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Les étoiles sur la page, la voix dans le ciel : mythe, Ovide et les aînés cris dans *Ursa Major* de Robert Bringhurst

Leonor María Martínez Serrano

Abstract

Canadian poet, translator, linguist and typographer Robert Bringhurst is a 21st-century humanist of penetrating lucidity and intellectual alertness. Since the early 1970s he has been composing a poetic oeuvre that is woven out of beautifully tessellated threads from various literary traditions. For over thirty years now he has been writing poems for multiple voices where he seeks to emulate the many-voiced or polyphonic nature of reality. To this end, he looks back to the old in their knowing, not just the Pre-Socratic poet-philosophers, but also the Oriental sages and the myth-tellers of the oral literatures of the First Nations. This article explores a universal myth from Mediterranean and Amerindian traditions as expressed in the book-length poem *Ursa Major. A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers & Dancers* (2003), a complex object art that sheds lights on timeless universals pertaining to humankind in its entirety in spite of the passage of time – the timeless desire for happiness and for knowledge.

Keywords: Robert Bringhurst, *Ursa Major*, polyphony, myth, oral literatures, First Nations.

Résumé

Le poète, traducteur, linguiste et typographe canadien Robert Bringhurst est un humaniste du 21e siècle d'une lucidité et d'une vivacité intellectuelle pénétrantes. Depuis le début des années 1970, il compose une oeuvre poétique tissée à partir de fils magnifiquement tesselés de différentes traditions littéraires. Depuis plus de trente ans, il a écrit des poèmes à voix multiples où il cherche à imiter la nature polyphonique ou à plusieurs voix de la réalité. Pour ce faire, il se tourne vers les anciens, non seulement les poètes-philosophes pré-socratiques, mais aussi les sages orientaux et les conteurs de mythes de la littérature orale des Premières Nations. Cet article explore un mythe universel des traditions méditerranéennes et amérindiennes exprimé dans le poème *Ursa Major* (2003), un art objet complexe qui éclaire les univers intemporels de l'humanité dans son ensemble malgré le passage du temps – le désir intemporel du bonheur et de la connaissance.

Mots-clés : Robert Bringhurst, *Ursa Major*, poliphonie, mythe, littératures orales, Premières Nations.

Introduction

It was out of sheer love of language and myth that Bringhurst composed the poly-phonic poem entitled *Ursa Major. A Polyphonic Masque for Speakers & Dancers* in 2003. The poem was subsequently revised and published in a new edition by Gas-pereau Press in 2009. The poet has been writing poems for multiple voices for over 30 years now. Bringhurst's polyphonic adventure started early in his literary career with the publication of *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986). Then *Conversations with a Toad* (1987) and *New World Suite No. 3* (1995) naturally followed in the steps of that early polyphonic poem, seeking new paths for an audacious form of experimentation. With *Ursa Major*, polyphony reached a climactic apex in the poet's hands, for not only did it bring several voices together into the telling of a universal myth – that of Ursa Major, the constellation presiding over the night sky in the northern hemisphere –it also brought together several cultural tradi-tions and languages, both modern and Classical. The overall impression is that of a palimpsest: *Ursa Major* is a poem of tremendous energy, beauty and intricacy, and also a polylingual, polyphonic poem bringing together living threads from several cultural traditions and mythologies, Greco-Roman (Mediterranean) and Cree (Amerindian). What makes this poem precisely unique is that several voices speak at the same time, and they do so in several languages, in order to tell a col-laborative version of a moving story that turns out to be universal, common to several cultures around the world. This article focuses on the polyphonic nature and the literary sources of *Ursa Major* as a most complex polyglot composition that brings together poetry and myth with great mastery.

A polylingual, polyphonic poem

As published originally in 2003, *Ursa Major* consisted of a preface by Bringhurst, a masque in five scenes telling the story of Ursa Major (the score is given in both linear form and as a voice map printed in different colours), a series of notes on the sources of the text, and a thoughtful afterword by Canadian poet and critic Peter Sanger. Any critical analysis of the poem must begin with a consideration of Bring-hurst's own reflections on his own work in his 2003 preface. At least two essential aspects are worth considering: first, the actual oral genesis of *Ursa Major*, a piece commissioned by a choreographer for performance by her company,[1] and, second,

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1)   As Bringhurst himself clarifies in his preface, "This text was commissioned by the choreographer Robin Poitras for performance by her company New Dance Horizons, based in Regina, Saskatchewan. Chiyoko Szlavnics joined us from Berlin to create the musical score, and the sculptor Jon Noestheden, who constructed the stage properties and crucial portions of the set, produced a kinetic work of visual art for

