

A Walk in the Woods, or a Poetics of Exile: Robert Bringhurst's "The Lyell Island Variations"

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Abstract

Written in response to various poets writing in different languages, "The Lyell Island Variations" is one of the most ambitious poem sequences in Canadian poet Robert Bringhurst's entire literary corpus. The sequence consists of nine poems that constitute, in the poet's words, "an album of mere mistranslations," brought together under the name of an island in Haida Gwaii, an archipelago off the coast of Alaska and British Columbia and home to the Haida, one of the native peoples of North America. The translations pay homage to a number of pre-eminent poets from several literary traditions, as the use of textual thresholds in different languages found in the epigraphs preceding each single poem makes clear. This article explores how, in "The Lyell Island Variations," the poet is trying to rescue remnants of visions and tattered fragments of wisdom from voices speaking different human languages, while making a relevant contribution to literary tradition.

Keywords: Robert Bringhurst, exile, oral literatures, Michelangelo Buonarroti.

Resumen

Compuesta en respuesta a varios poetas de distintas lenguas, "The Lyell Island Variations" es una de las secuencias poéticas más ambiciosas del canadiense Robert Bringhurst. Consta de nueve poemas que constituyen, en palabras del propio autor, "un álbum de meras traducciones equivocadas," reunidas bajo el nombre de una de las islas de Haida Gwaii, archipiélago situado frente a las costas de Alaska y la Columbia Británica, y hogar de los haidas, uno de los pueblos nativos de América del Norte. Los poemas traducidos rinden homenaje a poetas insignes de diversas tradiciones literarias, como

ponen de manifiesto las citas en distintas lenguas que preceden a cada uno de los poemas a modo de pórtico textual. Este artículo indaga cómo, en “The Lyell Island Variations,” el poeta trata de rescatar visiones y fragmentos de sabiduría de la mano de voces que hablan diversas lenguas humanas, a la par que trata de hacer una aportación relevante a la tradición literaria.

Palabras clave: Robert Bringhurst, exilio, literaturas orales, Miguel Ángel Buonarroti.

1. INTRODUCTION

Like poetry, the experience of exile is as old as humanity, but poets have found home in traditions and languages other than their own. Canadian poet Robert Bringhurst (b. 1946) has always had the hunch that a poet’s true home is tradition at large and that poets are perpetual exiles of sorts. Heir to the Modernist masters Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, he has written with the weight of tradition on his shoulders ever since he started his literary career in the early seventies, with books of poems like *The Shipwright’s Log* (1972), *Cadastre* (1973), *Bergschrund* (1975), *Jacob’s Singing* (1977) and *The Stonecutter’s Horses* (1979). The 1980s were a prolific decade for the author, who published not only the poetry volumes *Tzuhalem’s Mountain* (1982), *The Beauty of the Weapons* (1982), *The Blue Roofs of Japan* (1986), *Pieces of Map*, *Pieces of Music* (1986), and *Conversations with a Toad* (1987), but also *The Raven Steals the Light* (1984), a collection of myths and stories illustrated by the great Haida artist Bill Reid. Early in the 1980s Bringhurst started learning Haida to be able to read one of the most remarkable native oral literatures of North America in its original language. By then he had mastered Greek, Latin, Arabic and several modern languages to be able to converse with literary ancestors whom he had translated in his MFA Thesis *Carmina propria et opuscula translata* in 1975 in search of his own poetic voice. The experience of learning Haida meant a turning point in his career as a poet, translator and cultural historian, as the Haida mythtellers Ghandl and Skaay held an irresistible fascination for him from the very outset. He would devote several decades to mastering their language and to unearthing a precious oral literature which he compared to Homer’s *Iliad* in a monumental

trilogy comprising *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World* (1999) and two volumes of translations from Ghandl and Skaay, *Nine Visits to the Mythworld. Ghandl of the Qayah! Llaanas* (2000) and *Being in Being: The Collected Works of Skaay of the Qquuna Qiighawaay* (2001).

