garnett Sedgewick Memorial Lecture. Vancouver: University of British Columbia English Department, 1998. 24 p. 15 × 23.5 cm. Text of a lecture delivered at the University of British Columbia on 5 March 1998. Rev. in A.81.

1999

A.59 •• *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World*. Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers, vol. 1. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1999. 532 [544] p. Cloth in dustjacket, 15 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-55054-696-1. Contents: Acknowledgements; Prologue:

Reading What Cannot Be Written; [1] 1, Goose Food; 2, Spoken Music; 3, The One They Hand Along; 4, Wealth Has Big Eyes; 5, Oral Tradition and the Individual Talent; [2] 6, The Anthropologist and the Dogfish; 7, Who's Related to Whom?; 8, The Epic Dream; 9, The Shaping of the Canon; 10, The Flyting of Skaay and Xhyuu; [3] 11, You Are That Too; 12, Sleek Blue Beings; 13, The Iridescent Silence of the Trickster; 14, The Last People in the World; [4] 15, A Knife That Could Open Its Mouth; 16, The Historian of Ttanuu; 17, Chase What's Gone; [5] 18, A Blue Hole in the Heart; 19, The Prosody of Meaning; 20, Shellheap of the Gods; 21, 1 November 1908; 22, How the Town Mother's Wife Became the Widow of Her Husband's Sister's Sons; [Appendices] 1, Haida Spelling and Pronunciation; 2, Haida as a Written Language; 3, Spelling of Other Native American Languages; 4, The Structure of Skaay's Raven Travelling; 5, Haida Village Names; 6, A Short Pronouncing Glossary of Haida People and Places; Notes; Select Bibliography; Index (portions rev. in A.62 & A.64). (Opening volume of the trilogy that continues with A.62 & A.64.) Reviews: S.197, S.199, S.200, S.201, S.202, S.203, S.204, S.205, S.206, S.207, S.209, S.210, S.211, S.213, S.214, S.215, S.216, S.217, S.218, S.219, S.221, S.223, S.224, S.228, S.229, S.233, S.234, S.237, S.238, S.240, S.243, S.254, S.256, S.263, S.264, S.270. See also D.97.

A.59a •• *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World*. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. 532 [544] p. Cloth in dustjacket, 15 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-55054-696-1; 0-8032-1314-X. Corrected joint reprint. Same as A.59 except for the half title, title and copyright pages, and minor corrections to a few text pages.

A.59b •• *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World*. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000. 532 [544] p. Paper, 15 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-55054-795-X. Same as A.59 except for the binding, half title, title and copyright pages, and minor corrections to a few text pages.

A.59c •• *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. 532 [544] p. Paper, 15 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-8032-6179-9. Same as A.59 except for the binding, half title, title and copyright pages, and minor corrections to a few text pages.

A.60 *The Elements of Typographic Style*. 2nd edition, corrected 3rd printing. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 1999. 352 p. Paper, 13 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-88179-132-6. Contents: Superficially the same as A.55 and A.57, with the same ISBN as both and the same cover as the latter. But as noted on p 4, "This printing of the second edition incorporates additions and corrections to the following pages: 2, 21, 73, 87, 91, 137, 147, 186, 193, 207, 214, 215, 228, 232, 233, 236, 240, 252, 254, 256, 264, 270, 277, 279, 301, 306, 313, 315, 316, 317, 327, 332, 333, 335, 336, 340, 343, 345, 347."

A.60a *The Elements of Typographic Style*. 2nd edition, corrected 3rd printing. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 1999. 352 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 14 × 23.5 cm. ISBN 0-88179-133-4. Hardcover edition of A.60.

A.61 •• *A Short History of the Printed Word*, by Warren Chappell and Robert Bringhurst. Point Roberts, Washington / Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 1999. xx + 316 p. Paperbound, 15 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-88179-154-7. Contents: Preface to the Revised Edition by Robert Bringhurst; Preface to the First Edition by Warren Chappell; I: Prologue to Discovery; II: The Alphabet; III: Type Cutting and Casting; IV: Incunabula: 1440–1500; V: The Sixteenth Century; VI: The Seventeenth Century; VII: The Eighteenth Century; VIII: The Nineteenth Century; IX: The Early Twentieth Century: 1900–1940; X: The Second World War and After: 1940–1970; XI: The Digital Revolution and the Close of the Twentieth Century; Index. Augmented and revised throughout by Bringhurst, based on the first edition, authored by Warren Chappell alone and published in 1970. Reviews: S.227, S.235.

2000

A.62 •• Ghandl of the Qayahllaan. *Nine Visits to the Mythworld*, translated from Haida by Robert Bringhurst. *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers*, vol. 2. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000. 224 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 15 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-55054-803-4. Contents: Introduction: The Blind Poet of Sunshine and Sealion Town (partial rpt. in D.102, D.104); The Way the Weather Chose to Be Born (rpt. in B.82, B.93); Spirit Being Living in the Little Finger; In His Father's Village, Someone Was Just About to Go Out Hunting Birds (rev. from A.59); The Sealion Hunter (rpt. in B.84, C.77); The Myth of the One Who Got Rid of Nine of His Nephews (rev. from A.59); Those Who Stay a Long Way Out to Sea (rev. from A.59); Hlagwajiina and His Family; The Names of Their Gambling Sticks; A Red Feather. Appendix: Haida Spelling and Pronunciation (rpt. from A.59); Notes to the Text; Notes to the Illustrations; Select Bibliography. (Vol. 2 of the trilogy that begins with A.59 and concludes with A.64.) Identical to A.62a except for the title page, copyright page, binding and jacket. Reviews: S.230, S.231, S.232, S.239, S.243, S.248, S.250, S.254, S.263, S.264, S.270.

A.62a Ghandl of the Qayahllaan. *Nine Visits to the Mythworld*, translated from Haida by Robert Bringhurst. *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers*, vol. 2. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. 224 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 15 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-8032-1316-6. Contents: Identical to A.62 except for the title page, copyright page, binding and jacket.

2001

A.63 *The Elements of Typographic Style*. Version 2.4. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 1999. 352 p. Paper, 13 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-88179-132-6. Contents: Superficially the same as A.55, A.57 & A.60, with the same ISBN as these and the same cover as the latter two. But as noted on p. 4, "This printing of the second edition incorporates additions and corrections to the following pages: 2, 21, 43, 73, 87, 91, 113, 121, 137, 140, 142, 147, 181, 186, 188, 193, 207, 214, 215, 224, 227, 228, 230, 231, 232, 233, 236, 240, 247, 252, 254, 256, 264, 270, 277, 279, 281, 284, 300, 301, 302, 306, 309, 313, 315, 316, 317, 327, 331, 332, 333, 335, 336, 340, 343, 345, 347."

A.63a *The Elements of Typographic Style*. Version 2.4. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 1999. 352 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 14 × 23.5 cm. ISBN 0-88179-133-4. Hardcover edition of A.63.

A.64 •• *Being in Being: The Collected Works of Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay*, edited & translated by Robert Bringhurst. *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers*, vol. 3. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2001. 400 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 15 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-55054-826-3. Contents: Introduction: The Hunter of Visions; The Qquuna Cycle (rev. in part from A.59 & rev. in part from A.82); Raven Travelling (rev. in part from A.59); A Family Story: The Qquuna Qiighawaay (rpt. from A.59). Appendix: Haida Spelling and Pronunciation (rev. from A.59); Notes to the Text; Notes to the Illustrations; Select Bibliography. (Concluding volume of the trilogy that begins with A.59.) Identical to A.67 except for the title page, copyright page, binding and jacket. Reviews: S.246, S.263, S.270.

A.65 •• *The Book of Silences*. Los Angeles: Ninja Press, 2001. [48 + 8] p. Sewn in soft cover, loose in a hard folding case, 17 × 26 cm. With two platinum-print photographs by the designer/printer, Carolee Campbell. "One hundred signed & numbered copies with twelve lettered hors [de] commerce." Contents: Short Upanishad (rpt. from A.47); Parsvanatha (rpt. from A.47); [•] Nagarjuna (rev. from A.47); [•] Wang Bi (rev. from A.32); Bodhidharma (rpt. from A.47); Sengzhao (rpt. from A.47); Jizang (rpt. from A.32); Yongjia Xuanjue (rpt. from A.47); • Nanyang Huizhong; Sarah (rpt. from A.47); Baizhang Huaihai (rpt. from A.47); Nanquan Puyuan (rpt. from A.32); Han Shan (rpt. from A.47); Zhaozhou Congshen (rev. from C.73); Yunyan Tansheng (rpt. from A.47); Linji Yixuan (rpt. from A.47); Dongshan Liangjie (rpt. from A.47); • Xiangyan Zhixian; Yunmen Wenyan (rpt. from A.47); [•] Fayuan Wenyi (rev. from A.47); Xuedou Zhongxian (rpt. from A.47);

Danxia Zichun (rpt. from A.47); Dahui Zonggao (rpt. from A.47); Tiantong Rujing (rpt. from A.47); [•] Dogen Kigen (rev. from A.47); • Keizan Jokin; Jakushitsu Genko (rpt. from A.47); Bankei Yotaku (rpt. from A.47); [•] Hakuin Ekaku (rev. from A.32). Separately bound section entitled • “Contents and Notes.”

A.65a Prospectus for *The Book of Silences*. Los Angeles: Ninja Press. 2001. Single leaf inside a folded sheet of two leaves. Contents: • Untitled autobiographical statement occupying one side of the enclosed single leaf, promoting A.65.

A.66 *Breakfast*. “Last Chance Gulch: Hormone Derange Editions” [i.e., Berkeley: Peter Koch]: 2001. Broadside, 20 × 51 cm, 126 copies. Contents: A poem (rev. from B.28).

2002

A.67 *Being in Being: The Collected Works of Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighbawaay*, edited & translated by Robert Bringhurst. *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers*, vol. 3. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. 400 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 15 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-8032-1328-x. Contents: Identical to A.64 except for the title page, copyright page, binding and jacket. Reviews: S.251, S.260, S.264, S.264a.

A.68 •• *On Translating Haida Poetry: An Interview with Robert Bringhurst*, by Thérèse Rigaud. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2002. 24 p. Chapbook, 15 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-8032-1328-X. Contents: An interview. See also S.217, S.240, S.251, S.270.

2003

A.69 •• *Ursa Major: A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers and Dancers*. Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau Press, 2003. 96 p. 19 × 28 cm. ISBN 0-8032-1328-X. Contents: Script of a work commissioned by the choreographer Robin Poitras and first performed by her company New Dance Horizona, Regina, Saskatchewan, in March 2002. With an afterword by Peter Sanger. (Rpt. in part in B.100. Rev. as A.91. See also D.111.) Reviews: S.261, S.262, S.271, S.280

A.70 •• *The Fragments of Parmenides*. With wood engravings by Richard Wagener. Berkeley: Peter Koch, 2003. 64 p. 25 × 41 cm. Contents: Twenty fragments in Greek with Bringhurst’s English translation en face; “Afterword: The Poetry of Philosophy and the Survival of Pagan Thinking”; “Concordance”; colophon. “120 copies were bound by Peggy Gotthold in quarter leather and Hahnemühle Bugra paper protected by a case that is covered in Japanese silk. Twenty-six copies, lettered A to Z, were bound in full leather by Daniel Kelm and enclosed in a dropback box.” The fragments are grouped into three sections. (See also A.70a, A.77, B.87, E.9. Rpt. in A.83) Reviews: S.281. See also S.286a.

A.70a •• *The Fragments of Parmenides*. Berkeley: Peter Koch. 2003. 64 p. 25 × 41 cm. Same as A.70 except that this edition is bound in full leather and housed in a larger box along with a separate suite of ten signed wood engravings and broadside type specimens of the Diogenes and Parmenides Greek types.

2004

A.71 •• *Prosodies of Meaning: Literary Form in Native North America*. Winnipeg: Voices of Rupert’s Land, 2004. 56 p. 14 × 21 cm. ISBN 0-921098-17-0. Contents: Enlarged from the text of the Belcourt Lecture, delivered at the University of Manitoba, 1 March 2002. Rev. in A.81.

A.72 • *The Solid Form of Language: An Essay on Writing and Meaning*. Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau Press, 2004. 80 p. 11.5 × 18 cm. ISBN 0-894031-88-1. Contents: Essay on the orthographies of the world. (Rev. from B.81; rpt. in part in B.102.) Reviews: S.272, S.273, S.274, S.277a, S.278.

A.72a *The Solid Form of Language: An Essay on Writing and Meaning*. Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau Press, 2004 [Fifth printing, 2009]. 80 p. 11.5 × 18 cm. ISBN 0-894031-88-1. This printing – recognizable by the orange rather than pale gold cover paper, carrying letterpress type with far too much impression, as well as by the telltale numeral 5 on the copyright page – includes a change to the text on p. 14 and a correction to the Japanese character list on p. 50.

A.73 *The Elements of Typographic Style*. Version 3.0. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 2004. 384 p. Paper, 13 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-88179-206-3. Contents: Wholesale revision of A.63. See also A.42. Reviews: S.283a.

A.73a *The Elements of Typographic Style*. Version 3.0. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 2004. 384 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 14 × 23.5 cm. ISBN 0-88179-205-5. Hardcover edition of A.73.

2005

A.74 *The Fragments of Parmenides*. Louisville, Kentucky: Privately printed for students of Kentucky Country Day School. 2005. 46 p. 15 × 23 cm. Contents: • “Translator’s Preface”; Greek text & English translation of the fragments; “Afterword: The Poetry of Philosophy and the Survival of Pagan Thinking.” (Prototype of an intended trade edition of A.70, the same text reset in different types, with new preface. See also B.87, E.9.)

A.75 •• *The Library Opens Its Eyes*. Burnaby, British Columbia: Simon Fraser University. 2005. 4 p. 19 × 28 cm. Contents: Folding broadside containing a prose text of some 400 words commissioned by Simon Fraser University in celebration of its 40th anniversary. Designed and set by Bringhurst. “There are 300 copies ... printed by Alex Widen at the Sandhill Press in Vancouver. The paper is Arches....”

A.76 *The Old in Their Knowing*. Berkeley: Editions Koch, 2005. 48 p. 15 × 25.5 cm. Contents: I: Herakleitos, II: Parmenides, III: Miletos, IV: A Short History, V: Empedokles: Seven Fragments, VI: Empedokles’ Recipes, VII: Pherekydes, VIII: Pythagoras, IX: Demokritos, X: Xenophanes, XI: Of the Snaring of Birds, XII: The Petelia Tablet (all rpt. from A.47), with added Greek text on facing pages and a new dedication: “To the memory of Jane Ellen Harrison, scholar and heretic.”

A.77 •• *And Much More, Not Ourselves: The Work of Jan & Crispin Elsted*. Mission, British Columbia: Barbarian Press. 2005. [16 p.] 16 × 21 cm. “[A] rendering in stone of a speech given in air in November 2004 at the 25th anniversary celebration for Barbarian Press at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver ... designed, set, and printed at Barbarian Press ... by Elizabeth Bachinsky....”

A.77a *The Elements of Typographic Style*. Version 3.1. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 2005. 384 p. Paper, 13 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-88179-206-3. Contents: Revised and corrected version of A.73. See also A.42.

A.77b *The Elements of Typographic Style*. Version 3.1. Point Roberts, Washington & Vancouver, B.C.: Hartley & Marks, 2005. 384 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 14 × 23.5 cm. ISBN 0-88179-205-5. Hardcover edition of A.77a.

2006

A.78 •• *Wild Language*. Nanaimo, British Columbia: Institute for Coastal Research. 2006. 48 p. 11 × 18 cm. ISBN 1-896886-08-6. Contents: •• “Wild Language,” Bringhurst’s Ralph Gustafson Lecture,

delivered at Malaspina University College, 6 November 2003, and a later •• “Postscript: Wild Typography.” Both parts rev. in A.81. Reviews: S.287, S.303.

A.79 • *New World Suite N° 3*. New York: Center for Book Arts, 2005 [actually 2006]. 4 vols, 28 + 28 + 28 + 20 p. Each volume 21.5 × 31 cm, mounted on (and detachable from) a lectern base 41.5 × 41.5 × 8 cm, opening to 95 × 95 cm. “This edition ... consists of four parts, designed by Robert Bringhurst, housed in a structure designed by Hedi Kyle.... This is the Center for Book Arts 30th Anniversary Publication.... There are 75 copies ... including five artists’ proofs, produced in 2004–2005.” [Printed in 2005, bound in 2006.] Contents: Poem for three voices, rpt. with minor revisions from A.47 but redesigned by Bringhurst, in a binding designed by Hedi Kyle. Vol. 1: “First Voice (Viola)”; vol. 2: “Second Voice (Violin)”; vol. 3: “Third Voice (Cello)”; vol. 4: • “Afterword: Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue” (rpt in D.128, rev. in A.83, A.90); Subscribers to the Edition; Center for Book Arts Directors & Staff; colophon. (See also A.45.) Reviews: S.327.

A.80 • *The Typographic Mind*. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press. 2006. Pamphlet: *The Devil’s Whim* 16. [8] pp. 10 × 20.5 cm. ISBN 1-554470-32-3. Contents: A short essay, rpt. in A.83.

A.81 •• *The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks*. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press, 2006. 336 p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-024-2. Contents: •Foreword; The Polyhistorical Mind (rev. from D.75); The Persistence of Poetry and the Destruction of the World (rev. from B.71); • The Vocation of Being, the Text of the Whole; Native American Oral Literature and the Unity of the Humanities (rev. from A.58); The Audible Light in the Eyes (rev. from B.89); The Voice in the Mirror (rev. from D.115); Poetry and Thinking (rev. from B.79); The Tree of Meaning and the Work of Ecological Linguistics (rev. from D.107; rpt. in B.102, D.131); • The Humanity of Speaking; Prosodies of Meaning: Literary Form in Native North America (rev. from A.71); Wild Language (rev. from A.78); Finding Home: The Legacy of Bill Reid (rev. from D.121); • The Silence That Is Not Poetry – and the Silence That Is; Index; Acknowledgements. See also A.84, A.86. Reviews: S.288, S.289, S.294, S.295, S.296, S.298, S.299, S.303, S.306, S.307, S.308, S.312.

2007

A.82 Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay. *Siixcha / Floating Overhead: The Qquuna Cycle §3.3*, translated from the Haida by Robert Bringhurst. New York: Russell Maret, 2007. 32 p. 15 × 25.5 cm. Contents: Haida text, newly edited by Bringhurst, with slightly revised English translation (rev. from A.64). Printed letterpress from polymer plates and limited to 100 copies.

A.83 •• *Everywhere Being is Dancing: Twenty Pieces of Thinking*. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press, 2007. 352 p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-044-0. Contents: • “for the geologist’s daughter” (dedicatory poem) (rpt. in A.92, B.115); • Foreword; I: Everywhere Being is Dancing Knowing Is Known (rev. from B.56); Singing with the Frogs: The Theory and Practice of Literary Polyphony (rev. from D.89); The Meaning of Mythology (rev. from B.80); What Is Found in Translation (rev. from B.83); ii: The Philosophy of Poetry and the Trashing of Doctor Empedokles (rev. from B.79); To Tell the Truth by Lying: Gorgias the Sicilian and a Theory You Can’t Refuse (rev. from D.11); The Fragments of Parmenides: The Poetry of Philosophy and the Fate of the University (essay, Greek text & translation, rpt. from A.70); Raven’s Wine Cup (rpt. from B.87); III: Boats Is Sainulier than Captains: Thirteen Ways of Looking at Morality, Language and Design (rev. from A.56); Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue (rev. from A.79); The Typographic Mind (rev. from A.80); IV: Into the Absolute of Nature: The Face of Joan Miró (rev. from D.57); The Story and the Orphan (rev. from B.46); A Piece of Bread, a Loaf of Vision: The Art of Alice Kane (rpt. from B.55); • A Poet and a War; The Critic in the Rain (rev. from D.123); V: The Origin of Mind (rev. from D.103); Being Where We Are: The Art of Overhearing Charlie Mitchell’s Prayer (rev. from D.127); • It Used to Be I Sang Them: Big Charlie and the Origin of Horses; Jumping from the Train: How and Why to Read a Work of Haida Oral Literature (rev. from B.98); Index; Acknowledgements. See also A.83a, A.90. Reviews: S.300, S.301, S.302, S.304, S.317.

A.83a *Everywhere Being is Dancing: Twenty Pieces of Thinking*. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press. 2007. 352 p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-044-0. Casebound edition of A.83. Contents: Identical to A.81 except for the binding, jacket.

A.84 *The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks*. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press. 2006 [but issued in 2007]. 336 p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 1-55447-025-0. Casebound edition of A.81, made with sheets from the 2nd printing. Contents: Identical to A.81 except for the binding, jacket, and minor corrections. (These affect the page breaks on pp 225–227.)

A.85 *Zhaozhou Congshen*. [Sherman Oaks, California: Ninja Press, no date. Broadside, 43 × 28 cm, 75 copies on Nideggen paper. Contents: Poem, rpt. from A.65.

2008

A.86 *The Tree of Meaning: Language, Mind and Ecology*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008. [viii] + 329 + [xv] p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-59376-179-0 / 1-59376-179-1. First US edition of A.81, with a foreword by Jim Harrison. Bringham's original foreword is accordingly retitled "Prologue." Otherwise identical to the second printing of the Canadian edition except for the change in subtitle and changes throughout to US spelling. Physically, the paper is different, and the second color is absent from the title and contents pages. Last 5 leaves are blank.

A.87 •• *The Surface of Meaning: Book Design in Canada*. Vancouver: CCSP Press. 2008. 240 p. 23 × 28 cm. ISBN 978-0-97387727-2-9. Contents: Acknowledgements; Prologue; (1) The Invisible Book; (2) The Echo of Tangibility; (3) Stills from the Typographic Movie; Appendices; Index. Substantial excerpts rev. in D.132 and A.88. Reviews: S.309, S.310, S.311, S.316, S.319, S.322.

A.88 • *Why There Are Pages and Why They Must Turn*. Code(x)+1 Monograph Number One. Berkeley: Codex Foundation. 2008. 16 p. 14 × 19.5 cm. ISBN 978-0-9817914-1-8. Essay, adapted from the text of *The Surface of Meaning*, A.87 (rev. from D.132). "Five hundred copies were printed on the Heidelberg cylinder press ... by Peter Koch, Jonathan Gerken, and Shanna Mahan..."

A.89 • *First Meditation on Time*. Vernon, British Columbia: Greenboathouse Press, 2008. Broadside, 25.5 × 53 cm, 76 copies on Zerkall Wove paper. Contents: Prose.

2009

A.90 *Everywhere Being Is Dancing: Twenty Pieces of Thinking*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009. 352 p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-58243-438-4 / 1-58243-438-7. First US edition of A.83, Identical to the second printing of the Canadian edition except for changes to the copyright page, Americanization of the spelling, and authorial revision to "Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue." (In this essay, the three-color illustration of the Canadian edition has been deleted and half a page of text added.) Physically, the paper is different, and the second color is absent from the title and contents pages.

A.91 *Ursa Major: A Masque for Speakers and Dancers*. 2nd edition. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press, 2009. 96 p. 12.5 × 20.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-060-0. Contents: Rev. from A.69. The voicemap is printed in five colors. The afterword by Peter Sanger is omitted from this edition.

A.92 •• *Selected Poems*. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press, 2009. 272 p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-068-6. Not the same as A.95, though it bears the same title. Contents: I · "THE BEAUTY OF THE WEAPONS": "The Beauty of the Weapons", "Song of the Summit", "Ararat", "A Quadratic Equation", "One Glyph", "The Greenland Stone", "Poem About Crystal", "A Lesson in Botany", "Some Ciphers", "Anecdote of the Squid"; II · DEUTERONOMY: "Jacob Singing", "An Augury", "Essay on Adam", "Deuteronomy"; III · THE OLD IN THEIR KNOWING: "Herakleitos", "Parmenides", "Miletos", "A Short History", "Empedokles: Seven Fragments", "Empedokles' Recipes", "Pherekydes", "Pythagoras", "Demokritos", "Xenophanes", "Of the Snaring of Birds", "The Petelia Tablet"; IV · THE STONECUTTER'S HORSES; V ·

BONE FLUTE BREATHING: “These Poems, She Said”, “The Heart Is Oil”, “Ptahhotep’s River”, “Death by Water”, “Leda and the Swan”, “The Better Man”, “Cave of the Nymphs”, “Six Epitaphs”, “Poem Without Voices”, “Bone Flute Breathing”; VI · TZUHALEM’S MOUNTAIN; VII · THE BOOK OF SILENCES: “Short Upanishad”, “Pārsvanātha”, “Uddālaka”, “Nāgārjuna”, “Bodhidharma”, “Sengzhào”, “Yongjiā Xuánjué”, “Sarāha”, “Sarāha’s Exercise for Beginners”, “Baizhang Huaihai”, “Nanquan Puyuan”, “Hán Shān”, “Yúnyán Tánshèng”, “Línjì Yìxuán”, “Dòngshān Liángjiè”, “Xiāngyán Zhìxián”, “Yunmen Wenyan”, “Fayan Wenyi”, “Lianhua Fengxian”, “Xuedou Zhongxian”, “Danxia Zichun”, “Dahui Zonggao”, “Tiāntóng Rújìng”, “Dōgen”, “Keizan”, “Jakushitsu”, “Bankei Yōtaku”, “Hakuin”; VIII · LYELL ISLAND VARIATIONS: “Larix lyallii”, “Thin Man Washing”, “Absence of the Heart”, “The Reader”, “The Starlight Is Getting Steadily Dimmer”, “The Long and the Short of It”, “A River, a Runner”, “Riddle”, “Day In, Day Out”; IX · THE PHYSICS OF LIGHT: “Sutra of the Heart”, “Kol Nidre”, “Gloria, Credo, Sanctus et Oreamnos Deorum”, “*Rubus ursinus*: A Prayer for the Blackberry Harvest”, “For the Bones of Josef Mengele”, “Fathers and Sons”, “Hick & Nillie”, “Demons and Men”, “Sunday Morning”, “Children of the Old Horse”, “The Physics of Light”, “The Occupation”, “Long Poem on Four Feet”; X · THE BLUE ROOFS OF JAPAN; XI · CONVERSATIONS WITH A TOAD; XII · NEW WORLD SUITE N° 3: “All the Desanctified Places”, “Who Is the Fluteplayer?”, “The Children of Zhuang Zi Confront the Frozen Saskatchewan River”, “Winter Solstice, Cariboo Mountains”; XIII · URSA MINOR; XIV · THE LIVING: “Finch”, “Birds on the Water”, “The Flowers of the Body”, “Giotto’s Bones”, “The Focal Length of Fuel”, “So Do We”, “The Living Must Never Outnumber the Dead”, “At Last”, “For the Geologist’s Daughter”. Reviews: S. 314, S.315, S.321, S.323, S.324.