Bringhurst's brief but illuminating meditation on the polyphonic and polylingual nature of the poem:

> Most of the text of *Ursa Major* is meant to be spoken rather than sung, but I am interested in the ways in which speech can be musical, and in the ways in which music can speak. The speaking voices here make use of several musical devices or techniques. One of these, employed by Hera […], is retrograde motion. Hera, that is, speaks some of her lines both forward and backward. A more essential tool, employed throughout the work, is polyphonic speech. By that I mean, two or more voices often speak at once, though they have different things to say. The voices intertwine with one another, but their separate agendas prevent them, on the whole, from falling into a reciprocating, linear exchange. There is as a consequence little or no conventional dialogue. Where the polyphony is *antiphonal*, the voices alternate, like traffic at a four-way stop. Where it is *sustained*, the voices do not pause for one other; their crossing is continuous, like traffic on a cloverleaf or overpass. The polyphony throughout *Ursa Major* is *sustained* unless specifically marked otherwise. (2003, 7)

This is something Bringhurst had already accomplished in *New World Suite No. 3* – with astonishing mastery. However, whereas the *Suite* braided three different voices at the same time, all of them speaking English simultaneously at some points, now Bringhurst manages to bring together up to four voices speaking different languages, for this is a polylingual poem. The musicality of *Ursa Major* is thus achieved via the simultaneous voicings of several languages: Greek, Latin, Cree and English words are juxtaposed side by side. To Iain Higgins's mind, *Ursa Major* is "a relational hymn in which the separate multilingual voices […] disappear into the mostly sustained sonic 'shoom' of vocal counterpoint" (2004, 42). Of course, the text is given twice: first in "linear form" and then as "a voice map," which is "in its utter 'illisibility' a post-structuralist's dream, and there is no little pleasure to be got poring over its complex text with its several alphabets" (2004, 42). With his characteristic wry humour, the author points out that polyphony should not be a problem or come as a surprise to the hearer, for we do live in a multilingual world after all and our ears are tuned to hearing many voices speaking simultaneously, overlapping, colliding into one another all the time:

> The polyphony here is also very often polylingual. This is not, I think, a problem, despite the fact that theatre-goers and readers equally fluent in English, Latin, Greek and Cree appear to be in short supply. This is a masque, not an exam. What I ask of its audience, either in

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the verbal score, the choreography and the soundwork to move through and to rest in. Rehearsals began in Regina in March 2002, and the first performances took place at the end of that month…" (2003, 7).

text or in performance, is merely a willingness to watch and think and listen. All of us are practised, after all, at living in a multivocal, multilingual world. We have no choice. No other sort of world exists. (Bringhurst, 2003, 7)

"A score and a performance are of course two different things, each ideally in-debted to the other" (2003, 7), claims Bringhurst in his preface. As a matter of fact, *Ursa Major* was originally conceived as being a multimedia work,[2] combining words, dancing, singing and all the ingredients implicit in a choreography in time and in space. However, the only thing we have now left is words – the score of a performance[3] that took place on two occasions in Saskatchewan in March 2002. We do not even have the ghostly traces of recorded form. "Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to know how such a polyglot polyphony might sound, and this beautiful book is limited by the lack of a CD recording of a performance" (2004, 42), writes critic Iain Higgins.[4] And yet *Ursa Major* remains a beautifully designed book,[5] a handsome art object, and a typographical challenge for both Andrew Steeves of Gaspereau Press and Bringhurst, an expert typographer himself. As Brian Henderson observes,

> Part I displays the voices consecutively as a form of playscript for ease of reading, while Part II is a voice map […] which braids the voices as they would intertwine with each other in the polyphony of performance. This is the core of the book and the most visually appealing: four languages, three alphabets, three typefaces (plus two screens of them) pattern the page. Interesting musical devices are also used such as retrograde recitation where words are spoken in reverse order from their first appearance. (2005, 117–118)

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2)   Canadian poet George Elliott Clarke rightly observes that "the drama was and is multimedia, fusing words, music, dance, and a 'kinetic' set" (2003, C7).

3)   In "Late at the Feast," his excellent and perceptive afterword to the 2003 edition, Peter Sanger says: "The best commentary upon Bringhurst's *Ursa Major* can only be its performance. Of the seven choreographies out of which it is made, only one can be offered by a printed text with some accuracy – the choreography of its words, of its Latin, Greek, English and Cree. The other six choreographies at work in the masque, and audience, can be registered only glancingly, if at all, on the page" (2003, 77).