The poetic sequence “The Lyell Island Variations” was composed in the 1980s, at a time when the poet was possibly struggling with the lexicon and syntax of an extremely demanding language. Hence the title of the sequence: the poems are named after one of the islands in Haida Gwaii, home to the Haida and to an oral literature that flourished amid cedar woods before the arrival of colonisers dramatically decimated their population due to smallpox and measles in the 19th century. All of a sudden, Ghandl, Skaay and many other talented Haida mythtellers became exiles in their own homeland. It was only during the long hours in 1900 when they performed their myth cycles, narrative poems and stories to a dedicated anthropologist called John Swanton, who painstakingly took dictation in a language he did not understand, that they were truly alive again. “The Lyell Island Variations” was published as part of *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music* in 1986, but it was subsequently revised and expanded in *The Calling: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (1995) and in *Selected Poems* (2009). The thorough revision of the poems is expressive of how dear these poems are to Bringhurst. “The Lyell Island Variations” is the product of the author’s amazement at the multifarious diversity of languages grown by the tree of meaning and spoken by *homo sapiens* worldwide, but also a homage to the authors he translates into English, who were also literal or figurative exiles at some points in their lives.

2. WHAT EXILE IS, AND LANGUAGE AS THE TRUE HOME OF POETS

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, exile means “the state of being barred from one’s native country, typically for political or punitive reasons” and also “a person who lives away from their native country, either from choice or compulsion.” The word comes from the Latin *exilium*, which means ‘banishment.’ The concept of *exile* must be interpreted in relation to *home* and *homeland*. Home is spatial

and geographical to begin with. It is where one starts from. Homeland is our idiosyncratic ecosystem, where we are possibly our truest selves. It is our tiny place on Earth, where we belong and simply feel at home, next to the ones we love and we are loved by. Thus, home is stubbornly physical and tangible, but the first spiritual and intangible home to a poet (and to all human beings for that matter) is the mother tongue. Human beings cannot live outside language; they perceive the world through the senses and through the lively network of words that make up a language. Interpretation of objectively observable phenomena is possible thanks to the dissecting tools language provides humans with, for language is the construct with which we think and interpret the world. Not only do human beings speak, language speaks too. *Die Sprache spricht*, says Heidegger in *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, where he suggests that human beings' ultimate, essential home is language: "das Sein istet, die Welt weltet, die Zeit zeitigt, das Nicht nichtet, das Ding dingt, das Ereignis ereignet, die Sprache spricht. [...] Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins" (1959: 10).

3. POETS IN EXILE AND ELIOTIAN TRADITION

The history of Western literature is rich in examples of poets who were literal or figurative exiles at some point in their lives. Ovid (Rome, 43 BCE – Tomis, 17/18 CE), exiled in solitude and nostalgia by the Black Sea during the Roman Empire possibly remains the paradigmatic example. Exile meant for him to be deprived of his homeland and the people that were dearest to his heart. It was the absence of home and everything home stands for: a world of warmth and affection, the realm of privacy and intimacy as opposed to public life and emotional detachment. But exile was also an opportunity for him to produce literary works of art of lasting value. His *Tristia* (9-12 CE) and *Epistulae ex Ponto* (13-16 CE), which expressed his emotional distress and longing for home, were composed in Tomis, near the waters of the Black Sea, where the poet had been banished in 8 CE by the Emperor Augustus. In the twentieth century, the examples of poet-exiles are innumerable: cosmopolitan Rainer Maria Rilke travelling across Europe in search of inspiration for his poetry, the *Duineser Elegien* and *Sonette an Orpheus*; Ernest Hemingway living in Paris as a young man, starting to painstakingly write his short stories

– one word at a time – amid poverty and taking *la cité de la lumière*, a feast to last a lifetime, with him for the rest of his life; or T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, self-exiled masters of Modernist poetry who settled in England, France and Italy for long periods of time during their lives. Well-educated and travelled men, wandering intellectuals and scholars, these poets were cosmopolitan citizens dwelling in a vast world, seeking to understand reality in its manifold expressions. After all, a true, wise man is said to have no definite home and no definite address.¹ To all of them, exile was largely self-imposed, a prerequisite for creativity to flourish as it were, possibly because they had the hunch that a committed poet's true home is tradition, where they are not exiles anymore. Tradition is home. In the republic of letters, the non-stoppable music of words and ideas throughout history is stored within the boundaries of tradition. Nothing is left behind *en route*, as Eliot himself pointed out in his seminal essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), for the blood coursing through the veins of poetry is certainly the best that has been thought and felt by the great literary ancestors. Together, lying side by side, all the literary works of art form a timeless constellation or simultaneous vortex of the human imagination to which the aspiring poet must contribute something new. In Eliot's words:

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order (2014: 106).

