

THE CRITIC IN THE RAIN

A Review Essay

ROBERT BRINGHURST

The Arbutus/Madrone Files

Laurie Ricou

Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2002. 256 pp. Illus. \$34.95 paper.

A MALE STENOGRAPHER, present for one brief scene in *The Maltese Falcon*, is fully drawn by Dashiell Hammett in six words: “a lathy youth with salient ears.” T.S. Eliot would have fit the same description in the summer of 1920, when he wrote, at the ripe age of 31, a schoolboy-stiff but trenchant essay called “The Perfect Critic.”

Eliot, writing about an abstraction, could not sketch his perfect critic as vividly or swiftly as Hammett his stenographer. The critic he portrays has no discernible physiognomy. He does however have a name; he is in essence Aristotle – and as such, he has a method. He looks “solely and steadfastly at the object,” and renders his “analysis of sensation to the point of principle and definition.” He is not to “make judgments of worse and better. He must simply elucidate.” This is sufficient, Eliot says, because in the mind of a good reader, “perceptions do not ... accumulate as a mass, but form themselves as a structure; and criticism is the statement in language of this structure.”¹

I suppose, myself, that the perfect critic is a creature just as imaginary

¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*. 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1928), II, 15.

as Wonder Woman, Superman, the Trickster, or the Grinch. Yet perhaps the perfect critic is not only as imaginary as these but quite as real as they are too.

For three years I have been reading Laurie Ricou’s study of Pacific Northwest writing, *The Arbutus/Madrone Files*, pondering the question of how the perfect critic might differ from language to language, age to age, and, more importantly, region to region.

Ricou himself, I suspect, would be quick to deny that the perfect critic exists, and quicker still to say he has no aspirations to the role. One of the reasons his book consists of *files* rather than chapters is merely, I think, to admit that it was written on a computer; another is surely to proclaim that it is a tentative, largely arbitrary, and incomplete arrangement of observations and quotations. “Books are mortal. They die. A book is an act.... It is not information, but relation,” he reminds us, quoting Ursula Le Guin’s insightful novel *Always Coming Home* – which, in an interesting slip, he once (151) calls *Almost Coming Home*.

This book [*The Arbutus/Madrone Files*] is relation. I have imagined it as accumulated files because I have found that any filing

system's apparent ordering barely contains the ripples of unpredictable relations.... Inevitably, some items cannot be found, and others will not comfortably settle into any particular file. To collect some Northwest files is to acknowledge that the region is a set of shifting dependencies, partnerships, and conflicts.... Different filing systems would have created different Northwests.... I have made *files* just to resist a final product, the invariable place that nostalgia and the camera try to hang on to (160).

Other aspects of the book implicitly confirm this overt statement of its tentative and transitory nature. The typographer has given it a form not unlike a magazine, with double-column pages and tiny margins (defying the reader to add value by making marginal notes). A boxed quotation or decorative line drawing is inset into almost every spread. There are also frequent photographs, maps, cartoons, and even a recipe for salal-berry pie (quite a good recipe, in fact, except it calls for too much sugar).

These *Files* are the writing of a man who listens carefully to words and loves to read, but also of a man who loves to teach, has done so all his adult life, and has, I think, been humbled by his students' brusque repudiation of all their elders' claims to greater knowledge or authority. In the "afterfiles" (some fifty pages of overflow), Ricou sometimes quotes his students' papers. In the files themselves, he sometimes lapses into their language. (Here for instance: "Trying to think like a tree or a fish does, we have to admit that we cannot feel what a cedar does..." [153].

In an earlier life, Prof. Ricou would have impaled with red pencil that miscast preposition and that fruitlessly ambiguous and echolalic verb.)

Yet I have continued reading the book. One reason is that it is rich with cagey, penetrating insights. This, for example, apropos *October Ferry to Gabriola*:

Lowry is afraid not to mention everything he has ever read, not only the *Aeneid* and *Titus Andronicus*, but seemingly every billboard and advertisement on the northern reaches of the highway from Victoria to Nanaimo. He recognizes that these labels and bumper stickers and the clutter of newspaper headlines which interrupt his packed and already interrupted sentences catch scraps of a local, unwritten epic. Lowry is the genius loci whose local colour goes far beyond the local colour... (150).

And this, provoked by Annie Dillard's *The Living*:

That the nature writers start writing fat historical novels, imagining the density of a racist culture, and a society impatient for progress, might tell us something of where we are in the history of Northwest writing (146).