2010

A.93 •• *Selected Poems*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2010. 160 p. ISBN 978-0-224-09085-8. Not the same as A.92 or A.94, though it bears the same title. Contents: I · From *The Beauty of the Weapons*: “The Beauty of the Weapons”, “Song of the Summit”, “Ararat”, “A Quadratic Equation”, “One Glyph”, “The Sun and Moon”, “The Greenland Stone”, “Poem About Crystal”, “A Lesson in Botany”, “Anecdote of the Squid”; II · *Deuteronomy*: “Jacob Singing”, “An Augury”, “Essay on Adam”, “Deuteronomy”; III · From *The Old in Their Knowing*: “Herakleitos”, “Parmenides”, “Pythagoras”, “Demokritos”, “Xenophanes”, “Of the Snaring of Birds”; IV · *Hachadura*; V · *The Stonecutter’s Horses*; VI · From *Bone Blute Breathing*: “These Poems, She Said”, “The Heart Is Oil”, “Ptahhotep’s River”, “Death by Water”, “Leda and the Swan”, “Six Epitaphs”, “Poem Without Voices”, “Bone Flute Breathing”; VII · *Tzubahalem’s Mountain*; VIII · From *The Book of Silences*: “Short Upanishad”, “Sengzhao”, “Yongjia Xuanjue”, “Saraha”, “Saraha’s Exercise for Beginners”, “Han Shan”, “Dongshan Liangjie”, “Xuedou Zhongxian”, “Dogen”, “Bankei Yotaku”; IX · *Lyell Island Variations*: “Larix lyallii”, “Thin Man Washing”, “Absence of the Heart”, “The Reader”, “The Starlight Is Getting Steadily Dimmer”, “The Long and the Short of It”, “A River, a Runner”, “Riddle”, “Day In, Day Out”; X · From *The Physics of Light*: “Sutra of the Heart”, “Kol Nidre”, “Gloria, Credo, Sanctus et Oreamnos Deorum”, “*Rubus ursinus*: A Prayer for the Blackberry Harvest”, “For the Bones of Josef Mengele”, “Fathers and Sons”, “Hick and Nillie”, “Demons and Men”, “Sunday Morning”, “The Physics of Light”; XI · *Conversations with a Toad*; XII · *The Living*: “Finch”, “Birds on the Water”, “The Flowers of the Body”, “Giotto’s Bones”, “The Focal Length of Fuel”, “So Do We”, “The Living Must Never Outnumber the Dead”, “At Last”, “For the Geologist’s Daughter”, “All Night Wood”.

A.94 *Selected Poems*. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press. 2009. 272 p. 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-55447-069-3. Casebound edition of A.92, dated 2009 but not released until 2010. Includes corrections to some pages.

2011

A.95 •• *What Is Reading For?* Rochester, New York: Cary Graphic Arts Press, 2011. 40 p. 12.5 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 978-1-933360-53-9. Revised text of a lecture delivered on June 12, 2010, at The Future of Reading, a symposium at Rochester Institute of Technology.

A.96 •• *The Fate of the Coast*, by Rod Dobell & Robert Bringhurst. Nanaimo, B.C.: Institute for Coastal Research, 2010. 00 p. 00 × 00 cm. ISBN 0000. Contents: Two lectures from a symposium held at Malaspina University College [later Vancouver Island University], Nanaimo, on 31 March 2006. The lectures are Rod Dobell's "Holarchy, Panarchy, Coyote and Raven: Creation Myths for a Research Program" and •• Bringhurst's "The Speaking Coast."

A.97 •• *Selected Poems*. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2011. 266 p. ISBN 978-1-55659-391-8. US edition of A.92 and A.94. Same contents.

B CONTRIBUTIONS TO BOOKS & OTHER SEPARATE WORKS

1973

B.1 In *Nothing Speaks for the Blue Moraines: New and Selected Poems* by J. Michael Yates. Delta, British Columbia: Sono Nis Press, 1973: front flap of dustjacket. Contribution: Lengthy front flap copy is signed by Bringhurst. (See also D.9.)

1975

B.2 In *Pomegranate: A Selected Anthology of Vancouver Poetry*, edited by Nellie McClung. Vancouver: Intermedia Press, 1975: p. 10. Contribution: "Essay on Adam" (rpt. from A.6).

B.3 In *Propagation*, compiled by Scott Laurence Booth. Rochester, New York & Aldan, Pennsylvania: S.L. Booth, [1975]: p. [29]. 75 copies, numbered and signed by the printer/compiler. A book of "graphic directions," in which poems are vehicles for typographic experiments; "incorporated into [the] degree requirements" of the compiler at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Contribution: "Essay on Adam" (rpt. from C.11).

1978

B.4 In *The Poets of Canada*, edited by John Robert Colombo. Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1978: pp. 273-274. Contribution: "Essay on Adam" (rpt. from A.6). <I consulted this at UBC library.>

B.5 In *Aurora: New Canadian Writing 1978*, edited by Morris Wolfe. Toronto & New York: Doubleday, 1978: pp. 121-122. Contribution: • "Six Epitaphs" (rpt. in A.14).

1979

B.6 In *The Pushcart Prize, IV: Best of the Small Presses*, edited by Bill Henderson. 1979–80 edition. New York: Pushcart Book Press, 1979: pp. 495-499. Contribution: "The Stonecutter's Horses" (rpt. from C.32).

B.6a In *The Pushcart Prize, IV*. New York: Avon Books, 1979: pp. 495-499. Paperbound edition of B.6. Contribution: same as B.6.

1980

B.7 In *Quingumbo: Nova Poesia Norte-Americana*, organização de Kerry Shawn Keys. São Paulo: Editora e Livraria Escrita, 1980: pp. 277-299. Bilingual anthology (English and Portuguese). Contributions: "Anecdote of the Squid", "Essay on Adam", "Poem about Crystal", "A Quadratic Equation", "Genesis Frozen", "Scholium", "An Augury", "Song of the Summit", "The Beauty of the Weapons", "Some Ciphers", "Pythagoras" (all rpt. from A.6, except "The Beauty of the Weapons", rpt. from A.1). With Portuguese translations by several hands. See also T.Pr.1.

1981

B.8 In *The Maple Laugh Forever: An Anthology of Canadian Comic Poetry*, edited by Douglas Barbour and Stephen Scobie. Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1981: p. 164. Contribution: • “McGillicutty’s Fundamentalism”.

1982

B.9 In *News and Weather: Seven Canadian Poets*, edited by August Kleinzahler. Ilderton, Ontario: Brick Books, 1982: pp 10-16. Contributions: “Death by Water” (rpt. from A.8); “Ararat” (rpt. from A.6); “Song of the Summit” (rpt. from A.6); [•] “Jacob Singing” (rev. from A.7).

B.10 In *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, edited by Margaret Atwood. Toronto/London/New York: Oxford University Press, 1982: pp. 438-442. Contributions: “Deuteronomy” (rpt. from A.6); “These Poems, She Said” (rpt. from C.38); “Notes to the Reader” (rpt. from A.6).

B.11 In *Tasks of Passion: Dennis Lee at Mid-Career*, edited Karen Mulhallen, Donna Bennett and Russell Brown. Toronto: Descant Editions, 1982: pp. 57-81. Same as D.21, except for the title page and binding. Contribution: • Essay, “At Home in the Difficult World” (partial rpt. in B.91).

1983

B.12 In *Lords of Winter and of Love: A Book of Canadian Love Poems in English and French*, edited by Barry Callaghan. Toronto: Exile Editions, 1983: p. 87. Contribution: “These Poems, She Said” (rpt. from A.14).

B.13 In *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, vol. 2, edited by Donna Bennett and Russell Brown. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1983: pp. 623-626. (See also B.36.) Contributions: “Deuteronomy”, “Essay on Adam”, “These Poems, She Said” (all rpt. from A.14).

B.14 In *Here is a Poem: An Anthology of Canadian Poetry*, edited by Florence McNeil. Toronto: The League of Canadian Poets, 1983: pp. 93, 144. Contributions: “Some Ciphers” (rpt. from A.6); • “Principles of Composition, Part II”.

1984

B.15 In *Sun and Steel: New European/American Work*, edited by Alfred Kren. New York: Serra di Felice, 1984: p. [47]. Catalogue of an exhibition of painting and sculpture, held in New York City, 17 May–16 June, 1984. Contribution: “Stone-Lathe and Wing” (rpt. from A.14), accompanying the work of sculptor Amy Purcell.

B.16 In *Canadian Writers in 1984*, edited by W.H. New. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984: pp. 48-49. Same as C.42, except for the title page and binding. Contribution: “Two Variations” (not to be confused with the “Two Variations” in A.14).

B.17 In *The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse*, edited by Ralph Gustafson. 4th rev. ed. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1984: pp. 340-342. Contributions: “Xenophanes” (rpt. from A.14); “Essay on Adam” (rpt. from A.6); “Poem about Crystal” (rpt. from A.6).

1985

B.18 In *The New Canadian Poets, 1970–1985*, edited by Dennis Lee. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985: pp. 26-39. Contributions: “These Poems, She Said”; “Deuteronomy”; “Demokritos”; “Leda and the Swan”; “The Stonecutter’s Horses” (all rpt. from A.14); “Saraha” (rpt. from A.23).

B.19 In *Selected Poems, 1933–1980*, by George Faludy. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985: pp. 55–56. Contribution: “Noon to Sunset” (trans. from Hungarian, in collaboration with the author).

1986

- B.20 In *Vancouver: Soul of a City*, edited by Gary Geddes. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1986: pp. 223-224. Contribution: "Anecdote of the Squid" (rpt. from A.14).
- B.21 In *Vancouver Poetry*, edited by Allan Safarik. Winlaw, B.C.: Polestar Press, 1986: p. 165. Contribution: "Death by Water" (rpt. from A.14).
- B.22 In *From Hand to Hand: A Gathering of Book Arts in British Columbia*, edited by Anne H. Tayler & Megan J. Nelson. Vancouver: The Alcuin Society, 1986: pp. 117-134. Contribution: Essay, • "Typography & Type Design," with catalogue descriptions and illustrations. Same as D.37.
- B.23 In *A Gathering of Smoke: Gopiah's South Indian Prose-Poem Journals*, by Kerry Shawn Keys. Calcutta: The Writers Workshop, 1986: pp. 5-6. Contribution: Untitled commentary.
- B.24 In *Skelton at 60*, edited by Barbara Turner. Erin, Ontario: The Porcupine's Quill, 1986: pp. 84-91. Contribution: Essay, • "Of Gladness as a Moral Force in Time."
- B.25 In *Canadian Short Fiction*, edited by W.H. New. Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall, 1986: pp. 19-21. Contribution: "The Raven and the First Men" (rpt. from A.22).

1987

- B.26 In *Poesia canadese del Novecento*, Testi inglesi e traduzione a cura di Caterina Ricciardi. Napoli: Liguori Editore, 1987: pp 346-349. Bilingual anthology (English and Italian). Contributions: "Notes to the Reader" (rpt. from A.6); "These Poems, She Said" (rpt. from A.14), with Italian translations.

1988

- B.27 In *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Two*, edited by Gary Geddes. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988: pp 490-505. Contributions: "The Beauty of the Weapons", "The Sun and Moon", "Poem about Crystal", "Anecdote of the Squid", "Xenophanes", "The Stonecutter's Horses", "The Song of Ptahhotep" (all rpt. from A.14), "For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985" (rpt. from A.32). See also B.78a, S.89.
- B.28 In *Everyone Leans, Each on Each Other: Words for John Newlove on the Occasion of His Fiftieth Birthday*, [edited by John Metcalf. Ottawa:] The Bastard Press, 1988: unpagged. Contribution: • A poem, "Breakfast" (rev. as A.66).

1989

- B.29 In *Best Canadian Essays 1989*, edited by Douglas Fetherling. Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1989: pp. 185-194. Contribution: [•] "Off the Road: Journeys in the Past, Present and Future of Canadian Literature" (rev. from D.52).
- B.30 In *The Macmillan Anthology 2*, edited by John Metcalf & Leon Rooke. Toronto: Macmillan, 1989: pp. 212-214. Contribution: "Reflections on the Stone Age" (rev. excerpt from D.52).
- B.31 In *Canadian Travellers in Italy*, edited by Barry Callaghan. Toronto: Exile Editions, 1989: pp. 15-20. Contribution: "The Stone Cutter's [sic] Horses" (rpt. from A.14).

1990

- B.32 In *Native Writers and Canadian Writing*, edited by W.H. New. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990: pp. 32-47. Same as D.58, except for the title page and binding. Contribution: Essay, "That Also is You: Some Classics of Native Canadian Literature." Reviews: S.109a.
- B.33 In *Words We Call Home: Celebrating Creative Writing at UBC*, edited by Linda Svendsen. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990: pp. 26-29. Contribution: "Jacob Singing" (rpt. from A.14), with a short prologue discussing the genesis of the poem.

B.34 In *Mythic Voices*, edited by Celia Lottridge. Scarborough, Ontario: Nelson Canada, 1990: pp. 00. Contributions: “The Raven Steals the Light”; “The Raven with a Broken Beak” (rpt. from A.22).

B.35 In *Sobo Square iii*, edited by Alberto Manguel. London: Bloomsbury, 1990: pp. 224-228. Contribution: [•] “All the Desanctified Places” (rev. from C.60).

B.36 In *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, revised & abridged edition, edited by Russell Brown, Donna Bennett & Nathalie Cooke. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990: pp. 695-699. Contributions: “Deuteronomy”, “Essay on Adam”, “These Poems, She Said” (all rpt. from B.13, of which this is an updated edition).

1991

B.37 In *Towards 2000*, edited by Ron Clark & Martha Gould. Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1991: pp 52–55, 73. Contributions: [•] All the Desanctified Places (rev. from C.60); • “Winter Solstice: Clearwater River” (rev. as “Winter Solstice, Cariboo Mountains” in A.47, A.79).

B.38 In *The Form of the Book*, by Jan Tschichold, translated from the German by Hajo Haderer, edited with an introduction by Robert Bringhurst. Vancouver: Hartley & Marks, 1991: pp ix–xviii & passim. Contribution: • Introduction; several signed footnotes pertaining to Tschichold’s text; • four lines of Heine’s *Lorelei* in English translation. (Same as E.7.) Reprinted in E.7a, E.7b.

1992

B.39 In *In a Word: A Dictionary of Words that Don’t Exist But Ought to*, edited by Jack Hitt. New York: Dell, 1992: pp. 89-90. Contribution: • Entry for “illiterature.”

B.40 In *The Burning Words*, by Gaoyuan Wei. Cambridge, England: privately printed, 1992: pp. 29-30. Contribution: “Of the Snaring of Birds” (rpt. from A.14), with Wei’s Chinese translation on pp. 10-11.

B.41 In *Spit Delaney’s Island*, by Jack Hodgins. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart (The New Canadian Library), 1992: pp. 237-242. Contribution: • Afterword.

B.42 In *Inside the Poem*, edited by W.H. New. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992: pp. 14-15, 88–93. Contributions: Sunday Morning (rpt. from A.32); • White Pelican, Blue Jay: Part I of Robert Bringhurst’s ‘Sunday Morning’: A Dialogue, by Robert Bringhurst & Laurie Ricou. The other half of this “dialogue” is S.125.

B.43 In *Lyric Philosophy*, by Jan Zwicky. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992: pp. 33, 175, 459. Contributions: “Poem about Crystal”; “The Beauty of the Weapons”; “Body, Speech and Mind” [*Tzubahalem’s Mountain IV*] (all rpt. from A.14). See also S.159.

1993

B.44 In *Literature in English: Writers and Styles from Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present*, edited by W.H. New & W.E. Messenger. Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1993: pp. 1401-3, 1529-30. Contributions: “The Raven Steals the Light” (rpt. from A.22); “Some Ciphers”; “Essay on Adam” (both rpt. from A.14); “Wáng Bi” (rpt. from A.32).

B.45 In *Riffs*, by Dennis Lee. London, Ontario: Brick Books, 1993: back cover. Contribution: • Lengthy jacket blurb.

B.46 In *Gáigivdul.àt: Brought Forth to Reconfirm: The Legacy of a Taku River Tlingit Clan*, by Elizabeth Nyman and Jeff Leer. Fairbanks & Whitehorse: Alaska Native Language Center & Yukon Native Language Centre, 1993: pp. viii–xv. Contribution: • Foreword (rev. in A.83).

1994

B.47 In *Witness to Wilderness: The Clayoquot Sound Anthology*, edited by Howard Breen-Needham, Sandy Frances Duncan, Deborah Ferens, Phyllis Reeve, Susan Yates. Vancouver: Arsensal Pulp Press, 1994: pp 266–268. Contribution: • “Gloria, Credo, Sanctus & Oreamnos Deorum”. (Part 1 is rpt. From “Thirty Words” in A.32; full text rev. in A.47.)

B.48 In *Take this Waltz: A Celebration of Leonard Cohen*, edited by Michael Fournier and Ken Norris. Ste Anne de Belleville, Québec: The Muses’ Company / La Compagnie des Muses, 1994: pp. 20-21. Contribution: • “Bankei Yōtaku in Los Angeles”. (Here dedicated to Leonard Cohen. Rpt. as “Bankei,” minus the dedication, in A.47, and as “Bankei Yōtaku” in A.65 and A.92.)

B.49 In *Robert Fones: Historiated Letters*. North Vancouver, B.C.: Presentation House Gallery, 1994: pp. 36-43. Contribution: • “Literal Meaning,” an essay on the sculpture of Robert Fones.

B.50 In *Howe Sounds: Fact, Fiction and Fantasy from the Writers of Bowen Island*, edited by Richard Littlemore. Bowen Island, B.C.: Bowen Island Arts Council, 1994: pp. 3-11. Contribution: “Fast Drumming Ground2”, rpt. from D.62.

B.51 In *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, by Sean Kane. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1994: pp. 28-31, 54-60. Contribution: Editions and English translations of two Haida texts: Skaai’s • *Stluujagadang* (“Sapsucker”) and • *Xbunya Qagaangas* (“Raven Travelling”), opening scene. The latter is rpt. with additional material in C.65/D.77. Both are rev. in A.59. See also S.156.

B.52 In *Contemporary Authors*, new revision series, vol. 44, edited by Susan M. Trosky. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994: p. 47. Contribution: • Untitled statement beginning “I walk in the mountains, come back to my desk and am whole, and can speak in a whole voice, though often it seems to be somebody else’s. But equally often now I walk in the ruins of history....”

B.53 In *Diogenes Defictions*, by Thomas McEvelley. Berkeley: Peter Koch, 1994: pp. 5-8. Contribution: • Introduction. The book was printed to accompany a set of eleven lead plates, imprinted with sayings (in McEvelley’s English paraphrase) attributed to Diogenes of Sinope, encased in a ceramic box. The companion piece is a 72-page book containing Bringhurst’s introduction, an essay by McEvelley, photographic reproductions of the lead plates, and notes by the printer, Peter Koch. (There is a further edition of the sayings printed on card instead of lead, with a brief commentary by McEvelley, contained in a cardboard box. This edition includes no contribution by Bringhurst.)

1995

B.54 In *Peter Koch, Printer: Surrealist Cowboys, Maverick Poets, and Presocratic Philosophers*. New York & San Francisco: New York Public Library & San Francisco Public Library, 1995: pp. 7-13. Contribution: • Essay, “Stepping Again Into the Same Stream, Catching Different Fish: The Printing of Peter Koch.” Reviews: S.158.

B.55 In *The Dreamer Awakes*, by Alice Kane, edited by Sean Kane. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995: pp. 11-18. Contribution: • Introduction (rpt. in A.83). Excerpts from the introduction are reproduced (with a slight emendation) on dustjacket as well.

B.55a In *The Dreamer Awakes*, by Alice Kane, edited by Sean Kane. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995: pp. 11-18. Special Edition for Friends of the Osborne & Lillian H. Smith Collections, Toronto Public Library. Contribution: Same as B.55.

B.55b In *The Dreamer Awakes*, by Alice Kane, edited by Sean Kane. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995: pp. 11-18. (Softcover edition.) Contribution: Same as B.55.

B.56 In *Poetry and Knowing: Speculative Essays and Interviews*, edited by Tim Lilburn. Kingston, Ontario: Quarry Press, 1995: pp 52–64. Contribution: [•] “Everywhere Being is Dancing, Knowing is Known” (rev. from D.73). Also includes S.159.

B.57 In *Coming to Light: Contemporary Translations of the Native Literatures of North America*, edited by Brian Swann. New York: Random House, 1995: pp. 225-249. Contribution: • “John Sky’s *The One They Gave Away*.” Narrative poem translated from the Haida of John Sky of the Qquuna Qiighawaai, with introduction and notes (rpt. in B.57.a; rev. in A.59).

B.57a In *Coming to Light: Contemporary Translations of the Native Literatures of North America*, edited by Brian Swann. New York: Vintage, 1996: pp. 225–249. Contribution: “John Sky’s *The One They Gave Away*.” Rpt. from B.57, of which this is the subsequent softcover edition.

B.58 In *Windhorse Reader*, 2nd edition, edited by John Castlebury. Yarmouth, Nova Scotia: Samurai Press, 1995: pp. 38–39. Contribution: “Xuedou Zhongxian” (rpt. from C.63).

B.59 In *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, 6th edition, edited by J. Paul Hunter & Jerome Beaty. New York: Norton, 1995: p.--. Contribution: “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985” (rpt. from A.32).

B.60 In *The Norton Introduction to Poetry*, 6th edition, edited by J. Paul Hunter. New York: Norton, 1995: p. 425. Contribution: “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985” (rpt. from A.32).

B.61 In *The 1995 AAUP Book, Jacket and Journal Show*. New York: Association of American University Presses, 1995: pp. [vi–ix]; 2–105. This is the catalogue of an annual exhibition for which Bringham served as one of the jurors. Contribution: • Essay and • 52 brief comments on individual books and journals.

B.62 In *Gone Fishing*, by Brian Gauvin. Victoria, B.C.: Sono Nis Press, 1995: p. 30. Contribution: Excerpt from “Ararat” (rpt. from A.6).

1996

B.63 In *Climate and the Affections: Poems 1970–1995*, by Crispin Elsted. Victoria, B.C.: Sono Nis Press, 1996: back cover. Contribution: • Jacket blurb of approximately 300 words.

B.64 In *Vultures’ Country / Krajina supů*, by Kerry Shawn Keys. [Olomouc, Czech Republic]: Votobia, 1996: pp. 113, 131–132, 133, 150–151. Contribution: “Kerry Shawn Keys” (rpt. from A.2), with Czech translation by Petr Mikeš; and what appears to be an unauthorized excerpt from a letter of recommendation, quoted by Hana Waisserová in her essay “Natural Fire: An Introduction to the Life and Poetry of Kerry Shawn Keys.”

B.65 In *The Gift of Tongues: Twenty-Five Years of Poetry from Copper Canyon Press*, edited by Sam Hamill. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, 1996: pp. 27-30. Contributions: “The Song of Ptahhotep” (rpt. from A.26); “Parśvanatha” (rpt. from A.35). The editor’s supplementary comments appear on pp. 319 & 323.

B.66 In *Parole sull’acqua: Poesie dal Canada anglofono e francofono*, a cura di Liana Nissim e Caterina Ricciardi. Roma: Edizioni Empiria, 1996: pp. 200-204. Bilingual anthology (English and Italian). Contributions: “Death by Water” (rpt. from A.14); “Saraha’s Exercise for Beginners” (rpt. from A.32), with Italian translations.

1998

B.67 In *World Poetry: An Anthology of Verse from Antiquity to Our Time*, edited by Katharine Washburn, John S. Major & Clifton Fadiman. New York: W.W. Norton & Book-of-the-Month Club, 1998: pp. 83, 284-290, 815-816. Contributions: “The Petelia Tablet” (trans. from Greek, rpt. from A.14); “The Ode of Imr el-Qais” (trans. from Arabic, rpt. from A.2); “Antistrophe” (trans. from the Italian of Leopardi, rpt. from A.2.)