Needless to say, exile is usually a punitive measure imposed by adverse political circumstances. In a world plagued by war and violence, the loss of place and the sense of uprooting are one of the

fundamental dramas of contemporary human beings. In this respect, in *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Judith Butler argues that we live in a world where different forms of scarcity and post-truth politics make humanity vulnerable and exposed in the face of unexpected violence, fear and dispossession. Thus, after the traumatic experience of the concentration camps where his parents died, Paul Celan had to wander through different European capitals, including Bucharest and Vienna, before he settled in Paris in 1948, where he would write, translate and teach until he took his own life by drowning in the Seine. The great poet Czesław Miłosz had to leave his home in Poland to settle first in Paris and then in California for good. Banished from the land of his family, childhood, nature, religious imagination, he finds a homeland along the line of return, apokatastasis or restoration. For the Polish poet, the search for a homeland became his dream and lifelong task in the form of the daily self-discipline that poetic creation entails. And after the Spanish Civil War, lots of poets had to exile themselves in search of liberty for their poetry and their minds: Luis Cernuda, Rafael Alberti, Pedro Salinas and many other intellectuals, including leftist philosophers like the lucid María Zambrano, had to settle abroad to find a better life and a less hostile environment for their free, creative spirits.

But that was exile in the twentieth century. Nowadays, we live in a vastly different world of increasingly mobile people, who, thanks to faster means of transport, new technologies and globalisation happen to live on a small Earth. In a world of displacement and diaspora, exile is not always an unasked-for experience, but rather a mindscape embraced, willingly (or not), by many poets and novelists. For instance, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie divides her time between her homeland in Africa and the United States, where she teaches Creative Writing at university. Though her homeland Igbo traditions are firmly rooted in her identity as an African woman, she writes in English to reach a vaster readership. What is unquestionable is that exile brings about a singular mindscape which seems to be marked by an open-minded cosmopolitanism, tolerance and solidarity, in spite of the sense of emotional estrangement and split self that may accompany it at times. Identity is a construct, a cultural and experiential construct. It is fluid, hybrid, sensitive to the weather, as it were, and 21st-century humans are nomads, non-sedentary

creatures constantly on the move – physically and figuratively again. As Polish thinker Zigmunt Bauman suggests in his innumerable philosophical essays on liquid modernity, liquid love and liquid fear, under the present circumstances of modernity, humans are bound to be fluid entities in search of their own identity, which is always constructed in relation to other selves. It is not self-sufficiency and solipsism that 21st-century humans should embrace, but a stronger sense of community and positive interdependence on a global scale instead.

Does it make any sense to speak of a poetics of exile in poetry and translation today? It seems that poets are bound to be exiles within their own language and across human languages. Exile could be considered as a means of empowering poets to stretch the expressive possibilities of their mother tongue and a means of empowering translators to bridge the gap or abyss separating languages, worldviews and sensibilities. Literature is hybrid *per se*, because it feeds on previous literature. Great poets are aware that there is nothing of worth they can contribute to this epistemological adventure of humankind on Earth unless they gain a solid first-hand knowledge of poetry as a boundless work in progress. Just now we happen to live in a world whose most salient feature is precisely the increasing mobility of the population on an unprecedented scale in the history of humankind. But poets have always been extremely mobile beings, with no need to leave their home to experience the mind-boggling multifariousness, variety and richness inherent in life – and hence in poetry. Our contention is that poets have always been, and must remain of necessity, constant exiles, wanderers, world-crossers, as it were. They frequent other worlds to make new worlds of their own device by means of the creative use of common, ordinary words. They suffuse a new life into old words to make this old world of ours brand new time and again. Their imagination feeds on the innumerable experiences life brings to them, and the experience of travel, moving in time and in space, away from home and back again, is certainly a remarkable formative experience in a poet's life, which he/she seeks to transmute into a work of art that will speak to posterity. They listen to the non-stoppable music of words and ideas and seek to contribute something which is worthwhile and may survive the devastating test of time. This is no minor accomplishment.

At any rate, if we were to briefly trace the evolution of the concept of exile throughout history in our Western culture, it might make sense to point out that a sort of shift has taken place from exile conceptualised as punishment towards exile as being an experiential opportunity full of promise and renewal. Probably both conceptualisations of exile have coexisted throughout time. The experience of exile might have been imposed by political, socioeconomic and cultural circumstances such as war, dictatorship, tyranny, or economic crisis, or it might have been chosen willingly, of one's own free will, to expand one's vital and intellectual horizons. Exile was a form of punishment for Ovid and many others who did not want to abandon their homeland, but, in the knowledge society of worldwide physical and intellectual mobility, exile is a new mindset that represents the chance to experience multiculturalism and multilingualism at a planetary level. One of the most salient features of 21st-century poetry is precisely that it is multicultural and polylingual, even if the Earth has been a many-voiced and polyphonic place from the very outset. In a nutshell, in our modern, fluid world exile is much more of a mindscape, mindset or experience than an ontological or sociological given; it is possibly one more choice in a person's lifetime.