4)   Higgins argues that *a silent reading* of the score is not enough: "In fact, *Ursa Major* is limited by the lack of a DVD, since Bringhurst's book is more than a text; it is the verbal score for a symmetrically shaped five-act masque whose performance involves dance, costume, scenery, music, and song (the two main speakers are offstage). […] For without experiencing a performance it is next to impossible to feel the work's effects or think seriously about the concerns it embodies or enacts, including those of selective cultural cross-breeding and appropriation, and myth as opposed to history" (2004, 42).

5)   Clarke points out: "Andrew Steeves runs two or three of four languages together in painstakingly exquisite passages, using various densities of ink, and the work is introduced by a dramatic woodcut illustration of a bear's head by Wesley Bates" (2003, C7).

The myth of Ursa Major

At the core of Bringhurst's masque is the universal myth of Ursa Major, the familiar constellation also known as the Great Bear or the Big Dipper. One and the same myth unfolds into full bloom in the poem, though two stories from two different cultural traditions (Greco-Roman and Cree) are being told by different voices.[6] This is a recurrent characteristic of Bringhurst's poetics, which is fond of cultural syncretism. The poet is interested in salvaging valuable remnants of vision (or tattered fragments of wisdom) from the past, from different cultures, traditions and languages. Thus, Bringhurst has made use of two types of sources for his poem: (1) Greek and Latin sources, particularly Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book II), the only surviving substantial source for the story of Callisto (a bear myth) in the western Classical tradition according to Bringhurst himself, and (2) Cree sources, particularly the story entitled "The Bear-Woman," included in Leonard Bloomfield's classic *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree* (1930). What we get is a beautiful tessellation of stories which leaves no room for improvisation and nothing *en route*.

As Sanger puts it in his perceptive afterword to *Ursa Major*, "Bringhurst's masque is a performative act of re-collection and collaboration. Throughout its five scenes, it brings into collaboration and re-collection four languages, two traditions of myth (the Mediterranean and the Amerindian), and all the arts (poetry, music, sculpture, painting, and architecture)" (2003, 79).[7] In fact, by bringing together the Cree and Greco-Roman mythologies into one coherent *Gestalt*, Bringhurst is underlining the universality of stories about the great bear constellation, while at the same time emphasizing the universality of certain human concerns. According to Sanger, *Ursa Major* is a poem about human knowledge, about that which is worth knowing and preserving throughout time across human cultures, but it is also a poem about desire, that most elemental of human impulses: "It's also about the transformations of desire – betrayal, bitterness, loss, passion, yearning – so central to myths (transformations of gods and humans to animals and vice versa and living creatures to shiny bits of firmament)" (2005, 117), writes Brian Henderson.

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6)　In this respect, Mark Dickinson writes: "Composed for six speakers working in four languages [...], *Ursa* brings two classic stories into the same orbit: Ovid's retelling of Arcturus and Callisto, the basis for the Great Bear constellation, and Bear Woman, a Cree story by the mythteller Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw about a hunter who falls in love with a woman who is not what she appears to be. [...] These gathered traditions, Bringhurst reminds us, are tools through which people millennia apart have tried to understand where they are and what they are doing" (2009, 12).

7)　On the deliberate, careful selection of Greco-Roman and Cree sources for the making of *Ursa Major* on the part of Bringhurst, Sanger says that "In *Ursa Major* the narrative structure – within which its lyrics are spoken, sung, chanted – is explicit. It is polyphonically composed within each scene and from scene to scene in sequences of very deliberately chosen narrative sources. There is nothing improvisational about the masque's schema" (2003, 81).

Ursa Major is not just a complex tessellation of stories from different cultural traditions in several languages in that it retells two myths of the bear constellation using a Cree story, as told by the blind, illiterate mythteller Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw to Leonard Bloomfield in the summer of 1925, and Ovid's Callisto myth as recorded in Book II of his *Metamorphoses*, but also a rich tapestry braided with translations and original poems by Bringhurst. As George Elliott Clarke puts it, "This performance work – part original translations, part original poetry – merges Greek, Latin, Cree and English, literally, cascading and colliding together, voices and languages in a deft orchestration of polyphony" (2003, C7). In this respect, Bringhurst might be following in Ezra Pound's steps:

> Like Ezra Pound, the enraged inventor of modern poetry in English, who imported into
> our tongue the classic clarity and concision of Chinese ideograms, Egyptian hieroglyphics,
> Latin, Cree [*sic*], French, Italian and even old Anglo-Saxon, Bringhurst […] has been
> busily remaking Canadian poetry for more than 30 years by borrowing forms and ideas
> from multiple languages and cultural traditions, especially those of First Nations peoples.
> (Clarke, 2003, C7)[8]

In *Ursa Major* Bringhurst is poet, linguist, typographer, cultural historian, and translator all in one: a man seriously committed to his vocation as poet who relishes the very materiality and universality of the word, of language, and of myth. The simplicity, clarity and elegance of his language is what makes this poem in five scenes truly fascinating. Clarke speaks of its "singing simplicity" – no matter whether in the Cree renderings, or in the Latin translation of Ovidian hexameters or in the translations from fragments originally composed in classical Greek, the clarity shines through Bringhurst's words. His is a singing poetry, one that sings with clarity and conviction. And this is a polyglot polyphonic poem, which is a huge accomplishment. In the afterword to *New World Suite No. 3*, entitled "Licking the Lips with a Forked Tongue," Bringhurst draws a most interesting distinction between bilingual books and polyglot books:

> Bilingual books, with one language on the recto and another on the verso, can be a joy to
> handle and read. Two is a number at home in the standard codex form of the book, just as
> it is in the eyes and ears of readers, and in their feet and shoes. Polyglot books, containing
> three texts or more, are a problem of a different order. People have tried for two thousand
> years to make them work in codex form – with sometimes interesting results – but in

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8) In "Things to Be Done," an early article published in *Poetry*, IX/6, in March 1917, 312–314, Pound insisted on the need for more translations: "we should multiply translations. It is not everyone who has time to learn ten languages, or even two. Competition is of value even in matters of art and intelligence. […] We need standards of comparison. All excellence has not risen out of one ant-hill" (1917, 313).

general polyglot texts are more at home in separate books or in the scroll, which can be opened as much or little as you please: to a spread of one page or of five. (2005, 5)

The Greco-Roman and Cree sources of *Ursa Major*

Ursa Major consists of five scenes, at the beginning of which Bringhurst gives a detailed description of the speakers and dancers taking part in the action, as well as careful instructions as to the way voices are to interact with one another in their collaborative telling of the Ursa Major myth. As pointed out above, one of the main textual sources is the myth of Callisto as retold by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, Book II, lines 401–541. Bringhurst is prompt to emphasize that his translation from the original Latin text is not literal; in this he might be following the example set by Pound himself in his "Homage to Sextus Propertius," which was not a literal rendering at all in the eyes of some Classicists of the time. In his Afterword to *Ursa Major*, Sanger provides an excellent summary of the myth:

> According to Ovid, Callisto was one of a company of nymphs attending the goddess Diana (or Artemis, to use a Greek name), sister to Apollo, during Diana's life as a huntress in Arcadia (translatable from the Greek as bear-country). Zeus, returning from extinguishing the fire caused by the fall of Phaeton, which almost consumed the universe, sees Callisto and falls in love, or lust, with her. He changes himself into the form of Diana, embraces the unsuspecting Callisto, then changing back into his own form, rapes and renders her pregnant. Callisto tries to conceal her pregnancy from Diana, but her condition becomes public when Diana forces her to strip and bathe in a spring. Diana banishes Callisto for losing her virginity. Alone, in the woods of Arcadia, Callisto gives birth to a son, Arcturus. Hera, Zeus' wife, takes revenge upon Callisto after the birth by turning her into a she-bear. Lycaon, Callisto's father, raises Arcturus. As a she-bear, Callisto lives for fifteen years in solitude, afraid of humans, of gods, of her fellow beasts, until Arcturus accidentally discovers her while he is hunting. She recognizes him, pausing to gaze at him before fleeting. Arcturus construes her pause as aggression, not knowing it is love, and prepares to spear her. Zeus then intervenes to change both into stars. Hera's revenge is to secure from Neptune and Tethys, Neptune' wife and mother of the main rivers in the Universe, the promise that neither Arcturus in Boötes nor Callisto in Ursa Major will ever be able to conceal themselves below the levels of the waters of earth. (2003, 84–85)

Of the over one hundred verse lines Ovid devotes to the Callisto myth, Bringhurst quotes 28 lines or portions of lines lifted from the Latin text. The same Latin words from Book II of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* appear in scenes 1, 3 and 5 of *Ursa*