B.68 In *West by Northwest: British Columbia Short Stories*, edited by David Stouck & Myler Wilkinson. Victoria, B.C.: Polestar. 1998: pp. 11-14. Contribution: “The Raven and the First Men” (rpt. from A.22). Note: This piece is Reid’s alone, but it is credited here to Reid & Bringhurst.

B.69 In *A Matter of Spirit: The Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry*, edited by Susan McCaslin. Victoria, British Columbia: Ekstasis Editions, 1998: pp. 41-58. Contributions: Ten poems and a short prose piece. “Poem about Crystal”, “Deuteronomy”, “Herakleitos”, “Parśvanatha”, “Nagarjuna”, “Sengzhào”, “Hán Shan”, “Yúnmén Wényan”, “Thin Man Washing”; “Sunday Morning” (all rpt. from A.47); • brief essay, “In Praise of Vacant Lots.”

B.70 In *On Book Design*, by Richard Hendel. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998: pp. 13-14. Contribution: • Lengthy excerpt from a letter to Rich Hendel. Quotations from *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.55) are scattered elsewhere through the text.

1999

B.71 In *Coterminous Worlds: Magical Realism and Contemporary Post-Colonial Literature in English*, edited by Elsa Linguanti, Francesco Casotti and Carmen Concilio. Cross/Cultures 39. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999: pp. 139-149. Contribution: “Coterminous Worlds”: Excerpts (chosen by the editors) from “Breathing through the Feet” (rpt. from A.32), “Vietnamese New Year in the Polish Friendship Centre” (rpt. from A.32), Foreword to *The Calling* (rpt. from A.47) and [•] “The Persistence of Poetry and the Destruction of the World” (Bringhurst’s partial translation & revision of D.87, rev. in A.81).

2000

B.72 In *Poetry Comes Up Where It Can*, edited by Brian Swann. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000: pp. 27-28. Contributions: Excerpts from “Conversations with a Toad” (rpt. from C.72) and from “Dogen” (rpt. from C.71).

B.73 In *Currents: Stories, Essays, Poems, and Plays*, edited by Kevin McNeilly, Noel Elizabeth Currie, William H. New & William E. Messenger. Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice Hall, 2000: pp. 354-356. Contribution: “Bone Flute Breathing” (rpt. from A.14).

B.74 In *New Life in Dark Seas: Brick Books 25*, edited by Stan Dragland. London, Ontario: Brick Books, 2000: pp. 25-28. Contribution: “Jacob Singing” (rpt. from A.47).

B.75 In *Canadá: un estado posmoderno*, coordinado por Teresa Gutiérrez-Haces. Mexico, DF: Plaza y Valdés, 2000: pp. 521-525. Contribution: “La persistencia de la poesía y la destrucción del mundo” (rpt. from D.87). [Incorrectly labelled a translation.]

B.76 In *Solitary Raven: Selected Writings of Bill Reid*, edited by Robert Bringhurst. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000: pp. 9-34 & passim. Contribution: • Acknowledgements, • Introduction, extensive notes and chronology by Bringhurst. Same as E.8. Rev. as B.110.

2001

B.77 In *Letterletter*, by Gerrit Noordzij. Vancouver: Hartley & Marks, 2000 [actually 2001]: pp. vii–ix. Contribution: • Introduction. (The book also includes, on p. 115, a footnote written by Bringhurst.)

B.78 In *The Griffin Poetry Prize Anthology*, edited by Esta Spaulding. Toronto: Anansi, 2001: pp. 53-63. Contribution: “The Way the Weather Chose to be Born, translated from the Haida of Ghandl” (rpt. from A.62).

B.78a In *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Three*, edited by Gary Geddes. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001: pp. 388-400. Contributions: “The Beauty of the Weapons”; “Anecdote of the Squid”; “The Stonecutter’s Horses”; “These Poems, She Said”; “Poem without Voices”; “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985” (rpt. from A.47). See also B.27, S.240a.

2002

B.79 In *Thinking and Singing: Poetry and the Practice of Philosophy*, edited by Tim Lilburn. Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2002: pp. 79-93, 155-172. Contributions: • “The Philosophy of Poetry and the Trashing of Doctor Empedokles” (essay, based in part on D.8; rev. in A.83) and • “Poetry and Thinking”, essay based on a lecture delivered in January 2001 at Luther College, University of Regina (rev. in A.81). Reviews: S.264b.

B.80 In *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, edited by W.H. New. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002: pp. 432-3, 464-7, 571-2, 573, 596-9, 708, 790-94, 872, 953-4, 997-8, 1031, 1051-2. Contributions: 13 articles: • Ghandl; • Haida Oral Literature; • Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw; • Kanyátaííyo; • K’atchodi; • Kwakwala Literature; • Mandeville, François; • Mythology (rev. in A.83); • Petitot, Émile; • Reid, Bill; • Saayaach’apis; • Seidayaa; • Skaay. The article “Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw” is coauthored with Heather Hodgson. (See also D.98. In the same issue with S.256.)

B.81 In *Language Culture Type*, edited by John D. Berry. New York: Association Typographique Internationale & Graphis, 2002: pp 3–23. Contribution: • Voices, Languages and Scripts around the World (essay). Rev. as “The Solid Form of Language,” A.72.

B.81a In *A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, edited by Donna Bennett & Russell Brown. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002: pp. 954-975. Contributions: “Essay on Adam”; “The Stonecutter’s Horses”; “Leda and the Swan”; “These Poems, She Said”; “The Reader”; “Conversations with a Toad”; “Bone Flute Breathing” (all rpt. from A.47).

2003

B.82 In *This Art: Poems about Poetry*, edited by Michael Wieggers. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon, 2003: pp 25, 94. Contributions: “These Poems, She Said” and “Parable of the Voices” [*Tzûhalem’s Mountain* §XVII], (both rpt. from A.26).

B.83 In *Many-voicèd fountains: Studi di anglistica e comparatistica in onore di Elsa Linguanti*, a cura di Mario Curreli e Fausto Ciompi. Pisa: ETS, 2003: pp. 16-29. Contributions: Three Poems for Elsa: • ‘Self-Portrait: Giotto’s Bones’ (Rev. as C.80), • ‘And So Do We,’ • ‘The Living Must Never Outnumber the Dead’; • essay, “What is Found in Translation” (rev. in A.83). See also D.118.

B.83a In *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing*, edited by Laurie G. Kirszner, Stephen R. Mandell & Candace Fertile. Scarborough, Ontario: Thomson/Nelson, 2003: pp. 541-542. Contribution: “For the Bones of Josef Mengele” (rpt. from A.47).

2004

B.84 In *Voices from Four Directions: Contemporary Translations of the Native Literatures of North America*, edited by Brian Swann. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004: pp. 105-120. Contribution: “The Sea Lion Hunter”, translated from the Haida of Ghandl (rpt. from A.62), with new • Introduction and • Postscript.

B.85 In *Literature: A Pocket Anthology, Canadian Edition*, edited by R.S. Gwynn & Wanda Campbell. Toronto: Pearson Longman, 2004: p. 779. Contribution: “Essay on Adam”, rpt. from A.47.

B.86 In *Poetry: A Pocket Anthology, Canadian Edition*, edited by R.S. Gwynn & Wanda Campbell. Toronto: Pearson Longman, 2004: p. 347. Contribution: “Essay on Adam”, rpt. from A.47.

B.87 In *Carving the Elements: A Companion to the Fragments of Parmenides*. Berkeley: Editions Koch. 2004: pp. 13-17, 91-99, 123-138. Contents: • Introduction; • “Finding the Form of an Ancient Text” (essay); • “Raven’s Wine Cup” (essay, rpt. in A.83). Includes several photos by and of Bringhurst. (See also A.70, D.119, E.9.)

B.88 In *Presiding Spirits: Poetry International 2004*. London: Southbank Centre. 2004. This is an envelope of 12 postcards, together with a title card containing a preface by Ruth Borthwick. Each

of the 12 cards carries a short poem chosen by one of the participants in Poetry International 2004, together with a • short untitled comment. The subject of Bringhurst's comment is Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand."

B.89 In *Coming to Shore*, edited by Marie Mauzé, Sergei Kan & Michael Harkin. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004: pp. 163-182. Contribution: • "The Audible Light in the Eyes", essay based on a lecture delivered at the Collège de France, June 2000 (rev. in A.81). See also the editors' introduction, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

B.90 In *Hoi Barbaroi: A Quarter-century at Barbarian Press*. Mission, British Columbia: Barbarian Press, 2004: pp. 17-21. Contribution: • "Shouldering Civilization: The Private Search for Public Good", an essay on typographic history with special reference to the work of Barbarian Press.

2005

B.91 In Dennis Lee, *Dimora del cuore / Heart Residence*, a cura di Branko Gorjup e Francesca Valente. Ravenna: Longo, 2005: pp. 10-11. Contribution: Two paragraphs excerpted from "At Home in the Difficult World" (B.11/D.21), with facing translation into Italian.

2006

B.92 In *Words on the Water: Campbell River Writers' Festival 2006*. [Campbell River, British Columbia: Words on the Water Festival Society]: [p. 2]. Contribution: • "Birds on the Water" (poem), commissioned by the festival and printed on the inside front cover of the festival program (March 24-25, 2006). Photograph and brief biography of Bringhurst on p. [4].

B.93 In *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing*, edited by Laurie G. Kirsznner, Stephen R. Mandell & Candace Fertile. 2nd Canadian ed. Toronto: Nelson, 2007 [actually distributed in spring 2006]: pp. 597, 838-844. Contributions: "For the Bones of Josef Mengele" (rpt. from A.47); "The Way the Weather Chose to Be Born" (rpt. from A.62).

B.94 In *The Alcuin Society 2005 Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada / Prix pour l'excellence de la conception graphique du livre au Canada conférés par la Société Alcuin, 2005* [edited by Leah Gordon]. Vancouver: The Alcuin Society, 2006: pp 4, 12, 18, 24, 29, 34, 38, 43, 47-51. Contributions: As revealed on pp. 56 & 59, all the judges' comments are by Bringhurst – dictated rapidly into a tape recorder, then edited by Leah Gordon.

B.95 In *Reading Writers Reading: Canadian Authors' Reflections*, edited by Danielle Schaub. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press / Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2006: 195. Contribution: • "Reading What Is," a short prose meditation, facing Schaub's photograph of Bringhurst on p. 194.

B.96 In *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 2nd ed., edited by Keith Brown et al. Oxford: Elsevier, 2006 (14 vols.): vol. 10: 104-106; vol. 13: 202-205. Contribution: two multi-page encyclopedia entries: • "Printing and Typewriting" and • "Typography."

B.97 In *Don McKay: Essays on His Works*, edited by Brian Bartlett. Toronto: Guernica, 2006: 29-34. Contribution: "The Antithesis of Rape, Which Is Not Chastity" (rev. from D.35).

2007

B.98 In Gary Snyder, *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village*. [Emeryville, California]: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007: pp. vii-xv. Contribution: • Foreword (rev. in A.83).

B.99 In Robyn Sarah, *Little Eureka's: A Decade's Thoughts on Poetry*. [Emeryville, Ontario]: Biblioasis, 2007: 205-226. Contribution: • Two letters to Robyn Sarah, incorporated (along with letters from Dennis Lee) in Sarah's "A Dangling Conversation (for multiple voices)," a discussion of literary polyphony. (See also D.89, S.189, 190.)

B.100 In *Gaspereau gloriatur: Liber beati anni decimi*, vol. 1: Poetry, edited by Michael deBeyer, Kate Kennedy & Andrew Steeves. Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau, 2007: 23-35. Contribution: Scene 2 from *Ursa Major* (A.69).

B.101 In *Under Strange Sail: Translations & Improvisations from Many Hands*. Mission, British Columbia: Barbarian Press, 2007: s.n. [One sheet in a set of 16, loose in a folder]. Contribution: • “For the Sprinter Asopikhos / & for Others: A Version of Pindar’s Olympian 14.” Translation from Greek, originally made for the Olympic Literary Festival, Calgary, Alberta, in 1988.

B.102 In *Gaspereau gloriatur: Liber beati anni decimi*, vol. 2: Prose, edited by Michael deBeyer, Kate Kennedy & Andrew Steeves. Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau, 2007: 26-43. Contributions: Untitled excerpt from *The Solid Form of Language* (rpt. from A.72); Untitled talk [“The Tree of Meaning and the Work of Ecological Linguistics”] from *The Tree of Meaning* (rpt. from A.81).

2008

B.103 In *Water: A Selection of Poems on the Theme of Water*. [Edited by Graham Moss.] Oldham, Greater Manchester: Incline Press, 2008. [The pages are unnumbered. Bringhurst’s poem is the last one in the book.] Contribution: “Death by Water” (rpt. from A.47).

B.104 In *Book Art Object*, edited by David Jury. Berkeley: Codex Foundation, 2008: 79-97. Contribution: • “Spiritual Geometry: The Book as a Work of Art” (print version of Bringhurst’s keynote lecture at the Codex Symposium, UC Berkeley, 2007).

B.105 In *CJKV Information Processing*, 2nd edition, by Ken Lunde. Sebastopol, California: O’Reilly, 2008: xiii–xv. Contribution: • “Foreword.”

2009

B.106 In *Affix This to That with Poetry*. Gaspereau Press poetry sampler. Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau, 2009: [ii–v]. Contributions: “The Greenland Stone,” “Rubus Ursinus,” “Herakleitos,” all rpt. from *Selected Poems* (A.92).

B.107 In *The Broadview Anthology of Poetry*, edited by Herbert Rosengarten & Amanda Goldrick-Jones. 2nd ed. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2009: 904–910. Contributions: “Deuteronomy,” “The Beauty of the Weapons,” “These Poems, She Said,” “Leda and the Swan,” all rpt. from *The Calling* (A.47).

B.108 In *From a Speaking Place: Writings from the First Fifty Years of ‘Canadian Literature’*, edited by W.H. New et al. Vancouver: Ronsdale, 2009: 265-284. Contribution: “Singing with the Frogs,” rpt. from D.89.

B.109 In *This Is What They Say: Stories by François Mandeville*, translated from Chipewyan by Ron Scollon. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009: pp. 7-12 [& p. 265]. Contribution: • Foreword by Bringhurst. Same as E.10.

B.110 In *Solitary Raven: The Essential Writings of Bill Reid*, edited by Robert Bringhurst. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009: pp. 5, 9-35 & passim. Contribution: • Foreword, • Introduction, extensive notes and chronology by Bringhurst. Same as E.11. Rev. from B.76.

B.111 In *About More Alphabets: The Types of Hermann Zapf*, by Jerry Kelly. New York: Typophiles, 2009: pp. 7-9. Contribution: • Foreword.

B.112 In *Arc Poetry Annual 2010*. Ottawa: Arc Poetry Society, 2009: pp. 75-77. Contribution: “The Beauty of the Weapons,” rpt. from A.14. With commentary by David Seymour.

2010

B.113 In *Elements of Literature: Fiction, Poetry, Drama*, 4th Canadian edition, ed. by David Staines et al. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2010: pp. 693-700. Contribution: "Essay on Adam"; "The Stonecutter's Horses"; "Leda and the Swan," all rpt. from A.92.

B.114 In *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, 3rd ed., ed. by Donna Bennett & Russell Brown. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2010: pp. 989-1005. Contribution: "Essay on Adam"; "Leda and the Swan"; "These Poems, She Said"; "The Reader"; "Conversations with a Toad"; "Bone Flute Breathing", all rpt. from A.92.

B.115 In *Lyric Ecology: An Appreciation of the Work of Jan Zwicky*, ed. by Mark Dickinson & Clare Goulet. Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2010: p. 259. Contribution: "For the Geologist's Daughter," rpt. from A.92. [Bringinghurst also designed the book and wrote the colophon, supplied the photographs, and wrote the photo caption on p. 260.]

2011

B.116 In *XXX*, edited by John Berry. Hamburg: XXX, 2009: 00-00. Contribution: • "The Road to Palatino Nova." [Looks like this may never be produced.]

B.117 In *About More Alphabets. The Types of Hermann Zapf*, by Jerry Kelly. New York: The Typophiles, 2011. ISBN 978-0-9842744-0-6. Contribution: • Foreword.

C CONTRIBUTIONS TO PERIODICALS: POEMS

1963

C.1 [Two poems]. *Pegasus* (Salt Lake City, Utah) 1963: 31. Contents: • "Dead City" and • "Toward Boston", both signed "Bob Bringinghurst."

1972

C.2 [Three poems and one translation]. *Stoney Lonesome* (Bloomington, Indiana) 3 (1972): 13-15. Contents: • "Fragments Attributed to el-Samau'al" (trans. from Arabic, incl. in part in R.1); • "Poem, 1971"; "Self-Portrait for a Sansei Girl" (rpt. from A.1, where it appears as "Self-Portrait: The Sansei Poem"); • "Poem Authored Jointly with the Posthumous De Gaulle".

C.3 [One poem and two translations]. *Quarry* (Bloomington, Indiana) 2 (Fall 1972): 33-38. Contents: "The Beauty of the Weapons" (rpt. from A.1); Badr Shakir el-Sayyab, "Two Poems" (• "You Went Away" and • "City of Mirage", both trans. from Arabic; the latter incl. in R.1 and rpt. in A.6, C.15).

1973

C.4 • "Le debat du cuer et du corps de Francoys Villon." *Concerning Poetry* (Bellingham, Washington) 6:2 (Fall 1973): 12-14. Trans. from French, rpt. in A.2, C.6.

C.5 "The Beauty of the Weapons." Indiana University *Arbutus* (Bloomington, Indiana) (1973): 56. Rpt. from A.1.

C.6 [Three translations]. *Contemporary Literature in Translation* (Mission, British Columbia) 16 (Fall 1973): 11-14, 19-20, 21. Contents: "The Ode of Imr el-Qais" (trans. from Arabic, rpt. from A.2); François Villon, "Le Debat du cuer et du corps" (trans. from French, rpt. from A.2); François Villon, • "Je suis Francoys, dont il me poise" (trans. from French). See also D.1.

C.7 • "A Heterophrenic (American) Maid." *Vanguard* (Vancouver) 2.10 (December/January 1973/74): 12. Authorship of poem is not indicated; text appears in a greatly reduced, barely legible

photograph of the manuscript page, along with one by another poet; items are reported to be “by poets who have recently read selections of their work in the [Vancouver Art] Gallery’s Special Events programme.”

C.8 [Two poems]. *The Lamp in the Spine* (St Paul, Minnesota) 7/8 (Fall/Winter 1973): 62-63. Contents: • “The Light Around the Bittie” (rpt. in A.2 as Section ii of “Three Ways of Looking for the Northwest Passage in the Shipyards of Bristol and Rouen”); • “A Form of Parody”. These are parodies of Robert Bly and Robert Creeley.

1974

C.9 “Study for an Ecumenical Window.” *Stoney Lonesome* 4 (1974): 16-17. Rpt. from A.2.

C.10 [Two poems and one translation]. *Quarry* 4 (Spring 1974): 33-34. Contents: “Poem about Crystal” (rpt. from A.2); “The Poet, Having at Last Encountered the Muse” (rpt. from A.2); “Antistrophe from Leopardi” (trans. from Italian, rpt. from A.2).

C.11 [Two poems and one translation]. *West Coast Poetry Review* (Reno, Nevada) 3.3 (Spring 1974): 50-52. Contents: • “Essay on Adam” (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.6, A.14, B.2, B.3, B.4, B.7, B.13, B.17, B.36, B.44, C.14, C.54; rev. in A.47, B.85, B.86, B.113, B.114, C.66); • “[A] Quadratic Equation” (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.6, A.14, A.47, B.7); • “Four Fragments” (trans. from the Greek of Aeschylus, incl. in R.1).

C.12 • “Empedokles: Six Fragments.” *Prism International* (Vancouver) 13.3 (Spring 1974): 20-21. Trans. from Greek, rev. and enlarged as “Empedokles: Seven Fragments” in A.5, A.6, A.14, A.47, R.1. (See also D.8.)

C.13 [Two poems]. *Kayak* (Santa Cruz, California) 35 (June 1974): 63-65. Contents: • “The Identity Moving” (rpt. in A.6); • “Babylon” (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.6).

C.14 [Three poems]. University of British Columbia *Alumni Chronicle* 28.2 (Summer 1974): 19. Contents: • “Love Song” (rpt. in C.19); “Essay on Adam” (rpt. from C.11); • “The Stone and the Wing” (rev. as “Stone-Lathe and Wing” in A.6, A.14, B.15 & C.16).

C.15 [Four translations]. *Contemporary Literature in Translation* 19 (Summer/Fall 1974): 4, 18, 24. Contents: Badr Shakir el-Sayyab, “City of Mirage” (rpt. from C.3); Badr Shakir el-Sayyab, • “The Cry of the Mallard”; Mahmoud Darweesh, • “Waiting for Them”; Tumadir el-Khansa, • “Elegy” (all trans. from Arabic and incl. in R.1). Cover photograph – “Strafed Train in the Sinai, 1967” – is also by Bringhurst. See also D.5, E.1.

C.16 [Five poems]. *Stuffed Crocodile* (London, Ontario) 2.3 (September 1974): 46-50. Contents: [•] “Stone-Lathe and Wing” (rev. from C.14, where it appears as “The Stone and the Wing”); • “The Meadow” (rpt. in A.6); • “Phoenix” (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.6, C.23); • “Some Ciphers” (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.6, B.7, B.14, and rev. in A.14, B.44; further rev. in A.47); • “Genesis Frozen” (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.6, B.7).

C.17 [Two poems]. *3-cent Pulp* (Vancouver) 11.13 (September 1974): [1]. Contents: • “The Fish Who Lived to Tell about It” (rpt. in A.6, A.14); • “Sleep Does Not Have Chinese Eyes” (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.6).

C.18 • “For Robert Grosseteste.” *The Ontario Review: A North American Journal of the Arts* (Windsor, Ontario) 1 (Fall 1974): 76-77. Incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.6.

C.19 [Two poems]. *The Fiddlehead* (Fredericton, New Brunswick) 103 (Fall 1974): 24–25. Contents: “Love Song” (rpt. from C.14); • “Arrows”.

C.20 • “A Lesson in Botany.” *The Berkeley Samisdat Review* (San Jose, California) 2.4 (Winter 1974): 34. Rpt. in A.6, A.14, A.47.

C.21 • “An Augury.” *Pegasus* (Vancouver) 6.3 (Christmas 1974): 35. Incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.6, A.14, A.24, A.24a, A.47, B.7, C.25.

C.22 “Eight Poems and Translations.” *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* (Boston) ns 1.4 (1973/1974): 561–575. Contents: [•] Excerpt from “The Third Generation: A Treatise on the Gods” (rev. from A.2); “Strophe from Sophocles” (trans. from Greek, rpt. from A.2); “Herakleitos” (rpt. from A.2); • “The Petelia Tablet” (trans. from Greek, incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.14, A.47, B.67, A.76, A.92), “Four Glyphs” (rpt. from A.2); [•] “Isthmian” (rev. from A.1); • “A Short History” (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.5, A.6, A.14, A.47); “Antistrophe from Leopardi” (trans. from Italian, rpt. from A.2).

1975

C.23 “Phoenix.” *Littack* (Epping, Essex) 3.2 (March 1975): 151. Rpt. from C.16.

C.24 [Two poems]. *The University of Windsor Review* 10.2 (Spring/Summer 1975): 39-43. Contents: “Empedokles’ Recipes” (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.5, A.6, A.14, A.47); “Deuteronomy” (rpt. from A.3).

C.25 [Two poems]. *Prism International* 14.2 (Summer 1975): 14-15. Contents: “Pherekydes” (incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.5, A.6, A.14, A.47); “An Augury” (rpt. from C.21).

C.26 • “Hachadura.” *Poetry* (Chicago) 126.6 (September 1975): 311-317. Incl. in R.1; rpt. in A.6; rev. in A.14, A.47.

C.27 [Four poems]. *Mundus Artium: A Journal of International Literature and the Arts* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) 8.2 ([Winter] 1975): 130-133. Contents: “Portrait in Blood” (rpt. from A.1); “Jebel Saneen, Lebanon” (rpt. from A.1); “Song of the Summit” (rpt. from A.2); “The Greenland Stone” (rpt. from A.2).

1976

C.28 “Ararat.” *The North Carolina Review* (Raleigh, N.C.) Winter 1976: 58. Rpt. from A.6.

C.29 [Five translations]. *Black & White: A Review of the Arts* (Little Rock, Arkansas) 1 (Winter 1976): 19-23. Contents: Abul’ala [ibn] Ahmed el-Ma’arri: • “Five Poems from *The Necessity of the Unnecessary*” (trans. from Arabic, incl. in R.1). Individual poems are numbered and not titled.

1977

C.30 • “The Better Man.” *Kayak* 45 (May 1977): 50-51. Rev. in A.14, A.47.

C.31 “Jacob Singing.” *Queen’s Quarterly: A Canadian Review* (Kingston, Ontario) 84.3 (Autumn 1977): 441-444. Rpt. from A.7.