4. A COSMOPOLITAN POET AT HOME IN THE WORLD

A humanist and polyglot, Canadian poet Robert Bringhurst is a well-read, widely-travelled cosmopolitan man who feels at home anywhere on Earth. In actual fact, Bringhurst believes that the poet is a cosmopolitan individual, or a citizen of the world, in the literal and strictly etymological sense of the word. He has no definite address and no conventional home, as the Earth in its entirety may be considered his real home. Earth is home, and so is language, and so is Eliotian tradition. Geographical barriers are natural demarcations imposed by nature itself; political borders or frontiers are institutional divisions the author does not acknowledge as worthy of much attention. To a consummate humanist like him, being human is enough to belong to an age-old *genus*: the human species as such. Humanity at large is a human being's family. History is their family tree or genealogy, language is the primeval, invaluable legacy, and nothing is ever lost *en route*.

A tireless philosopher, a lucid linguist, a superb translator and a self-exacting typographer familiar with the craftsmanship of books as hand-made artefacts, Bringhurst is foremost a poet writing with the burden of tradition in his bones and on his shoulders. In the practice of translation he finds an endless source of literary nourishment and inspiration for his own work. His own poetics testifies to his being a Modernist poet, heir to Pound and Eliot, who also translated poems from other languages and traditions – Greek, Latin, Provençal, Italian and Chinese. Bringhurst is no exception in this respect. He spent ten years mastering Arabic and, though in his essay “Breathing Through the Feet: An Autobiographical Meditation”, he refers self-deprecatingly to his “little Greek and less Chinese” (1986: 104), he quotes and translates with ease from a wide array of classical and modern languages. Since the early 1980s, he has studied the indigenous languages and cultures of North America and learnt different native languages of North America, such as Haida, Cree, Navajo and Ojibwa. He has turned his attention to indigenous North American languages and cultures whose pre-industrial, anti-imperial thinkers (together with those from the Buddhist and early Chinese and Greek cultures) form an intellectual Third World from which, in Bringhurst’s view, we have more to learn than they have from us.

Seemingly written in response to the fragmentary epigraphs from various poets writing in different languages, “The Lyell Island Variations” is one of the most ambitious poem sequences in Bringhurst’s entire literary corpus. The definitive textual materialization of this sequence published in *Selected Poems* (2009), “The Lyell Island Variations” consists of nine poems that constitute, to borrow Bringhurst’s words in his prefatory note to the sequence as published in his book of poems *Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music*, “an album of mere mistranslations” (1986: 52). They pay a moving homage to a number of pre-eminent poets from different literary traditions, as the use of textual thresholds in different languages found in the epigraphs placed as brief quotations at the beginning of each single poem makes clear. Bringhurst rescues the vision and the voices of Paul Celan, René Char, Paul Valéry, Rainer Maria Rilke, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Jules Supervielle, Pindar, Pablo Neruda and Michelangelo Buonarroti, whose original poems were composed in

modern languages (German, French, Polish, Spanish and Italian) and in classical Greek and are now rendered into English. Our contention is that, when translating from other languages and traditions, Bringham is not an exile anymore, because he feels at home amid the voices of the ancestors, with whom he walks the woods of British Columbia, where he has been based for a few decades now.

To place Pindar next to Michelangelo, Rilke, Valéry, Celan, Cher or Neruda is certainly an act of intellectual bravery, as well as a forceful statement on his own poetics. To a serious poet like Bringham, it is of the essence to make poems that are firmly grounded on what has already been accomplished by his literary ancestors. After all, he is a true heir to the poetics of High Modernist masters. That the poet is tessellating words from so many different languages only testifies to his profound love of language, of all human languages, dead or alive, classical or modern. Though Bringham is convinced that poetry is an attribute of reality and that language is the net with which poets try to capture it the best way they can, he is well aware that languages are the most sophisticated epistemological tools in our intellectual confrontation with the world. As Bringham puts it in memorable words in his foreword to *The Calling. Selected Poems 1970-1995*,

Years ago in a Bosnian town a woman tried repeatedly to speak to me, though the words she knew and trusted were words I did not understand. At length, in desperation, she gave me an egg. So I was present at the birth of language –as all of us are many times in our lives. I saw a gesture turn an egg, for just an instant and for eternity, into a noun, and the egg transform the gesture into a verb. I have known since that moment that *I wanted –no matter how preposterous and impossible it might be– to learn all the words and grammars in the world*, and that poetry nevertheless precedes them all and can make its way, if it must, with the help of none (1995: 11, italics mine).