Major, delivered by Ovid's Daughter and accompanied in scenes 1 and 5 by Bringhurst's translation into English, voiced in slightly delayed polyphonic overdraft by an actor-dancer designated the Translator. This is what the beginning of this polyphonic poem looks like:

Ovid's Daughter [*speaking in Latin*]:
Translator [speaking over the Latin, with a slight delay, in English]:

Arcadiae tamen est inpensior illi
    Arcadia, bear country: that
cura suae: fontesque et nondum audentia labi
    was his favorite. After the flood, the springs were shy,
flumina restituit, dat terrae gramina, frondes
    the rivers timid. He persuaded them to flow.
arboribus, laesasque iubet reuirescere siluas….
    He gave the land back all its wild grasses, gave the tree limbs
    to the trees. He gave the country life again….

… ubi fibula uestem,
    … her dress just wrapped around and pinned, [Hera's first song begins about here]
uitta coercuerat neglectos alba capillos;
    a white cord knotted in the hair she never combed,
et modo leue manu iaculum, modo sumpserat arcum,
    and always a spear or a bow in her hand:
miles erat Phoebes….
    one of Moon Woman's warriors….

      …. nulla potentia longa est.
        …. no power lasts for long…

… huic odio nemus est et conscia silua…
    … then she hated the flowers and trees
    that had seen it and felt it…

… i procul hinc, dixit, nec sacros pollue fontes….
    … "Get away from here," Moon Woman said.
    "Don't pollute the sacred pool!…"

… adimam tibi namque figuram …
"… I'll drive the beauty out of you," the Queen said,…

… strauit humi pronam. Tendebat bracchia supplex:

    … and threw her on the ground. When she lifted up her arms

bracchia coeperunt nigris horrescere uillis

    to beg for mercy, they were already dark and turning shaggy,

curuarique manus et aduncos crescere in ungues

    fingers shrinking into toe and growing long, sharp claws …

officioque pedum fungi …

… posse loqui eripitur: uox iracunda minaxque

    … lost her grip on language. What erupted from her throat

plenaque terroris rauco de gutture fertur;

    was just a rough noise, a storm wind whipped in the pit of her belly.

mens antiqua manet …

    Yet her mind stayed just the way it was …

… ursaque conspectus in montibus horruit ursos

    … a bear afraid of other bears anytime she met them

pertimuitque lupos, quamuis pater esset in illis …

    on the mountain. Terrified of wolves too, even though

    her father was among them …

… incidet in matrem …

    … by chance he met his mother …

                 … ille refugit

                    … He wanted to escape

inmotosque oculos in se sine fine tenentem

    those eyes that didn't blink and never left him. He didn't know

nescius extimuit propiusque accedere auenti

    what spooked him. Then she started closing in on him. The spear

uulnifico fuerat fixurus pectora telo …

    was entering her chest …

sustulit et pariter raptos per inania uento

    … caught them up and spun them through the nothingness

inposuit caelo uicinaque sidera fecit ….

    and set them in the sky beside each other,

    made them into constellations…. (2003, 11–13)

Sanger meditates on the fragmentary nature of the Latin text as handled by Bring-
hurst in *Ursa Major* and comes to an enlightening conclusion:

Bringhurst's use of Ovid, therefore, offers the Callisto myth in a radically fragmentary form, characterized by abruptions, unassigned pronouns, and unexplained relationships. The effect is as if we were reading all that remains of a text recorded on a badly damaged papyrus roll. They are fragments of beauty, strangeness, bitterness, violence. They invest us with the sense of being part of a myth working at the limits of endurable human knowledge. But they are, nonetheless, fragments. They exist as such in *Ursa Major*, because Bringhurst wishes us to see and hear (who now can understand spoken Latin?) that the immediate, cultural tradition of which they are part exists only in the most damaged, intercepted form in the modern world. (2003, 83–84)

Bringhurst gives the details concerning the source of the Cree story that is the beating heart of scenes 2 and 4 (about one half is told in each scene):

The story told by Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw's Son is one of many that Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw himself told to Leonard Bloomfield at Sweet Grass Reserve, Saskatchewan, in 1925. It is published as "The Bear-Woman" in Bloomfield's *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree* (Ottawa, 1930). I have added a transcription into West Cree syllabics, updated Bloomfield's meticulous romanization, and corrected a couple of obvious minor errors but made no other changes to the Cree. While the English version spoken by the Translator owes much to Bloomfield's own translation – and much to the advice of another fine scholar, H. C. Wolfart – it should not be misconstrued as a precise and literal rendering. (2003, 75)[9]