1978

C.32 [Four poems]. *The Malabat Review: An International Quarterly of Life and Letters* (Victoria, British Columbia) 45 (January 1978): 126-134. Contents: • “The Heart is Oil” (rpt. in A.14, A.47); “Death by Water” (rpt. from A.8); • “Spell for White Sandals” (rpt. in A.14); • “The Stonecutter’s Horses” (rpt. in A.9, B.6, B.6a, and rev. in A.14, B.18, B.27, B.31, B.78a; further rev. in A.47, B.113).

1979

C.33 • “The Long and the Short of It.” *New Orleans Review* 6.2 (January 1979): 155. Rev. from R.1, where it appears as “Piece after Supervielle”; rpt. in A.32, A.47, A.48, C.53.

C.34 • “Demokritos.” *Pearl* (Odense, Denmark) 7 (Summer 1979):10-11. Rpt. in A.14, A.47, B.18, C.64.

C.35 “The Salute by Tasting.” *Hand Book* (Columbus, Ohio) 3 (1979): 3. Rpt. from A.13.

1980

C.36 [Two poems]. *American Poetry Review* (Philadelphia) 9.6 (Nov./Dec. 1980): 34. Contents: "Strophe from Sophocles" (rpt. from A.2); "The Greenland Stone" (rpt. from A.2). Both poems, delivered to *APR* editors by William Arrowsmith, are erroneously attributed to William Bringham.

1982

C.37 [Two poems]. *Prism International* 20.3 (Spring 1982): 26-27. Contents: • "Cave of the Nymphs" (rpt. in A.14); • "These Poems, She Said" (rpt. in A.14, A.47, B.10, B.12, B.13, B.18, B.26, B.36, B.78a, B.114, C.38, C.47).

C.38 "These Poems, She Said." *Saturday Night* (Toronto) 97.7 (July 1982): 64. Rpt. from C.37.

C.39 • "Poem without Voices." *Canadian Literature* (Vancouver) 93 (Summer 1982): 176. Rpt. in A.14, A.47, B.78a, C.68.

C.40 • "The Song of Ptahhotep." *The Malabat Review* 63 (October 1982): 69-71. Rpt. in A.14, B.27, B.65, C.64. [RB's bibliography is mistaken on this point; it says C63.]

C.41 "Leda and the Swan." *The Canadian Literary Review* (Scarborough, Ontario) 1 (Fall/Winter 1982): 16-17. Rpt. from A.14.

1984

C.42 • "Two Variations: i. The Reader; ii. Larix lyallii." *Canadian Literature* 100 (Spring 1984): 48-49. Rpt. as part of "The Lyell Island Variations" in A.32, A.47, A.48. Translated in T.It.5. (Not to be confused with "Two Variations: i. Absence of the Heart; ii. Thin Man Washing" in A.14.) Same as B.16, except for the title page and binding.

C.43 • "Jakushitsu." *Whetstone* (Lethbridge, Alberta) Fall 1984: 31. Rpt. in A.32, A.47, A.65.

1985

C.44 • "Riddle." *Canadian Literature* 105 (Summer 1985): 15. Rpt. in A.32, A.47, A.48, C.53; partial rpt. in C.46.

C.45 "Saraha." University of Arizona Poetry Center Fall 1985 Calendar of Readings (Tucson, Arizona). Rpt. from A.23. Accompanied by biographical note and announcement of reading.

C.46 "Riddle." *Ring of Bone Zendo Newsletter* (North San Juan, California; 15 October 1985): 1. Partial rpt. from C.44. Includes only the first four lines of the poem.

C.47 "These Poems, She Said." *De Tweede Ronde* (Amsterdam) 6.4 (Winter 1985): 84. Rpt. from A.14. With Dutch translation by Peter Verstegen.

1986

C.48 • "Hán Shan." *Prism International* 24.2 (January 1986): 43. Rpt. in A.32, A.47, A.65, B.69.

C.49 • "The Blue Roofs of Japan." *Lines Review* (Edinburgh) 95 (January 1986): 65-69. Rev. in A.31, A.31a, A.32; further rev. in A.47. Includes "Program Notes" dated Vancouver Harbour, July 1985 (rev. in A.31, A.31a). See also F.1.

C.50 [Eleven poems]. *CutBank* (Missoula, Montana) 26 (Spring/Summer 1986): 37-58. Contents: 1) "Six Poems from *The Book of Silences*": • "Uddalaka Aruni: A Song for the Weavers" (rev. in A.32); • "Wáng Bì" (rpt. in A.32, B.44; rev. in A.65); • "Jízàng" (rpt. in A.32, A.65); • "Línjì Yìxuán" (rpt. in A.32, rev. in A.47, A.65); • "Dānxiá Zìchún" (rpt. in A.32, A.47, A.65); • "Nánquán Puyuàn" (rpt. in A.32, A.65; see also F.2); 2) • "Sutra of the Heart" (rpt. in A.32, A.47, C.51; cf. S.241); "Rubus Ursinus: A Prayer for the Blackberry Harvest" (rpt. from A.28); "Thirty Words" (rpt. from A.25,

where it appears as “Thirty Words for Deborah Peaker”); • “For the Bones of Josef Mengele, Disinterred June 1985” (rpt. in A.32, A.47, B.27, B.59, B.60, B.78a, B.83a, B.93); “Tending the Fire” (rpt., with new prefatory note, from A.27).

C.51 “Sutra of the Heart.” *Canadian Forum* (Toronto) LXVI.760 (June/July 1986): 34-35. Rpt. from C.50.

C.52 “Sunday Morning.” *The Paris Review* (New York) 100 (Summer/Fall 1986): 54-55. Rpt. from A.32.

C.53 “Three Poems from *The Lyell Island Variations*.” *Landfall* (Christchurch, New Zealand) 159 (September 1986): 325-327. Contents: V: The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer; VI: The Long and the Short of It; VII: Riddle (all rpt. from A.32).

C.54 [Five poems]. *Crab Creek Review* (Seattle) 4.1 (Fall/Winter 1986): 6-8 (see also p 2). Contents: “Poem About Crystal”; “A Quadratic Equation”; “Of the Snaring of Birds”; “The Beauty of the Weapons”; “Study for an Ecumenical Window”, all rpt. from A.26.

C.55 “Hóng Zìchéng.” *Rambling Jack* (Auckland, New Zealand) 3 (November 1986): 14-16. Rpt. from A.32.

1987

C.56 “Conversations with a Toad: Excerpts from a Work in Progress.” *Border Crossings* (Winnipeg) 6.2 (March 1987): 32. Contents: • Conversations with a Toad, sections III, V and VI. (Sections III, and VI are rev., and Section V rpt., in A.33.)

C.57 [Four poems]. *Rubicon* (Montreal) 8 (Spring 1987): 103-107. Contents: “Hóng Zìchéng”; “Bodhidharma”; “Sengzhào”; “from *The Lyell Island Variations*: V. The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer,” all rpt. from A.32, but with two stanzas missing from the first poem.

C.58 [Two poems]. *Verse* (Oxford) 4.1 (March 1987): 14-15. Contents: Parśvanatha; Sengzhào, both rpt. from A.32. See also editorial comments by Mark Abley on pp. 8-9.

C.59 [•] “Conversations with a Toad.” *Descant* (Toronto) 59 (Winter 1987 [published 1988]): 7-14. Rev. from A.33; see also C.56. D.47 appears in the same issue.

1989

C.60 • “All the Desanctified Places.” *Margin* 10 (1989): 89-92. Rev. in A.47, A.79, B.37, C.69. Appears in the same issue with D.57.

1992

C.61 “Conversations with a Toad.” *Ellipse* (Sherbrooke, Québec) 48 (1992): 113-121. Sections III, IX and X, rpt. from A.33, with French translations by Jacques Brault.

1993

C.62 [Four poems]. *Windhorse Review* (Yarmouth, Nova Scotia) 11/12 (Summer 1993): [6-7]. Contents: • “Lotus Flower Mountain”; • “Rújìng” (rpt. as “Tiantong Rujing” in A.47, A.53, A.53a, A.65, A.92); • “Yúnmén Wényan” (rev. in A.47, rpt. from A.47 in A.65, B.69, A.92); • “Fayan Wényi” (rev. in A.47, A.65, A.92). [There are misspellings in the titles of the latter two poems.]

1994

C.63 [Four Poems]. *Canadian Literature* 140 (Spring 1994): 79-85. Contents: • “Dongshan Liangjie” (rpt. in A.47, A.65, A.92); • “Xuedou Zhongxian” (rpt. in B.58; rev. In A.47 and rpt. from A.47 in A.65, A.92, C.75); • “Yongjia Xuanjue” (rev. in A.47 and rpt. from A.47 in A.65 and A.92); • “Dogen” (excerpt rev. in B.72, C.71). Some of these poems rev. in A.47, A.65.

C.64 [Three Poems]. In *Forma di Parole* (Bologna) terza serie 2.1 (1994): 176-186. Contents: "Song of the Summit"; "Demokritos"; "The Song of Ptahhotep" (all rpt. from A.14). In the same issue with S.157.

1995

C.65 "Raven Travelling: Page One: A Lost Haida Text by Skaai of the Qquuna Qiighawaai, Transcribed at Skidegate in October 1900 by John Swanton, Edited & Translated by Robert Bringhurst." *Canadian Literature* 144 (1995): 98-111. Haida text and translation, with prose introduction. Same as D.77. The text and translation per se are rpt. from B.51.

C.66 "Essay on Adam." *Toronto Star*, 15 April 1995: H6. Rpt. from A.47. Accompanies S.161.

C.67 "Poem About Crystal." *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 29 April 1995: C25. Rpt. from A.47.

C.68 "Poem without Voices." *Toronto Star*, 3 June 1995: J2. Rpt. from A.47.

C.69 "From *New World Suite n° 3*." *Poetry Canada* (Kingston, Ontario) 15.2 (1995): 14-15. Rpt. from A.47, with a new • Preface.

C.70 "Parsvanatha." *Verse 12.2: The Best Verse: Ten Years of Poetry* (1995): 26. Rpt. from C.58.

1997

C.71 "From *Dogen*." *The Amicus Journal* (New York) 19.1 (Spring 1997): 44. "Dogen", part 3, rpt. from A.47.

C.72 "From Conversations with a Toad." *The Amicus Journal* 19.3 (Fall 1997): 42. Conversations with a Toad, part III, rpt. from A.47.

C.73 [Two Poems]. *Canadian Literature* 154 (Autumn 1997): 8, 110. Contents: • "Zhàozhou Congshen" (rev. in A.65, A.85); • "The Living Must Never Outnumber the Dead". In the same issue with S.187.

C.74 [Two Poems]. *Canadian Literature* 155 (Winter 1997): 15, 179. Contents: • "Lianhua Xiang"; • "Keizan". In the same issue with D.89.

1999

C.75 "Xuedou Zhongxian." *London Free Press* (London, Ontario), 10 January 1999: D1. Rpt. from A.47. With S.196.

2000

C.76 "These Poems, She Said." *La Manzana Poética* (Córdoba) 2 (Invierno 2000): 8. Rpt. from A.47. With S.226 and T.Sp.3.

C.77 "The Sealion Hunter." *Brick* (Toronto) 65/66 (Fall 2000): 68-74. Rpt. from A.62, with D.102.

2004

C.78 Excerpt from "Those Who Stay a Long Way Out to Sea." *The Times* (London), February 28, 2004: *Weekend Review* 11. Rpt. from A.62, with S.270.

C.79 "Giotto's Bones." *Times Literary Supplement* (London) Rev. from B.83.

2006

C.80 • "Finch." *Onearth* (New York) 28.2 (Summer 2006): 28.

2008

C.81 “Elements.” *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* (New York / Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge) 76 (= 41.1, May 2008): 80–85. Rev. from A.49.

2010

C.82 • “All Night Wood.” *Malabat Review* 170 (Spring 2010): 27.

D CONTRIBUTIONS TO PERIODICALS: PROSE

1973

D.1 • “Some Notes on Imr el-Qais.” *Contemporary Literature in Translation* 16 (Fall 1973): 15-18. Essay on the sixth-century Arab poet. See also “The Ode of Imr el-Qais” in A.2, C.6.

D.2 • “The Koran, the *Wake* and Atherton.” *A Wake Newslitter* (Colchester, Essex) ns 10.6 (December 1973): 92-93. A discussion of some Arabic sources used in *Finnegans Wake*, with reference to Chapter 12, “The Koran,” from James S. Atherton, *The Books at the Wake: A Study of Literary Allusions in James Joyce’s ‘Finnegans Wake’* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959).

1974

D.3 • Review of *Borges on Writing*, ed. N.T. di Giovanni, Daniel Halpern and Frank McShane. *The Canadian Fiction Magazine* (Prince George, B.C.) 13 (Spring 1974): 112-115.

D.4 • Review of *Drunk on Wood* by Charles Lillard. *The Vancouver Sun*, 26 September 1974: 5.

D.5 • “A History of Semitic Literature in One Quarto Page.” *Contemporary Literature in Translation* 19 (Summer/Fall 1974): 3. See also C.15, E.1.

D.6 • Review of *The Grassman* by Len Fulton. *The Canadian Fiction Magazine* 15 (Autumn 1974): 103-105.

1975

D.7 • “The Small-Press Connection.” *The Malabat Review* 33 (January 1975): 121-126. Review of *International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*, 10th edition, ed. Len Fulton. (Rpt. in part as D.00.)

D.8 • “Postscript to a Translation of Empedocles.” *The Ohio Review* 16.3 (Spring 1975): 68-73. See also “Empedokles: Seven Fragments” in A.5, A.6, A.14, A.47, and “Empedokles: Six Fragments” in C.12. And see B.79.

D.9 • “Clints and Grikes.” *Canadian Literature* 65 (Summer 1975): 112–114. Review of *Nothing Speaks for the Blue Moraines: New and Selected Poetry* by J. Michael Yates. (See also B.1.)

D.10 • “How Like a Winter Hath their Absence Been.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 25 September 1975: 5. Abridgement of an unpublished paper on the possibilities of private patronage for literature in the capitalist system, originally prepared as a submission to the Council for Business and the Arts in Canada.

D.11 • “In Praise of Gorgias.” *The Ohio Review* 17.1 (Fall 1975): 43-51. Essay (rev. in A.83).

1976

D.12 • “Aeschylus and Mrs Lembke.” *Contemporary Literature in Translation* 23 (Spring 1976): 4-8. An essay on poetry and translation, with special reference to Janet Lembke’s version of Aeschylus’ *Hiketides* (*Suppliants*). See also E.2.

D.13 • “Pay-TV.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 28 October 1976: 6. Discussion of funding for the arts, including television programming.

D.14 • “Copyright and the Literary Artist.” *The American Poetry Review* 5.5 (September/October 1976): 45-46. Discussion of the historical intent and significance of copyright law in North America.

1977

D.15 • “The Wicked Subsidy.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 15 February 1977: 6. Discussion of government funding of literary publishing in Canada.

D.16 • Review of *Modern Arabic Short Stories*, ed. Denys Johnson-Davies. *World Literature Today* (Norman, Oklahoma) 51.2 (Spring 1977): 327.

D.17 • “Instruction Instructing Itself.” *Prism International* 16.1 (Spring 1977): 15-17. Review of *Canadian Poetry: The Modern Era*, ed. John Newlove.

1978

D.18 • Review of *Avis aux navigateurs* by Jamil Almansour Haddad. *World Literature Today* 52.3 (Summer 1978): 513-514.

1979

D.19 • Review of *Les Mon’allaqat ou Un peu de l’âme des Arabes avant l’Islam*, ed. et trad. Jean-Jacques Schmidt. *World Literature Today* 53.2 (Spring 1979): 344.

D.20 • “The Kanchenjunga Press: A Valedictory Peroration.” *CVII [Contemporary Verse Two]: A Quarterly of Canadian Poetry Criticism* (Winnipeg) 4.3 (Fall 1979): 18-19. See also R.1.

1982

D.21 • “At Home in the Difficult World.” *Descant* 39 (Winter 1982): 57-81. Dennis Lee Special Issue. Essay, same as B.11.

1983

D.22 • “King Shahryar’s Realm.” *The Vancouver Literary News* 2.83 (February 1983): 15-19. An article on the 1982 Toronto Festival of Storytelling. Includes a full-page reproduction of a brush-and-ink drawing by Bringhurst (p. 16), signed *Pàng Zi* (“Oyster” – one of Bringhurst’s Chinese names). See also D.23.

D.23 • “The Oldest Profession.” *Books in Canada* (Toronto) 12.2 (February 1983): 4-6. Discussion of the Toronto Festival of Storytelling, with an introduction to the 1983 Festival. See also D.22.

D.24 • “Unrapping the World.” *Books in Canada* 12.8 (October 1983): 31-32. Review of *Birding, or Desire* by Don McKay (rev. in D.35, B.97).

1984

D.25 [Two reviews]. *Fine Print: A Review for the Arts of the Book* (San Francisco) 10.2 (April 1984): 63–64, 67. Contents: Reviews of • Bieler Press: *The Morning of the Massacre* by Michael Cadnum, and of • Greenhouse Review Press: *Limits of Resurrection* by Brad Crenshaw.

D.26 • “Notes on the Winners and Other Books.” *Amphora* (Vancouver) 57 (September 1984): 21-24. Comments on design, typography and printing, arising from a design competition judged by Bringhurst and others.

1985

D.27 [Two reviews]. *Fine Print* 11.1 (January 1985): 57–59, 61–62. Contents: Reviews of • Bieler Press: *Moon* by David Romtvedt, and of • Perishable Press: *Del quien lo tomó* by Joel Oppenheimer and *Making a Sacher Torte* by Diane Wakoski.

D.28 [Two reviews]. *Fine Print* 11.2 (April 1985): 105-107, 110-111. Contents: Reviews of • Copper Canyon Press: *Priest & A Dead Priestess Speaks* by H.D. and *Still Another Day* by Pablo Neruda (trans. William O’Daly), and of • Sea Pen Press: *Normal Street* by Deborah Greger and *A Tree Sequence* by Leslie Norris.

D.29 “The Raven and the Big Fisherman,” with Bill Reid. *Whetstone* (Lethbridge, Alberta) Spring 1985: 71-76. Rpt. from A.22.

D.30 • Review of Labyrinth Editions: *Five Poems* by W.H. Auden. *Fine Print* 11.3 (July 1985): 164–165.

D.31 • “Breathing through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation.” *Canadian Literature* 105 (Summer 1985): 7-15. Essay, rev. in A.32, B.71, D.40.

D.32 • Review of *Cut Stones and Crossroads: A Journey in the Two Worlds of Peru* by Ronald Wright. The Reader (Vancouver) 4.2 (July 1985): 1–3.

D.33 • Review of Nadja Press: *Bronze* by James Merrill and *Eleven Poems* by Frederick Morgan. *Fine Print* 11.4 (October 1985): 227–228.

1986

D.34 [Two reviews]. *Fine Print* 12.1 (January 1986): 32-33, 40-41. Contents: Reviews of • Meadow Press: *Blank Country* by Deborah Greger and *A Sky Empty of Orion* by Laura Jensen, and of • Sombre Reptiles Press: *Aleppo* by Beau Beausoleil.

D.35 [•] “Unrapping the World: The Poetry of Don McKay.” *Lines Review* (Edinburgh) 95 (January 1986): 87-90. Essay, rev. from D.24.

D.36 [Two reviews]. *Fine Print* 12:2 (April 1986): 68–69; 79; 119. Contents: Reviews of • Heyeck Press: *Brief Lives* by William Dickey, and of • Arion Press: *Poems* by Wallace Stevens.

D.37 “Typography & Type Design.” *Amphora* 63 (March 1986): 117–134. Essay, same as B.22.

D.38 • Review of The Windhover Press: *Forked Branches* by Ezra Pound. *Fine Print* 12.3 (July 1986): 163-165. (Beginning with this issue, Bringhurst’s *Fine Print* reviews are signed only with the initials “R.B.” This is in accord with the magazine’s custom in identifying reviews by its contributing editors. See S.58.) See also “Letters to the Editor,” *Fine Print* 12.4: 236.

D.39 • Review of Edition Tiessen: *Über die Wiederherstellung der ursprünglichen Anlage zum Guten in ihre Kraft* by Immanuel Kant, *Römische Elegien* by Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Troerinnen* by Euripides (translated by Ernst Buschor), etc. *Fine Print* 12.4 (October 1986): 200-203, 219. See also the anonymous note on Tiessen’s *Serving Author and Reader*, *Fine Print* 14.3: 105-106.

D.40 “Breathing through the Feet.” *Margin* (London) 1 (Winter 1986): 4-11. Essay, rpt. from A.32.

1987

D.41 • Review of Red Ozier Press: *Careless Love and Its Apostrophes* by William Bronk, *The Bicycle Rider* by Guy Davenport, *Small Ceremonies* by Connie Martin, and *Five Journals* by Charles Wright. *Fine Print* 13.2 (April 1987): 93-98.

D.42 • “Making Draft Horses Out of the Gods: An Interview with Robert Bringhurst.” *Prairie Fire* (Winnipeg) 8.1 (Spring 1987): 4-15. Interview conducted by Kristjana Gunnars.

D.43 • Review of Bieler Press: *Albert's Horoscope Almanac* by Albert Goldbarth, and *After the Long Train* by James Masao Mitsui. *Fine Print* 13.3 (July 1987): 159. See also “Letters to the Editor,” *Fine Print* 14.1: 5, 44-45.

D.44 “Pebble/Pond/Errata Slip: A Codicil to *Ocean/Paper/Stone*.” *Amphora* 69 (September 1987): insert, paginated 1-8 internally and 11-18 in reference to the magazine. Same as A.34.

D.45 • Review of *Twentieth Century Type Designers* by Sebastian Carter, *Letters of Credit* by Walter Tracy, and *Type Design Developments 1970 to 1985* by L.W. Wallis. *Fine Print* 13.4 (October 1987): 204-206, 211-212.

1988

D.46 • Review of Landlocked Press: *The Weather Within* by Theodore Enslin, *Walking with My Sons* by Joe Bruchac, and *A Trek of Waking* by Will Inman. *Fine Print* 14.1 (January 1988): 15-17.

D.47 Emmanuel Levinas. • “From Being to the Other: Paul Celan.” *Descant* 59 (Winter 1987 [published 1988]): 99-105. Essay, trans. by Bringhurst from French, with his brief introduction. In same issue with C.59.

D.48 • “Myths Create a World of Meaning.” *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 7 May 1988: C1, C7. Essay based on Bringhurst's participation in a panel discussion of “History and Mythology in the Modern World,” at the 1988 Olympic Writers' Festival in Calgary.

D.49 • Review of Peter and the Wolf Editions: *Point Lobos* by Robinson Jeffers. *Fine Print* 14.3 (July 1988): 112-115, 127. See also D.57a.

D.50 • “A Measure of Freedom.” *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 28 October 1988: C1. Essay on art, money and subsidy, in response to John Metcalf's pamphlet *Freedom from Culture* (Vancouver: The Fraser Institute, 1988).

D.51 • Review of Yolla Bolly Press: *The Inland Whale* by Theodora Kroeber. *Fine Print* 14.4 (October 1988): 186-188.

D.52 • “Off the Road: Journeys in the Past, Present and Future of Canadian Literature.” *Margin* 7 (1988): 82-93. Text of a lecture delivered at the University of Vienna in April 1988. Rev. in B.29, B.30.

D.53 • “Nootka Rag: Funeral Music for George Clutesi, 1905–1988.” *Canadian Literature* 118 (Autumn 1988): 190-193. Memorial essay comparing the writing and painting of George Clutesi to the music of Scott Joplin.

1989

D.54 • Review of Songs Before Zero Press: *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* by Pablo Neruda, translated by David Young. *Fine Print* 15.1 (January 1989): 37.

D.55 • “Social Responsibility of the Artist.” *Regional and Committee Reports to the Annual General Meeting*, published with *The Writers' Union of Canada Newsletter* (Toronto) 132 (May 1989): insert pp 23–24.

D.56 • Letter to the Editor. Toronto *Globe and Mail*, August ??, 1989. ?? Letter concerning the editorial policies of the CBC and the *Globe and Mail*.

D.57 • “Into the Absolute of Nature.” *Margin* 10 (1989): 62-69. Essay on the self-portraits of Joan Miró (rev. in A.83). In same issue with C.60.

D.57a Review of Peter and the Wolf Editions: *Point Lobos* by Robinson Jeffers. *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter* (Los Angeles) ?? (October 1989): ?? Unauthorized reprint of D.49.

1990

D.58 • “That Also is You: Some Classics of Native Canadian Literature.” *Canadian Literature* 124–5 (Spring 1990): 32-47. Essay, same as B.32.

1991

D.59 “The Black Canoe.” *Canadian Forum* LXX/803 (October 1991): 19-21. Excerpts from Chapter iv of *The Black Canoe*, A.39. [Replete with typographical errors.]

1992

D.60 • “One Small Island: A Case Study in the Contest between History and Literature.” *Bells: Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies* (Barcelona) 3, n.d. [1992]: 11-19. Essay, rev. as “Fast Drumming Ground,” B.50, D.62, D.138. [The name *Squamish* has been “corrected” throughout to *Spanish* by the Catalonian proofreader.]

