present in her absence

Carolyn Guertin

Tantant d’obtenir une polyphonie, d’offrir une contre-perspective, Carolyn Guertin crée un supplément pour le cycle poétique "The Old and Their Knowing" ("Les vieux et leur savoir") de Robert Bringhurst. Frappée par un véritable manque dans le texte de Bringhurst, Guertin décide de le remplir. Dans sa poésie, une myriade de femmes du monde pré-socratique émerge—quelques-unes sans noms et d’autres, comme Clytemnestre, Électre, Héra et Sappho sont nommées. Mises au premier plan, finalement concrétisées en mots, leur absence laisse place à leur présence.

an excerpt from

caw
caw
callings

a counterpoint for Robert Bringhurst

Counterpoint. The ability, unique to music, to say 2 things at once comprehensively. The term derives from the expression *punctus contra punctum*, i.e. ‘point against point’ or ‘note against note’. A single ‘part’ or ‘voice’ added to another is called ‘a counterpoint’ to that other, but the more common use of the word is that of the combination of simultaneous parts, each of significance in itself and the whole resulting in a coherent texture. In this sense Counterpoint is the same as Polyphony.

—*The Oxford Dictionary of Music*
I think that Robert Bringhurst's poetry is breathtaking. On reading his anthology *The Calling* (Toronto: McClelland, 1995), I felt compelled to respond to it as a poet in kind. As a feminist, however, there were many things in Bringhurst's politics and approach, especially in connection with pre-Socratic philosophy and Bringhurst's poetic cycle "The Old and Their Knowing," that did not ring true for me. The beauty of the pre-Socratics—from what we can understand in a post-Aristotelian world—was their inability to conceive of binary oppositions. For them, it seems everything was united in a single whole: art and science, thought and emotion, poetry and philosophy, and maleness and femaleness, and a host of other binarisms. As a feminist, I felt compelled to address the absence of the female in Bringhurst's poetry—an absence that is not echoed in his critical writing.

caw caw callings, my resulting 70-page poetic response, is not to be read as a challenge to Robert Bringhurst, for I will not take him to task for what he did not intend to do. It is instead a supplement, another voice in his chorus, that addresses a resonant absence...

This excerpt entitled "presence in her absence" was exhibited in a slightly different form by Artcite Gallery in Windsor, Ontario as a part of their *Telling Tales, Telling Lies* show for International Women's Day in 1996.
(present in her absence

she is present as a lack

) a void

all the mothers are conspicuous
conspicuously absent
present in absentia voiced in the silence in the gaps
in the mind in the earth
an ellipse of repressed thought

of the dreaming fluid self

a crescent in the voicelessness
The sun may be married to the moon
but he and his words never touch her.¹

she enters briefly from the wings
crazed murderess

with a phobia for cleanliness
and a gift for birthing
touch her

she is present in the water
as mother Amazon who is nurtured by her children:
crazed murderess

this mother of rivers has thousands of rivers for mothers²

but she is no warrior has no partner no mate
alone

a ghostly after-
image

in a mysterious world of
stillness

she is in the sky in the fluid crescent and eye

but she is

silent
Is the sound not integral to the vision?
(Is the female not integral to the male?)

Is the vision not heard as well as seen?

It is and vision lies outside language

exists beyond the words which
house it and trace it and lead us
its contours time and again with our
tongues\(^3\)

but in these callings her tongue is fixed

when she opens her mouth the wings of song
she only speaks when spoken to

her contours

are hidden behind curtains of silence

she is underground and neurotically out of sight but remembered with gifts on her wedding day so absent that she seems jilted at the altar of song (or she him?)
too ugly in this fictional world to be allowed a mirror for the journey home into language she is abandoned veiled and unknown
present in her absence · 107

Antigone is agoraphobic in a postscript
while even cursed Creon is namelessly remembered

where is electrifying Electra in her murderous rage?
Clytemnestra?
awaiting the scissors of fate

Herakleitos is cursed with a silly daughter

even Zeus-battered Hera

reduced from hurling lightning bolts to frying pans

is absent

and lonely Penelope silently weaves her unending fragments

elsewhere
she is present in dreaming Greek voices who sing
of that other philosophy from their fragmentary pages
of attraction and repulsion who sing of love
silence through the margins of

listen:

I say that whatever one loves is

Sappho sings softly not a warble of song
from her authoritative magnitude of fragmentary fame
sweetly voicing her knowing in this feminine void

this great Presocratic Philosopher of Love
is denied a heartbeat of sapphic meter
from the margins
Sappho’s surly contemporary serial killer Parmenides (who killed the bird of heart
in his thought)
he too whispered naughty secrets in the goddess’ shell-shaped ear
(he gave her credit for devising and introducing love to the gods in his theogony) he frolicked with the hot-tempered daughters of the sun
and played mean volleyball with sun maidens
on the scorching sands near Pyres’ home
while star-gazing after a hasty midnight embrace
it must have been he found the shape of his loves
in the shapely sky
Parmenides subsequently proclaimed the earth round and voluptuous
and said that all objects were suspended in a seminal fluid lighter than air
he knew all bodies left to themselves would fall to the ground impotent

even scorning Demokritos who never raised his head from his work of classifying bodies vowed that the original form made atoms and the void alone real believed in the bloody feminine labour of cosmogony a literal world-begetting and so shaped his theories on an embryological model
blazing Empedokles died in the embrace of his lover Etna, he circumscribed a feminine world in his travels with his taste for colour and cooking.

neatly drew and quartered motherly Gaia:

the 1 2 3 four elements he said interact under the influence of two cosmic powers

Love (who is Aphrodite) and Strife (who is ?

and engendered the gregarious microscopic universe for attractive Empedokles under Love the elements are dear to and desired by one another it is only Strife that makes them grim and hostile...

For this philandering philosopher world formation and world destruction were only possible adrift on the sea of Love where that sacred emotion enacted cosmological creativity

and the schizo phrenic goddess in the same orgiastic urge flaunted equal and opposite apocalyptic powers
she is present but silent 
her face covered by care-worn hands 
she is waiting waiting 
for all of the blood shed 
(not in acts of creation 
but in apocalyptic destruction that is the clockwork 
and machinery of an industrial age 
waiting for all the blood that has been shed 

to stop flowing 

weaving these fateful silences 
these small roots linking fingers to join in being in the fragrant earth that is heart hearth home 
that is her 
she is waiting through eternity 

She is deaf, dumb and blind. But she hears through the soles of her feet, speaks from under her skirt, and sees through the holes in the palms of her hands. 

like Philomela this blind seer does not speak words 
silence is her fluid signature
sparks

like

her words

punctuate spaces

present in her absence.
she is inarticulate

she is several

from the well-springs of eloquence
but not from the sources of meaning

she is here
Notes

1  Bringhurst Calling 216.
2  Bringhurst Calling 191.
3  Bringhurst Map 107.
4  Sappho 41.
5  Parmenides 83.
6  Lempriere 485.
7  Edwards, Volume 4, 448.
8  Edwards, Volume 2, 497.
9  Edwards, Volume 6, 444.
10 Bringhurst Calling 17.
11 Bringhurst Map 110.

Works Cited


