

READINGS OF NOTHING

Robert Bringhurst's "Hachadura"

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ROBERT BRINGHURST IS NOT YET a well-known name in Canadian Letters although this is beginning to change. In my experience he comes up now and then in discussions of West Coast poetry where he is likely to be connected with West Coast Surrealism, a group in which he is not a participant. Reading through his five books we find instead an intellectual poet with a stubborn and erudite sense of history and a very conscious technique.¹ In fact, Bringhurst pays so much attention to the craft of rendering the past that a good category for him may be "allusive." The Presocratic texts, the Old Testament, the writings of the Zen masters and New World myth mark out the arcanum from which he draws his imagery and such ancient spirits as Pythagoras, Moses and the Salish and Toltec shamans walk through his poems, speaking to us so sharply that a faint whiff of acid is left after them. However, trying to place his allusions more precisely than this is difficult. It is obvious that these portraits are there to remind us that our first texts are a record of reform. Moses and Pythagoras, the Buddhist philosopher-poet Saraha are shown to have created sharply elegant systems of thought, but we also see them as social critics: they have in common the fact that they could no longer suffer the glut of appetite around them or the complacent cruelties of the bad government under which they suffered. Is there, though, a possibility that Bringhurst has a present target in mind for these sharpened words from the past? Like those edged figures in Pound's verse, Bringhurst's ancient spirits could be making careful, indirect statements about a present situation. I will argue that this is an ironic poetry that does have the present as its target, though unravelling the network of its references and coming to its specific victim, is a challenge.

Bringhurst has, of course, allowed us some clues, and one poem in particular gives us an advantage in finding the strand of thinking that might be the focus of his irony. *Hachadura*, found roughly in the middle of *The Beauty of the Weapons*, appears to me to be directed to a recognizable, modern problem in poetry; though, as with most things in Bringhurst's work, this is not at first obvious. But we have been given a long introduction and reading *Hachadura* with this preliminary material in mind, we come upon a network of allusions to a very modern dilemma

in verse. With these references we can use *Hachadura* to uncover part, and I think it is an essential part, of Bringhurst's overall statement.

In the foreword to the poem, Bringhurst translates the title for us as *Hard Axe* and tells us that it was taken from the name of a village in El Salvador as he knew it "years ago before the present guerrilla war." The village was made up of a church and a few houses and not far away there was "a military prison as infamous as any in the hemisphere." This kind of contemporary reference is unusual in Bringhurst's poetry. Keeping it in mind, the title prepares us for a poem about the predecessors to Duarte and Molina, of an oppressive South American regime and the hard-edged faith required to survive under one. But we are thwarted almost immediately in this line of thinking. The opening stanzas extend the image of the axe rather than the politics of El Salvador: we deal with rock and leather thongs, with fins, wind, wing bones and spalled flint. The connection with El Salvador could yet be there as a faint connotation of the imagery of axes, bows, and hard edges, but later in the poem, in the midst of this appreciative reflection on thought as weaponry, we find an address to Wallace Stevens.

In the version found in *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), the allusion at first 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. (vi, 1-4)

It is not too difficult to get the general drift, and wit, of these lines. They seem to say that Stevens is meditating on his poetry and that while he takes it to be something like a fashionable monocle, he is really meditating on his own manicured thumb nail, another reference, perhaps, to poetry as weaponry. This in turn leads us to the question of whether the beauty of poetry springs from *amour plaisir* or from something like Rilke's "first touch of terror," or given the "halfway useful," some mixture of both. But to see a less hidden connection to Stevens, we must turn to an earlier version of *Hachadura*. In the version found in *Bergschrund* (1975), the allusion is quite clear. We find it again in verse section vi, but here the title of Stevens's *Le Monocle De Mon Oncle* is played with more openly. "*Ton ongle, ton ongle, plutot que ton monocle, Uncle / Wallace. Or a one-eyed sun-goggle, / halfway useful in the lethal roselight . . .*" says Bringhurst. Here, the French pun clearly gives a set of hidden claws or nails (*ongle*) to Stevens. If we read *Le Monocle* to find them, we uncover not only a severe sonnet-like form (which might be the "hard structure" or "nail" to which Bringhurst refers), but also a more complex network of allusions to Stevens's well-known poem. Reading *Hachadura* and *Le Monocle* in conjunction, the relations proliferate. 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*. Is the poem, then, an interlocution, an extended questioning, of Stevens's aesthetic?