D.61 “Bill Reid and the Spirit of Haida Gwaii.” *Shaman’s Drum: A Journal of Experiential Shamanism* (Willits, California) 27 (Spring 1992): 30-39. Unauthorized excerpt from Chapter vi of *The Black Canoe*, rpt. from A.39a. [Published here, without permission of author or photographer, by the University of Washington Press.]

D.62 [•] “Fast Drumming Ground.” *Howe Sound Review* (Bowen Island, British Columbia) 1.2 (Winter 1992): 16-21. Essay, rev. from “One Small Island,” D.60.

D.63 • Letter to the Editor. *Montreal Gazette*. March 16, 1992: B2. Response to S.120a, the *Gazette’s* reprint of a review from the *New York Times*.

D.64 “Raven’s New Playthings.” *Elmwood Quarterly* (Berkeley, California) 8.3 (Fall Equinox 1992): 11. Unauthorized excerpt from “The Raven and the First Men,” rpt. from *The Raven Steals the Light*, A.22.

1993

D.65 • Review of *Haa Twunnáagu Yís / For Healing Our Spirit: Tlingit Oratory*, ed. Nora Marks Dauenhauer & Richard Dauenhauer. *Language in Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press) 22.1 (March 1993): 151-4.

D.66 • Untitled statement. *Verse* (St Andrews, Scotland) 10.1 (Spring 1993): 105-106. Text of a letter dated 23 June 1989, published as one of eight responses to enquiries by David Hart. Other respondents include Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Ron Silliman, Phyllis Webb, Judith Wright. These statements, and the text of Hart’s original inquiry, are assembled under the general title “rsvp” on pp. 102-112.

D.67 • Review of *Robert Davidson: Eagle of the Dawn*, ed. Ian M. Thom. *The Reader* 12.2 (Summer 1993): 25-28.

D.68 • “Patricia Murphy.” *C Magazine* (Toronto) 39 (Fall 1993): 64-65. Review of an exhibition of watercolors.

D.69 • “Everywhere Being is Dancing, Knowing is Known.” *Chicago Review* (Chicago) 39.3–4 (1993): 138–147. Essay, rpt. in D.73, rev. in B.56, A.83.

D.70 • “Herakleitos in California.” *Amphora* 93 (Autumn 1993): 26–29 Review of Peter Koch: *Herakleitos*. Greek fragments with English translation by Guy Davenport.

1994

D.71 • Review of *Mantinia* and *Sophia* by Matthew Carter. *Print* (New York) 48.2 (March/April 1994): 121–122. Review of two typeface designs.

D.72 • Review of *George Grant: A Biography* by William Christian. *The Reader* 14.1 (Summer 1994): 3–5.

D.73 “Everywhere Being is Dancing, Knowing is Known.” *Poetry Canada* (Kingston, Ontario) 14.3 (1994): 8–11. Essay, rpt. from D.69.

D.74 • “On the Classification of Letterforms.” *Serif: The Magazine of Type & Typography* (Claremont, California) 1 (Fall 1994): 30–39. Essay on the principles of type classification, with repeated reference to botanical and zoological taxonomies. Includes “Appendix: Rough Map of the Kingdom of Letterforms.” But the sidebar, “A Note on Type Classification Systems,” was written by the editor of the journal, Donald Hosek, and not by Bringhurst. A quotation from *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42) is printed as filler on page 63 of the same issue. This is the first essay in an incomplete series, which continues with D.78, D.79, D.82 and D.88. For typographical corrections, see the corrigenda in *Serif 2* (Winter 1995): 6.

D.75 • “A Story as Sharp as a Knife, Part 3: The Polyhistorical Mind.” *Journal of Canadian Studies* (Peterborough, Ontario) 29.2 (Summer 1994): 165–175. Text of the third of Bringhurst’s three Ashley Lectures, delivered at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, in the spring of 1994. Prefaced by S.152. See also S.144. Rev. in A.81.

D.76 • Review of *On the Translation of Native American Literatures*, edited by Brian Swann. *American Ethnologist* (Arlington, Virginia) 21.4 (1994): 1038–1039.

1995

D.77 • “Raven Travelling: Page One: A Lost Haida Text by Skaai of the Qquuna Qiighawaai, Transcribed at Skidegate in October 1900 by John Swanton, Edited & Translated by Robert Bringhurst.” *Canadian Literature* 144 (1995): 98–111. Introduction, Haida text and translation. Same as C.65. This is the first appearance of the prose introduction, but the text and translation per se are rpt. from B.51.

D.78 • “Holding Ideas in the Hand: The Physics and Metaphysics of Renaissance Letterforms.” *Serif 2* (Winter 1995): 15–24. Second essay in the series which begins with D.74. Again there is a sidebar written by the editor of the journal, Donald Hosek. (On p. 6 of the same issue is a list of typographic corrections to D.74.)

D.79 • “Painting with Ink and Steel: The Roman and Italic Types of the Baroque Age.” *Serif 3* (Fall 1995): 21–30. Third essay in the series which begins with D.74.

D.80 • “Belay to Words.” *Antigonish Review* (Antigonish, Nova Scotia) 102–103 (Summer–Autumn 1995): 307–310. Short essay on the poet John Thompson. (See also S.169.)

1996

D.81 “Tales from Haida Gwaii.” *Shambhala Sun* (Boulder, Colorado) 4.3 (January 1996): 48–57. Prologue and two stories from A.22, in anticipation of A.51. The prologue includes some bizarre typographical errors and omissions but is correctly credited to Bringhurst. The stories – “Raven and

the First Men” and “Raven Steals the Light,” both written by Reid – are credited to Bringhurst by mistake, and the titles of both are altered by removing the initial definite article. See also D.83.

D.82 • “The Invisible Hand, Part I: Neoclassical Letterforms.” *Serif* 4 (Spring 1996): 19-29. Fourth essay in the series which begins with D.74. The unsigned “Annex” on p. 29 is by the journal’s editor, Don Hosek, not by Bringhurst. Continued by D.88. See also D.88a.

D.83 • Letter to the Editor. *Shambhala Sun* 4.4 (March 1996): 5. Abbreviated text of a letter pertaining to D.81.

D.84 • “El turismo es una lepra cultural.” *Diario de Avisos* (Santa Cruz de Tenerife), 10 de mayo 1996: 25. Interview conducted by María Jesús Llarena Ascanio (in Spanish).

1997

D.85 • “The Typographic Nude.” *Critique* (Palo Alto, California) 4 (1997): 86-91. Essay on typography, in the same issue with S.183.

D.86 “Boats is Saintlier than Captains: Thirteen Ways of Looking at Morality and Design.” *Zed* (Richmond, Virginia) 3 (1997): 19-28. Essay (rev. in A.56, which was however the first to appear; further rev., in A.83).

D.87 • “La Persistencia de la poesía y la destrucción del mundo.” *Presencia Literaria* (La Paz, Bolivia), 4 May 1997: 3-4. Essay written in Spanish, originally delivered as a lecture “en el Segundo Seminario de Poesía y Poética de la Universidad de La Laguna, San Cristóbal de la Laguna, Tenerife, Islas Canarias, ocurrido el 8 de mayo de 1996.” A quotation from Sophocles, present in the original text both in Greek and in English translation, has been abridged to a single line. In the same issue with T.Sp.1. Rpt. in B.75. Partial English translation in B.71; partial Italian translation in T.It.5.

D.88 • “The Invisible Hand, Part II: Romantic Letterforms.” *Serif* 5 (Fall 1997): 19-29. Fifth essay in the series which begins with D.74. Continuation of D.82. In the same issue with D.88a.

D.88a • “New and Improved Didot Family.” *Serif* 5 (Fall 1997): 6. Letter to the editor correcting an error in D.82. In the same issue with D.88.

D.89 • “Singing with the Frogs.” *Canadian Literature* 155 (Winter 1997): 114-134. Essay. In the same issue with C.74. Rev. in A.83. Rpt. in B.108. Responses: S.189, S.190.

1998

D.90 • “Dismembered Culture.” Review of *Haida Art*, by George F. MacDonald. *Canadian Literature* 156 (Spring 1998): 147-149. In the same issue with S.189 & S.190.

D.91 • Review of *The Birds of British Columbia*, by R. Wayne Campbell et al. *The New Reader* (Vancouver) 3.1 (1998): 3-5.

D.92 • Review of Jan Tschichold: *A Life in Typography*, by Ruari McLean. *Bulletin of the Printing Historical Society* (London) 45 (1998): 29.

D.93 • “Tierra, tecnología, polifonía y antepasados.” *Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies* 9 (1998): 171-175. Biographical essay written in Spanish, originally delivered as a lecture at the Universidad de Salamanca in 1990.

1999

D.94 • Review of *Paul Renner: The Art of Typography*, by Christopher Burke. *Bulletin of the Printing Historical Society* 47 (Summer 1999): 20-21.

D.95 • Reply to a Critique by John Enrico. ssila (Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas) *Newsletter* (Arcata, California) 18.3 (October 1999): 8. A rebuttal to John Enrico's attack (S.217) on *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59), which appears in the same issue.

D.96 • "Since when has culture been about genetics?" Toronto *Globe and Mail*, November 22, 1999: R3. A reply to Adele Weder's attack (S.218) on *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59), published in the same paper one week earlier.

2000

D.97 • Tribute to Al Purdy. Toronto *Globe and Mail*, April 24, 2000: R8. One of a group of tributes occasioned by Purdy's death on April 21.

D.98 • "Editing the Pretext." *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* (Toronto) 31.3 (April 2000): 113-125. Essay on typography and linguistics, discussing among other things Bringhurst's involvement with W.H. New's *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*. In the same issue with S.222. (See also B.80.)

D.99 • Review of Ninja Press: *The Architectures 1-7*, by Nathaniel Tarn. *Parenthesis*: Newsletter of the Fine Press Book Association (London/San Francisco) 4 (April 2000): 39-40.

D.100 • "Lo Sfiato della mongolfiera: Intervista a Robert Bringhurst di Carmen Concilio." *L'Indice* (Torino) 17.6 (Giugno 2000): 18.

D.101 • Review of *Artistry in Native American Myths*, by Karl Kroeber. *Language in Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press) 29.3 (Sept. 2000): 460-463.

D.102 "An Introduction to 'The Sealion Hunter.'" *Brick* (Toronto) 65/66 (Fall 2000): 65-67. Excerpt from the introduction to A.62, introducing C.77.

D.103 • "The Origin of Mind." *Canadian Literature* 167 (Winter 2000): 157-166. Essay incorporating a text in Nootka with English translation (rev. in A.83). In the same issue with S.233 & S.234.

2001

D.104 "Introduction to the Sealion Hunt" [sic]. *Storytelling Magazine* (Jonesborough, Tennessee) 13.5 (Fall 2001): 14-15. Excerpt from the introduction to A.62, reproduced (with numerous errors) from D.102, but without the accompanying translation.

D.105 • "The Life of Letterforms: The 1998 Georg Svensson Lecture." *Biblis* (Stockholm) 13 = 4.1 (2001): 6-17, 35-40. Text and 39 photographs, reproducing an illustrated lecture given by Bringhurst at the Royal Library, Stockholm, on 10 November 1998.

2002

D.106 • Review of *Spar: Words in Place*, by Peter Sanger. *The Globe and Mail*, August 10, 2002: D7.

D.107 • "The Tree of Meaning and the Work of Ecological Linguistics." *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* (Whitehorse). 7.2 (2002): 9-22. Text of Bringhurst's keynote lecture at the Conference on Environmental Ethics & Education, Whitehorse, 19 July 2001. Rev. in A.81.

D.108 • "Half a Life." Review of *Franz Boas: The Early Years, 1858-1906*, by Douglas Cole. *Canadian Literature* 173 (Summer 2002): 129-131. In the same issue with S.255.

D.109 • "And Sheila is an honourable woman." *The Globe and Mail*, October 14, 2002: A13. Editorial concerning the response of the Canadian Heritage Minister, Sheila Copps, to appeals for support of the Bill Reid Museum.

D.110 • Review of *Northern Haida Master Carvers*, by Robin K. Wright. *Oregon Historical Quarterly* (Portland) 103.3 (Fall 2002): 398-399.

2003

- D.111 “Disconnection and Its Contents.” *The Malabat Review* 144 (Fall 2003): 64. Four paragraphs rpt. from D.7.
- D.112 • “Water Works.” *The Globe and Mail*, October 25, 2003: D31.
- D.113 • Review of *Bill Reid: The Making of an Indian*, by Maria Tippet. *The National Post*, November 8, 2003: RB9.

2004

- D.114 • “A Short History of Typography.” *The Walrus* (Toronto) 3 (February/March 2003): 23-24. A chart in the form of alpha and omega, with brief snippets of narrative text, comments and illustrations.
- D.115 • “The Voice in the Mirror.” *Printing History* (Rochester, NY) 46 (23.2, 2004): 3-20. Text of Bringhurst’s keynote address at the American Printing History Association’s 25th annual conference, October 2000. Includes 11 illustrations. Rev. in A.81.
- D.116 • “Celebrating Gaspereau Press.” *Books in Canada* 33.2 (March 2004): 39. Brief article on Gaspereau Press. The title is not Bringhurst’s. In the same issue with S.271.
- D.117 • Remembrance of John Dreyfus (1918–2003). *Parenthesis*. (London/Mission, B.C.) 9 (March 2004): 6-7.
- D.118 • “Consider Translation: A Roundtable Discussion.” With Steven Engler, Susan Bassnett & Susan DiGiacomo. *Religious Studies Review*. (Valparaiso, Indiana) 30.2–3 (April, July 2004): 107-120. Outgrowth of Engler’s review (S.248) of *Nine Visits to the Mythworld*. Text overlaps in part with the essays “What is Found in Translation” in B.83. & “The Future of the Past” in D.126.
- D.119 “Finding the Form of an Ancient Text.” *Letter Arts Review* (Greensboro, NC) 19.2 (2004): 36-41. Essay on translating Parmenides, rev. from B.87 (disfigured by several typographical errors).
- D.120 • Review of *Lichens of North America*, by Irwin M. Brodo. *The National Post*, December 4, 2004: RB6. This micro-review – some sixty words – is part of a feature in which 17 writers “pick the perfect gift book for this holiday season.” The feature is run as a series of headers from p. RB6 to p. RB11.

2005

- D.121 • “Finding Home: The Legacy of Bill Reid.” *Canadian Literature* 183 (Winter 2004): 180-191 [actually published in April 2005]. Text of a lecture delivered at the First Nations House of Learning, University of British Columbia, on 6 February 2004. Rev. in A.81.
- D.122 • “Also known as.” *The Times Literary Supplement*, May 6, 2005: 26. Review of *The Ends of the Earth*, by W.S. Merwin.
- D.123 • “The Critic in the Rain.” *B.C. Studies* 2005 (Vancouver) 147: 103–107. Review of *The Arbutus/Madrone Files*, by Laurie Ricou (rev. in A.83).
- D.124 • Review of *Early Type Specimens in the Plantin-Moretus Museum*, by John Lane. *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada/Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada* (Toronto) 43.2 (Autumn 2005): 79-81.
- D.125 [With Peter Koch & Dan Carr] “Excerpts from *Carving the Elements: A Companion to the Fragments of Parmenides*.” *Parenthesis* (Vancouver) 11: 10-13. Excerpts from B.87/E.9, with commentary by the editors of *Parenthesis*. In the same issue with S.281.

2006

D.126 • “The Future of the Past: Translating Native American Literature into Colonial Tongues.” *Ellipse* (Fredericton, NB) 76 (Winter 2005–6): 11-22. Text of Bringhurst’s keynote lecture at the *Congrès trisannuel de la Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs*, Vancouver, 8 August 2002.

2007

D.127 • “The Art of Overhearing Charlie Mitchell’s Prayer.” *Ellipse* 78 (2006-7): 17-22. Essay, rev. in A.83.

D.128 “Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue.” *Event* (New Westminster, BC) 36.1 (2007): 7-16. Essay, rpt. from A.79.

D.129 “Goldilocks and the Three Alphabets.” *Communication Arts* (Menlo Park, Calif.) 49.6 (2007): 230-238.

2008

D.130 “Approaches to Language, Literature & Insight Practice: An Interview with Robert Bringhurst by Sergio Cohn.” *Pacific Rim Review of Books* (Victoria, BC) 8 (Spring 2008): 3, 34. Interview originally conducted by e-mail for the Brazilian journal *Azougue*. See also T.Pr.4. In the same issue with S.305.

D.131 “The Tree of Meaning.” *Ascent* (Montreal) 37 (Spring 2008): 13-16. Excerpts from “The Tree of Meaning and the Work of Ecological Linguistics” in *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81).

D.132 • “Why There Are Pages and Why They Must Turn.” *World Literature Today* 82.5 (Sept.–Oct. 2008): 20-26. Essay adapted from *The Surface of Meaning* (A.87). Rev. in A.88.

2009

D.133 • In Memoriam: Kay Amert (1947–2008). *APHA Newsletter*. (New York) 169 (Winter 2009): 7. Brief memorial, excerpted from D.134, which was written earlier but published later.

D.134 • In Memoriam: Kay Amert, 1947–2008. *Parenthesis* (Over, Cambs.) 16 (February 2009): 35-39. Memorial essay accompanied by a list of Seamark Press books and a bibliography of Amert’s publications. See also D.133.

D.135 • “Mediæval in Padua.” *Parenthesis* 17 (Autumn 2009): 43-46. Review of *Medieval in Padua* by Russell Maret. In the same issue with D.136, S.319, and S.320.

D.136 • “Gerald Giampa, 1950–2009.” *Parenthesis* 17 (Autumn 2009): 12. Obituary for the printer Gerald Giampa. In the same issue with D.135, S.319, and S.320.

2010

D.137 • “Peter Koch: A Short Introduction.” *Amphora* (Vancouver) 00 (July 2010): 00–00. Text of a brief talk with which Bringhurst introduced printer Peter Rutledge Koch, when the latter delivered a lecture in Vancouver, 25 March 2010.

D.138 “Fast Drumming Ground.” *Mānoa* (Honolulu) 22.1??? (X 2010): 00–00. Rev. from D.62, with a new • headnote dated May 2010.

E EDITED & CO-EDITED WORKS

1974

E.1 *Contemporary Literature in Translation* (Mission, British Columbia) 19 (Summer/Fall 1974). Arabic literature issue, guest-edited by Bringhurst. Includes C.15, D.5.

1976

E.2 *Contemporary Literature in Translation* 23 (Spring 1976). Issue in honor of William Arrowsmith, guest-edited by Bringhurst. Includes D.12.

1980

E.3 Barry Downs. *Sacred Places: British Columbia's Early Churches*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1980. 176 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 25 × 27.5 cm. ISBN 0-88894-285-0. Illustrated study of aboriginal and colonial religious architecture in British Columbia. The acknowledgements report that Bringhurst "refined the work and put it all together."

1981

E.4 John Dowd. *Sea Kayaking: A Manual for Long-Distance Touring*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981. 240 p. Paper, 14 × 21.5 cm. ISBN 0-88894-305-9. Bringhurst is identified as editor in the acknowledgements. Sections on sea ice, icebergs and tides written by Bringhurst, though not signed by him.

1983

E.5 •• *Visions: Contemporary Art in Canada*. Essays by Alvin Balkind, Gary Michael Dault, Terrence Heath, John Bentley Mays, Diana Nemiroff and Charlotte Townsend-Gault. Edited by Robert Bringhurst, Geoffrey James, Russell Keziere and Doris Shadbolt. Vancouver and Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1983. 240 p. Cloth in dustjacket, 25 × 28.5 cm. ISBN 0-88894-392-X. Acknowledgments signed by Bringhurst; Editors' Foreword signed by Bringhurst and his co editors. Related archive: R.2. Reviews: S.28, S.29, S.30, S.31, S.35, S.36, S.38, S.39, S.40, S.41, S.42, S.43.

1985

E.6 Norm Sibum. *Ten Poems*. Vancouver: William Hoffer, 1985. 32 p. Cloth, 15 × 24 cm. The colophon records that "The manuscript was edited for the press by Robert Bringhurst. [There are] 100 signed and numbered copies."

1991

E.7 •• Jan Tschichold. *The Form of the Book: Essays on the Morality of Good Design*. Translated from the German by Hajo Haderer. Edited, with an introduction, by Robert Bringhurst. Vancouver: Hartley & Marks. 1991. xviii + 182 p. 15.5 × 24 cm. ISBN 0-88179-034-6. Same as B.38. Introduction and several textual notes signed by Bringhurst. Four lines of Heine translated by him. See also E.7a, E.7b. Reviews: **XXX**.

E.7a Jan Tschichold. *The Form of the Book: Essays on the Morality of Good Design*. Translated from the German by Hajo Haderer. Edited, with an introduction, by Robert Bringhurst. London: Lund Humphries. 1991. ISBN 0-85331-623-6. Same as E.7 except for title page, copyright page and jacket. Reviews: S.124.

1995

E.7b Jan Tschichold. *The Form of the Book: Essays on the Morality of Good Design*. Translated from the German by Hajo Hadeler. Edited, with an introduction, by Robert Bringhurst. Vancouver: Hartley & Marks. [1995]. xviii + 182 p. 15.5 × 24 cm. ISBN 0-88179-116-4. This is the paperback reprint of E.7/B.38. Only the copyright page and binding differ. Reviews: S.176.

2000

E.8 •• Bill Reid. *Solitary Raven: Selected Writings*, edited with an introduction by Robert Bringhurst. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre; Seattle: University of Washington Press. 2000. 252 p. 19 × 22 cm. ISBN 1-55054-797-6. Same as B.76. Includes acknowledgements, introduction, extensive notes and chronology by Bringhurst. Rev. as E.11. Reviews: S.236, S.249, S.253.

2004

E.9 •• Robert Bringhurst et al. *Carving the Elements: A Companion to the Fragments of Parmenides*. Berkeley: Editions Koch. 2004. 144 p. 15 × 23 cm. ISBN 0-88179-116-4. Companion to A.70 & A.70a. See also B.87. Reviews: XXX.

2009

E.10 François Mandeville. *This Is What They Say: Stories*, translated from Chipewyan by Ron Scollon. Foreword by Robert Bringhurst. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre. 2009. 286 p. 15 × 23 cm. ISBN 978-1-55365-473-5. Same as B.109. The Appendix, “Four States of an Oral Text,” is based on pp 22–25 of *The Surface of Meaning* (A.87). Softcover.

E.10a François Mandeville. *This Is What They Say: Stories*, translated by Ron Scollon. Foreword by Robert Bringhurst. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 2009. 286 p. 15 × 23 cm. ISBN 978-1-55365-473-5. Identical to E.10 except for the cover.

E.11 Bill Reid. *Solitary Raven: Essential Writings*, edited with commentary and notes by Robert Bringhurst. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre. 2009. 252 p. 19 × 22 cm. ISBN 978-1-55365-448-3. Same as B.110. Revised and expanded edition of E.8. Includes revised introduction, chronology and bibliography, as well as additional notes by Bringhurst. Softcover. Reviews: S.325.

E.11a Bill Reid. *Solitary Raven: Essential Writings*, edited with commentary and notes by Robert Bringhurst. Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre. 2009. 252 p. 19 × 22 cm. ISBN 978-1-55365-448-3. Special edition for the Bill Reid Foundation and Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art. Identical to E.11 except for the back cover.

F FILMS & RECORDINGS

1986

F.1 *The Blue Roofs of Japan*. Vancouver, B.C.: privately published, 1986. Cassette tape. Contents: Acoustic version of A.31. Pirated from the 1985 CBC Radio studio tape. Voices by Robert Bringhurst and Donna White, produced for the CBC by Don Mowatt.

1989

F.2 *In Rage for Order: Poems with Music*. Galiano Island, B.C.: René Mahlow, 1989. Cassette tape. Contribution: “Nánquán Puyàn”, from A.32. Voices by Heather McRae & René Mahlow. Produced by René Mahlow using texts by various authors.

F.3 *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*. Documentary film, produced & directed by Alan Clapp. First broadcast: CBC national television, September 1992. One-hour documentary on the creation of Bill Reid's sculpture *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii*. (See also A.39.)

R ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS

R.1 *Carmina propria et opuscula translata*. Unpublished MFA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1975. Location: Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library, Vancouver. Contents: I. *Carmina*: An Augury (from C.21); Genesis Frozen (from C.16); Essay on Adam (from C.11); Patrimony (first pub. in A.6); Deuteronomy (from A.3); Babylon (from C.13); • Decalogue; A Short History (first pub. in C.22); Parmenides (first pub. in A.5); Pythagoras (from A.4); Pherekydes (first pub. in C.25); Empedokles' Recipes (first pub. in C.24); Three Deaths (first pub. in A.6); The Dogs of New Spain (first pub. in A.6); A Quadratic Equation (from C.11); Sleep Does Not Have Chinese Eyes (from C.17); Piece After Supervielle (first pub. as "The Long and the Short of It" in C.33); • One Out of Six; Some Ciphers (from C.16); For Robert Grosseteste (from C.18); Phoenix (from C.16); Notes to the Reader (first pub. in A.6); Hachadura (first pub. in C.26); II. *Opuscula Translata*: El-Samau'al, "Fragment" (trans. from Arabic, from C.2); El-Khansa, "Elegy" (trans. from Arabic, from C.15); El-Ma'arri, "Five Poems" (trans. From Arabic, first pub. in C.29); Badr Shakir el-Sayyab, "City of Mirage" (trans. From Arabic, from C.3); Badr Shakir el-Sayyab, "The Cry of the Mallard" (trans. From Arabic, from C.15); Mahmoud Darweesh, "Waiting for Them" (trans. from Arabic, from C.15); "The Petelia Tablet" (trans. from Greek, first pub. in C.22); Aeschylus, "Four Fragments" (trans. from Greek, from C.11); Empedokles, "Seven Fragments" (trans. from Greek, rev. from C.12).

