

***The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks.* By Robert Bringhurst. Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press, 2006. 329 pp. Paper \$31.95.**

Robert Bringhurst is a Canadian poet who has been writing and publishing poems for over thirty-five years. He has published 13 collections of poetry, collections of essays ranging from ***A Short History of the Printed Word*** to a ***The Elements of Typographic Style***. In addition he has devoted years to the study of languages—Spanish, Greek, Cree among others—and has translated works from a major Haida poet, Skaay, as well as fragments from Parmenides. In one of the talks in this book, he makes the case that one of the greatest of all Canadian books is the work of a man named Francois Mandeville, fluent in French, Chipewyan, Dogrib, Cree and Slavey. Mandeville lived in Fort Chipewyan in northern Alberta in the early 20th century, and his stories and myths were collected by a linguist named Li Fang-Kuei in 1928. The collected stories were published in Taipei fifty years later; a place, where as Bringhurst dryly notes “there are not a lot of Chipewyan speakers” nevertheless, “*Chipewyan Texts* is one of the great Canadian books” (76). Bringhurst’s musings, ranging from an analysis of Velazquez’s paintings to Chinese characters, from American Sign Language to literary forms in native North America, always work to shed light on the well springs of culture. That the sources of all great human culture also lie close to the natural world is an idea that informs most of this work, for “Every human culture is really just an extension of the underlying culture known as nature” (142).

One of the most important arguments that emerges from this astonishingly scholarly collection of “talks” given over a decade, is that “linguistics is a branch of natural history.” Variations of this idea has emerged in the work of many authors, of course. Emerson wrote that “Words are signs of natural facts”; Mary Austin thought that the north American continent informed an “American Rhythm,” and Gary Snyder believes that poetry is an ecological act. But Bringhurst’s inspiration is perhaps older; an Aristotelian linking of poetics with biology. In a chapter entitled “The Polyhistorical Mind,” Bringhurst writes about a coherent *system* of storytelling which can be imagined like a system of science, mathematics, or the system which is created by the species making up a forest. According to Bringhurst, a literature “is a system of storytelling, not just a collection of stories or myths.” (The critic Franco Moretti in discussing a literary system similarly seeks to look beyond “concrete individual works” to a trio of constructs—“graphs maps, and trees”— which are used to describe the collectivity which makes up literary history.) Bringhurst describes this sense of a literary collectivity as being polyphonic (“One story is not enough. One history is not enough”) but extends this insight to include biology—the birds, deer, plants—which create the ecology from which the human mind has emerged—along with language and literature. Language, according to Bringhurst, is a “life form, like a species of plant or animal” (30). And if you want to understand a story “you have

to go beyond it, into the ecosystem of stories” (169) just as you must go into a forest to understand a tree.

In another essay in the book Bringhurst looks at the world *Humanism* which he feels has been “oddly misunderstood” by twentieth century writers. Humanism does not place humans in the center of the universe--that would be like tracing the “Etymology of ‘humanism’ back to David Hume.” According to Bringhurst the root for human can be traced back to an archaic Indo-European word for Earth; a human is one who lives on the earth. “These and other shreds of linguistic evidence suggest that Indo-European and Native Americans once thought about such matters in similar terms” (55).

It is the breadth of Bringhurst’s cultural knowledge that makes his argument for the intermeshing between culture and nature worth noting. Earlier in the book he suggests a more traditional understanding of culture, nature and biology when he suggests that culture is “exogenetic heredity, nothing less and nothing more. It is everything we transmit from generation to generation by nongenetic means” (50). Everything needed by a trout or Douglas Fir to be a trout or Douglas Fir is transmitted through the genes, and that is nature. But these kinds of distinctions provide a narrow view; for as Bringhurst points out, even a trout or Douglas Fir needs a community, or ecosystem, within which to truly thrive. Here culture and nature begin to merge:

All of us—animals, plants, bacteria and fungi—need the community we create for one another and the earth that underlies it and the sun that keeps it warm. The community we create for one another is, of course, the ecosystem. That is culture in the large sense. Culture in this large sense is identical with nature. It is nature *seen from the inside*. From the standpoint of any given species, this culture in the large sense—the environment—is exogenetic too. It is genetically produced and genetically maintained, but not by any single species. On its own, no species can create a situation that enables it to live, much less to thrive (51).

In the chapter “Poetry and Thinking,” Bringhurst ponders a sentence of Chinese characters and realizes that the pattern reveals the “culture of nature.” Here again, though coming from a different perspective, culture and nature fuse into a meaningful whole:

Sun, moon, mountains and rivers are the writing of being, that 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(143).

That human language, poetry, literature is an aspect natural order links us tightly to the world, rather than separating us from it.

One interesting aspect of this line of thought is that it also means that language and poetry—the best poetry—is wild. “Poetry is what I start to hear when I concede the world’s ability to manage and to understand itself” (145). This should give all ecocritics something to mull over: language used in a utilitarian way—in a way that we believe we can control, getting the result that we want, influencing others—even for worthy causes—seems not to be a part of the “culture of meaning” that Bringhurst is writing about here. Words are not just

poker chips that are used for passing judgments or passing exams. Words are the tracks left by the breath of the mind as it intersects with the breath of the lungs. Words are for shining, like apple blossoms, like stars, giving a sign that life is lived here too, that thought is happening here too, among the human beings, just as it is out there in the orchard and up there in the sky, and in the forest, in the oceans, in the mountains, where no human beings are around (144).

We proudly manipulate words, but words, it seems, also play with us.

--Rebecca Raglon, Department of English, University of British Columbia