

REVIEWS

Listening to Bringhurst

Listening for the Heartbeat of Being: The Arts of Robert Bringhurst. Eds. Brent Wood and Mark Dickinson. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015.

Robert Bringhurst. "Air, Water, Land, Light, and Language: Reflections on the Commons and its Contents." In *Editing as Cultural Practice in Canada*. Eds. Dean Irvine and Smaro Kamboureli. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016. 211-24.

Listening for the Heartbeat of Being begins to remedy the dearth of scholarship on Robert Bringhurst, the poet, translator, editor, and typographer whose *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Myhtellers* is a landmark work of literary criticism and translation of Haida poetry that caused a stir at the time of its publication and may well return to the limelight in the current climate of debates around cultural appropriation. He is also a poet of expansive ecological vision, by many accounts a brilliant linguist, and a penetrating philosopher and essayist whose work, while influential, has garnered surprisingly little critical attention. *Listening* is a gem of an introduction to this elusive and fascinating figure.

The objective of any collection of essays should be to strike a balance between the variety of perspectives that different contributors bring, on the one hand, and the sense of unity one gets from a coherent set of objectives, on the other; *Listening* succeeds admirably on this score. Its contributors include scholars, poets, translators, print designers, storytellers, a publisher, an editor, a dancer, a journalist, and a radio host. Together they offer a kaleidoscopic view of the man and his varied work as a poet, translator, and typographer. Their perspectives range from critical readings of individual poems to warm portraits of Bringhurst as a colleague, collaborator, and friend. As Brent Wood and Mark Dickinson state in their introduction, the book "aims to reveal Bringhurst's diverse vocations as facets of a single project" (4). The overlapping concerns and connected strands of these essays achieve this goal, demonstrating the interconnectedness of poetry, typography, and translation in this singular figure's exploration of ancient literary traditions, philosophies of being, and complex ecological relations.

Although Crispin Elsted warns that "Robert would not thank me for writing him a shrine to inhabit" (100), the tone of this volume is of

deep appreciation. These are, by and large, highly laudatory essays: their unified objective is to showcase the range and extent of Bringhurst's work, but the many personal connections among the contributors mean that the book is also a celebration of the man and his influence and friendships. This effect by no means detracts from the book's critical value; as Elsted also reminds us, "Friendship is implicit in all Bringhurst's work, whether the reader knows him personally or not" (89) – Bringhurst "wants people to know, because knowing is both essential to life, and joyous" (95). There is a great deal of joy in this volume, and a deepened "knowing" of a figure who has, until now, remained at the margins of Canadian literary criticism.

One joy I found in this book is that it is beautifully arranged: it strikes a welcome balance of approaches alternating among biography, literary criticism, and personal and philosophical meditation. We are guided from sweeping descriptions to close readings, from critical analysis to warmly conversational reflections, from the works to the man at work. Bringhurst's approach to language and to making books is material as well as intellectual and imaginative; accordingly these essays contemplate not only the abstract, philosophical themes that run through his poems, but also the sensuous surfaces of his books and the rhythms of his language.

The volume begins with two valuable introductions to Bringhurst's life and work. Dickinson and Wood's introduction ranges across the "scope of his career" and characterizes his methods: he "seeks to re-enchant the world, yet his approach is anything but Romantic," we read; he is "[m]ore literary engineer than bard, more philosopher than shaman, more craftsman than prophet," a "custodian of precious, nearly extinct modes of consciousness and the voices and texts through which we access them" (5). Custodianship is an apt way of characterizing Bringhurst's highly disciplined practice of listening and his representation of other voices and languages, the other "thought-worlds" to which they give a glimpse (7).

His purpose, however, extends beyond mere custodianship to the transformative thinking that happens when – as Bringhurst himself puts it – the polyphonic intertwining of different voices enlarges "the space they occupy ... and the mind gets larger with it" (9). Arguing for a deeper appreciation of Bringhurst's cultural importance, the editors remind us that we are at a moment when the "global ecological crisis provides evidence every day of the hubris which drives colonial expansion and technological consumption of the natural world. Our only path through the evolving malaise," they posit, "may be a collective re-awakening to humility, a poly-

phonic epiphany owing something to a renaissance of North American Indigenous cultural ideals,” a “cultural transformation” for which “Bringhurst’s listening skills may prove a valuable catalyst” (17).