A nexus seems to be the word "nothing"; Bringhurst has seen possibilities in this word that Stevens only suggests. There is, for instance, a modulation of the word in *Hachadura*'s opening line, "There is a nothing like the razor / edge of air," which looks like a response to the "no's" and "nothings" in Stevens's first stanza:

"Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds,
O scepter of the sun, crown of the moon,
There is not nothing, no, no, never nothing,
Like the clashed edges of two words that kill."
And so I mocked her in magnificent measure.
Or was it that I mocked myself alone?
I wish that I might be a thinking stone. (1, 1-7)

Although we have begun to find an approach to *Hachadura*, we may have also added another enigma to the one with which we started. Before we can find the meaning of Bringhurst's response, we need to confront the question of who is the "Mother of heaven" and what were the two words that 'killed,' and in what sense can words kill?

Harold Bloom, one of Stevens's more well-known and intrepid interpreters, has called this stanza "one of the most ferocious ironies in our poetry"² and sees this irony as romantic and self-reflexive. For Bloom, the "Mother of heaven" refers to the imagination, but the personification is very consciously made. Stevens has seen through a belief in such a presence; he is very aware that he is talking to himself. According to Bloom, then, 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 creation. The mood slides between bitterness and a nostalgic wish for the return of the past; the interrogation itself has been caused by an awareness of encroaching middle age (Stevens was nearing the troublesome boundary of forty on writing the poem), the feeling that an uncaring, and boring reality could no longer be kept at bay by the beauties and dangers of verse. For Bloom, then, the irony turns the more positive meaning of "there is nothing like poetry" into a negation of 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.

With this, 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:

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

of the sea-eaten iron, and the open
lattice of the wave. (1, 1-10)

These aggressive "nothings" have, then, been made to go directly against the grain of Stevens's inwardly directed irony. The repetitious use of simile (like a razor edge of air, like pebbles, like sea wind and salt hide) gradually make a word having no physical referent, a "no-thing" into a substantive, something almost tangible or concrete. Looked at from this angle, as a response to Stevens, we see not a poetry of melancholy and self-interrogation, but a negative, ghostly poetry that has the force or energy of a weapon. The idea that poetry is dangerous and composed of the "clashed edges of words that kill," has been re-instated so forcefully against Stevens's doubt, it is as if an armed spirit has suddenly come down to earth to defend itself against attack.

This revision has many other implications. For one thing, by the time we have reached the end of the first stanza, the self speaking these lines has almost been erased; we are no longer in a psychological present at all. These 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, something more primitive than sophisticated word play: the origin of a poetic *techné*, a very ancient use of irony and word craft. The key 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; it amplifies the meaning of "razor edge" and we glimpse a "nothing" that has an edge so sharp it is also, somehow, "air" and this is a neat reworking of the idea that the poetic word has a "clashed edge." But, more than this, the image has a lot of associations with the weapon images of Bringhurst's earlier poems.