The poems in the sequence “The Lyell Island Variations” are brought together under the name of an island in Haida Gwaii (also known as the Queen Charlotte Islands), an archipelago off the coast

of Alaska and British Columbia and home to the Haida, one of the native peoples of North America. Bringham defines it in the note preceding the sequence as “a forested, rain-drenched Cyclades in a corner of the North Pacific” that “holds somewhere within itself – as anyone can tell by simply listening – one centre of the world” (1986: 52-53). The island has been deforested by greedy humans in search of profit and money, but remnants coming from other worlds wash up on the beaches, like songs, stories and myths told by the impressive Haida mythtellers. As Bringham himself observes,

In the meantime, much washes up on the beaches, changed by the journey. Dislodged bits of the world wash up on the beaches, pickled and dead, or seachanged into something rich yet skeletal, familiar and yet strange. Like these small offerings from elsewhere, gathered in the shadow of the island’s momentary name.

In another time, stories and songs were transformed as they passed through the prism of languages on this coast. They rotated and changed as they moved through the Salishan into the Wakashan tongues, and from Tsimshian and Haida to Tlingit and Tahltan and back again. This is an album of mere mistranslations, or it is a cycle of songs which have altered, as might have seemed right to men and women whose flesh is now trees – and of whom we should think as the trees are falling (1986: 52-53).

What is unquestionable is that, in “The Lyell Island Variations,” the poet is trying to rescue remnants of visions and tattered fragments of wisdom from voices speaking different human languages. Bringham’s choice of a place that looks like periphery to the Western canon is obviously deliberate. The poems in the sequence embody a wide spectrum of human languages and literary traditions, not just literary works that are written down in the form of books, but also those monumental oral literatures of the native people of North America, which is the immediate geographical and spiritual home to the poet. In much the same way Bringham walks in the woods to make himself whole again, he revisits the past time and again in

search of inspiring literary fruits produced by his ancestors. The result of this archaeological excavation is a handful of poems that are accomplished translations of texts written in a variety of human languages. After all, Bringham is a poet speaking many languages and saying much of import to his fellow human beings.

A work in progress for a long time, since at least 1986 until its completion in 2009, “The Lyell Island Variations” constitute an ambitious literary enterprise indeed. The fact that the poet should have spent over 20 years writing this sequence is indicative of how dear these poems are to him. The whole poetic sequence consists of these nine pieces, which are translations from six different languages and nine different poets: “*Larix lyallii*” (Paul Celan, “Fadensonnen”), “Thin Man Washing” (René Char, “Le Masque funèbre”), “Absence of the Heart” (Paul Valéry, “Les Pas”), “The Reader” (Rainer Maria Rilke, “Der Leser”), “The Starlight is Getting Steadily Dimmer” (Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, “Miesiac jak królik wśród obłoków hyca”), “The Long and the Short of It” (Jules Supervielle, “Parfois l’air se contracte”), “A River, a Runner” (Pindar, “Olympian 14”), “Riddle” (Pablo Neruda, *Aún*), and “Day In, Day Out” (Michelangelo Buonarroti, poem no. 241 from his *Rime*). One may also wonder why Bringham chose these and not other poets for inclusion in his sequence of ‘mere mistranslations’. One might venture that some of the poets he chooses to translate into English were also exiles or cosmopolitan wanderers, most notably Rilke and Celan. Some of them were polyglot poets who could read different languages and were proficient translators themselves, like Rilke, Valéry, Celan or Char. At any rate, Bringham calls his poems ‘mistranslations’, possibly because he is aware that, even though much is gained in translation, something about the flavour of the original texts must be lost in bridging the gap between the source and the target language.