R.2 Kanchenjunga Press Archive. Location: Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library, Vancouver. Acquired in 1979. Copies of the publications, correspondence with authors, editorial correspondence, financial records, manuscripts, and other files of the Kanchenjunga Press, which was active from 1972 to 1978. The press was founded by Bringhurst in collaboration with Miki Sheffield, and Bringhurst served as senior editor throughout the life of the firm. The operation was based in Bloomington, Indiana, during 1972–73, and in Vancouver (with branch operations in Red Bluff, California, and in San Francisco) during 1973–78. (See also D.20.)

R.3 The Robert Bringhurst Papers. Location: Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library, Vancouver. Acquired in 1983. Despite its name, this archive is devoted entirely to manuscripts and working papers for *Visions: Contemporary Art in Canada* (E.5). It includes six manuscript drafts and extensive editorial correspondence, along with design sketches, layout grids and working notes for the typography and illustration.

R.4 Robert Bringhurst Archive. Location: National Library of Canada, Ottawa. Acquired in 1987; additional material acquired in 1990 and in 2000. Manuscripts and correspondence, teaching notes, translations, copies of early journalism, financial records, photographs, academic and military records, advertisements and announcements for books and readings, tape recordings of readings, reviews, and other files from the 1960s through the end of 1999. Includes copies of nearly all books and other publications designed by Bringhurst during this period, with records concerning the typography, and the business records of Robert Bringhurst Ltd. Journals are included for the period 1964–75.

S CRITICAL STUDIES, REVIEWS & OTHER SECONDARY SOURCES

S.1 Anonymous. Review of *The Shipwright's Log* (A.1). *Choice* (Chicago) 10.11 (January 1974): 1714.

S.2 Anonymous. Review of *Cadastre* (A.2). *Choice* 10.11 (January 1974): 1714.

1976

S.3 Norman Stock. Review of *Bergschrund* (A.6). *Library Journal* (New York) 101 (15 March 1976): 819. Stock calls Bringhurst “a poet who looks outward to the world and draws strength for his vision from the hardness of nature itself” and says that “Bringhurst’s poetry is distinguished by a lack of self-pity in facing reality and history, and by a willingness to grapple with the problem of finding an original language for that which is not-man.”

S.4 Robert A. Lecker. Review of *Bergschrund* (A.6). *Quill & Quire* (Toronto) 42.5 (April 1976): 46.

S.5 Raymond J. Smith. “Poetry Chronicle.” *The Ontario Review* (Windsor, Ontario) 4 (Spring/Summer 1976): 104-110. Review of several books, including *Bergschrund* (A.6).

S.6 Anonymous. Review of *Bergschrund* (A.6). *Choice* 13.7 (September 1976): 815.

S.7 John Biguenet. “Stones are to Silence as Darkness is to Light.” *West Coast Review* (Burnaby, British Columbia) 11.2 (October 1976): 39. Review of *Bergschrund* (A.6). “The disciplined imagination behind his images is as precise as the disciplined light of a laser. That imagination is informed by many traditions (Semitic, Greek, Precolumbian) which it not only absorbs but reiterates.... *Bergschrund* is not a book; it is a library.” (See also S.10.)

1977

S.8 William Meads. “The Holes in the Stone.” *Kayak* (Santa Cruz, California) 44 (February 1977): 60-65. Review of *Bergschrund* (A.6). “The extraordinary thing about Robert Bringhurst is that he really knows how to see. And he takes his seeing seriously: seeing is his way of thinking, of knowing, of being. His images, even the most daring ones, are never merely invented.... And he has absolute control of his rhythms, particularly in the matter of defining the line.... Like Brecht, he writes a ‘perfectly natural’ idiom which no one speaks.... There are no gimmicks: everything is in a natural speech rhythm. Yet its taste on the tongue seems somehow distilled.”

S.9 Kerry Shawn Keys. “Bringhurst Aorist.” *Loose Leaves Fall: Selected Poems*. Camp Hill, Pennsylvania: Pine Press, 1977: 72. A poem. (See also “Kerry Shawn Keys” in A.2.)

1978

S.10 John Biguenet. Review of *Jacob Singing* (A.7). *The New Orleans Review* ?? (??1978): ?? (See also S.7.)

S.11 Marilyn Bowering. “Long Poems from the Little Presses.” *Quill & Quire* 44.9 (July 1978): 42. Review of several books, including *Jacob Singing* (A.7).

S.12 Douglas Barbour. “Canadian Poetry Chronicle: VI.” *Dalhousie Review* (Halifax) 58.3 (Autumn 1978): 555-578. Review of many books, including (p. 569) *Bergschrund* (A.6). (See also S.53.)

S.13 Gail McKay. *The Pat Lowther Poem*. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1978: unpagged. Section XLIV of the poem is a portrait of Bringhurst, who replaced Pat Lowther as Visiting Lecturer in the University of British Columbia’s Dept. of Creative Writing after Lowther was murdered in 1975.

1980

S.14 [Colin Browne]. “I Believe in Vengeance.” *CVII [Contemporary Verse Two]* (Winnipeg) 5.2 (Winter 1980/81): 10-17. Interview with Vancouver bookseller William Hoffer, in which Bringhurst and others also appear. (The title is a quotation from Hoffer. See also S.82, S.93, S.106, S.191.) In the same issue with S.15.

S.15 Jane Munro. "Bringhurst's Range: Essential Information." *CVII [Contemporary Verse Two]* 5.2 (Winter 1980/81): 38-41. Review of *Bergschrund* (A.6), *Jacob Singing* (A.7), and *The Stonecutter's Horses* (A.9), with a partial account of an interview. In the same issue with S.14.

1981

S.15a Elsa Linguanti. "Allo-Fanìe: I Poeti Canadesi Della West Coast." *Letterature d'America. Rivista trimestrale* (??: Bulzoni) 2.7 (Primavera 1981): 123-153. Essay on the poetry of the Canadian West Coast from 1961 to 1981, focussing especially on the work of Earl Birney, George Bowering, and Bringhurst. (See also S.157.)

1983

S.16 Robin Skelton. "Poetry Selected, Collected, and Resurrected." *Quill & Quire* 49.3 (February 1983): 33. Review of several books, including *The Beauty of the Weapons* (A.14). "Bringhurst is an acutely intelligent writer, his mind at once austere and sensual. He reanimates fragments of Greek, Chinese, Egyptian and Aztec thought so that they illuminate our present, and he does so in a style of utmost clarity and simplicity.... *The Beauty of the Weapons* is a book to place beside Eliot's *Prufrock* and Stevens's *Harmonium*." (See also S.34.)

S.17 Alan Twigg. "From Indian Legends to Feminist Mythology." *The Province* (Vancouver), 20 March 1983: Magazine, 6. Review of several books including *The Beauty of the Weapons* (A.14). Nominates Bringhurst as "the Colonel Kurtz of Canadian poetry."

S.18 David Helwig. "Irving Layton: Orator Howling in an Empty Stadium." *The Star* (Toronto), ?? 1983: ?? . Review of two books: *The Beauty of the Weapons* (A.14) and Layton's *A Wild Peculiar Joy*. [The howling orator mentioned in the headline is Layton rather than Bringhurst.]

S.19 Wayne Holder. Review of *The Beauty of the Weapons* (A.14). *The Vancouver Literary News* 4.83 (April 1983): 26-31.

S.20 Charles Seluzicki. Review of *Albion Broadbeats 1980-81*. *Fine Print* (San Francisco) 9.2 (April 1983): 51-52. Includes review and partial reproduction of *The Knife in the Measure* (A.10).

S.21 Charles Lillard. Review of *Tzubahalem's Mountain* (A.12) and *The Beauty of the Weapons* (A.14). *The Reader* 2.2 (Vancouver), June 1983: 1-4.

S.22 Sam Hamill. Review of *The Beauty of the Weapons* (A.14). *Western American Literature* (Logan, Utah) 18.2 (Summer 1983): 187-189. "Bringhurst possesses an enormous appetite for the history of ideas. That alone would make him valuable. But his extraordinary ear and exceptional attention to craft bring to his poems a sense of living speech, of musically alive speech, that is rare.... He combines translation with imaginative writing as well as anyone since Rexroth and Duncan.... There is a depth of humanity in these poems, one that will grow, one from which we all may learn. *The Beauty of the Weapons* is a wonderful introduction to one of the finest younger poets in North America."

S.23 Steven Smith. "Blood and Butterfly Bones". Review of *The Beauty of the Weapons* (A.14). *Books in Canada* (Toronto) 12.7 (August/September 1983): 25-27.

S.24 Sr Anne Leonard. Review of *The Beauty of the Weapons* (A.14). *CM* (Ottawa) 11.5 (September 1983): 213.

S.25 W.J. Keith. Review of *The Beauty of the Weapons* (A.14). *Canadian Book Review Annual 1982*. Toronto: Simon & Pierre, 1983: 164.

S.26 Sandra Djwa & Ronald B. Hatch. Review of *The Beauty of the Weapons* (A.14). *University of Toronto Quarterly* 52.4 (Summer 1983): 347-348. In the Poetry section, "Letters in Canada 1982."

S.27 Chaviva Hosek. "Poetry in English 1950 to 1982." *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, edited by William Toye. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1983: 667-668. There is no entry on Bringhurst in this initial edition of the *Companion*, but Hošek discusses his work briefly in relation to that of Christopher Dewdney and others. (See also S.188.)

S.28 Russell Bingham. "In-depth Look at Canadian Art." *Edmonton (Alberta) Journal*, 11 December 1983: B6. Review of *Visions* (E.5).

S.29 Harold Town. "Critics, History and Art." *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 24 December 1983: Entertainment, 15. Review of *Visions* (E.5).

S.30 Adele Freedman. Review of *Visions* (E.5). *Quill & Quire* 49.12 (December 1983): 24.

1984

S.31 Susan Crean. Review of *Visions* (E.5). *Books in Canada* 13.1 (January 1984): 23-24.

S.32 Robert Fulford. "By Persons Unknown." *Saturday Night* (Toronto), March 1984: 9-11. Discussion of several poets including Bringhurst. In "*The Beauty of the Weapons* ... one senses a writer whose austerity hides a minefield of complex passions.... Bringhurst has something in him of the physicist, philosopher, biologist, and poet.... He reads and thinks widely, and his work is the poetry of a passionate cultural historian.... In some poets this burden of reference might be oppressive; in Bringhurst it's carried with both ease and conviction. Bringhurst seems at home wherever he travels."

S.33 Pete McMartin. "Fruits of the excavation...." *The Vancouver Sun*, 16 March 1984: A5. Account of an interview, provoked by S.32.

S.34 Robin Skelton. "Recent Canadian Poetry." *Poetry* (Chicago) 144.5 (August 1984): 297-307. A wide-ranging discussion. Pp. 303-304 are devoted to Bringhurst – who, Skelton says, "may be the poet we have all been waiting for: one who can reclaim for poetry the dignity, wit, brilliance, and wisdom it has recently appeared to have mislaid. He is without doubt a major poet, not only in the context of Canadian letters, but in that of all writing of our time." (See also S.16.)

S.35 Robert J. Belton. Review of *Visions* (E.5). *University of Toronto Quarterly* 53.4 (Summer 1984): 507-511. In the Humanities section, "Letters in Canada 1983."

S.36 Anonymous. Review of *Visions* (E.5). *Publishers Weekly* (New York) 226.7 (17 August 1984): 51.

S.37 Reginald Berry. "Natural & Unnatural." *Canadian Literature* (Vancouver) 102 (Autumn 1984): 136-138. Review of several books including *The Beauty of the Weapons* (A.14). Describes Bringhurst as "one of the wisest voices in Canadian poetry" and "an eloquent guide to the dark places of intellect and flesh."

S.38 Stephen Allan Patrick. Review of *Visions* (E.5). *Library Journal* 109.14 (1 September 1984): 1664.

S.39 J.E. Simpson. Review of *Visions* (E.5). *CM* 12.5 (September 1984): 189.

S.40 Peter Millard. Review of *Visions* (E.5). *Arts Manitoba* (Winnipeg) 4.1 (Winter 1984): 27.

S.41 Joel H. Kaplan. "Multiple Vision." *Canadian Literature* 103 (Winter 1984): 80-81. Review of *Visions* (E.5).

S.42 Anonymous. Review of *Visions* (E.5). *Print Collector's Newsletter* (New York) 15.5 (November/December 1984): 185.

S.43 G. Eager. Review of *Visions* (E.5). *Choice* 22.10 (December 1984): 549.

S.44 Maureen Bradbury. Review of *Ocean/Paper/Stone* (A.18). *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada / Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada* (Toronto) 23 (1984): 113–114.

S.45 Dona Sturmanis. “A Wood Carver & Word Carver Collaborate.” *Antiques & Art/ Collector's Choice* (Vancouver) 11.3 (December 1984/January 1985): 4, 20. Review of *The Raven Steals the Light* (A.22).

1985

S.46 Anne Petrie. “A Salty and Sexy Raven.” *The Vancouver Sun*, 26 January 1985: C15. Review of *The Raven Steals the Light* (A.22).

S.47 Ross Carter. “Round-Up of Recent Books on Studies of Northwest Indians.” *PNL/A [Pacific Northwest Library Association] Quarterly* (Bellingham, Washington) 49.1 (Fall 1984): 14-15. Review of several books including *The Raven Steals the Light* (A.22).

S.48 George Woodcock. Review of *Ocean/Paper/Stone* (A.18). *Canadian Literature* 103 (Spring 1985): 174.

S.49 “Canadians Compare through Poet’s Eye.” *The Press* (Christchurch, New Zealand), 21 March 1985: 8. Article on a poetry reading in Christchurch by Bringhurst and Marilyn Bowering.

S.50 Shari Meakin. “West Coast Myths Brought to Life.” *B.C. Outdoors* (Vancouver) 41.3 (April 1985): 74. Review of *The Raven Steals the Light* (A.22).

S.50a Carol Hunter. Review of *The Raven Steals the Light* (A.22) In *SAIL* 9.3 (*Studies in American Indian Literature*), (Summer 1985): 138-139.

S.51 L.R. Ricou. Untitled review, beginning “The work of Claude Lévi-Strauss...” *Canadian Literature* 105 (Summer 1985): 201–202. Review of several books, including *The Raven Steals the Light* (A.22). “These are, simply, the best versions of Indian tales I have read: they are colloquial yet poetic, precise yet spilling outside their boundaries, accumulating and then blending into one another. The writers, like Raven, are intelligent yet irreverent.... In such collisions, we recognize that ‘the purpose of myths ... is not merely to relate experiences, but to lead to significant changes in the structure of things.’ Bringhurst and Reid share this passion in a truly extraordinary, liberating collection.” (See also S.65, S.102, S.125.)

S.52 Yoshikawa, Tsuneko. “Kanada no shijin: shishi nado no koto: Autrey Thomas-shi Robert Bringhurst-shi no rainichini furete.” *Nihon Gendai Shijin Kaiho* (Tokyo) ns 27 (August 15, showa 60 [1985]): 6. Article about Thomas and Bringhurst, in Japanese.

S.53 Douglas Barbour. *Canadian Poetry Chronicle* (1984). Kingston, Ontario: Quarry Press, 1985. Includes (pp. 16-17) a discussion of *The Beauty of the Weapons* (A.14). (See also S.12.)

S.54 Stephen Spender. *Journals 1939–1983*, ed. John Goldsmith. London: Faber & Faber, 1985. The entry for 4 April 1982 (pp. 442-443) recounts a meeting with Bringhurst in Vancouver and describes Spender’s first encounter with *Bergschrund* (a10.): “poems of dazzling purity ... the work of a mind dwelling on great geographical and historical heights, completely unlike anything else, showing the utter commonplaceness of the confessional writing fashionable now.”

S.55 Anonymous. Review of *The Beauty of the Weapons* (A.26). *Publishers Weekly* 228.21 (22 November 1985): 8, 50.

S.56 Glennis Zilm. Review of *Tending the Fire* (A.27). *Amphora* (Vancouver) 62 (December 1985): 24-25. Reprinted as S.126.

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- S.57 Tom King. Review of *The Raven Steals the Light* (A.22). *Canadian Book Review Annual 1985*. Toronto: Simon & Pierre, 1986: 287.
- S.58 Anonymous. "Editorial News." *Fine Print* 12.2 (April 1986): 66-67. Announces Bringhurst's appointment as contributing editor of the magazine.
- S.59 Anonymous. "Shoulder Note." *Fine Print* 12.2 (April 1986): 66-67. Includes review of *Shovels, Shoes and the Slow Rotation of Letters* (A.29).
- S.60 Ray Gonzalez. Review of *The Beauty of the Weapons* (A.26). *The Bloomsbury Review* (Denver) 6.5 (April/May 1986): 28.
- S.61 Jorie Graham. "Making Connections." *New York Times Book Review*, 28 September 1986: 32-33. Review of four books including *The Beauty of the Weapons* (A.26).
- S.62 Ronald Hatch. "Poems of a Modern Saint – or is It a Preacher?" *The Vancouver Sun*, 25 October 1986: C12. Review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.32).
- S.63 Kathi Neal. "'Lost generation' poet devotes energies to preserving culture of native peoples." *Winnipeg Free Press*, 26 November 1986: 43. Brief and confused account of an interview conducted while Bringhurst was writer-in-residence at the University of Winnipeg.
- S.64 Patricia Keeney Smith. "Poetry lighting up our dark corners to show the invisible." *The Star* (Toronto), 29 November 1986: M4. Review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.32).
- S.65 Laurie Ricou. Review of *Ocean/Paper/Stone* (A.18). *B.C. Studies* (Vancouver) 71 (Autumn 1986): 57-59. (See also S.51, S.102, S.125.)
- S.66 Phil Hall. Review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.32). *Books in Canada* 15.9 (December 1986): 26-27.

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- S.67 Fraser Sutherland. "Poetry, Science, Mind and Religion." Toronto *Globe and Mail*, 30 January 1987: E19. Review of several books including *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.32).
- S.68 W. Kevin E. McNeilly. "Knowing not Owing: Robert Bringhurst and the Plurality of Being." M.A. Thesis. University of Western Ontario. 1987.
- S.69 Anthony Mattina. Review of two books including *The Raven Steals the Light* (A.22). *Western Folklore* (Claremont, California) 46.2 (April 1987): 144-146.
- S.70 Mia Stainsby. "Humble toad the inspiration for a princely work of art." *The Vancouver Sun*, 6 June 1987: G3. Review of *Conversations with a Toad* (A.33 & A.33a).
- S.71 Ron Clark. Review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.32). *Wascana Review* (Regina) 22.1 (Spring 1987): 92-95.
- S.72 F[rances] W[oods]. Review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.35). *Booklist* (Chicago) 83.21 (July 1987): 1644.
- S.73 W[illiam] B[right]. Review of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (A.31). *Fine Print* 13.3 (July 1987): 127-128.
- S.74 G.V. Downes. "Breathing in Tune and Time." *Event* (New Westminster, B.C.) 16.2 (Summer 1987): 115-117. Review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.32).

S.75 Z[denek] V[olný]. "Z nových překladů: Robert Bringhurst." *Tvorba* (Prague) 37 (16 September 1987): ix. In Czech, with Volný's translations of "Poem about Crystal" and two excerpts from *Tzubahalem's Mountain*.

S.76 Glennis Zilm. Review of *Conversations with a Toad* (A.33). *Amphora* 69 (September 1987): 24-26. An unsigned apology in reference to the editing of this review appears in *Amphora* 70 (December 1987), p. 32, and a fuller text in a subsequent issue (see S.91).

S.77 Ronald B. Hatch. Review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.32). *University of Toronto Quarterly* 57.1 (Fall 1987): 40-41. In the Poetry section, "Letters in Canada 1986."

S.78 Richard Silberg. Review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.35). *Poetry Flash* (Berkeley, Calif.) 175 (October 1987): 20.

S.79 Robert Solomon. Review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.35). *Small Press (The Magazine and Book Review of Independent Publishing)* (New York) 5.2 (December 1987): 48.

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S.80 M. Waters. Review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.35). *Choice* 25.5 (January 1988): 764.

S.81 Dan Davidson. "Book Gives Native View of History" and "Yukon Book Reflects Indian Anthropology." *The Whitehorse Star* (Whitehorse, Yukon), 3 February 1988: 28. Review of *Part of the Land, Part of the Water* (A.36) and local gossip concerning the book.

S.82 [William Hoffer]. In *List No. 69: Canadian Literature*. Vancouver: William Hoffer, n.d. [1988]. One of many Hoffer catalogues which depart from bibliographical description into anecdote, criticism and invective. Entry 25 (p. 3), which begins as a bibliographical description of *The Stonemason's Horses* (A.9), goes on to address the strained relationship between poet and bookseller. (See also S.14, S.93, S.106, S.191.)

S.83 Maggie Helwig. Review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.32). *What* (Toronto) 13 (November/December 1987, "Publication date: March 10, 1988"): 8-9.

S.84 Larry Scanlan. "Notebook: Interview with Robert Bringhurst." *The Whig-Standard Magazine* (Kingston, Ontario), 26 March 1988: 25. A discussion devoted chiefly to *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.32) and *Conversations with a Toad* (A.33).

S.85 Zdenek Volný. "Útržky mapy, útržky hudby." *Svetová literatura* (Prague) 33 (n° 2, 1988): 50-51. A discussion of Bringhurst's poetry and politics, in Czech, with translations of nineteen poems (see T.Cz.2).

S.86 Steven Pugmire. Review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.35). *Western American Literature* 23.1 (May 1988): 88-89. Reviewed with Sam Hamill's *The Nootka Rose*.

S.87 Nancy Campbell. "Storytelling the Oldest Tradition." *The Whitehorse Star*, 22 June 1988: 36. Interview occasioned by Bringhurst's participation in the First Northern Storytelling Festival, Whitehorse, June 1988.

S.88 Anonymous. "Poet Says Native Tradition is Largely Ignored." *The Yukon News* (Whitehorse, Yukon), 22 June 1988: 5.

S.89 Gary Geddes. "Robert Bringhurst." *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Two*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988: 527-528. Critical summary accompanying anthology selections. (See also B.27, S.95, S.240a.)

S.90 Roman Gadzo. Review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.35). *The Fessenden Review* (San Diego, Calif.) 11.4 (1988): 33-34.

S.91 Glennis Zilm. Review of *Conversations with a Toad* (A.33). *Amphora* 73 (September 1988): unpaginated “special insert” between pp. 10 & 11. Enlarged and corrected from S.76, as explained by the editor’s note on p. 10 of this issue.

S.92 Jan Conn. “Beneath the Silk Print of Bamboo.” *This Magazine* (Toronto) 22.4 (August/September 1988): 41. This poem (which carries a dedication to Bringhurst) recounts a visit to the Point Grey Road garret in Vancouver where Bringhurst lived from 1977 to 1986.

S.93 [William Hoffer]. In *List No. 71: Canadian Literature*. Vancouver: William Hoffer, n.d. [1988]. Entry 67 (pp. 7-9) begins as a bibliographical description of *Ocean/Paper/Stone* (A.18) and its codicil, *Pebble/Pond/Errata Slip* (A.34). Then, with reference to “A Measure of Freedom” (D.50), it continues the diatribe begun in S.82. (See also S.106, S.191.)

S.94 Kelly Savage. “Magical myths entertain, educate.” *Southbridge News* (Southbridge, Mass.), 29 October 1988: 13. Review of two books including *The Raven Steals the Light* (A.22b).

S.95 Gary Geddes. Review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.35). *Journal of Canadian Poetry* (Nepean, Ontario) n.s. 3 (1988): 15-18. (See also S.89, S.240a.)

S.96 Glenn Sheldon. Review of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.35). *Small Press Review* (El Cerrito, California) 20:12 (December 1988): 12.

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S.97 Jon Davis. “For What We Fashion.” *American Book Review* (Boulder, Colorado) 2.1 (March/April 1989): 22. Review of two books including *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (A.35).

S.98 Anonymous. “The Owl and the Bluejay.” *Margin* 8 (1989): 44. A parody of sorts, published under Bringhurst’s name though not written by him. It is part of a series entitled “Alpha and Digby Birds” (pp. 30-53), which includes other examples of the same genre – passages fictitiously attributed to D.H. Lawrence, Thomas Hardy, Gerard Manley Hopkins and others– along with several items whose attributions appear to be genuine.

S.99 Roo Borson. “The Gift, for Robert Bringhurst.” In *Intent, or the Weight of the World*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart. 1989: 28. A poem.

S.100 John Whatley. “Readings of Nothing: Robert Bringhurst’s *Hachadura*.” *Canadian Literature* 122-23 (Spring/Summer 1989): 108-122.

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S.101 A[listair] P[eebles]. “Listening to a Different Voice.” *The Orcadian* (Stromness, Orkney, Scotland), 19 April 1990. Account of a poetry and storytelling performance by Bringhurst in Stromness.