BRINGHURST LIKES EDGES and sharp boundaries. If we place this first enjambment in the context of his imagery about the craft of poetry found in the previous poems, the full range of its implications becomes clear. There is the “dressed edge of the air” in the *Song of the Summit* and the closely drawn parallel between poetic craft and the cutting of stone in *Stone-Lathe* and *Wing*. In *Pythagoras* intellectual light is connected with the shaving of obsidian to a transparency that is like “the clarity of the clean talon,” and in *Four Glyphs* the images of sharpened stone, light and sky seem very close to *Hachadura*’s opening:

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. (III, 8-13)

These and similar images 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.” Our earliest thinkers were using a sharply turned irony and this was achieved through a technique like stone-cutting or the fastening of a handle to an axe-head by allowing wet thongs to tighten around it. In these first lines of *Hachadura* we get, then, a mingling of images of primitive artifacts and symbolic connections with myth, Homer, the transcendent and critical consciousness of the early Greeks. It is an understatement to say that the answer to Stevens’s query about whether he is mocking a mistress or himself is complete. He has been shown a condensed history of early techniques of poetic irony comparable to 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.” Stevens is mocking himself and he should be mocking himself; poetry’s first law, which we have glimpsed in this ancient craft, is just such self-negation.

The connection of these weapon images with early thought is further borne out by the next stanza. We are here introduced to Eurytos (*c.* 450 B.C.), a later Pre-socratic philosopher attached to the Pythagoreans through his master Philolaus. Eurytos is thought to have applied geometrical theory in the form of patterns of coloured pebbles to the study of the human spirit.³ In *Hachadura* he never quite arrives at his “nothing” and his “abacus” is “unsheathed,” weapon-like, from his hand as he tallies the human dust. But what point is being made with this juxtaposition of Eurytos and his abacus with Stevens’s melancholy self-questioning?

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 in our culture from myth consciousness to the beginnings of rational-

ism. We begin to see Eurytos's relevance. The complexity of the Presocratic number mysticism and idealism often obscures the fact that they were also satirists. Hera-
kleitos, for instance, had some rather pointed things to say about the Dionysian
rites:

They purify themselves by staining
themselves with other blood, as if
one were to step into mud in order to
wash off mud.⁴

Herakleitos seems to be making the point that in such rites men show themselves ignorant of the gods; the gods transcend man and exist wholly apart from the world of human desire. For him, any ritual which allows for the intermingling of divinity and men is corrupt. The Pythagorean number mysticism also seems to be based on a similar insight. In Bringhurst's magnificent portrait of this system, "Unity is a substance not a property. Light / is finite and motionless. Darkness / is the everlasting verb . . . And the darkness . . . this . . . *these* / darkneses are everywhere." Here we see an equal insistence that there is a clean, transparent world of spirit that transcends the world of material pleasures; in trying to mix the two spheres man corrupts himself. With the appearance of Eurytos, the cluster of weapon images with which Bringhurst starts off *Hachadura* now seems clearly connected to his other portraits of the Presocratics. They would thus share and forward the Pre-socratic goal of reforming a hedonist, corrupted imagination. By questioning the "Mother of Heaven" figure of the imagination, the voice in Stevens's poems has opened the dangerous possibility of a poetry adrift in egoism. Set beside Eurytos, we can now see that his irony is exposing a poetry grounded in the pleasure of self-aggrandizement and self-projection.

We gain further support for this reading in the next stanza. The malignant counter-force that is shown next would give us the reaction of a pleasure-based mind to this new kind of impersonality:

Therefore:

darkness under the sunrise,
darkness in the hollow of the hand;

inside the spine the darkness,
the darkness simmering in the glands;

the rumpled 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. (1, 22-32)

A seamless egotism has been split here. Like the contrast between the "darkness of the everlasting verb" and the transcendent, motionless light shown us in *Pythagoras*, this stanza shows us the splitting of the mind into a potent, dramatic polarity. In these dark images, we have the inner response to the ironic self-control of the first verse, a similar imagery has been used and we have gone a step toward a larger, more comprehensive order of irony. We have moved from imagery of edges and fissures to imagery of lines.