The essays that follow explore the precise nature and extent of these “listening skills.” Mark Dickinson’s “artistic and intellectual biography” is an engaging survey of formative events and relationships in Bringhurst’s life. Dickinson renders the poet’s complex humanity with great care and sensitivity. Emphasizing Bringhurst’s mobility and polyglot education, his avid reading of the modernist poets, his apprenticeship and friendship with Bill Reid, his turn (suggested by Reid) to polyphony in his poetic technique, and his passion for language and ancient art forms that led to his monumental translations of Haida stories, he paints a complex and vivid portrait of this fascinating and (to many readers) elusive figure.

Each successive essay elaborates on a particular work or facet of Bringhurst’s career or influence. Peter Koch’s brief but delightful account of collaborating with Bringhurst on *The Old in Their Knowing* introduces the idea of translation as continuance rather than preservation – the printing of ancient texts “an exercise in joyful work conceived in the spirit of the great scholar-printers of the Renaissance” (50). Koch’s reflection on first meeting Bringhurst at the famous California restaurant Chez Panisse makes the subtle equation between “[f]ine printing and fine food” that anticipates the poet’s own view that “culture is food” (46, Bringhurst 215) – an enticing metaphor that underscores the vital necessity of cultural labor of all kinds. Kevin McNeilly’s essay “Ecologies of Estrangement” gives us a rich sampling of this food in a succinct, beautiful, and penetrating meditation on Bringhurst’s thinking through of the fraught period of the Vietnam War in *Antigone*. A particular highlight of this essay is McNeilly’s close reading of passages that he sets against Ann Carson’s translation, among others. McNeilly also clarifies how, for Bringhurst, poetry becomes a form of Heideggerian dwelling that is not appropriation, and translation a form of deep listening that opens the English language to the otherness of the world, engaging the world’s polyphony rather than concealing or homogenizing it. The most compelling part of Iain MacLeod Higgins’ essay, which traces Bringhurst’s journey from “prentice” to mature poet, is also its close reading, this time of “Antistrophe from Leopardi.” Higgins provides the original Italian text and his own direct “Englishing” in order to masterfully reveal both the limitations and the brilliant revisions of Bringhurst’s translation. This is the kind of fine-tuned scholarship that can

dramatically deepen readers' appreciation of particular works, enticing them to return to them, or read – or teach—them for the first time.

Inviting us, then, to revel in the sensuous materiality of the books that Bringhurst has designed, Crispin Elsted elucidates the careful craft of typography and book production that works in consort with his more abstract “[s]tructures... of thought” as “a play of opposites, a fugue” (90). Like Higgins, Elsted is interested in Bringhurst’s maturation as a poet and craftsman, marking *Bergschrund* as the turning point in the development of his “distinctive feeling for the page” (91). As Wood shows in his detailed analysis of Bringhurst’s prosody, the poet has a distinctive feeling for sound as well. Wood’s contribution, although rather long and abstract in comparison with the economy of the first several essays, deftly turns our attention to the experiments in visual and auditory rhythm and thus prepares us for thinking about the sophisticated sonic textures of Bringhurst’s polyphonic poems, on which much of the second half of the book focuses. Wood’s lucid analysis of how, in another act of translation, the musical structures of polyphony shape the verbal medium of poetry is a helpful introduction, followed by Clare Goulet’s recollections of performing one of the parts for “Conversations with a Toad” “in the damp stone basement of a ... bar” in 1995. The challenges of live performance that Goulet describes, and the link she draws between polyphony and metaphor’s conveyance of “the relation – the points of congruity and the *spaces* – between things,” help to further define the parameters and characteristics of the form that Bringhurst regards not as a “technique” so much as “a complex property of reality” that informs his art (139).

Meditating on the avant-garde significance of Bringhurst’s introduction of polyphony into poetry, Dennis Lee underscores its striking novelty – “no one had ever written a poem that operates this way,” he recalls (150). He issues an emphatic plea for accessible recordings of poems like *The Blue Roofs of Japan* and *New World Suite*, which are currently only readily found in print. After reading the previous two essays, it is hard not to agree with Lee that reading these poems is like looking at a musical score without being able to listen to the symphony. As Goulet insists, performers and listeners must – and can – be trained to hear this kind of poetry, to appreciate what Lee calls its “strange yet assured music, which alternates between clarity and a murmuring cacophony” (150). Many of the book’s final chapters, culminating in Wood and Dickinson’s evocative description of *Ursa Major* (which “at first glance or listen” can seem “largely incomprehensible” [233]), are geared to retraining our poetic ears (and eyes) to this unique poetic form. As Katherine McLeod underscores, Bringhurst

envisions polyphony as a form that occupies the “narrow space between speech and music” – and listening, too: as she observes about *The Blue Roofs of Japan*, readers have to “perform a listening *while* speaking – a listening *while* reading” that keeps them aware at all times of “the contradictions and convergences of the simultaneous voices” that the poem records (157, 156).