But what is the point in bringing all these poets and languages together into the boundaries of a unitary work? To begin with, “The Lyell Island Variations” is a poetic manifesto of sorts. The main tenets of this statement on poetics might not be visible or discernible straightaway, but, upon closer scrutiny, it is clear that: (1) Bringham embraces the Earth, languages and tradition as his true home as a poet; (2) nutriment for his poetry is to be found in the minds and

works of his literary ancestors, even if that may imply that he should learn other languages to be able to read them firsthand in the original; (3) tradition is to be won by hard labour, as Eliot suggested in his seminal essay, for poetry is not a matter of divine inspiration; (4) languages are a subtle ecosystem that must be honoured at all costs, and there is no better way for him to honour languages than to learn them; and (5) the poet is not an exile if he seeks the company of kindred spirits in other literary traditions and brings their best works back to life again via translation for the enjoyment and enlightenment of other humans. In his struggle with words to capture the poetry that he conceives of as being an attribute of reality, Bringhurst resorts to other poets' words to fulfill his poetical agenda. At any rate, what the poems in "The Lyell Island Variations" appear to have in common is a handful of fundamental characteristics: the use of linguistic thresholds in the languages he translates from as the starting point for Bringhurst's renderings into English, usually in the form of brief quotations preceding the poems themselves; the objective, elegant language of crystalline simplicity and deep thought that pervade all the compositions in the sequence, dictated by the original poems; and the conviction that poetry is not the letting loose of feelings and emotions, a feast of one's private subjectivity or the glorification of the self, but rather the restrained dwelling of the mind on intellectual heights of unusual intensity.

5. WHEN BRINGHURST MET MICHELANGELO, OR FOUND IN TRANSLATION

In a world of increasing mobility, languages and translation are called upon to play a decisive role in bringing people closer together. Such is the power of translation to bridge the abyss separating languages, cultures, worldviews and sensibilities that it has become a fundamental cultural practice, not just for poets, but for humanity in its entirety. What is found or gained in translation far exceeds what is lost. Some of the best poets from all times have tried their hand at translation at some point in the development of their literary career, particularly when looking for a poetic voice of their own. Eliot, Pound, Celan, Miłosz and Bringhurst, to name but a few poets, have all found in translation genuine literary nourishment, and not merely an

exercise in intellectual gymnastics or an inconsequential pastime. As mentioned above, Bringhurst brings under the title “The Lyell Island Variations” a collection of nine texts which he terms *mistranslations*. They are not mistranslations, but robust poems composed on the basis of invaluable texts borrowed from poets writing in different traditions whom he admired and probably sought to emulate. In what follows, we dwell on one of the poems in the sequence in which Bringhurst walks next to another humanist, the Italian Michelangelo Buonarroti.

“Day In, Day Out,” the closing piece in “The Lyell Island Variations,” was first incorporated to the sequence and published for the first time in Bringhurst’s *Selected Poems* (2009). It is a poem on an artist’s calling and vocation to find truth, beauty and eternity in what he does with his hands and his imagination, and it remains a powerful statement on the poet’s mission. The textual threshold preceding Bringhurst’s poem is lifted from one of the many poems written by Michelangelo, who lived in sixteenth-century Italy, during one of those historical periods that represent a peak of creativity in the history of the human imagination. The artist whose genius produced such masterworks of Western art as the fresco paintings of the Sistine Chapel, or the sculptures of the *Pietà* (1499) or *David* (1504), Michelangelo Buonarroti (b. 6 March 1475 – d. 18 February 1564) was a prolific sculptor, painter, architect, engineer and poet.² Together with his contemporary Leonardo da Vinci, he embodies the ideal of the Renaissance humanist—a versatile polymath at home in a number of disciplines at which he excelled with contributions of the highest order. Thus, the archetypal Renaissance man produced a prodigious output in every field, so that the sheer volume of works, sketches, poems and correspondence preserved to this day makes him the best-documented artist of the sixteenth century and the first Western artist whose biography was published while he was still alive. Two biographies were published, in fact: one by his apprentice Ascanio Condivi (*The Life of Michelangelo*) and another by the well-known Italian biographer Giorgio Vasari (*The Lives of the Artists*).

Aware of the potentialities and force of the art of sculpture, Michelangelo knew how to create beauty out of marble blocks. It is a miracle that he managed to carve out of formless stone blocks such

beauty and perfection as he achieved in the *Pietà*, in the colossal statue of *David*, or in other technical accomplishments like *Moses* or *Laocoön and his Sons*. Michelangelo is also known as a most accomplished fresco painter and prolific architect. He is especially remembered for his frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, which took him almost four years to complete (1508-1512), and for his major architectural projects in Florence and Rome (the Laurentian Library, Palazzo Farnese, San Giovanni dei Fiorentini, and the Sforza Chapel in the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore, among others). The sheer bulk of his work gives an idea of the kind of human being Michelangelo was: an abstemious and hard-working person of monk-like chastity all his life according to his biographer Condivi, he always lived like a poor man, indifferent to food or drink, and he was a solitary and melancholy person by nature. He avoided the company of human beings, and impressed his contemporaries with his *terribilità*, a sense of awe-inspiring grandeur that stemmed from his own personality, genius and talent. It comes as no surprise that such a man should have attracted the attention of Robert Bringhurst, a tireless craftsman, a polymath himself, a committed poet, linguist and typographer who puts all his passion and attention into every single project he embarks on.