In the first stanza, for instance, we had the "nothing" eating in through the underbelly of the bone and now there is a darkness inside the spine. Again, in the first stanza we had some sea-eaten iron and a razor-edge of air but now there is a rumpled blade of darkness; lastly, the wet and living "membrane of the darkness" seems obversely related to the salt hide drying inward. The parallels are not exact, but 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. At the end, we are given a conscious, formal progression: we have gone from the intermittent "fissures" of ironic words or phrases, to a continuous "line" demarking two complete and conflicting worlds. A darkly material, savage, inner self is now coming under the control of an equally potent, awakening, ironic self which is focused on an outside. Stevens's mockery of a "mistress" (really a self-mockery) has been set within a very different context and is opening the possibility of poetic statement beyond the inner world of self.

The formal progression does not stop here. The balance is momentary, the simmering darkness is an ongoing presence and Bringhurst's challenge now is to see how far he can extend this ironic line of self-control, developing Stevens's self-doubts into a counter-aesthetic. In the next stanza we are confronted with the image of a strange bird flying through both moonlight and sunlight. 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. In stanza II of Stevens's poem we have:

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.
A torrent will fall from him when he finds. (II, 1-4)

Another idealized figure for the poet has briefly replaced thoughts of self-decline and mortality; this exquisite symbol has been worked up from an impressionist palette in the hope that it will find its place among other such singers. Like Yeats's golden bird, this red one (contrasted neatly with real birds of wind and wing) 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, however, is finding another dimension in which to sing and appears not very concerned with becoming a member of a choir. In fact we can no longer be sure that we are dealing

with a symbol for the poet; Bringhurst's bird looks quite alien and the red and gold have been scraped away to disclose a more basic and lethal hue:

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. (II, 1-5)

Stevens's brilliant red bird of poetry can be placed within his general project of subverting these modern world views that vitiate the imagination and which have produced a "culture dominated by science."⁵ But, in the face of this archetypal figure for the lyric poet, 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 or 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. We have also settled on one image. This dangerous bird of poetry is a symbol in which a whole complex of ideas is beginning to cohere.

After this signal though, the relation between the two poems becomes ambiguous and the line separating them bafflingly complex. Bafflement may be meaningful here. The point of departure is Stevens's continued cross-examination of the presence he finds in his poetry. The glowing and hopeful symbol of the red bird is momentarily helpful against his depression but he quickly slides back to mocking his 'mistress': "No spring can follow past meridian. / Yet you persist with anecdotal bliss / to make believe a starry *connaissance*" (II, 9-11). The narrator is again doubting his imagination, criticizing the romantic trope (and what appears to be his own belief), that poetic inspiration is connected to something outside himself, a divine mystery or "starry *connaissance*" which could hold against doubt or ameliorate it. Against this hint of fatalism, Bringhurst next throws out a group of 'meridians' that are so visually intricate that we can almost not follow them until we realize that the two worlds we saw being separated in the first stanza now adhere in the boundaries and layered feathers of wings.

There is a point at which
 meridians are knotted
 into nothing and a region
 into which meridians fray and intertwine,
 but not like mooring lines; they
 fray like the leading and trailing edges
 of wings, running from nothingness
 to muscle and strung from the muscle back again. (II, 6-13)

Stevens's symbolic bird has now not only been "repainted," it has been reconstructed and his "meridian" has been remade into almost a thesaurus of the word "line." The language is, again, enigmatic, just bordering on sense; the links between the various "lines" are subtle and hermetic; though, with a careful reading we can begin to make out the connections, or guess at them.

Stevens's "meridian" demarks youth from age and a romantic poetry from the cessations and diminutions of age; but, for Bringhurst, the word demarks a further step away from self-concern. We are brought to a point where the meridian gets "knotted," a point where intended meaning or guided direction of statement seems to curve into itself or becomes solipsistic. The meridian is, secondly, in a region where it begins to "fray," where words take on multiple meanings, or become figurative because what is being perceived cannot be stated in conventional speech. Thus this "fraying" poetic line will not be like a mooring line rubbing against a dock, there will be no links to earthly harbours and securities, no literal level of meaning for this symbolic wing in the self. The true symbol will fray meaning such that it lets us feel the empty nothingness away from which the narrator in Stevens's poem, through his imaginative bird, is trying to escape.

