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Listening for the Heartbeat of Being: The Arts of Robert Bringhurst edited by Brent Wood and Mark Dickinson

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This Web of Interrelations: On the Many Arts of Robert Bringhurst

***Listening for the Heartbeat of Being: The Arts of Robert Bringhurst* edited by BRENT WOOD & MARK DICKINSON**

McGill-Queen's UP, 2015 \$60.00

Reviewed by **KIRSTEN ALM**

My first encounter with the writings of Robert Bringhurst took place some years ago when we read his "Song of the Summit" in a Literatures of the West Coast graduate seminar at the University of Victoria. The poem begins:

The difference is nothing you can
see
only the dressed edge of air
over those stones, and the air goes
deeper into the lung, like a long
fang. (1-4)

For me, its opening lines were an induction into Bringhurst's austere country of exacting limits, sliding over the "dressed edge" of my mind like the liquid consonants of its fourth line. Intrigued and allured, I found a dozen or so volumes of Bringhurst's poetry in the library after class but, unfortunately, little evidence either in the stacks or online of critical engagement with Bringhurst's writing.

Listening for the Heartbeat of Being is the book I was looking for those years ago. With a scope nearly a match for Bringhurst's own, this volume's sixteen scholarly and personal essays by luminaries such as Margaret Atwood and Erica Wagner offer responses to Bringhurst's own wide-ranging interdisciplinary body of work. The essays have been gathered for the expressed purpose of "[revealing]

Bringhurst's diverse vocations as facets of a single project" (Wood 4): Bringhurst's "drive to access modes of consciousness not shaped by the industrial world but evolving from cultures outside it, beyond it, and prior to it, in which the essential reciprocity between the human and the rest of the natural world is maintained by myth, philosophy, and literature" (5). Addressing the "paucity of critical writing on [Bringhurst's] massive literary *oeuvre*" (4), this collection, edited by Brent Wood and Mark Dickinson, will be an immediately useful resource for scholars and students considering Bringhurst's poetry, translations, and work as a typographer.

The essays collected in *Listening for the Heartbeat of Being* are widely diverse. Ranging in length from three to 36 pages, they vary from extended literary criticism of Bringhurst's poetry and translations to anecdotal accounts and personal reflections by Bringhurst's peers and readers. Though the variation in the essays lends some unevenness to the collection, they are a testament to the continuity of Bringhurst's own "vision of global literary activity" (202) harmoniously working to accomplish Wood and Dickinson's stated desire to demonstrate the stability of Bringhurst's philosophy within his diverse pursuits. The diversity of voices and forms offers a rare moment of illumination into the connections and preoccupations of this present-day polymath while the perspectival shifts and variations are a refreshing change from conventional collections of critical essays.

In addition to providing, at long last, a chronicle of Bringhurst's artistic and intellectual developments, the essays in *Listening for the Heartbeat of Being* give well-warranted and insightful attention to Bringhurst's poetry. Clare Goulet's analysis

of Bringhurst's polyphonic poetry is enhanced by her personal experience of participating in performances of these complex poems, underscoring the need for sound recordings of Bringhurst's poems to be made available. Iain Macleod Higgins's essay, "Salvage Selvage Joinery: Bringhurst's Early Drafts," analyzes how Bringhurst's philosophy and poetic voice evolved through his early drafts. Higgins helpfully positions Bringhurst as a poet in relation to his poetic and philosophic predecessors.

While appreciating the perceptive analysis of Bringhurst's poetry in the collection, I was particularly taken with the book's response to Bringhurst's decades of work on his *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers*: five of the sixteen essays specifically address this topic and many of the remaining essays allude to it. Contributions by Margaret Atwood and Erica Wagner endorse Bringhurst's intention of positioning the Haida myths "side by side with the great myth-based artistic creations of the world" (Atwood 191). Other commentaries by the Indigenous storyteller, dancer, activist, radio host, and teacher of the Haida language, Káan Sangáa, and the Alaska Native storyteller and writer, Ishmael Hope, (260) offer ratifications of Bringhurst's work. Such Haida commentators offer insights on Bringhurst's work from an authoritative perspective, answering critics who might be understandably wary of accusations against Bringhurst and his cultural appropriation of indigenous myth-making from his non-indigenous heritage. To some extent, the marginally defensive tone of some of the essays treating Bringhurst's *Masterworks* affects the tenor of the book, likely an unavoidable consequence of the controversy about cultural insensitivity and cultural

appropriation which surrounded the publishing of *Masterworks*. It is to be hoped that addressing the controversy—now well-over a decade old—will encourage study of these works for their own sake. Indeed, several essays counter controversy by offering insightful critical analysis of the work itself. In "Anatomy of a Voice: Robert Bringhurst's Rhythms," Wood reads *Masterworks* as an iteration of Bringhurst's "interest in rhythm that exceeds mere versification to infuse his entire body of work" (102). Wood further offers insightful analysis of Bringhurst's work as translator-poet and helps position this work within Bringhurst's entire poetic corpus. Sharing the perspective of other contributors to the volume, such as Káan Sangáa and Ishmael Hope, Nicholas Bradley's "At Land's End: *Masterworks of the Classical Haida Mythtellers*" differentiates Bringhurst's study of Haida literature—which Bradley argues is "a means of resisting the historical and economic forces that have conditioned the present" (206)—from colonialism's desire to claim land and culture (206). Bradley's essay offers a sweeping view of the complexity of Bringhurst's work in its translating from Haida, the inheritances of nineteenth and twentieth century ethnography and anthropology, and the nature of authorship in oral literature, finally offering perceptive analysis of a portion of Bringhurst's translations.

In essays such as these, Wood and Bradley do more than break new ground in the literary criticism of Bringhurst's translations; they also demonstrate the argument that it is in the three volumes of these translations from the Haida that Bringhurst's "vocation is most fully synthesized [as] cultural historian, student of language, poet, essayist, typesetter, and book designer" (5). While acknowledging

the need for scholars proficient in both Haida and English to continue the work of critical analysis of the texts, the work undertaken in *Listening for the Heartbeat of Being* provides a place from which to begin in the meantime.

One curious absence in the book is focused attention on Bringhurst's essays, many of which have been collected in his two books, *The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks* and *Everywhere Being is Dancing: Twenty Pieces of Thinking*. Bringhurst has frequently engaged the essay to explicate what he perceives to be links between contemporary issues and concerns and his desire to restore reciprocity between humans and the rest of the world by means of myth, philosophy and literature. A

consideration of Bringhurst's essays would have further supported Wood's and Dickinson's claim that Bringhurst's body of work is united under a single purpose and shown Bringhurst at work in another field as the "celestial janitor." Hopefully, this fine volume will prompt further study of this important author and his work.

Works Cited

Bringhurst, Robert. "Song of the Summit." *Selected Poems*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2011. 17. Print.

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