This interpenetration enacts an ecology, an interconnectedness that is key to Bringhurst’s sense of the world and of all of us in it, and which lies behind his work with Indigenous languages and stories, upon which several chapters in the second half of the book also expand. The publisher Scott McIntyre introduces the controversy of the Haida translations, which generated many accolades but also charges of appropriation. McIntyre’s defense of Bringhurst is amplified by Erica Wagner’s eloquent lauding of *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers* as a book that “shifted” her world “on its axis; truths I thought perfectly well established,” she writes, “suddenly seemed in doubt; a way of being I had never considered began to appear in my mind” (184). The editors include the review that Wagner, as literary editor of *The Times* in London, invited Margaret Atwood to write. This is the only piece that was not written specifically for this volume, though it is not out of place amongst the many reminiscences included here. In the midst of renewed debates about cultural appropriation, with colonial wounds rubbed raw once again, Atwood’s breezy and characteristically wry accolades for the trilogy are less convincing than Wagner’s thoughtful, questioning sense of the importance of “texts that take unfamiliar shapes; that call us to attend to them on their own terms, not on ours” (186). Nicholas Bradley’s meticulously researched essay on the *Masterworks* trilogy more thoroughly details the nature of the criticisms that Bringhurst received for failing to follow proper protocol with the Haida communities whose stories he was translating, such as consulting with elders, for instance, and for romanticizing a culture as ancient and vanished (214). Ultimately, Bradley also defends – though more tentatively than the others, perhaps – Bringhurst’s “pursuit of a comparative, pluriform literary criticism” that recognizes “that literature in North America is older, more diverse, and more sophisticated than is often acknowledged” (215). Like Emily Carr, who insisted that totem poles be recognized as art, Bringhurst insisted that these “oral stories are in fact poetry” and “NOT folklore,” as library catalogues would have us believe (213, 207). Bradley accounts for the controversy around the translations but does not get bogged down in it; rather, his objective is to treat the sto-

ries as poetry and offer his own sense of the “voyages” upon which they take their readers.

Coincidentally, however, Bringhurst writes explicitly about this complex editorial terrain in his contribution to *Editing as Cultural Practice in Canada* (eds. Dean Irvine and Smaro Kamboureli). This essay follows at least two others that will be of interest to many readers of *Canadian Poetry*: Frank Davey’s essay on bpNichol’s editorial work and Kate Eichhorn and Heather Milne’s essay on editorial projects focusing on “feminist poetics” and “contemporary avant-garde writers” (191). Bringhurst makes interesting arguments, here, about editors as arbiters of culture, and about the ways in which culture vacillates between private property and the commons, that resonate well with many of the essays in *Listening*. He plainly lays out his perspective on the moral imperative behind his translation and editorial appropriation of Haida myths, reasserting his beliefs that he was working to give new life, form, and language to “manuscripts from a culture that had vanished,” “like the culture of Renaissance Florence or ancient Athens” (221). His argument that these stories entered the commons when they were told to John Swanton in the first decade of the twentieth century would be more persuasive, I think, if it were grounded in Indigenous rather than Lockean ideas of property. As I understand them, the protocols that we are asked to follow when entering or working with particular Indigenous cultures are tied to different notions of both property and culture. Of course, Bringhurst has Indigenous support as well. In his essay, he relies heavily on Bill Reid’s endorsement of his project, which is echoed in *Listening* by the respectful testimonials of Káawan Sangáa (W.F. Morrison) and Ishmael Hope. On many levels, they concur, Bringhurst has made meaningful connections with Indigenous communities in ways that many Euro-Canadians still have not; he has studied and learned the Haida language and teachings about the world and many of the stories that help to animate it. He did so, he explains in *Editing as Cultural Practice*, because he “felt morally obliged” – it “seemed ... the requisite act of respect” (219).

Bringhurst certainly has much to teach us about stretching and even reshaping our imaginations to think differently about respect and coexistence. In Dickinson’s view, “[a]cademics of a post-colonial bent have not yet realized that in both his polyphonic compositions and translations, Bringhurst shows what decolonization of consciousness might actually look and sound like” (44). Sharon Butala’s response to the performance of *Ursa Major*, quoted at length in Wood and Dickinson’s final chapter, hints as to what this might mean. Her account traces her increasing receptivity

to the enveloping beauty of a world she only partly understands. Her initial bafflement and disorientation give way, not to clarity so much as to a profound sensory experience as she becomes aware of the “music” and “stunning vision” that surrounds her, and of its connection to deep histories and spiritual traditions.

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