WE CAN BEGIN TO SEE why so much of Bringhurst's imagery is concerned with shaving and refining and making sharpened edges. The term "Nothing" has no referent. Trying to picture it will always involve figures of speech; it can be approximated but not presented in an image. For Roland Barthes, ". . . *nothing* is perhaps the only word in the language which admits of no periphrase, no metaphor, no synonym, no substitute; for to say *nothing* in any other way than by its pure denotation (the word *nothing*) is immediately to fill the nothing, to belie it. . . ."⁶ By fixing his symbol for poetry to such an inexpressible key term, Bringhurst is opening up his language. Such "nothingness" provides an *exterior* for language and this severely restricts a magic which gives the guarantee for anything said to the author. Stevens's twelve stanzas spiral inward as the old romantic solutions and formulas crumble and his quest for a credible source for his poetry becomes more pressing, Bringhurst's "nothingness" provides an *outside* for his language that is as objective and cold as the "not-self" found in the scientific perspective.

But Bringhurst's "nothingness" is not quite the exterior explored by science. In an article that traces this problem in a long line of modern poetry, Karsten Harries catches what I think is becoming clear in Bringhurst's reconstruction of Stevens's symbol:

All metaphor that is more than an abbreviation for more proper speech gestures toward what transcends language. Thus metaphor implies lack. God knows neither

transcendence nor metaphor — nor would man, if he were truly godlike. The refusal of metaphor [by modern poets] is inseparably connected with the project of pride, the dream of an unmediated vision, a vision not marred by lack, that does not refer to something beyond itself that would fulfill it.⁷

For Harries, then, true metaphor relies on a context of the unknown: the more essential the metaphor, the more complete the recognition of a 'lack' or the necessity of mediation. For Stevens the older romantic formulation of this mediation, the "starry *connaissance*," is losing its power and he is suffering the loss of the fluency and self-sufficiency such a faith gave him. He is feeling this as a lack, a still point, or negative. But for Bringhurst, poetry is to come precisely from this negative, the sense of lack, of an encompassing sense of *le Neant*, or not-self that Harries sees as essential to metaphor; for him 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 poet must do this or he will fall into pride, and his poetry will become a mere projection of himself.

We can begin to see, then, how far Bringhurst has developed his first bits and pieces of ironic statement. We have gone from images of weapons that ironically restated Stevens's "nothing" and various stages of a dark reaction, through a gradual widening of the ironic interplay with *Le Monocle*, to an attempt to relocate the source of poetic imagery not in the self, but in the perception of an infinity outside the self.

A logical next step would be to find the social stance that such a poetic entails. Opening an exterior that is the basic ground of poetry could mean, for instance, that Bringhurst allow a more priestly or prophetic attitude than is evident in Stevens, and in the following stanza a prophet does appear.

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. (II, 14-21)

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. Perhaps for Bringhurst, Elijah is figuring the fight against an imagination which has become a "mistress"; poetry is cohabiting with social power and furthering corruption. But Elijah is also the archaic figure who received a divine visitation in the whirlwind; the figure who, after finding that "the Lord was not in the wind, earthquake and fire," heard "a still small voice." Verse 22 of

I Kings 18 tells us: "Then said Elijah, unto the people, I, / *even*, I only, remain a prophet of the / Lord; but Baal's prophets *are* four hundred." For Elijah, and perhaps for Bringhurst, this 'exterior' is then also the isolation of banishment. He is outcast, though, this has allowed him to see that the tribe's beliefs have eroded; they have sunk into greed, materialism and idol worship, though one small, isolated voice remains.