S.102 Laurie Ricou. “Poetry.” In *The Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, 2nd ed., vol. IV. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1990: 3-45. The section of Ricou’s essay devoted to the metaphysical lyric is largely devoted to Bringhurst and begins by quoting in full the short lyric “Poem about Crystal,” from A.14. Further references to Bringhurst can be found in the index to the volume. (See also S.51, S.65, S.125.)

S.103 Mordecai Richler. *Solomon Gurski Was Here*. 1990. Richler’s novel recasts Haida trickster mythology in Jewish terms, acknowledging *The Raven Steals the Light* (A.22) as its source. (See also S.155.)

S.104 Joy Asham Fedorick. “Fencepost Sitting and How I Fell Off to One Side.” *Artscraft* (xx) 00 (Fall 1990): 9-14. A Cree woman, writing on the issue of whites, natives, and the revival of aboriginal literature, discusses Bringhurst’s involvement with the Cree and Ojibwa. (Rpt. as S.104a.)

S.104a Joy Asham Fedorick. "Fencepost Sitting and How I Fell Off to One Side." In *Give Back: First Nations Perspectives on Cultural Practice*. North Vancouver, B.C.: Gallerie, 1992: 27-46. Republication of S.104.

S.105 Russell Brown et al. "Robert Bringhurst." *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990: 695. Critical and biographical summary accompanying anthology selections. (See also B.36.)

1991

S.106 [William Hoffer]. In *List No. 77: Canadian Literature*. Vancouver: William Hoffer, 1991. Entries 85 and 86 (pp. 16-17) begin as bibliographical descriptions of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (A.31a) and *Shovels, Shoes and the Slow Rotation of Letters* (A.29), and continue with gossip and complaint. (See also S.82, S.93, S.191.)

S.107 Peter Sanger. "Poor Man's Art: On the Poetry of Robert Bringhurst." *Antigonish Review* (Antigonish, Nova Scotia) 85-86 (Spring/Summer 1991): 151-169.

S.108 Fraser Sutherland. "Robert Bringhurst." In *Contemporary Poets*, ed. Tracy Chevalier. Chicago & London: St James Press. 1991: 99-100.

S.109 Nancy Beale. "Everyone's in the Same Boat." *The Ottawa Citizen*, 3 November 1991: C2. Article on Bill Reid's *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* and Bringhurst's *The Black Canoe* (A.39).

S.109a Bette S. Weidman. Review of *Native Writers and Canadian Writing* (B.32) In *SAIL* 2.3.4 (*Studies in American Indian Literature*, Series II), (Winter 1991): 61-65.

S.110 Chris Dafoe. "An Odyssey of Mythic Proportions." Toronto *Globe and Mail*, 16 November 1991: C5. Article on Reid's *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* and Bringhurst's *The Black Canoe* (A.39).

S.111 Benjamin Forgey. "Canada's Sculptured Spirit." *The Washington Post*, 19 November 1991: C1-2. Article on Reid's *The Spirit of Haida Gwaii* and Bringhurst's *The Black Canoe* (A.39a).

S.112 Renée Blackstone. "A New-Day Noah's Ark." *The Province* (Vancouver), 24 November 1991: C14. Review of *The Black Canoe* (A.39).

S.113 Charles Lillard. "Mixed Bag About First Nations." *The Times-Colonist* (Victoria, B.C.), 24 November 1991: M5. Review of several books, including *The Black Canoe* (A.39).

S.114 Norbert Ruebsaat. Review of *The Black Canoe* (A.39). *The Reader* 10.4 (Vancouver), December 1991: 41-44.

S.115 Elizabeth Anthony. "The Sacred and the Profound." *Books in Canada* 10.9 (December 1991): 31-33. Review of several books, including *The Black Canoe* (A.39).

S.116 Ann Rosenberg. "Native Myth to Urban Ornament." *The Vancouver Sun*, 7 December 1991: Saturday Review section. Review of several books, including *The Black Canoe* (A.39).

S.117 Elizabeth Beauchamp. Review of *The Black Canoe* (A.39). *Edmonton Journal*, December 22, 1991: D4.

S.118 John Lekich. "Poetic Vision: Bill Reid's Spirit of Haida Gwaii." *The Vancouver Star* (Vancouver) 2.6 (December/January 1991-92): 14-19. Feature article based on *The Black Canoe* (A.39) and an interview with Bringhurst.

1992

S.119 Kay Kritzwiser. "A Visible Heritage." *Quill & Quire* 58.1 (January 1992): 24. Review of several books, including *The Black Canoe* (A.39).

S.120 Karal Ann Marling. "A Noah's Ark of the North." *The New York Times Book Review*, February 9, 1992: 13. Review of *The Black Canoe* (A.39a).

S.120a Karal Ann Marling. "Unique Vision Lies Behind Launch of the Black Canoe." *Montreal Gazette*, February 29, 1992: K5. Reprint of S.120. (See also D.63.)

S.121 Calvin Luther Martin. *In the Spirit of the Earth: Rethinking Time and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992. Bringhurst is quoted repeatedly in Chapters 4-5, and his work discussed in Chapter 6, "Between the Lines: Bibliographical Essay and Epilogue."

S.122 Anonymous. "Reid's Chroniclers Edge Out Competition." *The Vancouver Sun*, 2 May 1992: Saturday Review section, SR9. Chiefly an account of an anonymous interview with Bringhurst on the subject of *The Black Canoe* (A.39).

S.123 Richard Bingham. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42). *Quill & Quire* 58.9 (September 1992): 68-69.

S.124 Ruari McLean. "Master Bookmaker." *Times Literary Supplement* 4665 (28 August 1992): 25. Review of Jan Tschichold, *The Form of the Book: Essays on the Morality of Good Design* (E.7a).

S.125 Laurie Ricou. "Saxifraga punctata, Raven": Part II of "Robert Bringhurst's 'Sunday Morning': A Dialogue," by Robert Bringhurst & Laurie Ricou. In *Inside the Poem*, edited by W.H. New. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992: 93-100. The other half of B.42. Ricou appears as a fictional character in the portion of the dialogue written by Bringhurst, while Bringhurst appears as a fictional character in the portion written by Ricou. (See also S.51, S.65, S.102.)

S.126 Glennis Zilm. Review of *Tending the Fire* (A.27). In *Praise of the Book: Being a facsimile of important articles ... from Amphora 1965-1990*. Vancouver: Alcuin Society, 1992: 46-47. Reprint of S.56.

S.127 Jean-Pierre Duquette, "Écrire l'image." *Ellipse* 48 (1992): 15-21. Essay on the *livres d'artiste* of Lucie Lambert, including *Conversations with a Toad* (A.33). Repeated in English translation by Hugh Hazelton, pp. 22-28. In the same issue with C.61 and T.Fr.3.

S.128 Francesco M. Casotti, "The Stonecutter's Horses." *La Cultura Italiana e le Letterature Straniere Moderne*, ed. Vita Fortunati. Bologna: Università di Bologna / Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1992: 305-312. Essay (in English) on the poem (A.9, rev. in A.14) and its sources.

S.129 Anne Taylor. "Largo" and "The Garden." *Writing North: An Anthology of Contemporary Yukon Writers*, ed. Erling Friis-Baastad & Patricia Robertson. Whitehorse: Beluga Books, 1992: 158-160. The first of these short prose pieces is a portrait of the author in relation to Bringhurst, the second a portrait of Bringhurst in relation to the author. The garden in question is one Bringhurst built – quite successfully by other accounts – in the late 1980s and early 1990s in front of his cabin on Bowen Island.

S.130 Mark Woodhouse. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42). *Library Journal* 117: 21 (December 1992): 130-132.

1993

S.131 Harry C. Edwards. "The Last Word on Type?" *Aldus Magazine* (xx): 00 (March/April 1993): 14. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42).

S.132 Alastair Johnston. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42a). *Ampersand* (Oakland, California) 12.1 (1993): 13. (See also D.36 and A.43.)

S.133 Steffani Frideres. Review of *The Black Canoe* (A.41). *Canadian Ethnic Studies* (Calgary) 25.1 (1993): 132-133.

S.134 [Gerald Lange]. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42). *Abacadabra* (Journal of the Alliance for Contemporary Book Arts, Los Angeles) 7 (Spring 1993): 17. Shortened version of S.136. An announcement of Bringhurst's forthcoming lecture at UCLA appears on p. 23 of the same issue.

S.135 [Roy R. Behrens]. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42). *Ballast Quarterly Review* (Dysart, Iowa) 8.3 (Spring 1993): 13.

S.136 Gerald Lange. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42). *The Typographer* (Washington, DC) 19.4 (May/June 1993): 13-14. Lengthened version of S.134.

S.137 Anonymous. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42). *Step-by-Step Graphics* (Peoria, Illinois) 00 (July/August 1993): 131-132.

S.138 Anonymous. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42). *The Editorial Eye* (Alexandria, Virginia) 16.8 (August 1993): 9.

S.139 Sharon Brown. *Some Become Flowers: Living with Dying at Home*. Madeira Park, British Columbia: Harbour Publishing, 1993. A nonfiction work concerning the death of the author's mother. Several

Canadian writers (notably the author's husband Andreas Schroeder and friends George Payerle and Crispin Elsted) play important roles. Bringhurst makes a cameo appearance on pp. 160-161, polishing wine glasses on New Year's morning, 1985.

S.140 Philip B. Meggs. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42). *Print* (New York) 47.4 (July/August 1993): 274-275.

S.141 Matthew Dennis. Review of *The Black Canoe* (A.41). *Journal of the West* (Manhattan, Kansas) 32.4 (October 1993): 116.

S.142 Janet Smith. "Bringhurst takes on poetry bashers at writers' fest." *Kitsilano News* (Vancouver), 20 October 1993: 32.

S.142a Janet Smith. "Poet Bringhurst Finds Nourishment on Bowen." *Undercurrent* 19.42 (Bowen Island, British Columbia), 22 October 1993: 6. Retitled reprint of S.142.

S.143 Richard Eckersley. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42). *Bookways* (San Antonio) 9 (October 1993): 61-62.

1994

S.144 [Sean Kane]. "Ashley Fellow Begins Residence." *Arthur* (Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario) 28.15 (January 1994): 3. Article announcing Bringhurst's arrival at Trent University as Ashley Fellow and predicting the subject matter of his lectures.

S.145 Reginald Berry. "Bringhurst, Robert." Ian Hamilton, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994: 67-68.

S.146 Vítor Quelhas with Rui Rocha. "A minha música são as palavras." *Expresso Cartaz* (Lisbon), 16 April 1994: 3, 20-21. Commentary and interview, in Portuguese, occasioned by the publication of T.Pr.2. In the same issue with S.147.

S.147 Rui Rocha. "Olhar de águia." *Expresso Cartaz*, 16 April 1994: 21. Review of T.Pr.2, in Portuguese. In the same issue with S.146.

S.148 Mário Santos, "As árvores não crescem numa foto." *Público* (Lisbon), 16 April 1994: 28. Commentary and interview, in Portuguese, occasioned by the publication of T.Pr.2.

S.149 Sidney E. Berger. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42a). *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada / Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada* 32.1 (Spring 1994): 60-61.

S.150 José Guardado Moreira. "A Voz do Viajante." *Ler* (Lisbon), XX 1994: 00. Review of T.Pr.2, in Portuguese.

S.151 Christopher Burke. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42). *Bulletin of the Printing Historical Society* (London) 37 (Summer 1994): 14-15.

S.152 [Michael A. Peterman]. "Point-Counterpoint." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 29.2 (1994): 165. Preface to D.75, signed "M.A.P." The text quoted in this preface is Bringhurst's own preface to the lecture, specially written for the magazine but never published apart from this excerpt.

S.153 Philip Marchand. "Obscure B.C. Poet is a rising star at Berkeley." *Toronto Star*, 6 August 1994: K4. Obscure Toronto newspaper discovers that a Canadian poet unfamiliar to its book critic is familiar to librarians at the University of California. Based in part on a telephone interview conducted in July 1994. (See also S.161.)

S.154 James Harrison. "Bringhurst, Robert." Eugene Benson & L.W. Conolly, ed., *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*. London: Routledge, 1994: vol. 1, pp. 148-149.

S.155 Elisa Morera de la Vall. *The Trickster: A Recurring Figure in Commonwealth Literature*. Dissertation. Universitat Central de Barcelona, 1994. Dissertation in two parts. Part One deals with African trickster tales in the novels of Chinua Achebe. Part Two deals with Mordechai Richler's use of *The Raven Steals the Light* (A.22) in his novel *Solomon Gurski Was Here* (S.103).

S.156 Sean Kane. *Wisdom of the Myhtellers*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1994. A study of the workings of myth and its persistence in the 20th century, with particular attention to the work of Bringhurst and Alice Kane. The principle sources include A.39, B.55, C.65/D.76. (See also B.51.)

S.157 Elsa Linguanti. "Robert Bringhurst," in *In Forma di Parole* (Bologna) terza serie 2.1 (1994): 238-239. In Italian. (See also S.15a.)

1995

S.158 Anonymous. "Peter Rotleg Kroch: Repeated Dunking, by Robert Boringhurst," in "*Figments of Hepatitis*. Done out of the 'Greek' by Guy Hideabed / Putrid Kroch." n.p., n.d. [San Francisco, 1995]. A parody of B.54 in the form of a 4-page leaflet, marked "Supplemental insert to the catalog." The probable author is Alastair Johnston (compare A.43 and S.132).

S.159 Jan Zwicky, "Bringhurst's Presocratics: Lyric and Ecology," in Tim Lilburn, ed., *Poetry and Knowing: Speculative Essays and Interviews*. Kingston, Ontario: Quarry Press, 1995: pp 65-117. Essay on the sequence "The Old in Their Knowing," from A.14, with reference to A.2, A.5 and C.22. In the same volume with B.56. (See also B.43.)

S.160 Arlette Kouwenhoven. "De laaste totempalen van de Haïda Indianen." *Scarabee* (Schoonhoven, Netherlands) 15 (April 1995): 4-8. Article in Dutch, on Haida art and culture. Bringhurst, who is described as "antropoloog en kenner van de Noordamerikaanse inheemse volkeren," is quoted at length throughout the article (based on interviews conducted at Bowen Island in 1994).

S.161 Philip Marchand. "Simplicity motivates poet's work of a lifetime." *Toronto Star*, 15 April 1995: H6. Report of an interview (conducted in Toronto in early April 1995) combined with review of *The Calling* (A.47). With C.66. (See also S.153.)

S.162 Michael Redhill. Review of *The Calling* (A.47). *Quill & Quire* 61.5 (May 1995): 36.

S.163 Scott Ellis. "Where the Music Goes." *Books in Canada* 24.5 (Summer 1995): 30-31. Review of *The Calling* (A.47) together with Peter Dale Scott's *Murmur of the Stars: Selected Shorter Poems*.

S.164 Chris Dafoe. "Robert Bringhurst: in ink and paper." *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 24 June 1995: C1–2. Based on an interview conducted in Vancouver in April 1995, with reference to A.47.

S.165 [Agostino Contò et al.] Jurors' review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42), in *Selezione delle opere in concorso / A Selection of the Entries, 1993–94*. Verona: Premio Internazionale Felice Feliciano. 1995: p. 29. This is the exhibition catalogue for the 4th annual Premio Internazionale Felice Feliciano. The book (considered in the *studi e ricerche* category) is praised by the jurors but did not receive an award. Text in Italian with a free English translation by Monica Della Preda.

S.166 Paul Hayden Duensing. "The Typographer's Bible?" *The Compleat Typographer* (Athens, Georgia) 24 (April 1995): 13-14. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42).

S.167 George Elliott Clarke. "Two Poets Coming of Age." *Halifax Mail Star* (Halifax, Nova Scotia), 11 August 1995: B2. Review of two books: *The Calling* (A.47) and Victor Coleman's *Lapsed W.A.S.P.* (See also S.174.)

S.168 Dennis Rimmer. "Writer says poetry is not a lucrative field." *Bellingham Herald* (Bellingham, Washington), xx 1995: 00. Review of *The Calling* (A.47) combined with account of a telephone interview. The reviewer's insights are as original as his headline suggests.

S.169 Peter Sanger. Note to Thompson's "Ghazal XXXIV." In John Thompson, *Collected Poems and Translations*, edited by Peter Sanger. Fredericton, New Brunswick: Goose Lane, 1995: 267. Sanger summarizes a letter from Bringhurst concerning this poem. (See also D.80.)

S.170 Crispin Elsted. Review of *The Calling* (A.47). *The Reader* 15.3 (Winter 1995): 23-27.

S.171 Zoë Landale. Review of *The Calling* (A.47). *University of British Columbia Alumni Chronicle* (Vancouver) 49.3 (Winter 1995): 25.

S.172 Paul S. Koda. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.42). *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* (New York) 89.4 (December 1995): 487-488.

S.173 Johanna Hiemstra. "The Storyteller and Indigenous Canadian Oral Narratives: A Study of the Relationship of Contemporary Storytellers to the Remembered Indigenous Oral Narratives." M.A. thesis, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, 1995. A study of three mythtellers: Esther Jacko, Louis Bird and Bringhurst.

1996

S.174 George Elliott Clarke. "Top books of '95." *Halifax Mail Star*, 5 January 1996: 00. Review of several books, including *The Calling* (A.47), which Clarke calls "the best all-round book of poems" for 1995. (See also S.167.)

S.175 Bill Russell. "Following Truth: Sam Hamill and Robert Bringhurst Visit Latin." *Latin Line* (Charlotte Latin School, Charlotte, NC) 19.5 (March 1996): 12-13. Student writer's account of Bringhurst's and Hamill's (separate) visits to a North Carolina prep school. With caricatures of both.

S.176 Gerald Lange. Review of *The Form of the Book* (E.7b). *Serif* 4 (Spring 1996): 61-62).

S.177 "The Best Books of 1995." *Quill & Quire* 62.2 (February 1996): 38. Review of twelve books, including *The Calling* (A.47).

S.178 Bernd Dietz. "El poeta canadiense Robert Bringhurst, en Córdoba." *Diario Córdoba*, 24 de abril 1996: 38.

S.179 Elsa Linguanti. "'A tune beyond us, yet ourselves': Memory and Robert Bringhurst's Poetry," in *Memoria e sogno: quale Canada domani?*, a cura di Giulio Marra, Anne de Vaucher & Alessandro

Gebbia. Venezia: Supernova, 1996: 161-170. Text in English. Includes a three-page bibliography of Bringhurst's work.

S.180 Jim Harrison. "Time Suite." In *After Ikkyū and Other Poems*. Boston: Shambhala, 1996: 66-73. Harrison's poem quotes (or misquotes) Bringhurst's "Pythagoras," probably from A.26, and speaks of "the great Bringhurst, / who could have conquered Manhattan / and returned it to the Natives, / who might have continued dancing / on the rocky sward." See also A.86.

1997

S.181 Margarete Gross. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style*, 2nd edition (A.55). *Library Journal* 122:1 (January 1997): 92. Differs markedly from its predecessor, S.130.

S.182 Roger C. Parker. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style*, 2nd edition (A.55). *Mac Monitor* (Savannah, Georgia) 00 (XX): 00.

S.183 Lisa Gluskin. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style*, 2nd edition (A.55). *Critique* 4 (Spring 1997): 7. In the same issue with D.85.

S.184 Lewis Blackwell. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style*, 2nd edition (A.55). *U&Lc* (New York) 24.1 (Summer 1997): 35.

S.185 Angelynn Grant. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style*, 2nd edition (A.55). *Illustration Annual* (Palo Alto, California) 1997: 212-214.

S.186 Jonathan Hoeffler. "On Classifying Type." *Emigre* (Sacramento, California) 41 (Spring 1997): 55-70. Includes a detailed assessment of the typeface classification system outlined in *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.55).

S.187 Iain Higgins. "Many Mansions." *Canadian Literature* 154 (Autumn 1997): 197-203. Review of many books, including *The Calling* (A.47). In the same issue with C.73. (See also S.193.)

S.188 Geoff Hancock. "Bringhurst, Robert," in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, 2nd ed., edited by Eugene Benson & William Toye. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997: 143-144. This is the first edition of the *Companion* to include an entry on Bringhurst. Other discussions of his work also appear in the same volume – e.g., Chaviva Hosek's article "Poetry in English 1950 to 1982" (revised from S.27) and Cynthia Messenger's "Poetry in English 1983 to 1996."

1998

S.189 Jan Zwicky. "Being, Polyphony, Lyric: An Open Letter to Robert Bringhurst." *Canadian Literature* 156 (Spring 1998): 181-184. A response to D.89, in the same issue with D.90 and S.190.

S.190 Sean Kane. "Polyphonic Myth: A Reply to Robert Bringhurst." *Canadian Literature* 156 (Spring 1998): 184-192. A response to D.89, in the same issue with D.90 and S.189.

S.191 Glenn Woodsworth. *Cheap Sons of Bitches: An Informal Bibliography of the Publications of William Hoffer, Bookseller*. Vancouver: Tricouni Press / Stephen Lunsford. 1998. Bringhurst was involved – as author, editor, typographer or combatant – in many of the publications of the legendary bookseller William Hoffer (1944-1997) and is quoted and mentioned here repeatedly. (See also A.9, A.18, A.31a, E.6, S.14, S.82, S.93, S.106.)

S.192 Rod McDonald. "1997 ATypI Conference, University of Reading." *Serif* 6 (Spring 1998): 13-14. This report on the annual conference of the Association Typographique Internationale includes a brief account of the lecture Bringhurst gave there under the title "The Typographer as God: Creating Script and Type for Far Off, Far Out, Far Fetched and Unwritten (so far) Languages."

S.193 Iain Higgins. Review of *The Calling* (A.47). *Journal of Canadian Poetry* 12 (1997): 27-46. Enlarged from S.187 and focussing exclusively on *The Calling*.

S.194 Erling Friis-Baastad. "Poet Contains Multitudes." *The Yukon News* (Whitehorse), 11 September 1998: 22. Based on a telephone interview conducted just before Bringhurst's 1998 visit to Whitehorse to read at the local college.

S.195 Anonymous. "Poet Writer-in-Residence." *Western News* (University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario) 34.24 (September 24, 1998): 7. Brief article reporting Bringhurst's impending arrival as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario.

1999

S.196 Ian Gillespie. "Listening to Silence." *London Free Press* (London, Ontario) 10 January 1999: D1. Account of an interview and announcement of a forthcoming reading at the London Public Library. With C.75.

S.197 Lorna Jackson. "The Nature of Indianness." *Quill & Quire* 65.3 (March 1999): 63. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59).

S.198 Sandee Wong. "Western's writer-in-residence provides safe environment for budding authors." *Western News* (London, Ontario) 35.12 (1 April 1999): 11. Story and interview occasioned by Bringhurst's tenure as writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario.

S.199 Mark Abley. "Haida Tales Brought Back to Life." *Montreal Gazette*, April 10, 1999: J4. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). (See also S.199a, S.223.)

S.199a Mark Abley. "Haida Myths Beautifully Told." *Edmonton Journal*, April 23, 1999: I6. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59), reprinted from S.199.

S.200 Olive P. Dickason. "Saving the Classical Haida Myths." *Toronto Globe and Mail*, May 1, 1999: D16. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59).

S.201 Norbert Ruebsaat. "Tricking the Trickster." *The Vancouver Sun*, May 29, 1999: E11. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59).

S.202 Terry Glavin. "Exquisite Haida Epics Surface After a Century." *The Georgia Straight* (Vancouver) 33/1642 (June 10–17 1999): 25. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59).

S.203 Anonymous. "Swanton's Way." *B.C. Bookworld* (Vancouver) 13.2 (Summer 1999): 28-29. Trade paper review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59).

S.204 Anne Moon. "Whose culture is it, anyway?" *Times-Colonist* (Victoria, B.C.), June 20, 1999: 10. Article on the "cultural appropriation" controversy over *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59).

S.205 Candace Fertile. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). *Monday Magazine* (Victoria, B.C.) July 1, 1999: 00.

S.206 Candace Fertile. "Haida mythology echoes inclusively." *Calgary Herald*, July 3, 1999: D7. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59), adapted from S.205.

S.207 Hugh Brody. "Pilgrimage to the Poem." *The National Post* (Toronto), July 6, 1999: B11. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59).

S.208 Hans Werner. "The Soul of Haida Gwaii." *Toronto Star*, July 11, 1999: D28-29. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59).

S.209 Mark Thoburn. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). *Leader Post* (Regina, Saskatchewan), July 17, 1999: ?? Rpt. as S.215.

S.210 John Bemrose. "The Timely Wisdom of Traditional Tales." *Maclean's* (Toronto), July 12, 1999: 56-57. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59).

S.211 Jay Currie & Michèle Denis. "Hearing Old Songs." *Two Chairs* (Vancouver) 2.6. (July 1999): 7-9, 25. Rambling interview concerning *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59).

S.212 Charles Bigelow. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style*, 2nd edition (A.55). *Written Language and Literacy* (Amsterdam) 2.1 (1999): 156-161.

S.213 Val Ross. "Lost Masterpieces Regained." *Toronto Globe and Mail*, July 17, 1999: C8. Discussion of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59).

S.214 [Victor Golla]. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). *SSILA* (Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas) *Newsletter* (Arcata, California) 18.2 (July 1999): 13. See also S.217, S.225, S.251, S.252.

S.215 Mark Thoburn. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). *Two Chairs* 2.7 (October 1999): 29. Rpt. from S.209.