Another reason I've returned to the book repeatedly is that until I opened it I mistakenly believed I had a tolerable sense of the lay of the Pacific Northwest literary land. Ricou has taught me otherwise. Most of his evident favorites – David Wagoner, Ken Kesey, Ursula Le Guin, Jack Hodgins, Malcolm Lowry, among others – are also favorites of mine, but his account

of the literary understory includes some dozens of books and writers I was wholly unaware of or had thought I could ignore.

So many books and names crop up that reading a few files is like hiking through the underbrush. Quick pause to admire these few phrases or that cluster of ideas, then another foot forward to yet another microscopic view. As a writer, I find this both rewarding and disconcerting. This is a book about reading; it pays a lot of attention to writing; and yet it is a book in which the lives and works of writers never have room to appear in the round. No books are discussed as wholes. Still less is there any mention of the trajectories writers follow from book to book, the shapes of their ambitions, dreams, careers. We are all, as it were, reduced to fragments, as if we were newspaper writers, or as if Ricou were reading us now in our own on-site museum, on the edge of an archaeological dig, sifting the shredded papyri till a scrap falls into place and a phrase or two comes clear.

But for this there is a reason, and that reason above all is what draws me back to the book. It is the primacy which the author concedes to the landscape, his willingness, better his eagerness, to think about human beings as merely one more part of the local fauna, nourished and dwarfed like everything else by the local flora, and therefore always (almost) coming home. These files are called *Arbutus/Madrone* because the literature they address is born and bred in a certain topography, largely congruent with the range of *Arbutus menziesii*, the only Northwestern tree with evergreen leaves and deciduous bark, and the only one that changes its name when it crosses the border. It is known in Canada as arbutus and in the USA as madroño or madroña or madrone. It grows from around Bute

Inlet in the north to Big Sur in the south, a swath of coast that was once home to more than sixty indigenous languages, whose literatures still simmer in the trees.

There are other totemic plants with similar ranges – red alder, black cottonwood, redcedar, silver fir, and Douglas-fir are all contenders – but arbutus and its shrubby relative, salal, are the two that have established greatest hold on Ricou's imagination and helped to guide him, so it seems, into the world of coastal writing. The files gathered in the shadow of this bichromatic tree are named for other features of the sea- and landscape: Island, Raven, Rain, Kuroshio, Salal, Sasquatch, Salmon, Great Blue Heron.... Each one cuts through several literary strata; none exhausts or even measures the things it intersects, but each brings many things to light, and each plays unashamedly with language and with ideas as it goes.

The fit between Ricou's capacious bookshelf and the range of the arbutus is approximate at best. He strays north of its habitat at times and gives short shrift to the southern extremes of madroño country. There are also, inescapably, writers who, in my eyes, have the status of major landmarks but are mentioned here in passing or not at all. Robin Blaser, Marilyn Bowering, Roo Borson, Wilson Duff, Melville Jacobs, William Stafford, Michael Yates and Jan Zwicky are among the missing. Sam Hamill, Patrick Lane, Don McKay, Susan Musgrave, Gary Snyder and Phyllis Webb are barely mentioned. Charles Lillard and Terry Glavin, who between them have considerable claim to be the speaking conscience of the Northwest Coast in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, are mentioned as if by accident, in ways that only serve to hide their writing.

More predictably, since this is not a study of urban writing, there is no sign of the street poets (Gerry Gilbert and Tim Lander among others), nor of the contributions made to West Coast literature by Al Purdy and John Newlove – two particularly streetwise rural poets who lived and wrote here for a time. Inclusive as it is, the book is only what it claims to be: a finite act, an incomplete relation, based on a partial, and partially arbitrary, selection of works and themes.

Are temporary, tentative, partially arbitrary arrangements necessarily imperfect? How else is the forest organized? How else do pileated woodpeckers, black-tailed deer, red squirrels, and wood frogs move across the land? Are they imperfect? What of the critic who aspires to do likewise? Do his rapid shifts of focus, the wide cast of his net, the sometimes random nature of his samplings, and his lapses into wordplay mean that Ricou rejects the very notion of perfection in a critic – or do they simply mean that this is what, in his particular predicament, he thinks perfection is? *Samsara* equals *nirvana*, the wise old teachers say: the trickster-haunted world in which we lead our messed-up lives is actually identical to the world of perfect bliss; confusion and enlightenment are two ways of perceiving the same thing.