Bringhurst's poem "Day In, Day Out" is a memorable tribute to the Italian artist. The poem is prefaced by these Italian words by Michelangelo: "il saggio al buon concetto arriba / d' un' immagine viva / vicino a morte" (2009: 151), taken from poem number 241 of his *Rime*. As a poet, Michelangelo wrote hundreds of love sonnets and madrigals addressed to friends for whom he nurtured a great love (Cecchino dei Bracci, Tommaso dei Cavalieri or Vittoria Collona), pervaded in many cases by Neoplatonic notions and openly erotic connotations. Upon closer inspection, it turns out that "Day In, Day Out" is an accomplished translation of Michelangelo's poem.³ The piece consists of three stanzas and three clearly distinguishable movements. What makes this such a poignant poem is that it is almost a meta-poetic meditation on the work of a whole lifetime: through the practice of sculpture, painting and architecture, Michelangelo devotes his whole life to a passionate search after beauty and truth,⁴ and he somehow feels that he is closer to the ultimate vision exactly at the moment when death is closing in. Thus, in the first part of the poem, the image of the artist as thinker or sage constantly seeking the ultimate truth is

presented in a language of lyric urgency and passionate clarity that is simply moving in its straightforward simplicity:

After many years and versions,
 then the thinker finally manages,
 in hard, high-country stone, a clear
 conception of a living image, death is closing in.
 We come so late to high, bright things
 we can't stay long. (2009: 151)

Michelangelo chose the path of sculpture as a way of capturing the fleeting beauty and truth he intuited pervaded the universe. After all, as French philosopher Alain Badiou claims in his *Manifesto for Philosophy*, there are four types of generic procedures or conditions of Philosophy –the matheme, the poem, political invention and love–, which may produce different kinds of truth: scientific, artistic, political and amorous truths. According to Badiou, a truth is a paradoxical thing, as it is “at once something new, hence something rare and exceptional, yet, touching the very being of that of which it is a truth, it is also the most stable, the closest, ontologically speaking, to the initial state of things” (1999: 36). Punctuated by a system of trial and error, Michelangelo’s entire oeuvre is conceptualised in Bringham’s poem as being nothing more than a relentless sequence of tentative approaches to touch an irreducible core of meaning, or the truth.⁵ Day in, day out, his struggle with colour, line, perspective, stone and words takes him ever closer to his goal. It remains a true miracle that Michelangelo should have been able to shape the formless marble blocks into the beautiful sculptures of utter perfection he made. His art was his way of capturing the beauty and eternity of the world, the ultimate vision he distilled from the fleeting appearances of the real, and his precious gift to posterity. In this respect, the “hard, high-country stone” is possibly meant as a reference to the Carrara marble, and the “clear conception of a living image” is a generic allusion to the many sculptures he produced. That stone should be made to sing like this by Michelangelo remains a welcome mystery. And yet he cannot avoid feeling a certain sense of belatedness: he arrives too late at the clear conception, to “high, bright things,” so late that he feels death is just round the corner. Truth is elusive, slippery, and so it does not let itself be trapped that easily –it keeps hiding from humans’

inquisitive gaze. Beauty is also such an overwhelming thing that humans, mere mortals, cannot bear their presence for long. Most importantly, the sculptor is a thinker: he thinks with his mind and his hands in shaping formless stone blocks into meaningful and clear images that point to the ultimate beauty and truth of this world.

The second stanza and part of the poem is a meditation on the unstoppable flux of reality, and it seems to juxtapose Herakleitos' flux-doctrine with Platonic notions on the realms of appearances and immutable ideas. That "reality keeps wandering, / day in, day out, from one / incarnation to another" (2009: 151) suggests that everything is in flux, that reality is perpetually in the making, always in a state of pure metamorphosis, and so it must be extremely complex for the artist to cling to unchangeable forms, to "hang on / to anything it's found" (2009: 151). There are no reliable handholds or footholds either for the audacious imagination of the artist in search of eternal essentials, constantly on the move after a more refined perfection. "In the upper / reaches of loveliness" (2009: 151), up there in the Platonic realm of pure ideas, maybe there is a chance that "reality / is very nearly done" (2009: 151). If objects of this world are nothing but pale shadows or reflections of the unchanging forms populating the realm of ideas, then the ultimate reality must be looked for there. Beauty, perfection and eternity dwell together in this divine realm, placed outside the province of time and space as it were, far away from this perishable world.