So Bringhurst has salvaged a precious text from a classic in its field, Bloomfield's compilation of Cree stories, corrected minor errors in the linguist's romanization, and translated directly from Cree – one of the vernacular languages spoken in North America that is now often forgotten by academia as sustaining a living body of literature. In the many essays and meditations he has devoted to the native oral literatures of North America, Bringhurst precisely reminds readers that all literature

9) In the early 1920s Bloomfield began his classic work on North American Indian languages, contributing the first of many descriptive and comparative studies of the Algonquian family. For his part, Sanger, in the Afterword to *Ursa Major* (2003), points out that "The second main source used in *Ursa Major* is, as Bringhurst acknowledges in his notes, Leonard Bloomfield's *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree*, a substantial book of nearly 350 pages issued as Bulletin 60 in the Anthropological Memoirs Series of the National Museum of Canada. Scene 2 of the masque contains the first half, and scene 4 the second half, of a story told to Bloomfield while he was collecting linguistic material on the Sweet Grass Reserve near Battleford, Saskatchewan, in the summer of 1925. Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw (anglicized as Coming Day), 'a blind old man' to use Bloomfield's words, reputed by other Sweet Grass Cree to know more traditional stories than any other member of the band, told Bloomfield the bear-woman story that Bringhurst quotes and translates. Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw was, in fact, the chief contributor to Bloomfield's collection. Fifteen of its thirty-six stories were of his telling. Each, incidentally, ends with the words (or a slight variation upon the words): "'That is the end of the sacred story'" (2003, 85).

is oral at its roots. There is an immense body of literary texts, mostly transcriptions recorded by linguists, anthropologists and ethnographers, awaiting careful edition, translation and critical elucidation. They are buried, and almost completely forgotten, in archives in libraries across North America. Bringhurst has visited them time and again to make amazing discoveries: to his astonishment, he has found the welcome gift of literary texts of impressive quality.

In an enlightening essay entitled "What Is Found in Translation" (included in his prose compilation *Everywhere Being Is Dancing*), Bringhurst claims that translation should serve three basic social functions: one is that of keeping our links with the past, so that we need to go back to such classics as Plato, for instance, to keep in our minds their useful insights into the essence of things; another is that of keeping cultures (and languages) in touch, informing people of their neighbours' achievements; and the third one, which is usually forgotten, is that of making discoveries – i.e., finding out texts that have not yet been given the attention they deserve and sharing the discovery with other fellow human beings to enlarge their perception and size of the world (2007, 75).[10] Bringhurst is well aware that any consideration of the literary legacy he has received from his ancestors must begin with an appreciation of the literary history of the land where he happens to live and which he calls *home*. He has been readjusting his mental map of the literary world where he lives for a long time, paying attention to the oral literatures of over a hundred languages of the First Nations of North America.

These are the opening lines of Scene 2, which is to say the beginning of the Cree version of the Ursa Major myth:

Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw's Son [*speaking in Cree*]:
Translator [*sotto voce*, with a slight delay, speaking in English]:

Kîtahtawê pêyak ayîsiyiniw itahk êh-wa-wîkit,
Once there was a man who lived alone,
êh-pêyakot,
    all alone,
nama wîhkâc wâpamêw ayîsiyinawah,
    never seeing any other people,
wiya pikôh êkotah êh-ayât.
    no one there except for him.

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10) In the same essay Bringhurst dwells on what could be termed *Weltliteratur*, his omnivorous literary canon: "What I need as a human being is a picture of the whole of human history. And what I need as a practicing writer is a picture of the whole of human *literary* history. I need a picture rich in local detail but also with a sense of shape. Like the globe beside my desk, it should give me a sense of how large and various, but also how finite and fragile, are the time and space of the species to which I belong" (2007, 87).

Kâh-nipâcih kâ-tipiskâyik,
> After sleeping through the night,

wiyâpaniyiki mâcîw.
> he went hunting in the morning.

Wiyâpamâci mostoswah,
> Whenever he saw buffalo,

nipahêw.
> he killed them.

Pêyak otêyiniy otinam,
> He just took the tongue,

êkwah pêyak opêminak,
> and just a haunch,

êh-kîwêt, ê-takohtêt wîkihk,
> and headed back to where he lived

êkwah mânah êh-kîsitêpot,
> and cooked his meal,

kâh-mîcisoci,
> and then, when he had eaten,

êkwah ê-nikohtêt.
> gathered firewood.

Êkosi êkwah piyisk tipiskâyiw mâna.
> After that, darkness came the way it does.