S.215a Carmen Concilio. "Poetry and Globalization: Robert Bringhurst's Poetic Wor(l)ds". In Alfredo Rizzardi, ed., *Il Canada e le culture della globalizzazione*, Bari: Schena Editore, 1999: 405-427.

S.216 Brett, Brian. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). *Books in Canada* 28.7 (October 1999): 9-10. See also S.221.

S.217 John Enrico. "Bringhurst's Haida: A Dissenting View." *SSILA* (Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas) *Newsletter* 18.3 (October 1999): 5-8. A lengthy attack on *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59) and on its author. Bringhurst's brief rebuttal (D.95) appears in the same issue. From October 1999 until September 2001, the larger attack from which this excerpt comes was posted by Enrico on the internet with the URL <www.bringhurst.net>. In September 2001, after a threat of legal action on grounds of defamation, the website was closed. See also A.68, S.214, S.225, S.251.

S.218 Adele Weder. "The Myths and the White Man." *Toronto Globe and Mail*, November 15, 1999: C3. Discussion of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). Bringhurst's reply is D.96.

S.219 Joel Martineau. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). *B.C. Studies* (Vancouver) 123 (Fall 1999): 91-92.

S.220 Anonymous. "Top Five B.C. Writers." *The Vancouver Sun*, December 17, 1999:F4. A list of five names presented as part of a larger list of the "Top 100 British Columbians." Bringhurst is named fourth of the top five writers. The first three writers on the list are Earle Birney, George Woodcock and Dorothy Livesay (all deceased at the time); in fifth place is Joy Kogawa. Other subgroups include the "top five artists" and the "top five businessmen." Bringhurst alone (of all the names on all the sublists) does not appear in the larger list (pp. F8-11) of 100.

2000

S.221 Mrs C.W. [Wilna] Hodgson. Letter to the Editor. *Books in Canada* 29.1 (February 2000): 4. A lengthy letter from a Cree elder, about *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59), occasioned by S.216, and accompanied by a response from Brian Brett.

S.222 Richard Eckersley. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.57). *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* (Toronto) 31.3 (April 2000): 149-154. In the same issue with D.99.

S.223 Mark Abley. "Homage or Theft?" *Times Literary Supplement* (London) (5 May 2000): 4-5. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59) and an account of the controversy spawned by the book. (See also S.199.)

S.224 Jeet Heer. "An Internet Review as Sharp as a Knife." *The National Post* (Toronto), May 20, 2000: B7. Review of John Enrico's unsigned internet review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59).

- S.225 Dell Hymes. "In Defense of Bringhurst." SSILA (Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas) *Newsletter* 19.1 (April 2000): 3.
- S.226 Bernd Dietz. "Una tarjeta de visita: la poesía de Robert Bringhurst." *La Manzana Poética* (Córdoba) 2 (Invierno 2000): 4-6. In the same issue with C.76 and T.Sp.3.
- S.227 Philip Marchand. "The Word Made Flesh." *Toronto Star* June 18, 2000: C15. Review of *A Short History of the Printed Word* (A.61).
- S.228 Christopher Camuto. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). *Audubon* (New York) 102.3 (May/June 2000): 106.
- S.229 Scott Steedman. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). *Paris Voice* (Paris) 6.23 (July/August 2000): 19.
- S.230 Terry Glavin. "Mythworld Revisits Haida." *The Georgia Straight* 34/1706 (31 August–7 September 2000): 34. Review of *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* (A.62).
- S.231 Sara O'Leary. "Twice-Told Tales." *The Vancouver Sun*, October 21, 2000: E7. Review of *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* (A.62), comparing it to Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*.
- S.232 Candace Fertile. "Tales of the Sealion People." *Monday Magazine* (Victoria, B.C.), October 19–25, 2000: 00. Review of *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* (A.62).
- S.233 Kevin McNeilly. "Cutting Both Ways: Robert Bringhurst and Haida Literature." *Canadian Literature* 167 (Winter 2000): 167-174. Review article concerned primarily with *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). In the same issue with D.103 & S.233.
- S.234 W.H. New. "Re-Collecting 1999." *Canadian Literature* 167 (Winter 2000): 176-187. A catch-all review article which devotes (on p. 183) several sentences to *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). In the same issue with D.103 & S.233.
- S.235 Stephen Heaver. Review of *A Short History of the Printed Word* (A.61). *Parenthesis* 5 (December 2000): 52-53.

2001

- S.236 Candace Fertile. "Writings of the Raven." *Monday Magazine* (Victoria, B.C.), January 25–31, 2001: 11. Review of *Solitary Raven* (E.8).
- S.237 Christopher Moore. "Native Canada's Literary History." *The Beaver* (Winnipeg) 81.1 (February/March 2001): 54-55. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59).
- S.238 Douglas R. Parks. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). *Choice* (Middletown, Connecticut) ?? (April 2001): 00.
- S.239 Noah Richler. "A Man True to Someone Else's Words." *The National Post* (Toronto), June 7, 2001: B7. Column on *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* (A.62). See also S.242.
- S.240 Jeff Leer. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). *International Journal of American Linguistics* (Chicago) 66.4 (dated October 2000, but published June 2001): 565-578. This review depends heavily on contributions from John Enrico, author of the defamatory website known as <bringhurst.net> (cf. A.68, S.217, S.251).
- S.240a Gary Geddes. "Robert Bringhurst." *Fifteen Canadian Poets Times Three*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001: 388-389. Critical summary accompanying anthology selections. (See also B.78a, S.89.)

- S.241 Sheila Peters. "Hecate Strait." In *Tending the Remnant Damage*. Vancouver: Porcepic, 2001: 25-45. Peters's story is built in part around extended quotations from "Sutra of the Heart," taken from A.32.
- S.242 Noah Richler. "Where two cultures meet, complainers arise." *The National Post* (Toronto), November 8, 2001: A21FR. Column on *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers* (A.59, 62, 64). See also S.239.
- S.243 Marie Mauzé. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59) and *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* (A.62). *L'Homme* (Paris) 160 (2001): 229-231.
- S.244 Elsa Linguanti. "Una Pluralità di voci." In *Persistenza della poesia e distruzione del mondo: Testa e studi di poesia anglofona postcoloniale*, a cura di Elsa Linguanti. Pisa: Bandecchi & Vivaldi: 3-8. About half the article consists of a translation of Bringhurst's "La Persistencia de la poesía y la destrucción del mundo" (from B.71/D.87). Also included is a translation of "The Reader," with original text (from A.32).
- S.245 Robyn Sarah. "Good poetry stands up to evil." *The Gazette* (Montreal), November 17, 2001: J3. Column on "For the Bones of Joseph Mengele," from *The Calling* (A.47).
- S.246 Patrick Brown. "A Window into the Haida Past." *Island Tides* (XXX), November 22, 2001: 8. Review of *Being in Being* (A.64).
- S.247 John D. Berry. "The Parmenides Project." *Alphabet* (San Francisco) 27.1 (Fall 2001): 23-25.

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- S.248 Steven Engler. Review of *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* (A.62). *Religious Studies Review* (Valparaiso, Indiana) 28.1 (January 2002): 88-89. See also D.118.
- S.249 Joel Martineau. Review of *Solitary Raven* (E.8). *B.C. Studies* 132 (Winter 2001/2002): 98-99.
- S.250 Robert E. Walls. Review of *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* (A.62a). *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* (Seattle) 93.1 (2002): 38.
- S.251 Anonymous. Editorial apology for errors in Je# Leer's review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). *International Journal of American Linguistics* 67.2 (dated April 2001, but published February 2002): unnumbered first page. "The author of the review quoted some unfounded statements from another author" – i.e., from John Enrico and his website, <bringhurst.net> (cf. A.68, S.217, S.240).
- S.252 [Victor Golla]. Review of *Being in Being* (A.67). SSILA (Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas) *Newsletter* 21.1 (April 2002): 14-15. See also S.214, S.217, S.225.
- S.253 Carl Gombert. Review of *Solitary Raven* (E.8). *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 94.2 (Spring 2002): 94-95.
- S.254 Bill Siverly. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59) and *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* (A.62a). *Wicazo Sa Review* (Minneapolis) 17.2 (Fall 2002): 196-204. See also S.260a.
- S.255 Kevin McNeilly. "Walter Benjamin in Vancouver." *Canadian Literature* 173 (Summer 2002): 194-198. Includes a discussion of "Lyell Island Variations" from *The Calling*, contrasted with George Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies*. (In the same issue with D.108.)
- S.256 Iain Higgins. "Bringhurst, Robert," in W.H. New, ed., *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2002: 152-4. In the same issue with B.80.
- S.257 Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). *The Review* (Toronto) 1.1 (October 2002): 5-7.

S.258 Wendy Wickwire. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59). *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 93.4 (September 2002): 199.

S.259 Viktoria Tchernichova. "Robert Bringhurst's 'The Lyell Island Variations': Dialoguing Memories," in Giovanni Dotoli, ed., *Il Canada del nuovo secolo: gli archivi della memoria*. Fasano, Brindisi: Schena. 2002: 77-89.

2003

S.260 Richard Dauenhauer. Review of *Being in Being* (A.67). *World Literature Today* (Norman, Oklahoma) 77.1, (April-June 2003): 159.

S.260a Bill Siverly & Michael McDowell. "Afterword: Form in Poetry of Place." *Windfall: A Journal of Poetry of Place* (Portland, Oregon) 1.2 (Spring 2003): 00-00. One of a series of afterwords published in successive issues of this journal, all dealing with aspects of the poetry or place. This one makes extensive reference to *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59) and *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* (A.62a). See also S.254.

S.261 Noah Richler. "He aims for the stars." *The National Post* (Toronto), July 10, 2003: AL1 Front. Richler's final column, devoted to *Ursa Major* (A.69).

S.262 George Elliott Clarke. "Bringhurst's Ursa Major shines brilliantly." *The Chronicle Herald* (Halifax), August 10, 2003: C7. Review of *Ursa Major* (A.69).

S.263 Terry Glavin. Review of *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers = A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59), *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* (A.62) and *Being in Being* (A.64). *B.C. Studies* (Vancouver) 138-139 (Summer-Autumn 2003): 181-184.

S.264 Dell Hymes. Review of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59), *Nine Visits to the Mythworld* (A.62), and *Being in Being* (A.67). *Language in Society* 32.5 (November 2003): 747-751.

S.264a Anthony K. Webster. Review of *Being in Being* (A.67). *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* (Washington, D.C.) 13.2 (December 2003): 263-264.

S.264b Adam Dickinson. "Love in the Time of Clear-Cuts." *Antigonish Review* (Antigonish, N.S.) 135 (Autumn 2003): 83-88. Review of *Thinking and Singing* (B.79).

2004

S.265 Kevin McNeilly. "Gained in Translation: Robert Bringhurst has a boundless appetite for cross-cultural exchange." *The Vancouver Sun*, January 31, 2004: D17.

S.266 John Burns. "Lecture gives a new read on Reid attacks." *The Georgia Straight* (Vancouver) 38/1885 (February 5-12, 2004): 33-34. Concerns the lecture "Finding Home," delivered in Vancouver on 6 February 2004 and later printed in *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81).

S.267 Alexandra Gill. "Rallying around Bill Reid." *Toronto Globe and Mail*, February 6, 2004: R8. Concerns the lecture "Finding Home," delivered in Vancouver on 6 February 2004 and later printed in *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81).

S.268 Alison Taylor. "Bringhurst breathes new life into old native stories." *Pique Newsmagazine* (Whistler, British Columbia) February 6, 2004: 24.

S.269 Lynne Davis. "Risky Stories: Speaking and Writing in Colonial Spaces." *Native Studies Review* (Saskatoon) 15.1 (Spring 2004): 1-20.

S.270 Margaret Atwood. "Uncovered: An American Iliad." *The Times* (London), February 28, 2004: *Weekend Review* 10-11. Review of the trilogy *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers* (A.59, 62, 64). With C.78.

S.271 Iain Higgins. "Bear Bones." *Books in Canada* 33.2 (March 2004): 42. Review of *Ursa Major* (A.69). In the same issue with D.116.

S.272 Carmine Starnino. "Language as she is spoken." *Toronto Globe and Mail*, October 16, 2004: D12. Review of *The Solid Form of Language* (A.72).

S.273 Philip Marchand. "That Incredible Invention." *Toronto Star*, November 14, 2004: D13. Review of *The Solid Form of Language* (A.72).

S.274 George Elliott Clarke. "In Essay, Poet Uses Beautiful Poetry." *Halifax Chronicle Herald*, December 26, 2004: *The Novascotian / Books*, p 15. Review of *The Solid Form of Language* (A.72).

S.275 Brian Lynch & Colin Thomas. "Haida Past Speaks to Troubled Present." *The Georgia Straight* (Vancouver) 38/1931 (December 23, 2004): 61.

S.275a Michael Elcock. *A Perfectly Beautiful Place*. Lantzville, B.C.: Oolichan Books. The chapter "Flan-aa-gaan" (pp. 198-202) includes a mildly fictionalized account of Bringhurst's visit to Seville in 1990.

2005

S.276 Rebecca Wigod. "'Uncompromising' writer honoured." *The Vancouver Sun*, May 2, 2005: B1 front. An account of Bringhurst's winning the Lieutenant-Governor's Award for Literary Excellence, presented on April 30, 2005.

S.277 "The Edward Sapir Prize." ssila (Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas) *Newsletter* 24.1 (April 2005): 5. Announcement of Bringhurst's receipt of the 2004 Edward Sapir Prize for *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers* (A.59, 62, 64).

S.277a Stephen Taylor. "Liquid Mathematics." *Vector* (Cambridge, UK) 21.2 (Spring 2005): 44-49. Review of *The Solid Form of Language* (A.72)

S.278 Gilbert Wesley Purdy. Review of *The Solid Form of Language* (A.72). *The Georgia Review* xx (Summer 2005): 434.

S.279 Nicholas Bradley. "'We Who Have Traded Our Voices for Words': Performance, Poetry, and the Printed Word in Robert Bringhurst's Translations from Haida." *Essays on Canadian Writing* (Toronto) 83 (Fall 2004): 140-166.

S.280 Brian Henderson. "Poet on Point." *Canadian Literature* 186 (Autumn 2005): 117-118. Review of *Ursa Major* (A.69).

S.281 Crispin Elsted. Review of *The Fragments of Parmenides* (A.70). *Parenthesis* 11 (Autumn 2005): 24-26. In the same issue with D.125.

S.282 Viktoria Tchernichova. "'To Sing Thought Back into Being': Memoria, poesia e pluralità dell'essere nel pensiero di Robert Bringhurst," in Roberta Ferrari e Laura Giovanelli, ed., *The Complete Consort: Saggi di anglistica in onore di Francesco Gozzzi*. Pisa: Pisa University Press. 2005: 407-423.

2006

S.283 Denise Hayes. "Poetry is at centre of existence for award-winning Quadra resident." *North Islander* (Campbell River, B.C.), March 17, 2006: 1a, 5a. Newspaper article in anticipation of the 2006 Words on the Water literary festival in Campbell River.

S.283a Jerry Kelly. Review of *The Elements of Typographic Style* (A.73). *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 100.1 (March 2006): 137-138.

S.284 Carlos Gomes, "First Place, First Nations." *Ellipse* 76 (Winter 2005–6): 5-7. Editorial notes concerned primarily with Bringhurst's relations to First Nations literature. In same issue with D.126.

S.284a Nicholas P.R. Bradley. *Ecology and Knowledge in the Poetry of Pacific North America*. Dissertation. University of Toronto. 2006. Discusses "the works of five poets, each affiliated to some extent with the west coast of North America: Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder, Don McKay, Jan Zwicky, and Robert Bringhurst.... I demonstrate first that Jeffers and Snyder depict a world marked by intricate interrelationships and dependencies; they attempt to explore the essence of the world by escaping an anthropocentric point of view.... In turn I demonstrate that Bringhurst incorporates into his poetry elements of various mythologies and Buddhist philosophy in order to create a poetics of radical anti-anthropocentrism. I conclude by discussing the question of political efficacy in contemporary nature poetry."

S.285 "Quadra Island Author Awarded Honorary Degree." *Campbell River Mirror* (Campbell River, B.C.), June 16, 2006: A16. Lengthy news release evidently issued by the University College of the Fraser Valley.

S.286 Noah Richler. *This Is My Country, What's Yours?: A Literary Atlas of Canada*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart. 2006: 48–54, 82–83, 459. Chapter 2, "Stories and What They Do," is based largely on a reading of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* (A.59) and on interviews and correspondence with Bringhurst.

S.286a Peter Rutledge Koch. "The Pre-Socratic Project and Remarks on the Philosophical Side of Fine Printing." Pp. 39-55 In *Book Talk: Essays on Books, Booksellers, Collecting, and Special Collections*, edited by Robert H. Jackson & Carol Zeman Rothkopf. New Castle, Delaware: Oak Knoll. 2006. In part, an account of the making of *The Fragments of Parmenides* (A.70).

S.287 Mark Dickinson. Review of *Wild Language* (A.78). *The Malahat Review* 157 (Winter 2006): 103-104.

2007

S.288 Philip Marchand. "The Book of the World – A Poet Pronounces." *Toronto Star*, January 14, 2007: D06. Review of *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81).

S.289 Jeanette Winterson. "Her Word." *The Times* (London), January 27, 2007: *Weekend Review*, p. 3. Review of *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81).

S.290 Milda Kniezaitė. "Tikrovė nekalba angliskai nei lietuviskai." *Lietuvos žinios* (Vilnius, Lithuania), Vasario [February] 24, 2007: 18. "Truth speaks neither English nor Lithuanian." Report of a reading by Bringhurst and his Lithuanian translator, Kornelijus Platelis, celebrating the publication of *Kvapuoti pądomis* (T.Lt.3). Shares page with S.291.

S.291 Milda Kniezaitė. "Kas idomu ir ka verta uzrasyti." *Lietuvos žinios*, Vasario [February] 24, 2007: 18. Account of an interview with Bringhurst, conducted in Vilnius, February 22, 2007, provoked by the publication of *Kvapuoti pądomis* (T.Lt.3). Shares page with S.290.

S.292 Linda Kusina. "Bija 60 daz1das Kan1das." *Latvijas av3ze* (Riga, Latvia) 63 (2966), Marts [March] 5, 2007: 12. Account of an interview with Bringhurst, conducted in Riga, February 27, 2007. See also leader on front page of the same publication.

S.293 Margita Gailitis & Edvins Raups. "Dzeja un mitologia." *Kult5ras forums* (Riga, Latvia) 9 (247), Marts [March] 2–9, 2007: 4, 6. Account of an interview with Bringhurst, conducted in Riga, February 27, 2007. In the same issue with T.La.1.

S.294 Judith Fitzgerald. "Prose and Cons of Poetry." *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 7 April 2007: D8. Review of *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81).

- S.295 Michael Hayward. "Wisdom and Wild Language." *Geist* (Vancouver) 64 (Spring 2007): 74. Review of Gary Snyder's *Back on the Fire* and Bringhurst's *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81).
- S.296 [Victor Golla]. Review of *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81). SSILA (Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas) *Newsletter* 26.1 (April 2007): 9.
- S.297 Nicholas R. Bradley. "Remembering Offence: Robert Bringhurst and the Ethical Challenge of Cultural Appropriation." *University of Toronto Quarterly* (Toronto) 76.3 (Summer 2007): 890-912.
- S.298 Jay Ruzesky. Review of *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81). *Event* 36.2 (September 2007): 122-124.
- S.299 Peter Mitham. *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81). *Ampora* 147 (September 2007): 37-38.
- S.300 Zachariah Wells. Review of *Everywhere Being Is Dancing* (A.83). *Quill & Quire* 73 (December 2007): 37.
- S.301 Sarah Petrescu. "Cleaning House." *The Times-Colonist* (Victoria, B.C.), 16 December 2007: D9. Article occasioned by *Everywhere Being Is Dancing* (A.83).
- S.302 Candace Fertile. "A mind at play with language." Toronto *Globe and Mail*, 22 December 2007: D5. Review of *Everywhere Being Is Dancing* (A.83).

2008

- S.303 Rebecca Raglon. "The Natural History of Language and Literature." *Canadian Literature* 196 (Spring 2008): 127-8. Review of *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81) and *Wild Language* (A.78). See also S.312.
- S.304 Alexander Varty. Review of *Everywhere Being Is Dancing* (A.83). *Georgia Straight* 42/2090 (January 10-17, 2008): 28.
- S.305 Trevor Carolan, "Branches on the Tree of Being: Views of Robert Bringhurst." *Pacific Rim Review of Books* (Victoria, BC) 8 (Spring 2008): 4. Review of *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81) and *Everywhere Being Is Dancing* (A.83). In the same issue with D.130.
- S.306 D.H. Tracy. Review of *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81). Chicago: *Poetry* 191.5 (February 2008): 438-440.
- S.306b Anik See, "Squeezing a Spiral into a Square Hole: Dürer, Bringhurst and Proportion." In *Saudade: The Possibilities of Place* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 2008): 59-72. Chiefly a meditation on *The Elements of Typographic Style*.
- S.307 Kevin McNeilly. Review of *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81). Toronto: *University of Toronto Quarterly* 77.1 (Winter 2008): 451-453.
- S.308 Ariela Freedman. Review of *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81). Montreal: *Vallum* 6.1 (Winter 2008): 73-77.
- S.309 Douglas Williamson. Review of *The Surface of Meaning* (A.87). *Logos* (London) 19.4 (2008): 211-212.

2009

- S.310 Anonymous. "Picture Perfect: the Illustrated Book of the Week." Review of *The Surface of Meaning* (A.87). Toronto *Globe and Mail*, February 7, 2009: F11.
- S.311 Andy Brown. Review of *The Surface of Meaning* (A.87). *Matrix* (Montreal) 82 (Spring 2009): 58-61.
- S.312 Rebecca Raglon. Review of *The Tree of Meaning* (A.81). *Journal of Ecocriticism* (on-line journal, Burnaby, B.C.) 1.1 (2009): 80-82. See also S.312.

S.313 Mark Dickinson. "Canadian Primal: Five Poet-Thinkers Redefine Our Relationship to Nature." *The Walrus* (Toronto) 6.5 (June 2009): 62-65. Essay on the "Group of Five" (Lee, McKay, Bringham, Zwicky, and Lilburn) who appear in Tim Lilburn's anthology *Thinking and Singing* (B.79).

S.314 Fraser Sutherland. "Art and Nature, Body and Mind." Toronto *Globe and Mail*, July 11, 2009: F12. Review of *Selected Poems* (A.92).

S.315 Mark Dickinson. "In the Wake of Our Ancestors." *The Times* (London), August 8, 2009: *Weekend Review* 12. Review of *Selected Poems* (A.92).

S.316 Randall Speller. Review of *The Surface of Meaning* (A.87). *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada / Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada* (47.1 (Spring 2009): 110-113.

S.317 Nicholas Bradley. "Pressing Concerns." *Canadian Literature* 201 (Summer 2009): 153-155. Review of *Everywhere Being Is Dancing* (A.83) and *Gaspereau Gloriat* (B.102).

S.318 David Seymour. "Pure Functionality." *Arc Poetry Annual 2010*. Ottawa: Arc Poetry Society, 2009: pp. 78-80. [With supplemental on-line commentary, pp. 80-81.] Essay on "The Beauty of the Weapons," from A.14. With B.112.

S.319 Sebastian Carter. "The Surface of Meaning." *Parentesis* 17 (Autumn 2009): 56-57. Review of *The Surface of Meaning* (A.87). In the same issue with D.135, D.136, and S.320. See also the review of *Book Art Object* (B.104), pp. 58-59 in the same issue.

S.320 Paul Razzell. "In Brief." *Parentesis* 17 (Autumn 2009): 3-4. Includes a report on Bringham's receipt of the American Printing History Association's award for individual achievement. In the same issue with D.135, D.136, and S.319.

S.321 Nicholas Bradley. Review of *Selected Poems* (A.92). *The Malabar Review* 169 (Winter 2009): 97-102.

S.322 Shane Neilson. Review of *The Surface of Meaning* (A.87). *DA: A Journal of the Printing Arts* (Erin, Ontario) 65 (Fall/Winter 2009): 96-98.

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S.323 Gillian Harding-Russell. Review of *Selected Poems* (A.92). *Prairie Fire* 30.4 (Winter 2009–2010): 00–00.

S.324 Zachariah Wells. Review of *Selected Poems* (A.92). *Arc* (Ottawa) 63 (Winter 2010): 117-118.

S.325 Norbert Ruebsaat. "Words of an Artist." Review of *Solitary Raven* (E.11). *Literary Review of Canada* (Toronto) 18.2 (March 2010): 20-21. Review of *Solitary Raven* (E.11).

S.326 Manuel J. Albert. "La literatura puede perderse por exceso." *El País* (Madrid, Edición Andalucía) 7 de abril 2010: Andalucía 8. Account of an interview with Bringham just before a reading in Córdoba.

S.327 Yvonne Korshak & Robert J. Rubin. "Robert Bringham (1946–): New World Suite Number Three." In *Beyond the Text: Artists' Books from the Collection of Robert J. Rubin*. Exhibition Catalog. New York: Grolier Club, 2010: 72-73.

S.328 Paul Watkins. "A Poetics of Listening." Review of *Selected Poems* (A.92). *Canadian Literature*. Consulted on the web on 12 August 2010.