Does that mean nothing is imperfect? No critic is imperfect? No book better than another? No writer more worth reading? Perfection, in a critic as in a casserole, is a relation, not a state: an impermanent response to impermanent conditions. In the wild, perfection is perfectly transitory and common. It is occurring all around you, whether you notice it or not, a hundred times a second. In the fenced-off places where humans labour to hang on to life, to health, to wealth, to fixed conceptions

and opinions, and to other things that cannot be hung on to, perfection is apt to be something that constantly floats out of reach and evaporates like a dream instead of something that keeps happening no matter where you turn.

That is a reason for taking books and stories, thoughts about books, and thoughts about reading and writing, back into the wild, or for trying hard to do so, however impossible or implausible it may seem.

What seems to me imperfect in *The Arbutus/Madrone Files* is that it has not carried this vital process through as fully as it might have. I would have liked to see a deeper sense of personal immersion in the landscape and far more attention paid to the indigenous oral literatures of the Northwest. The perfect critic on the Northwest Coast, I hold, must speak from first-hand knowledge of the animals, plants, landforms, and must not get trapped in English, even if books in the English language are all he wants to read. The truly perfect critic would know the flora and fauna no less well than the books, and would be fluent in fifty or sixty ancestral languages indigenous to the Coast, from, let us say, Wailaki and Kato in the south (in the Eel River watershed, just southeast of Cape Mendocino) to Aleut, in the Aleutians (4,000 miles north and west of the current reach of the arbutus).² None of us, of course, is going to qualify as perfect by this standard, but each of us could try to do our share.

With that in mind, I would like to suggest a few amplifications and

² Ethnographers have argued, sometimes heatedly, for a hundred years about the boundaries of the culture area called the Northwest Coast. I am not attached to any particular position in these arguments. That is my reason for being so vague in counting the languages involved.

correct a few trivial slips and lapses in the text.

The Lushootseed mythteller Gweqwulc'e' (Susie Sampson Peter) is quoted once, in English translation, in an epigraph (41). Other than that, not a single specific work of Native North American oral literature is ever mentioned in this book, and not a single oral poet or mythteller in a single indigenous literature is named. Indigenous themes are identified. The salmon-boy theme, for example, is mentioned (107-8), but not a single indigenous work, not a single actual incarnation of this or any other pre-colonial theme is ever named or discussed.

Languages are mentioned often, but sometimes in a way that suggests unease with their very names. In a discussion of Mimoko Iko's play *The Gold Watch*, Ricou observes a "need to study, to negotiate some understanding with another culture" (68). This need, he says, "is almost as strong across the Pacific as it is toward the Haida, Salish, and Lushootseed." The difficulty here is that Salish is the name of a language family of which Lushootseed is a member. It is as if one mentioned, as examples of European languages, German, Finno-Ugric and Hungarian, or Finnish, Indo-European and French. And repeatedly, the verb *transliterate* is used where *transcribe* is meant (e.g., 47, 48). There is an underlying confusion, in other words, between writing down what an oral poet or storyteller says (transcription) and transposing a written text from one orthography to another (transliteration).

Quite a few indigenous words, transcribed by different scholars in

different orthographies, are scattered through the text, but these are not always copied correctly. We are told, for instance (161), the Kwakwala word for arbutus. But the word is mistranscribed, as *xáxanele7ems* instead of *xáxa'nele7ems* (or, in a better spelling, *xaxa'nele'ems*). To readers with no experience of Native American languages, the difference will appear inconsequential. It consists in nothing more than the presence or absence of an apostrophe accompanying the *n*. But *n* and 'n are different letters in Kwakwala, with two quite different sounds – as different as *t* and *d* in English. The 'n is glottalized or ejective; the *n* is not. And of the two roots which Ricou gives for the word; neither is correct. The root is *xa'n*, which means "naked", not *xan*, which, if it meant anything in Kwakwala, would mean "little".

The discussion of the Kwakwala name for arbutus comes, as well it might, in the final lines of the final file. It is meant, without doubt, as a gesture of respect for indigenous languages and cultures, and that is how I take it. The file it concludes is, however, the Anasayú File. *Anasayú* is the word for arbutus (or madrone) in a fictional language, Kesh, spoken in Ursula Le Guin's *Always (Almost) Coming Home*. Ricou devotes a dozen pages to this language and to things that purport to be said in it: more pages by far than he devotes to all the actual native languages and all of the rich literatures – Kwakwala, Lushootseed, Nootka, Tillamook, Hanis, Hupa, Kathlamet, and many more – that have lived far longer than English in the region where arbutus also lives.