Êkwa êy-ay-apit, piyisk kaskêyihtam êh-pêyakot.
> Living by himself there, he started feeling lonely.

Êh-wâpaniyik, mîn êh-mâcît,
> When dawn came again, he went hunting,

mînah pêyak nipahêw mostoswah.
> and killed another buffalo.

Kîwêw;
> He came back,

apisîs otinam ka-mîcit.
> bringing just a little bit to eat.

Cîk êy-ihtât wîkihk,
> Coming hear his camp,

kâ-wâpahtahk mistah êh-astêyikih mihtah wîkihk
> he saw there was a big stack of firewood.

Ay-itêyihtam, "Awiyak ê-kîh-takohtêt."

    He thought, "Someone must have come."

Êkos îtêyihtam.

    That's what he was thinking.

Miywêyihtam.

    He was happy.

Êh-pîhtokêt, nam âwiyah wâpamêw.

    He didn't see anyone inside.

Êsah kâh-wêpâhtakahikêyihk.

    He could tell, though, that someone had been sweeping.

Mihtâtam êkâh êh-wâpamât awiyah.

    Seeing no one made him sad. (2003, 15–17)

As in the case of the translation from Ovid's Latin, now Bringhurst is also prompt to point out that his version of "The Bear Woman" should not be "misconstrued as a precise and literal rendering" of the original Cree story. That it owes much to Bloomfield's literal transcription of the story is evident when we place Bringhurst's poem against the opening of the story in the linguist's rendering:

> Once upon a time a man lived all alone and never saw any people, being all alone in that place. When he had slept at night, in the morning he went hunting. Whenever he saw buffalo, he killed them. He would take a tongue and a thigh-bone and go home, and when he reached his dwelling, he would prepare his meal, and when he had eaten, he would gather firewood. So night would come upon him. As he stayed thus by himself, at last he felt lonesome. When daylight came and he as usual went hunting, again he killed a buffalo. He went home; he took a little to eat.
>
> When he was near his dwelling place, he saw a great pile of firewood by his tent. He wondered about it; "It must be that someone has come," he thought. He was glad. When he entered, he saw nobody, though it was plain that someone had swept the place. He was sorry that he saw no one. He stayed there. "How is it that there is no one here?" he thought. Lo, there where he sat, he found some moccasins. He was very glad, thinking, "A woman perhaps is the one who came here. In the morning I shall hunt; I shall try to come upon her when she is here, if she comes again," he thought.
>
> At daybreak he quickly went off to hunt. Again he killed a buffalo. He took the tongue, the ribs, the kidneys, and a thigh-bone. Then he went home, thinking, "I shall come in time to find her there." He kept running.
>
> When he got near his dwelling, he saw a little smoke, and a great pile of firewood. When he entered, eagerly he looked about: he saw no one. He was very sorry that no one was there.

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Then, as he went about his cooking, soon he found some moccasins. He picked them up and examined them; they were very pretty.

"Probably it is a woman has been coming here," he thought; "Now all the harder I shall try to find her here. Early in the morning I shall go," he thought.

After eating, he lay down to sleep. He got up early; without eating he went forth to hunt. In a short time he killed a buffalo; and when he cut it up, took the ribs and the kidneys and went home. He ran as he went. When he was close to his dwelling, he saw much smoke rising from his tent. He was very glad thinking, "Perhaps she is there."

When he got there and entered, lo and behold, there sat a very handsome woman on his settee. He sat down there, and she smiled at him as he looked at her. It appeared that she had already done the cooking. Without delay she took off his moccasins and put others on his feet, and she washed his hands and face. Thereupon she gave him to eat, and they took their meal. Oh he was very glad. (Bloomfield, 1930: 59–60)

Though Bringhurst's version of "The Bear Woman" owes much to Bloomfield's, it is a completely different text. His is a poem rich in musicality and echoes from the original Cree, whose simplicity manages to shine through Bringhurst's English words. There is no room for ornament, for superfluous adjectives or convoluted structures. Simple literary devices such as repetition (of key words, phrases or sentences, and ideas) will do to evoke the ancient flavour of the story originally told in a Cree reserve in 1925 by a blind, illiterate man to Leonard Bloomfield.