The closing stanza brings together two key words: the "terror!" evoked by death closing in and the "beauty" of the ultimate insight into reality, knowledge, wisdom, the final revelation:

So terror, coming deeply into beauty,
calms huge hunger with strange food.
I see your face and cannot think or say
which is the greater – the damage or the joy,
or the end of the world or the ultimate pleasure (2009: 151).

The "huge hunger" is the desire for knowledge, a *cupiditas naturalis* that Aristotle said was part and parcel of the human condition in the opening lines of his *Metaphysics*;⁶ the "strange food" is the vision, "il

buon concetto [...] d' un' imagine viva" (2009: 151), in Buonarroti's words. Looking at or scrutinising the thinker's face, the poetic voice is unable to say whether it is the terror evoked by closing death or the beauty of knowing at last something of everlasting value that is greater. With every single person's death, "the end of the world" is enacted time and again, but "the ultimate pleasure" is something that cannot be stolen once it has been experienced first-hand – not even death can spoil that last, decisive moment when the sage comes to experience the truth face to face at last. There is something sublime about the gnomic quality of the closing lines of "Day In, Day Out": they do bring the circle of the poem into perfect completion, while at the same time they make human life a meaningful *Gestalt* that death ends for good.

The fruit of a most special kind of archaeological excavation, "The Lyell Island Variations" remains a most welcome gift to 21st-century readers. It also offers a sort of elementary map of Western poetry. It brings together some of the greatest titans on the horizon of Western literature, from the very cradle of Greek literature as represented by Pindar, through the Renaissance, of which Michelangelo Buonarroti is an indisputable peak in the history of the human imagination, to some of the most well-known twentieth-century poets writing in different languages, such as Rilke, Valéry, Celan or Neruda. It is also a moving homage to the linguistic diversity that characterises the human species. The tree of language has grown innumerable branches over time, which are the human languages spoken by successive civilizations, but the root underground remains the same: the universal substratum of meaning, the desire to mean something and to be acknowledged in this vast world of ours. Like learning or loving, meaning is also the fundamental vocation of all humans from all places and times. To this day, poetry possibly remains the most powerful means to mean something worthy of being preserved for posterity through words.

NOTES

¹ In the "Prefatory Note" to his books of poems *The Beauty of the Weapons*, Bringhurst reminds us of "the Rinzaï masters' admonition, that the true man has no name and no address."

² For essential information regarding the life and work of Michelangelo, see the entry on ‘Michelangelo’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 19, pp. 11081-11088.

³ This is poem 241 from Michelangelo’s *Rime*: “Negli anni molti e nelle molte pruove, / cercando, il saggio al buon concetto arriva / d’ un’ immagine viva, / vicino a morte, in pietra alpestra e dura; / c’ all’ alte cose nuove / tardi si viene, e poco poi si dura. / Similmente natura, / di tempo in tempo, d’ uno in altro volto, / s’ al sommo, errando, di bellezza è giunta / nel tuo divino, è vecchia, e de’ perire: / onde la tema, molto / con la beltà congiunta, / di stranio cibo pasce il gran desire; / né so pensar né dire / qual nuoca o giovi più, visto ’l tuo ’spetto, / o ’l fin dell’universo o ’l gran diletto” (1967: 251).

⁴ With his contemporaries, Michelangelo appeared to share “their eagerness to imitate the grandeur of Nature with the skills of art, in order to come as close as they could to that ultimate knowledge many people call intelligence” (Vasari, 1991: 414).

⁵ Michelangelo’s search for truth through his art is conveyed by means of the gnostic quality of the language of the poem. As a whole, the composition is markedly pervaded by what Culler calls “the lyric present” (i.e., one of the defining features of the lyric poem as a genre), which is “temporal rather than atemporal –not outside time–, iterative but not located anywhere in particular in time, yet offering a particularly rich sense of time, of the impossible *nows* in which we, reading, repeat these lyric structures. It contributes to the sense of lyric as event, [...] an event that occurs in our world, as we repeat these lines” (2014: 174).

⁶ These are the opening lines of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*: “All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight” (1924: 1552).

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