We must keep in mind, though, that Elijah is one of a list of possible stances toward the exterior that Bringhurst has found. Counterpointing Elijah's isolate audition there is an almost scientific description of a bird in flight.

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. (II, 22-26)

This almost zoological description keeps the Elijah possibility in perspective by reminding 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. These two figures of "nothingness," then, deny any intrinsic connection to social power or to powers in the self for a poetry that can be relied on.

Perhaps I am giving too much weight to Elijah and the bird. Both are yet only possibilities, *figures* of isolation and the outcast; they are also members of a list. Another version of the sound that Elijah heard and that the bird makes over its leading and trailing edges is music, the sound made by "the illusion of a plectrum, tuning pegs and a frame." And this third possibility for poetry prepares us for what I take as the climactic stanza of the poem, its defining moment. In stanza III of the Stevens's poem we have another statement of the aesthetic problem. He is now playing with the possibility of philosophic study as an alternative ground for the imagination. "Is it for nothing, then, that old Chinese / Sat titivating by their mountain pools / Or in the Yangtse studied out their beards?" (III, 1-3). But this doubt returns when he realizes that such a quest after wisdom may be simply the absurd compensation for an impotence of the imagination. Bringhurst's answer to the question gives poetry an ultimately potent role. 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. We are again refiguring Stevens's query about "nothingness" but now with an accumulated weight to the irony:

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. (III, 1-16)

As the culmination of the debate with Stevens over the origin and purpose of poetry, the stanza is something of a technical marvel. The “line” we have been following from the beginning has now taken a final shape: fissure (word), to meridian (line), to frayed meridian (symbol), to wing shape, strings, to a harp-like bow (stanza or verse paragraph). The strings have been sounded; double meanings play back and forth about this last “nothing.” The word now signifies the various exteriors we have found: the ironic reinstatement of poetry as a weapon, the early Greek satire of hedonism and corrupted myth, the mathematical/moral infinity discovered by Eurytos; equally it merges the reach of time through which the bird flies and the subject who has taken on Elijah’s vow and denied himself participation and status in a corrupted society (the kind of society that would allow the prison camp outside La Hachadura). The pattern of tensions between gradually more polarized forces in the self has thus reached a limit. In this stanza, the bow string has been let go, and the target for Bringhurst’s ghostly arrow is the egoism of the poet who wants to “possess” or “repossess” a corrupt form of the imagination rather than to recognize a clean “nothingness” as the ultimate source of his poetry.

BEGINNING WITH THE FIRST SYLLABLE and line break, then continued through the building of larger forms like the symbol, the stanza and verse paragraph, we see in *Hachadura* the gradual enclosure of the self by the not-self. Each development of a larger poetic form thus shows us a wider expanse of this exterior until it becomes all encompassing. Although the problem of *amour*

plaisir in poetry continues to be a target for Bringhurst's irony, by stanza III an essential difference has been made. After this, the word "nothing" does not appear significantly again. And in the remainder of the poem the exterior becomes a background, a transparent and negative source out of which the more positive content of imagery is drawn.⁸

In one instance of this use, found in stanza VII, the exterior becomes a kind of absolute coldness into which parts of us project. "Empedokles says the talon / is the crystallization / of the tendon, the nail is the wintered nerve" (VII, 1-3). Another use shows us a glimpse of the Goddess of this alienation, a glimpse of a surrounding indifference out of which poetry comes. In stanza V, of *Le Monocle* the mistress of Stevens's first poetry is shown as alluring and sensual; in the past she allowed him a most pleasurable feast of the imagination under the "furious star" of Venus; while for Bringhurst there is

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,
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. (V, 5-14)

The "pleasure principle" that has not yet been given up in Stevens's poem is thus aligned with its severe, classical opposite. Artemis was sister to Apollo, sister then to beauty, her arrows were of an absolute clarity while her brother's were gold. She also changed Acteon the hunter into a stag and had his own hounds rip him to pieces because he happened to see her bathing, without clothes, or without benefit of mediation. To see "Artemis" directly would, then, be like looking steadily into the essence of indifference, into an ultimate alienation; thus, we can only have her "grazing" the ice here. But 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.