The plot of the story is simple enough and can be easily summarised. A man lives alone by himself and spends his days hunting buffalo. From the hunted animals he takes only little meat to take home and eat. Suddenly, he starts feeling terribly lonely, but keeps on going hunting though. One day he returns home from hunting only to find out that someone has been in his home, doing the household chores, sweeping the floor, piling a stack of firewood by the house. But he is sad as he sees there is no one inside. He finds only a pair of good moccasins and starts thinking that maybe there has been a woman. He is determined to find her, and so he leaves home early in the morning to go hunting and comes back home only to sadly find out once again that there is no one. However, one day he comes back and finds a beautiful woman sitting on his seat. She takes care of him, gives him food to eat and asks him to bring more meat next time he goes hunting, for her family is terribly hungry. From that point on, the man spends his days hunting all the time while the woman spends her days preparing the food they are to take to her family. Then, one day they set out on a journey to her land. The man is surprised to see how she manages to take all the bundles of gear and provisions with her without apparently making any effort at all. All she has to do is step on every bundle of food, and it all will come up exactly at the place where they camp for the night. Finally, they arrive at her parents' home. Her

sister, her father and her mother are all extremely happy to see that the woman has brought them food to eat. To the man's surprise, what he thought was a woman turns out to be a bear, and so are all the members of her family. He is horribly sad because he cannot stay with them anymore.

The story is told in two halves, in scenes 2 and 4. The first half finishes exactly at the point where the man asks the unknown woman where she comes from. The second half concludes with the man leaving the bear family with a broken heart full of sadness. But what does this story have to do with the Ursa Major myth, or with Ovid's account of Callisto in Book II of *Metamorphoses*, we may ask. The counterpart of Callisto, the beautiful nymph transformed into a she-bear by jealous Hera upon the discovery of Zeus' infidelity in the classical story as told by Ovid, is the bear woman in the Cree myth. But now the movement has been reversed as it were: the protagonist in the Cree story is a woman that turns out to be a bear, whereas in Ovid's story an innocent woman falls prey to Zeus' assault, is repudiated by the virgin goddess Artemis, and is eventually turned first into a horrible she-bear by his furious wife and then into a constellation (Ursa Major) by Zeus himself. What is common to both stories is that two worlds or realms – that of the immortal gods and that of mortal humans – interact with one another in astonishing ways, and it seems that it is always humans that take the worst part with them at the end of the story: Callisto is condemned to roam the woods and mountains for 15 years till she finally meets her son Arcturus, whereas the man of the Cree story is forced to abandon hopelessly broken-hearted a world of bears (spirit beings) where he does not seem to fit in at all.

Desire is also at the core of both stories: it is a savage form of desire that prompts Zeus to approach Callisto, rape her and render her pregnant; it is, by contrast, a tender form of desire that prompts the hunter to help the stranger by hunting buffalo nonstop to get food for her hungry family. It is in the middle of nowhere, amid the solitude of the woods or the mountains, be it in ancient Arcadia or in the vast expanses of land in Canada, that both stories have their setting. Both Callisto and the Cree hunter are ultimately outsiders, solitary hunters living on the fringe of society that come face to face with powerful beings, whose presence is too overwhelming by human standards. Both spend their time in the company of trees, rivers and mountains. Both suffer from unendurable pain in the end. However, there is a radical difference between Callisto's story and the bear woman story, as Sanger explains in these lucid words:

> The narrator of the bear-woman story in *Ursa Major* is Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw's Son. His counterpart in scenes 1, 3 and 5 is Ovid's Daughter. Thus, both the Cree and Graeco-Roman myths are being transmitted within the masque as family property, in accordance with Amerindian practice. The masque honours that propriety. But there is a notable difference between the two bundles of transmitted materials. Ovid's Daughter speaks in fragments.

> Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw's Son transmits his myth in full. Paradoxically it is the Ovidian written version that breaks apart in performance, while the Cree myth, crucially transmitted at the juncture between the traditional and the modern by an illiterate storyteller as blind as Homer, endures as an integrity. (2003: 86)

Ovid's story is told by his Daughter in a fragmentary form, whereas the Cree story is being told by Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw's Son, the original storyteller's son, in full, as an integrity. The contrast is that between fragmentation and unity, even if both are transmitting their bundles of words as valuable family property. In Bringhurst's idiosyncratic literary canon, the oral literatures of the First Nations are on a par with the Greco-Roman literary tradition. After all, the literary imagination is but a voracious prolongation of the human intelligence seeking to understand reality from multiple perspectives and through the prism of different languages as spoken by humankind over time. *Ursa Major* captures the hardly audible voice of a constellation in the sky through a masterful tessellation of words on the page, whilst reminding alert readers of the universality of human concerns across eons of time and space, no matter whether in ancient Arcadia or in Cree territory.

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