I think that grasping his sense of a "not-self" or exterior for language is a good start in understanding Bringhurst's poetry as a whole. *Tzuhalem's Mountain*, the last poem in *The Beauty of the Weapons* is quite different in cultural and visual content than *Hachadura* yet within its beautifully dark metaphors we see the same scrupulous attention to preserving and presenting a sense of a world outside our own. In this reconstruction of the mind of a Coast Salish chieftain, we see an

outlook as iconoclastic as Eurytos' or Elijah's and here again is a psychology that breaks all of the rules about possession which our culture has so thoroughly constructed. In making love to one of his various wives, Tzuhalem, passion and ecology merge.

Love, in this bed full of horses
and fishes, carnivorous birds
are leading us down into oceans
and up into mountains. (III, 1-4)

Even the most intimate of feelings has been tied to an outside, filtered through imagery that points it outward away from any attempt at interiorization, any attempt to hold on or to possess the emotion by containment within a subjective, aesthetic response. We now find this transparent exterior everywhere in Bringhurst's poems. In *Sutra of the Heart* at about the mid-point of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* (1986) the old sense of the heart as an inner, secretive "seat of the emotions" is radically changed by opening it to everything outside. The swing away from the old way of looking is so severe that we begin to see that the "heart" being described is really our love of the world, our love of the world for its own sake not for the sake of love in itself:

The heart is a house with torn floorboards
the heart is a seeded and peeled
grape on the vine, a bell
full of darkness and anvils,
the heart is a flute with four fingerholes
played in the rain.
The heart is a deep well dug upward. (9-15)

And so on through some eighty-five lines of tying the heart to various similarly inappropriate objects. Somehow each new metaphor works, but only because we can, perhaps, see the humour involved in upsetting the custom that says our "heart" is and must be our most inner and serious possession. The heart is really an organ for perceiving the beauty of a world cleanly unaware of us.

Perhaps, now, it is no longer so strange to see a modern like Stevens and these acerbic pictures of the ancients so closely, though oppositely, aligned. Northrop Frye's insight might be useful here: if, as Frye tells us, modern literature is completing a vast, circular movement back to the myth consciousness in which it began, in *Hachadura*, Bringhurst can be seen to have paused in the boundary created by our first "scientists." The wish of the voice in Stevens's *Le Monocle* for a return of his "mistress," now seems to direct poetry to a self-enclosed, self-contained world; Bringhurst has shown that this wish ends in a corrupted myth. One can gain a great deal of ironic leverage and insight into both Stevens and modern culture

by aligning ancient man problematically alive in myth and the problematic hunger for the securities of myth in modern man, as, I think, Bringhurst has done here.

there is a 'back-stretched
 connexion' like that of the bow
 or of the lyre. (Herakleitos, *Fragment 23*)

NOTES

- ¹ Bringhurst's books so far include *Cadastre*, *The Shipwright's Log*, *Bergschrund*, *The Beauty of the Weapons*, and *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*.
- ² Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), 37.
- ³ Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), II, 110.
- ⁴ Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952), 25.
- ⁵ Margaret Peterson, *Wallace Stevens and the Idealist Tradition* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press), 3-13.
- ⁶ Roland Barthes, *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Editions du Seuil, 1972; New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 108.
- ⁷ Karsten Harries, "Metaphor and Transcendence," *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1978), 78.
- ⁸ The word 'nothing' we have been following does appear once more. We find it in Stanza VI, where we have "this one, this one saying nothing . . ." and in the context of the stanza 'this one' is I think a carefully shaded figure for the poet as he shows us, indirectly, the wintry exterior which Stevens would like to escape from.

